

## **J.S. BACH - PRELUDES, FUGUES**

Johann Sebastian Bach was educated primarily as a practical and consequently performing musician. In his case, as a keyboard player, as we would say nowadays, particularly as an organist, later also as a harpsichordist – apart from that he also learnt to play the violin extremely well. One could say that his training was particularly channeled towards being able to provide a musical accompaniment on the clavier for the liturgy, supporting it with appropriate musical techniques and phrasing. The young Bach did not learn from books but from practical experience, by copying what other people had already mastered, by listening to the great and less great masters of his time and by gaining experience with a minimum of effort.

After the death of his father, the following five years from 1695 to 1700 were spent with his older brother Johann Christoph in Ohrdruf. These years, parallel to his lessons at the gymnasium, were particularly directed to a thorough study of every conceivable musical technique and set form, preferably in the context of musical improvisation. Johann Christoph was a pupil of Johann Pachelbel and had worked all his life as organist in that small Thüringer town south of Gotha. No one could surpass his knowledge of the daily work. And it was precisely this knowledge that he passed on to the young Sebastian.

Playing toccatas, preludes, fugues and fantasies was a part of the daily practice routine – during the church service, weddings, funerals, baptisms and numerous other instances of communal worship. The chorales were mostly introduced by a brief improvisation on the theme or a fugato on a motive taken from the theme, so that the congregation could pitch the correct tone afterwards. Sometimes the congregation had not to join in the singing and instead just the chorale theme was played ornamented with beautiful figurations or played as a set hymn or cantus firmus embedded between the other parts. It was not uncommon that the free improvisations and virtuosic toccatas served to link the liturgical moments of the service or to create a festive or doleful mood.

Bach was already an excellent improviser at an early age and long after his death, stories circulated about his exceptional improvisations. Bach made regular use of an entire stock of existing forms and set rules but he also used earlier ideas of his own and other people. Not only in his youth, when he copied the skills of famous countrymen like Reincken or Buxtehude or the great Italians of that era, but also well into old age he continued to revert back to recognised and established successful models and techniques. He often rewrote his own works for different instrumental settings or to be used for other purposes.

The Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 894) re-live in the Triple Concerto in A minor (BWV 1044). The Fugue from BWV 901 is a different version of the Fugue in A flat major from the second book of the Well-Tempered Clavier and the Fughetta from BWV 902 is to be found in another version in the Fugue in G major in the same book. The question is how much earlier than their better-known variants were these

works written? In many cases the original manuscripts are missing and these are needed to date the very early works in particular and even some of the later compositions with accuracy. Basing this solely on grounds of style is not always sufficient.

The latter is especially difficult with the works that Bach wrote between 1700 and 1710. There are few known manuscripts from that period, only some collections specified by name like the Möllersche Handschrift and the Andreas Bach-Buch which were compiled by Johann Christoph Bach. Both collections give us a good impression of what the young Sebastian was presented with in order to learn the trade, including works of Buxtehude, Reincken, Lully and Böhm and in addition minor masters such as Buttstedt, Ritter and Fabricius. The Andreas Bach-Buch and the Möllersche Handschrift also contain works from the young Sebastian himself, such as the Prelude in C minor (BWV 921) and the Fugue in A major (BWV 949) in the first mentioned source and the Prelude and Fugue in A major (BWV 896) in the second.

It is precisely these works which can give us an impression of the development of the young composer and prevent us from identifying the compositions of the young Bach too easily on the basis of his later mature works. The Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 895) and in A major (BWV 896) are the products of a very young Bach who still had to find his way. Both compositions date in all probability from his late teens. He must have written the Prelude in C minor (BWV 921) a little later. Harmonically it is already very skilful and very contrasting in its rhythm and texture. The brilliant and virtuosic Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 894) immediately confirms how rapidly Bach's development must have taken place. Yet, Bach could scarcely have been more 25 years old when he composed this already very mature work.

The fugues written on themes of Tomaso Albinoni date from the same period when he was appointed to Weimar in 1709 after Lüneburg and Mühlhausen. The theme of the Fugue in B minor (BWV 951) comes from the opus 1:8 by Albinoni – Fuga ovvero Thema Albinonium elaboratum et ad Clavicimbalum applicatum –, which is generally performed together with the Prelude in B minor (BWV923) and it is presented in this way in various hand-written copies. The theme from the Fugue in A major (BWV 950) comes from opus 1:3 by Albinoni. The theme that Bach has used for his fugue on a theme by Reincken (BWV 954) derives from the Second sonata from his Hortus musicus.

The Fugue in D minor (BWV 948) typifies Bach's exceptional musical gifts. Although this fugue, as well as the Fugue in A major (BWV 949) is regarded as an early work, possibly dating from the first years in Weimar, the special combination of artistry and inspiration which typifies the music of the later Bach, is here already clearly visible. Like the energy that is immediately established in the first beats: a signal motive that is followed by a lengthy figure of semiquavers. Each time this signal motive re-enters in this three-part fugue, the flywheel of the fugue receives a brief impetus of increased energy. Bach has already tried this out in the Fugue in A major, but the result is less inspired, more rigid, proficient but not yet ingenious.

Between the fugal sections of the Fugue in D minor Bach allows himself to be propelled by virtuosic toccatas briefly at first and then somewhat longer at the end. No wonder, as this early work confirms, that Bach already soon after 1710 was considered to be a famous composer attracting pupils from everywhere.

The Prelude and Fugue in A minor (BWV 894) that Bach in all probability wrote either still in Weimar or during the first years in Cöthen is not less startling. Bach must have realised later that the concertante way of writing in this composition was more suitable for a concert. The fact remains that the earlier clavier version is a brilliant concert piece. Bach has apparently invested much playing pleasure here, in the virtuosic playing technique, the rapid toccata figures, the flowing harmonic turns. I find it a complete mystery why the authorship of Bach of this prelude and fugue in particular is questioned in various written accounts.

It is a fact that Bach has experimented at length, has learned by copying the art from many other people and in his youthful enthusiasm has not always been consequent in keeping the rules. Nearly all the works on this CD reflect that Bach like any other young person has learnt the profession through doing, learning by listening and experimenting, but also he has learned at high speed and extremely thoroughly. Finally this CD shows that even in the less known and less perfect works he also had the ability of a genius to surprise the listener with unexpected themes and melodic meanderings.

Leo Samama, 2005

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