

“What did people do in the evenings before television came?”, a question for which only the elderly today can recall an answer. In Bach’s time music-making would certainly have played a major role, while those not playing might be engaged in reading or quiet domestic work such as making and repairing garments. Competence in at least one, possibly several musical instruments was commonplace, the flute, violin and oboe being particularly popular. But the center of attraction for those who could afford one would undoubtedly be the keyboard instrument – a harpsichord or a clavichord. Bach’s home included both, as well as a pedal-harpsichord essential for organ practice, and a lute-harpsichord, the latter being a rare instrument of which Bach had two custom-built to his own specification, emulating the delicate sound of the lute.

We open with one of several concertos for solo harpsichord or organ based on the works of other composers. In these pieces for solo keyboard Bach uses an alternation of loud chorus passages with quieter recitative-like elaborations to create an orchestral effect of solo and tutti. This first Concerto is a solo organ piece based on a Concerto by Prince Johann Ernst, half-brother and close neighbour of Bach’s employer from 1708 to 1717, the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar. In 1713 Johann Ernst returned from a visit to Amsterdam, one of the great music-publishing centers of the Baroque period, bringing with him all the latest music – so much in fact that extra shelves had to be installed in his palace.

This musical wealth was freely available to Bach, an opportunity which he seized with enthusiasm, choosing to perform and study these works, then to re-write them for solo keyboard. It seems that Bach was in fact on better terms with the lively Prince Johann Ernst than with his own stricter employer, the Duke, a fact which would eventually lead to friction and Bach’s departure. Whether for its inherent musical quality or as a gesture of friendship we do not know; however this first Concerto BWV 592 is based on a composition by Johann Ernst himself. The disc closes with another concerto in the same series, this one based on Vivaldi’s Op 3/8 (*hear the original on *Baroque Music Collection* BMC 4*).

A PEDAL-HARPSICHORD, that is, a harpsichord with an additional organ-type pedal-board, would have been found in the home of most German organists during the Baroque period. Organ practice in churches was difficult; some willing collaborator had to be found – and paid – to pump the organ, and the churches could be very cold in winter.

Additionally, several contemporary organists whom we have recorded on the pedal-harpsichord have assured us that practice on the pedal-harpsichord is infinitely more demanding in terms of accuracy and precision than on the organ, which provides yet another reason for employing the pedal-harpsichord as a practice instrument. A two-manual harpsichord with pedal-board in the home would afford opportunity for organ practice, as well as having the two manuals for more substantial keyboard-only pieces which require the contrast provided by two manuals. Pedals could also be brought in to reinforce manual-only compositions where necessary, either to add bass, or to assist with a long hand-span. (*Hear more of these dramatic instruments on *Baroque Music Coll.* BMC 26, BACH 726, 727, 745*).

Moving to the CLAVICHORD, the two short Fantasies resemble the two-and three-part Inventions in style, while the Air and Variations in the Italian Manner, dating from Weimar about 1709, may be considered as a forerunner or model for the much later and more mature Goldberg Variations. This set of variations, being soft and delicate in style, lends itself particularly to performance on the clavichord.

Carl Philip Emmanuel often stated that the clavichord was his father’s favourite instrument – indeed he himself continued to play it (with great passion according to several contemporary accounts) until his death. Several important and unique features distinguish this instrument. First as to the action itself: press down on a key, and through the action of a simple central pivot like a see-saw, the other end of the key moves upwards to strike the string. The strings of the clavichord are damped at one end. The keys which strike them are tipped with brass, so as the key strikes the string and as long as it is kept in place, the length of the string between the brass striker and the undamped end is free to vibrate. As soon as the key is released the string is automatically silenced again, since one end is damped (*see front cover*).

Two features emerge from this simple system. First, the player can strike any key either hard or softly, thus permitting the dynamics of volume, which we take for granted on the modern piano (but which are not possible on the harpsichord). Second, the other end of the key is striking the string directly, almost like the violinist’s finger on the bow-string. There is a little mechanical sideways play on each key, and when the key is moved gently, even minutely from side to side, it lengthens or shortens the vibrating length of the string, thus creating the much-prized art of *vibrato* (called *Bebung* in German) just as the violinist does. So the clavichord player can vary the sound volume of individual notes, and create *vibrato*, a special singing quality, which only the clavichord can produce.

Indeed 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 have its tone produced. The singing notes have got to be caressed and the musical problems answered in much greater detail.” Michael Thomas incidentally, is playing a clavichord built by himself, recorded

by Oryx in his peaceful workshop at Hurley on the River Thames in the Berkshire countryside.

Interspersed between the clavichord selections, we have a Prelude and Fugue performed by Gunnar Johansen on his Sperrhake Harpsichord. Here again Bach is showing his eagerness to absorb, learn from and re-present the works of other composers. Bach obviously liked the theme from Albinoni's Trio Sonata Op.1, since he composed two separate fugues on this subject. In some manuscripts, the Fugue BWV 951 is coupled with the Prelude in the same key, BWV 923. They are presented together as a pair in this recording.

The mechanism of the HARPSICHORD differs radically from that of the clavichord just described. The harpsichord player depresses a key which causes a jack to rise up and pluck the string with a plectrum, damping it again with a felt damper as it falls back. The plectrum plucks according to its fixed regulation, and the player cannot adjust the volume by touch. Differences in volume needed to illustrate and clarify the architecture and internal structure of each piece are obtained, much as with the organ, by *terrace dynamics* - moving from one manual to another or coupling two together. Normally on a German harpsichord there will be two manuals (though three and even four was not unknown in Bach's time), each manual having 8-foot and 4-foot sets of strings. The lower would probably have a 16-foot set as well, and the upper a 2-foot set. Thus German instruments were fairly large and robust, giving a full-bodied sound much like the instrument played by Dr Johansen on this disc.

In addition to his own domestic harpsichord(s) and clavichord(s), Bach appears to have sought a gentler, richer sound, simulating the LUTE. It is not known whether or not Bach himself played the lute. However he used it as continuo in his Passions for the more sensitive arias, and we know that Sylvius Weiss, perhaps the most famous Lutenist of the time, was a frequent visitor to the Bach family apartments in Leipzig. Seeking the softer, richer tone of the gut-stringed Lute and the depth of bass in the Theorbo (the bass of the Lute family), Bach arranged to have a keyboard instrument re-creating the lute sound custom-built to his own specification.

There were several builders experienced in such instruments, one being Johann Nicolaus Bach, a second cousin of Johann Sebastian, a composer, organist and instrument maker in Jena. The basic type closely resembled a small wing-shaped, one-manual harpsichord. It only had a single gut-stringed stop, but this sounded a *pair* of strings tuned an octave apart in the lower third of the compass and in unison in the middle third, to approximate as far as possible the impression given by a lute. According to contemporary accounts, even this simplest of versions made a sound that could deceive a professional Lutenist, a fact considered almost miraculous at the time. But a basic shortcoming was the absence of dynamic expression, and to remedy matters Johannes Nicolaus Bach also made instruments with two and three manuals, whose keys sounded the *same* strings but with different quills and at different points of the string, so providing two or three grades of dynamic and timbre; he also built Theorbo-Harpsichords with a compass extending down an extra octave.

It seems that for his own instrument Bach turned to Zacharias Hildebrandt, better known as an organ-builder and pupil of Bach's friend Gottfried Silbermann. In an annotation to Adlung's *Musica Mechanica Organoedi*, Johann Friedrich Agricola described a 'Lautenwerk' that belonged to Bach:

*"The editor of these notes remembers having seen and heard a 'Lautenclavicymbel' in Leipzig in about 1740, designed by Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach and made by Mr. Zacharias Hildebrandt, which was smaller in size than a normal harpsichord but in all other respects similar. It had two choirs of gut strings, and a so-called little octave of brass strings. It is true that in its normal setting (that is, when only one stop was drawn) it sounded more like a theorbo than a lute. But if one drew the lute-stop (such as is found on a harpsichord) together with the cornet stop [the 4' brass stop undamped?], one could almost deceive professional Lutenists."*

On this disc we hear the magnificent Partita in c minor BWV 997, composed for Lute or Keyboard, here given a powerful performance on a modern reconstruction by the performer of a Baroque Lute-Harpsichord based on as much historical evidence as is currently available. It is preceded by the Fugue in g minor for Lute, BWV 1000, performed here on the Lute, so that the listener may compare the two sounds. This was later reworked as the Organ Fugue BWV 539.

*More detail on the Lute-*

*Harpsichord can be found on the Website: "The Baroque Lute-Harpsichord: A Forgotten Instrument" - <http://www.barquemusic.org/barluthp.html> Our front cover illustration shows the mechanics of the clavichord.*