

BMC 28 - Johann Josef FUX: Chamber Music

Johann Joseph Fux (1660-1741) is remembered less for his music than for his famous textbook on counterpoint, the *Gradus ad Parnassum* – which incidentally is still available, and popular today. Yet his music is well worth remembering for its own sake; it was not for nothing that the Emperor Leopold I of Austria made Fux his Court Composer and Music Director.

But to begin at the beginning; Fux was born of peasant stock at Hirtenfeld in Eastern Styria, Austria, about 1660. Little is known of his youth, except that he became a student at Graz University when he was about twenty. Again he disappears into obscurity, perhaps to study in Italy. When next heard of, he is the Organist of the famous Scottish Church in Vienna, and on the highroad to Imperial preferment. In 1696 he got married, and two years later was appointed Court Composer by the Emperor, an appointment usually reserved for Italian musicians. The Emperor evidently realized that Fux was a man of exceptional talent, to give him precedence over the all-conquering Italians.

Further high appointments were in store; in 1701 Fux became Capellmeister at St. Stephen's Cathedral, Vienna, and ten years later, in 1711, Music Director at the Imperial Court itself - the highest musical position in Europe. Fux filled the post with distinction, composing and directing many operas and oratorios, as well as dozens of smaller pieces. His most famous stage work was the festival Opera *Costanza e Fortezza*, performed in the most sumptuous and spectacular manner in Prague Castle in 1723 when the Emperor Charles VI was crowned King of Bohemia.

In 1725 Fux published his famous *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a textbook from which most of the composers of the next generation learnt their counterpoint - indeed Bach himself had a copy in his library. Some six years after the publication of the *Gradus*, Fux's wife died, and from then on he seems to have devoted himself more to sacred music. He himself died in 1741, aged 81.

As a secular composer, he was soon neglected, but his sacred works continued to be performed for many years, and his book maintained its influence.

Then, in the middle of the Nineteenth Century, Ludwig Ritter von Köchel, better known as the compiler of Mozart's works, became interested in Fux, and produced a biography and catalog of works. This reawakened interest to some extent in the old Court composer, and eventually some of his works were reprinted in the Austrian *Denkmaler* series; Fux began to emerge from the shadows as a fine composer in his own right, and not a mere academic. He was indeed the greatest master of the Austrian Baroque in music.

On this disc we show Fux in more intimate mood, with a selection of works for Chamber Ensemble, Harpsichord and Clavichord, the latter performed by Michael Thomas on a clavichord built by himself, recorded by Oryx in his peaceful workshop at Hurley on the River Thames in Berkshire. The complexities and rich variance of tonalities available on the clavichord make it a much more demanding, more critical instrument to play. Michael Thomas has said that: “A piece of music that takes a fortnight to learn on the harpsichord will take seven weeks on the clavichord, because each note has got to be held and its tone produced. The singing notes have got to be caressed and the musical problems answered in much greater detail.”

The **Partita à Tre** opens with an *Overture* in the French style. The ingenious *Minuet-and-Trio*, in which the treble part of the *Minuet* becomes the bass part of the *Trio*, shows Fux putting his knowledge of counterpoint to a more light-hearted use.

In the **Ciaccona in D** we find Fux exploring the art of *Air-with-Variations* in a composition which might be seen as a precursor of Bach's similar works. Michael Thomas observes the ordered progression of the harmonic structure, quoting Fux's own words: “A composition meets the demand of good taste if it is well-structured, avoids trivialities as well as willful eccentricities, aims at the sublime, but moves in a natural way and has the power to please even the experts... An undisciplined composition, even if it embodied some exquisite idea, might tickle the ears of untrained listeners but would never satisfy the fine taste of the connoisseur; brilliant ideas will not do, they demand perfect

workmanship"... sentiments with which Bach would surely have agreed.

The **Harpeggio** reflects the Toccatas of Froberger, while the **Sonata Septima** is probably a keyboard reduction of a Trio Sonata. The final **Sinfonia** is in effect a sort of Trio Sonata, mixing Italian and French styles.