

Johann Sebastian Bach and Gottfried Silbermann were contemporaries, colleagues and the greatest of friends. They both received official titles from the Dresden Court, Bach as Court Composer, Silbermann as Court Organ Builder. Bach was, as he himself said, a music-craftsman, Silbermann an organ craftsman, and both were content with nothing less than the highest expression of their respective crafts. Silbermann was godfather to Carl Philip Emmanuel Bach; there is no doubt that Silbermann was a frequent visitor in the Bach home at Leipzig. Bach was highly knowledgeable in matters of acoustic and the detail of organ construction, and was frequently called upon to provide the testing and official acceptance of new instruments. While it is noteworthy that he never provided the official certification of instruments by his friend Silbermann, he would certainly have played several of Silbermann's instruments before their official dedication, offering useful comments and perhaps criticisms from the player's point of view. The two also worked together on the first pianos, or fortepianos, a number of which were supplied to King Frederick the Great at Potsdam. It was on one of these that Bach extemporized on a Royal Theme, the basis of what would become the Musical Offering. Fitting indeed therefore, that Bach's great Organ Works should be performed on instruments by Gottfried Silbermann.

On this disc we have some major works, the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue and the "Great" Fantasia and Fugue for example, as well as some lighter works such as the Trio, the Aria and the Fugue in c minor. Here we can demonstrate the richness and power of Silbermann's instruments, as well as the "silvery sounds" famous during Silbermann's time and commented upon so favorably by Mozart. Particularly typical is the 16' Pedal Posaune found on all his organs, it gives a clear and definite bass, the "fondament" which Bach considered so important, without being overpowering – so different from the ubiquitous "Bourdon" which manages to boom without giving any clearly definable note. This comes out particularly well in the Chorale Variations BWV 725.

Our disc features three different Silbermann Organs, and if they all sound very similar this is no coincidence. Working out of his Freiberg workshops, centrally situated to serve his home state of Saxony, Silbermann formulated a standard village organ of 2 manuals and 21/23 stops – for it was mostly the surrounding villages that he was to serve as organ builder.

Silbermann was looking for mass-production, or as near as was possible. This provided him with considerable savings on pipe and woodwork construction, savings which he passed on to his customers in the form of the very best materials available and immaculate workmanship, to which he frequently added a free extra stop over and above the contracted specification. Silbermann was a good businessman! He also confined his projects to the borders of Saxony, thus minimizing transportation costs.

BWV 564, Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C, is an early work, written at Weimar around 1709. At that time Bach was deeply engrossed in the study of Italian masters. He threw himself into the perusal of Vivaldi's Violin Concertos and as a result he began to experiment, transcribing such compositions for the organ or the clavier. In this Organ work we see an attempt to create on the keyboard instrument a kind of Italian concerto consisting of three movements. The first begins with the rhapsodic passage-work traditional in organ toccatas, followed by a very extensive pedal solo. When the main theme is announced, however, we have the impression of listening to the vigorous entrance of an orchestra. There follows as second movement a lofty *Adagio* in a-minor, presenting an exquisite *Cantilena* which might almost be a soloist supported by softly accompanying instruments. The third section offers a fast fugue with unexpected pauses in its subject, achieving with the help of contrapuntal devices an effect of bold humor and piquancy.

Bach frequently adapted his own works or those of other composers. We have three examples on this disc: the **Trio in G**, an Organ adaptation from his own Sonata for Gamba and Clavier BWV 1027, last movement. **BWV 131a** is an Organ version of the Fugue which ends the wonderful, youthful Cantata 131 – *Aus der Tiefe ruf ich, Herr, zu dir* (*From the depths I cry, Lord, to Thee*).

Bach clearly had access to all the current compositions of Europe throughout his life – but even more so during his years in Leipzig, where the city's three-times-a-year Trade Fair brought together major book and music publishers. In 1726 Francois Couperin published a collection of Trios for 2 violins and continuo, one of which is the origin of the **Trio BWV 587**.

The **Prelude and Fugue in f minor BWV 534** was written while Bach was still employed at Weimar, but was seriously thinking of leaving as he had not been appointed to succeed the Capellmeister who had died in office. The intervening period, devoted to continuous composition of cantatas, clavier, and organ works, gradually endowed the composer's feelings with a measure of dignity which expresses itself in the Prelude in f-minor in concentrated composition which eschews musical decoration for virtuosity's sake. A short Toccata section at the end still betrays the attentions of the brilliant performer, but the Fugue, with its monastic theme beginning with four half-notes, deepens the contemplative temper which dominates the Prelude. The conclusion contains one of the discords, those "many strange tones" which, the authorities so often complained, confused the congregation and unsettled the choir.

The majestic **Prelude and Fugue in G Major BWV 541** is one of the few in which there is a definite connection between the thematic material of the Fugue and that of the Prelude. It appears that the Fugue was composed first, on a subject taken from Cantata 21, *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, transposed into the major and somewhat extended. A rhythmic unity binds the entire work, which is dignified and

jubilant, like the procession of angels in Jacob's dream moving continuously to and from the Lord. Bach had originally written a middle movement for the work in the manner of the Italian concerto, but he decided against this and finally used it as the *Andante* in the e-minor Trio Sonata.

The Leipzig Church Service was grounded upon the Scripture for the Day. This provided a theme for the Sermon. A chorale melody would also have been appropriate for the day as being associated with the Scripture, and Bach would generally attempt to link the chorale melody and the scriptural message together into what often amounted to a very powerful musical sermon in its own right. Also part of the service was the custom of "*preluding*" in which the organist would perform variations upon the chorale of the day, before, after and often during appropriate rests in the service. This explains why Bach composed so many sets of chorale variations, of which we hear one example in our present program.

The quiet **Pastorale** with its three movements was probably composed at Arnstadt, or perhaps early Weimar. The theme of its last movement bears a distinct relationship to the last movement of the Third Brandenburg Concerto.

We end our program with the monumental **Prelude (Fantasia) and Fugue in g minor BWV 542**, probably composed at Cöthen about 1720 and purportedly performed by Bach in the presence of Johann-Adam Reinken in the St Katharinen Kirche Hamburg, 1720. Not quite so stormy in style as the Toccata, the Fantasia of Bach's writing was still more improvisational, less straightforward in character than the Prelude. The Fantasia & Fugue in g BWV542 is one of the more famous of Bach's Organ pieces, and in fact the Fugue was already famous during Bach's time, used by Mattheson of Hamburg (who slightly altered it and called it his own) for organ candidates to work out extempore in their test performance, and was also referred to by an 18th century musician as "*the very best pedal piece by Herr Johann Sebastian Bach*". The Fantasia (or Prelude) was written with particular emphasis on the style of the Northern Organ-Masters. Its "*bursting torrents of ornament, imitative episodes, organ recitatives, the boldest modulations, and broad, resonant progressions of chords – all are here in apparent disorder, and yet the mature genius of Bach presides over it and informs it all*" (Spitta). The Fantasia falls into five distinct sections, three in what might be called the true Fantasia style, these interspersed with two short fugal movements, yet each part leading quite smoothly on to the next. The non-fugal parts of this Fantasia consist of solo passages, preceded by powerful stirring chords of strangely varying harmonies. Contrasting sharply with this moving Fantasia, yet in its very contrast complementing it, comes a lively Fugue – its theme in fact derives from an old Netherlands dance tune.

Returning in conclusion to our theme of Bach as organist and organ-tester, it is worth noting that many of Bach's organ works were composed specifically to test a new organ. The Dedication (*Einweihung*) of a new instrument was an occasion of great celebration among its congregation, often with special booklets published, and with local dignitaries present. Listening to his various organ works with this in mind, one can hear Bach trying out every possible test of the new organ's capabilities, from fast delicate finger work to powerful full-organ chords – "I want to hear if the organ has a good lung", Bach used to say. It is also on record that when Bach pulled out all the stops, the organ-builders would go pale with fright! Fortunately Silbermann's instruments were always well-endowed with a more than adequate wind supply.

Visit the Gottfried Silbermann website at www.BaroqueMusic.org/silbeng.html

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