

J.S. BACH – TOCCATAS

The years J.S. Bach spent in Weimar from 1708 to 1717 were of great importance for his development as a composer. Though Weimar may not have been a particularly large town during those years (its 5000 inhabitants rated it smaller than Bach's birthplace Eisenach or Mühlhausen where he had worked prior to his appointment in Weimar), its cultural atmosphere, instilled by Duke Wilhelm-Ernst of Saxe-Weimar, provided the young Bach with a full opportunity to unfold as a composer, organist, harpsichordist, violinist and teacher.

The very pious Wilhelm-Ernst strongly suppressed an excess of licentious festivities in his town, especially if they coincided with important religious days. But he was also a sincere art lover. He installed the court chapel to its former glory and he was quite capable of enjoying the occasional good opera. Furthermore he founded a lyceum and an orphanage in his town. During his rule (1683-1728) and that of his successors Ernst-August (1728-1748) and notably Karl-August (1775-1828) Weimar became one of the most important cultural centres of the German Empire.

Bach had been employed briefly in Weimar in 1703 as a teenager. The situation now, five years later, was a completely different one. He had meanwhile grown from apprentice to master and was directly appointed 'Cammer und Hoforganist' with a commencing salary of 85 guilders, which supplemented with other earnings, rapidly rose to 160 guilders in his appointed year and to nearly double in 1716. In the meantime, in 1714, he had become concertmaster of the court chapel. During these years more and more pupils applied to him for lessons. Thus Bach was ultimately earning appreciably more than any of his other colleagues in Weimar. Moreover these incomes emphasize the good name and fame which Bach had rapidly achieved in Weimar.

Good wages were very essential because Bach and his young wife Maria Barbara had increased their family by six children between 1708 and 1715, of which only the twins born in 1713 died almost instantly. Both Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel were born in Weimar. An expanding amount of compositions is directly connected to Weimar. It is difficult to pinpoint the number of cantatas written during these years. There must have been many, few of which had traceable dates. It is a different case with the works for organ. The Orgelbüchlein, many of the Chorale preludes and nearly all the Preludes and fugues constitute a mere fraction of Bach's unbelievable production for the organ during these years. In addition, there are many keyboard concertos in the style of Vivaldi, possibly a substantial part of the Brandenburg concertos and finally the seven great keyboard Toccatas.

The influence of the Italian style has been of great importance for the development of Bach's individual and virtuosic style in all these compositions. It was specifically during these Weimar years that there originated in Bach's music a characteristic mixture of northern severity and southern virtuosity, of northern thoroughness and southern clarity. The keyboard Toccatas are splendid examples of this. The toccata is

originally an improvised piece as ornamented instrumental intonation for polyphonic vocal or instrumental composition. In the early seventeenth century Praetorius wrote 'a Toccata is an introduction or Prelude which an organist plays on an organ or harpsichord preceding a motet or fugue and in which he improvises with only a few chords and ornaments'.

From the beginning there had existed a connection between phases of brilliant and virtuosic playing and the stricter fugal sections. During the course of the seventeenth century these contrasting elements developed further, either verging towards a broader capriciousness in the real toccata parts, interspersed with a varied procession of fugal intervals comparable to Frescobaldi, Froberger and Muffat, or towards a broader unity between toccatas and fugues as used by Buxtehude, Reincken and eventually Bach. The northern composers also had a tendency to use a simplified form consisting of not more than four parts: toccata-fugue-toccata-fugue and finally two polarly yet complimentary parts: a toccata and a fugue.

Bach's seven Toccatas (BWV 910-916) written during the years 1707-1712 clearly show different influences. The Italian ritornel style (with its dialogue between solo and tutti) the virtuosic concertante which intermittently had varied changes of intervals and showy complicated modulations which sometimes had special effects, but also the amazingly ingenuous polyphony in many of the fugues and the inclination towards more complex forms and clearer thematic links; all this is a sign of Bach's unfaltering inventiveness, his ceaseless search for new solutions, for new sounds and above all his unsurpassable control of all the facets of the composer's craft.

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