

J.S. BACH - SONATAS, DUETS, SUITES

This edition in the series of the complete keyboard works of Bach consists primarily of a large amount of early works, together with several later compositions. It concludes with the *Prelude, Fugue and Allegro* for lute (BWV 998) arranged for harpsichord written around 1740 and the *Four Duets* (BWV 802-805) written in the years immediately prior to this. The dates of these works as well as those assigned to a majority of the early compositions are not conclusive.

Various compositions from his youth have been dealt with previously in this series. It was mentioned then that Bach had learned his trade primarily in a practical way, firstly by performing and copying huge amounts of music from his predecessors who were nationally well-known as well as locally valued musicians. Sebastian Bach learnt the trade from many known and unknown, old and young masters and even from contemporaries like Vivaldi. It was moreover of great importance that he, as descendant of such an extensive family of musicians, had widespread and easy access to a realm of libraries that were well equipped with sheet music and tracts.

Sebastian Bach was an insatiable learner and not exclusively of music. He was just as keen on religion, in his case the Lutheran faith, Latin and everything else he had a chance to learn at school. Anyone observing his school results between 1695 and 1700 discovers that the young Sebastian's results improved with each year. The years that he lived with his older brother Johann Christoph in Ohrdruf, after the death of his father, were mainly concentrated on a thorough study of every conceivable musical technique and set form preferably in the sphere of musical improvisation, alongside his lessons at the gymnasium. Johann Christof was himself a pupil of the well-know composer Johann Pachelbel and worked his entire life as organist in that small Thüringer town south of Gotha. No one could surpass his knowledge of his daily work and it was precisely this knowledge that he passed on to the young Sebastian.

After his stay in Ohrdruf, Sebastian and his classmate Georg Erdmann left for Lüneburg because there was a shortage of space in his older brother's house due to family expansion. He enrolled in the "matins choir" in Lüneburg, a choir specially set up for talented but poor children. This entitled him to free tuition at the Michaelis School, where as well as Lutheran studies, he followed lessons in logic, rhetoric, Latin, Greek, mathematics, history, geography and poetry.

In Lüneburg, Bach was able to browse in a well-equipped music library through the works of Sweelinck, Scheidt, Schiedemann, Froberger and even through earlier compositions that were written at the time of Lassus and Monteverdi! In Lüneburg Bach must have been confronted with the construction of the organ and possibly from the organ builder J.B.Held. What was more important for his development however, was the presence of the organist Georg Böhm who was connected to the Johanniskirche. He influenced the young Bach with his playing and compositions. It is not improbable that Böhm encouraged the young Bach to go and listen to the virtuosic organ playing of Johann Reincken. Possibly this explains why Bach transcribed two of Reincken's sonatas for harpsichord at such a young age.

Beginning in Lüneburg and later in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen and Weimar Sebastian developed at high speed from a school boy to a young, practising teacher completely at ease in the job of the improvising organist, the practical organ adviser, the disciplined composer of organ works, cantatas and chorale arrangements and the composer of elegant keyboard works. Most of the works on this CD originate from Bach's "wander" years between about 1703 and 1713. The collection of Bach's early works is not easy to date. It is even difficult to determine the authenticity of a number of compositions that were originally considered to be early works of Bach. All the works on this CD are more or less attributed to Bach by a consensus by researchers. There are controversial opinions about a few, for example, the *Sonata in A minor* (BWV 967) which is recorded in the well-known and moreover trustworthy Möllerschen Handschrift. How many works have not been scrapped from the list during the last century, all of them properly registered with a BWV (Bachs Werke Verzeichniss) which now are legitimately accepted as work from contemporaries, pupils or colleagues.

Both the Möllersche Handschrift and the Andreas Bach-Buch, compiled by Johann Christoph Bach give us a good impression of what the young Sebastian was presented with in order to learn the trade. There were the works of Buxtehude, Reincken, Lully and Böhm and also those of minor masters such as Buttstedt, Ritter and Fabricius, whereas both volumes also contain early works of Sebastian for example the aforementioned *Sonata in A minor* (BWV 967), the *Suite in F major* (BWV 820), the *Suite in A major* (BWV 832) and the *Praeludium et Partita del Tuono Terza* (BWV 833)

In the *Sonata in A minor*, in which the term sonata should be interpreted in its old sense as "sound"(it is only one-part) the lack of horizontal inventiveness argues against Bach and the search for virtuosity as well as complexity, i.e. scholarly techniques is in Bach's favour. The work greatly resembles an etude combining the Italian and South German style. In the *Suites in F major* (BWV 820) and *in A major* (BWV 832) it is notably the French style which must have fascinated the young Bach. Both suites are very concise compared with the later large suites and even with the still youthful *Suite in A minor* (BWV 818a) and *in E flat major* (BWV 819a). Bach was not very daring yet rhythmically and metrically. The thematic is simple and the harmonies are dominantly elementary. One cannot describe this music of Sebastian Bach as opulent as was the French music around 1700.

The *Suite in A major* (BWV 832) with its brilliant "Air pour les trompettes" and the sonorous *Sarabande* is a little more developed and adventurous. In the *Praeludium et Partita del Tuono Terzo* (BWV 833) Bach seems to hover between the watershed of two eras: the old scholarly style and the gallant new. The scholarly contrapuntal style may seem particularly old fashioned here (until quite recently one attributed this work to the seventeenth century Italian composer Bernardo Pasquini), but the numerous brief ornaments in this series of dances preceded by an introduction nevertheless indicate Bach's search for a more opulent and elegant style.

Both the terms Partita and Overture can be used for a series of dances or a dance suite. In the case of the Partita it refers to the German interpretation of the Latin "pars"(part) therefore consecutive parts. In the case of the Overture it refers to "pars pro toto" because the French suites in particular were preceded by an overture. This means that the *Overture in G minor* (BWV 822) is just a suite like the aforementioned suites.

Although research has dated this work to be from 1702, hence a product of the seventeen-year-old student, the style as well as the technique is more developed than in the *Suites in F* and *A major*. The use of sequences (the same figure repeated at different pitches) and of a clear rhythmic pulsation (namely in the actual overture), but also the ornaments written out in full in the Aria and the succession of as many as three minuets, indicates, in my opinion, that this is a step further in Bach's development and not an earlier stage.

Each of the *Suites in A minor* (BWV 818a) and *in E flat major* (BWV 819a) exist in two versions. For this recording the *Sarabande simple* and the *Sarabande double* of BWV 818 have been added to BWV 818a. The *Allemande* from BWV 819 has been added to BWV 819a. Both suites have been dated in earlier editions as works from the years just before Bach left Cöthen to go to Leipzig, therefore around 1720/22. Seen from any angle, there is no possible way to be a hundred percent certain. Even though both suites give us an impression of Bach as we know him from the great French and English suites, both works are more concise in their dimensions. The *Suite in A minor* is just a bit less harmonically daring than the *Suite in E flat major*. This suite could possibly be dated later but definitely not the *Sonata in A minor*.

It is now generally accepted that the *Sonata in A minor* (BWV 965) and the *Sonata in C major* (BWV 966) are transcriptions ascribed to Bach which he must have made while still a teenager before 1705 from the two trio sonatas from *Hortus musicus recentibus aliquot Flosculis: Sonaten, Allemanden, Couranten, Sar[a]banden et Gigue* (Hamburg 1688) by Johann Adam Reincken (circa 1643-1722). In both sonatas it is surprising to note how much Bach sought to develop his own style, or rather what we consider nowadays as typical Bach, by consulting composers who were actually two generations older than himself.

The question is should we ascertain, and we do so in many ways, that Bach was in fact no innovator (at least not in the full extent of his oeuvre) or in this case it is more correct to say that Reincken, in 1688, has written strikingly modern music... Be as it may, Reincken wrote beautiful music in both his two trio sonatas, not less effective in their adaptation for harpsichord by Bach. They belong to the type *Sonate da camera* (chamber sonata) because of their succession of dances (*Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Gigue*) preceded by a prelude and fugue (in fact barely different to the Overtures).

Although both aforementioned works are recorded as sonatas, namely, based on the original title of Reincken, the writing of a harpsichord sonata as such is still not general practice at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Johann Kuhnau was the first to follow this trend around 1695. The *Sonata in D major* (BWV 963) is the only harpsichord sonata that we know by Bach (the *Sonata in A minor* should be regarded as incomplete.) He probably wrote the work before 1705. It consists of a prelude revealing the influence of Kuhnau, followed by an extensive fugue with a concluding Adagio. Finally, Bach lets us hear that he has mastered the technique of the fugue even in jest namely in a *Thema all'Imitatio Gallina Cucca*, or rather a theme in which a rooster and a hen are imitated. But the theme is also imitated because that is precisely the witticism of a fugue.

With the *Prelude, Fugue and Allegro* for lute or harpsichord (Bach shows no preference) and the *Four Duets* we reach the last creative period of the Thomas Cantorship in Leipzig. It has already been an established fact for years and no longer a question of searching. The confidence of the master characterises each of these works whether they opulently and yet modestly follow the French style, as in the late lute compositions, or pursue sobriety in their effective two-part writing, as in the duets. Bach wrote these last works originally for organ in 1739 and placed them in the third volume of his *Clavierübung*. The two-part structure of these duets makes them, for that matter, utterly suitable to perform on other instruments as well as the organ. From the point of musical development, particularly in the artistic use of counterpoint and harmonic progressions, the duets can be also considered as the crown on Bach's composing for more educational purposes comparable to his two-part *Inventions*.

Leo Samama, 2006

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