

BACH 719-720 - J. S. BACH (1685-1750): VIOLIN & HARPSICHORD SONATAS & Solo Harpsichord Works

On December 2nd, 1717, 32-year-old Johann Sebastian Bach arrived at the small Court of Anhalt-Cöthen to hold the position of Capellmeister, the highest rank given to a musician during the Baroque Age. His master was the young Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, at barely 23 a relative youngster like Bach and indeed nine years Bach's junior.

As hereditary Prince, Leopold had succeeded his father at the age of ten in 1704, though as a minor he had been placed under the guardianship of his mother who ruled on his behalf. For most of his mother's interregnum, Leopold was absent from Cöthen. From 1707 to 1710, he attended the *Ritteracademie* in Berlin, one of the preeminent schools for young princes in Germany, to round off his formal education.

He then went on the "Grand Tour of Europe", as was the custom for princes and the nobility, escorted by his steward and private tutor. In October 1710, Leopold, then almost sixteen, traveled to The Hague and Amsterdam in the Netherlands, then to England, crossed parts of Germany and France, and ended up in Italy. After a visit to Venice and a three-month stay in Rome during the Spring of 1712, he returned home in April of the following year by way of Florence, Venice, Vienna, Prague, Dresden, and Leipzig, bringing back with him a considerable amount of published music.

There seems to have been much music-making along the way, as evidenced by substantial recorded expenses for harpsichord rentals and repairs as well as for strings. The historian Johann Adam Hiller, a musician writing in 1769, noted: "*This Prince Leopold was a great connoisseur and champion of music; he himself played the violin not badly and sang a good bass.*" An inventory of instruments in the Prince's private possession indicates that he also played the harpsichord and the viola da gamba.

Hiller's general assessment of Leopold's musical interest and competence matches that of Bach, who refers to Leopold in a 1730 letter as one "*who both loved and knew music.*" After the prince's formal accession to power on May 14, 1716, he was able to devote full attention to his favorite pastime.

A unique opportunity had arisen in 1713 for the Cöthen Court to hire at one stroke a substantial contingent of excellent musicians. This came about when Friedrich Wilhelm I of Prussia, the "Soldier King," rose to power in Berlin and dissolved his father's cherished Court Capelle. The young Prince Leopold, not yet of age and still on his Grand Tour, learned about the new Prussian King's act of cultural barbarism, through indirect channels or perhaps through relationships formed at the *Ritteracademie* in Berlin. He managed to persuade his mother to hire a core group of the Berlin virtuosos for the Cöthen Capelle. Indeed, she proceeded so swiftly that around the beginning of 1713, six distinguished musicians moved to Cöthen from Berlin, among them Bach's predecessor as Capellmeister, Augustin Reinhard Stricker and his wife, and Joseph Spieß who would become the Leader, or *Premier Cammer Musicus*. With the addition of the best of the local town musicians, the resultant Capelle compared favorably, in both size and quality, with the musical establishments of much larger courts.

At the end of 1717, when Bach took up Stricker's responsibilities in Cöthen, the Court Capelle numbered sixteen members (not including the Capellmeister) almost all of whom were instrumentalists, reflecting the accent on secular music rather than church music which was not encouraged at the Calvinist Cöthen Court. Bach must have been particularly pleased to work with the core group of eight chamber musicians, well trained and distinguished virtuosos; these musicians were bound to form a closely knit community. Bach apparently developed particularly warm and lasting personal relationships with some of his colleagues. He would also remain in touch both with the Court and its musicians in later years; he became godfather in 1728 to Leopold, son of the lead violinist Joseph Spiess.

In keeping with practices at other Courts, musical soirées and other forms of musical entertainment would have been an integral part of courtly life at Cöthen. The repertoire would have consisted primarily of instrumental music for larger and smaller ensembles, concertos and sonatas in particular, as well as solo pieces such as keyboard and lute suites, including the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the *French Suites*, *The Well-*

Tempered Clavier, the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, and the Suites for solo cello, as well as the Violin and Harpsichord Sonatas heard on this disc.

Thus we may perhaps visualize these Sonatas being performed in some such musical evening, in the imposing surroundings of a fairly prosperous Court, and the convivial atmosphere of friends who would most certainly have shared the Prince's musical interests and appreciated the high quality of musicianship.

So whom, in our re-created Court scene, should we place seated at the harpsichord for the performance of these Sonatas? Though Bach was an expert violinist (it was the first instrument he learned to play, and his previous employment had been as a violinist), he was by now better-known as a harpsichordist. Indeed he was acquiring a wide reputation in this capacity. And if Schmieder is correct in the dating of these Sonatas at 1720, we may assume that Bach was playing a brand new harpsichord.

Earlier in 1719, Bach had been in Berlin to acquire a new harpsichord for the Cöthen Princely Court that had been ordered from Michael Mietke, Court Instrument maker in Berlin, who was famous for building fine, elegantly decorated harpsichords.

Possibly Bach had previously visited Berlin in order to commission the instrument, but on March 1 the Court Treasury advanced him 130 talers "*for the harpsichord built in Berlin and travel expenses*", and subsequently on March 14 the Chamber Valet and Capelle Copyist was reimbursed for 8 talers cartage "*for the Berlin Clavecyn*", listed in an 1784 Capelle inventory as "*the grand Harpsichord with 2 manuals, by Michael Mietke in Berlin, 1719*".

And who would be playing the violin? No doubt Joseph Spiess, Leader of the Court Capelle who had been brought into employment from Berlin... or perhaps even the brilliant and renowned violinist-virtuoso Johann Georg Pisendel, if he had happened to be on a visit from Dresden (it is strongly suspected that Bach wrote his Solo Violin Sonatas and Partitas as a friendly challenge to Pisendel).

For informal enjoyment however, it is quite possible that Bach and Prince Leopold could have taken turns, alternating between the violin and the harpsichord, for the Prince was said to have attained a passable degree of expertise in both these instruments.

As to the works themselves, an important point to bear in mind is that they are essentially Trio Sonatas, that is, sonatas for three parts of equal importance, each part given the same prominence in composition, each having an equal turn with the melody or theme. The three parts consist of the violin as one, and the left hand and the right hands of the keyboard as the other two parts.

Any or all of the works on this disc would doubtless have been again performed during the early 1730s at Leipzig, after Bach had taken charge of the Collegium Musicum which gave regular performances in the miniature 150-seat concert hall attached to Zimmermann's Coffee House – or in summer, in Zimmermann's Gardens "outside the Grimma Gate".

We have included a selection of Solo Harpsichord works for programme variety: The Four Duets (really 2-part Inventions) were published by Bach in 1739 as part of the *Clavierübung* Part III, whilst the Fantasy in c-minor is dated 1738, together with its incomplete Fugue. The grand Fantasy & Fugue in a-minor BWV 904 is from Bach's early Leipzig years, at 1725. The Prelude & Fugue in a-minor BWV 894, however, was composed before Cöthen, during Bach's stay at Weimar. Rather than simply reintroducing it for one of the Collegium's concerts, Bach elected to rework it entirely, converting the two movements into the two outer movements of the Triple Concerto for Flute, Violin and Harpsichord, BWV 1044, using for the slow movement the *Adagio* from the Organ/Pedal-Harpsichord Trio Sonata BWV 527.

Front Cover painting: "Still Life" by Jacob Marell (1613-1681), a native of France who became a pupil of Georg Flegel in Frankfurt am Main. His still life paintings are in the Dutch and Flemish tradition, often the chosen formal arrangement to include a symbolic meaning.