

J.S. BACH - FANTASIES, CAPRICCIOS

At the end of his essay on the true art of clavier playing (*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, part 1: 1753, part 11: 1762) Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach deals with the free fantasy. He affirms that a fantasy is only free when it has no set time and diffuses into a number of keys. It is like an improvisation that is less strictly bound to themes but is based rather more on thoughts or emotions. There is total freedom of the spirit and the hands that is linked mainly to the clavier, especially the harpsichord and the clavichord and later the pianoforte, but much less to the organ. Works for the organ were audibly more strictly composed even when Fantasy was indicated in the titles.

Emanuel Bach based his aesthetic and technical ideas, as far as the fantasy is concerned, in particular on that one work of his father which already in the eighteenth century stood exemplary for the *stylus phantasticus*: the Chromatic Fantasy (BWV 903). In this work Johann Sebastian Bach, in the realms of fantasy, embarked upon a reckless harmony, which must have shocked many people in the eighteenth century. We should not take the latter literally but see it in an aesthetic sense. Since the sixteenth century, fantasy was already an essential part of musical composition and was even present in the entire culture of the late Renaissance and the Baroque. One created gardens of fantasy, wrote epics of fantasy and composed works, which apparently originated out of an unbridled fantasy.

But the latter is only partly true. Even Emanuel Bach had to admit that in spite of all the freedom and fantasy, the free fantasy in a composition is thoroughly tied to rules. Rules connected with counterpoint, rules concerning rhetoric and certainly rules regarding formal structures. In this way the fantasy is as surprising and tasteful (it is certain that *Geschmack* had begun to play an important role for the sons of Bach in analysing and appreciating art) as it is a clever reflection of the deepest mainspring of composition: the fantasy, the power of imagination.

Just as his sons had used him as an example, likewise Sebastian Bach made use of the fantasies of Froberger and d'Anglebert. Bach coupled his large fantasies to fugues and must have seen the fantasy as an alternative to the preludes that precede nearly all of the other fugues. Johann Sebastian Bach composed some fifteen works with Fantasy indicated in the title; seven for organ and eight for harpsichord or clavichord. A few additional fantasies exist that are not attributed to him, but they were recorded with a BWV number at that time. The eight fantasies for klavier on the accompanying CD are definitely by Bach.

The Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D minor (BWV 903), of which several versions have been handed down, is a beacon between the old and the new music, between the Baroque rhetoric and the new *Empfindsame* style which came to full development shortly after Bach's death. He wrote the work between 1720 and 1730, at a time when his own technique had developed to an unprecedented mastery.

The introductory fantasy consists of elements from the virtuosic clavier toccatas with brilliant passages full of rapid runs, but within the fantasy itself also the much loved arpeggios (swiftly interchanging broken chords) and expressive recitative passages can be found. While passages

chiefly show off the dextrous finger work, the real fantasy is found in the fantastic elements of the chromatic chord movements that typify the arpeggio sections. Here Bach makes optimal use of the possibilities of equal temperament and the unprecedented possibilities it gives for modulation. Nowhere does harmony stand still; Bach continually impels the music on to rhetoric dramatic movement. It should therefore not surprise anyone that the subsequent 3-part fugue is thoroughly chromatic, in which the stylus phantasticus has nothing to do with the whimsical style of the past, but is concerned with the unbridled fantasy to keep a steady course in a chosen harmonic quicksand.

The Fantasy and Fugue in A minor (BWV 904) is more peaceful in character. Both the fantasy and the fugue are stricter in form and give a more intimate impression. In the 4-part fugue Bach lets chromaticism seep through very slowly as an expression of fantasy. As a contrast the Fantasy in C minor (BWV 906), with an unfinished fugue, is more dramatic and extrovert. The 3-part fugue is a little gem of ingenuity. It is unclear why Bach did not complete this fugue. We cannot imagine that the chromaticism was such as to confuse him. Usually the suggested way to round off this work is to repeat it from the beginning up to the ending in C minor. Although this is not ideal it is nevertheless acceptable for recording this series.

The Fantasy and Fugue in A minor (BWV 944) consists of a very brief arpeggio-introduction and an extensive 3-part fugue based on an almost Italian classical form with, in the middle, a type of harmonic-thematic development similar to those written in Bach's more Italian orientated concertos. The Fantasy in G minor 'duobus subjectis' (on two themes – BWV 917) appears to have been a finger exercise for the large fantasies with an ingenious contrapuntal section in which two subjects or themes share the same countersubject, a descending chromatic figure. The clear form and the deft counterpoint in the Fantasy in C minor 'sur un Rondeau' (BWV 918) are more interesting. The Fantasy in A minor (BWV 922) is striking in its repetitive bravura and virtuosic technique.

That Sebastian Bach also had to learn the 'trade' at one stage is evident from the capriccios on this CD. Their character and form could qualify them as fantasies. Bach experimented here for the first time with the stylus phantasticus. Development is still in its infancy, in spite of le goût français with many embellishments and several surprising harmonic movements. Moreover these works have an added interest because of their links to biographical occurrences in his life. The Capriccio 'sopra la lontananza del fratello diletteissimo' in B flat major (BWV 992) is linked to the departure to the Swedish court in 1704 or 1706 of Johann Jacob, Bach's favourite brother ('fratello diletteissimo') who was three years older.

This capriccio is completely in the style of the Kuhnau Bible Sonatas, which appeared in 1700. It consists of various narrative sections in which (1) his cajoling friends try to delay the forthcoming journey of Johann Jacob, (2) everything that could befall him abroad is portrayed, (3) a general lament is performed, (4) finally the departure is inevitable, (5) the stage coach is prepared for the (6) departure to the call of the horn.

Bach wrote the second capriccio, Capriccio 'in honorem Johann Christoph Bachii Ohrdruf' in E major (BWV 993) in honour of his eldest brother Johann Christoph who took him under his roof in Ohrdruf after his parents died. The form of this capriccio is, in my opinion, more

scholastic than the previous one and therefore perhaps written earlier, in spite of the higher BWV number. The contrapuntal technique reminds one of the later inventions, the development is clever but not perfect, more exploratory. However the end is surprising and is indicative of the later fantasies.

Bach composed the Aria variata in A minor (BWV 989) in Weimar probably around 1710. Many sources add *alle maniera italiana* or something similar to the title. Like the many works that Bach wrote at that time, the style is strongly connected to the Italian works that he studied in Weimar. The ornate aria, for that matter more French than Italian, is followed by ten predominantly Italian variations. One might want to consider this cycle of variations as a preliminary study for the famous Goldberg Variations, but as far as the thematic form and fantasy are concerned the Aria variata does not measure up to the later masterwork. Only in the Chromatic Fantasy does Bach reach the peak of his capabilities, the real fulfilment of the meaning of the *stylus phantasticus*.

Leo Samama, 2004

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