

“Bach’s life consists of dates, facts, and didactic kitsch. His personal documents (requests, applications, advice, proposals, complaints) have no language of their own. Their pious style, their stylized flourishes stifle any response.”

Wolfgang Hildesheimer, *Mozart* (London, 1982)

However one feels about Hildesheimer’s unvarnished opinions, he is spot on about this regrettable dearth of first-hand information. Considering Bach’s life is no simple task, and we have two options as we attempt to slip into his skin: trying to come to terms with reports made by contemporaries like his sons and related by Forkel, his first biographer, writing some 50 years after his death; and relying on our own musical judgment and intuition. A combination of these approaches can lead to a certain understanding of Bach’s music.

Forkel links Bach and the clavichord in categorical terms: “He liked best to play upon the clavichord; the harpsichord, though certainly susceptible of a very great variety of expression, had not soul enough for him, and the piano was in his lifetime too much in its infancy and still much too coarse to satisfy him. He therefore considered the clavichord as the best instrument for study, and, in general, for private musical entertainment. He found it the most convenient for the expression of his most refined thoughts, and did not believe it possible to produce from any harpsichord or pianoforte such a variety in the gradations of tone as on this instrument, which has, indeed, a soft tone, but is on a small scale extremely flexible.” These strong and explicit words are curiously at odds with the scant attention paid to the clavichord in modern reference works on Bach – little more than a passing nod in most cases – and, until relatively recently, by musicians.

One suspects that writers such as Spitta, Basso and Cantagrel cannot have tried playing Bach's solo keyboard music on the clavichord themselves (or enlisted a friendly musician to do it for them) in order to find out first hand whether Forkel's affirmations held water. Had they checked, they might well have realized that Forkel – and Bach – knew what they were about, and that much of Bach's solo keyboard music, from the most modest preludes to the grandest and most elaborate suites and fantasies, suits the clavichord wonderfully well. The overwhelming evidence of sound, touch and emotion obtained when playing or listening to many of Bach's keyboard works on the clavichord is sufficient to validate Forkel's account. It confirms that the clavichord is fully able to express refined thoughts, and that it has quite enough soul to go around.

It is possible, though, that these writers had no clavichord, clavichord player or clavichord recordings on hand to help them out. Although the instrument has been around in different guises in a practically unbroken tradition since the 15th century, modern-day clavichord enthusiasts have largely been a rare (and rarefied) breed. It is only in recent decades that really excellent copies (and successful restorations of historical instruments) have made the clavichord a more reliable, widespread and musically satisfying presence, and that these instruments, along with the musicians who have learned to play them well, have made the clavichord a serious contender on the (small) concert stage and in recordings.

Were earlier writers and musicians reluctant to acknowledge the clavichord's importance in Bach's life because of its traditional role as “merely” a teaching and practice instrument, and because it was “only” played in intimate settings? This

may be so, given the negative perception of instruments used for these purposes rather than for public performance. A closer look at contemporary reports, however, suggests that study, teaching and private music making were essential and ongoing activities in both Bach's home and his professional sphere, and that the clavichord must have played a vital role in all of them.

In *Le Moulin et la rivière*, Gilles Cantagrel gives a lively description of Bach's domestic musical environment, in which it is easy to imagine the clavichord (the clavichord builder and player Derek Adlam even suggests that Bach's home had at least one clavichord in every room!): "Music at home, music in the home, *Hausmusik*. Bach lived his life in imitation of Luther. The macrocosm of the church, the community of the parish and the city, was faithfully and vigorously reproduced in the microcosm of the home. Music was indissolubly linked to the intimacy of home and hearth as well as to the sacred and the metaphysical." "And, of course, music was made on a daily basis in the family – and what a family! – on the keyboard and string instruments, flutes and oboes they knew how to play. Johann Sebastian, Anna Magdalena and the children all took part, of course, as did their lodgers, private students, and friends. 'His house was as animated as a dovecote', as C.P.E. Bach tenderly recalled."

At other times a more studious atmosphere prevailed, and as Bach's children grew up they naturally began to study with their father, learning the pieces he wrote for their instruction. The first of these "private journals" as Cantagrel calls them, because of the glimpse they provide into Bach's family life and teaching methods, was the *Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*, begun in 1720 for Bach's eldest son; other

examples include the *Notenbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach* and the *Clavierbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach*. Nine-year-old Wilhelm Friedemann copied out much of his *Clavier-Büchlein*, which includes his father's added fingering, in his own hand. Of its 62 pieces of increasing difficulty, a number of which prefigure the preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, five are included on the present album. The idea of first Bach, then his sons playing these little pieces on the clavichord, as in Forkel's report, is compelling: "(Bach) had the excellent habit of playing all the way through the pieces (his students) had to learn, saying 'It should be played this way'." Other pedagogical pieces that are similarly well suited to the clavichord are the Five Little Preludes and the Six Little Preludes, several of which also figure on this album. Forkel explains that the latter pieces were written in unusual and charming circumstances: "The first thing (Bach) did was to teach his scholars his particular mode of touching the instrument. For this purpose, he made them practice, for months together, nothing but isolated exercises for all the fingers of both hands, with constant regard to clear and clean touch. (...) But if he found that anyone began to lose patience, he was so obliging as to write little connected pieces, in which those exercises were combined together. Of this kind are the six little Preludes for Beginners (...). He wrote (them) down during the hours of teaching, and in doing so, attended only to the momentary needs of the scholar. But he afterwards transformed them into beautiful, expressive works of art." All of these short early works are, in Jovanka Marville's words, "miniature chef-d'oeuvres that anticipate Bach's great works".

As his sons progressed, Bach wrote increasingly complex music for them, including the Inventions and Sinfonias, the French and English Suites, the Partitas and the *Well-Tempered*

Clavier. It is intriguing to think that these works, now central to modern piano repertoire, were first and foremost pedagogical pieces, and that as such they would certainly have been played on the clavichord by Bach's sons, as well as by his private students and the hundreds of boys he taught during his tenure at the Leipzig Thomasschule. The Partita in E major, originally for the violin and transcribed by Bach for lute or keyboard, and the Sonata in D minor, whose keyboard transcription is attributed to W.F. Bach, make a striking impression on the clavichord. Bach regularly arranged, transcribed and reused his own works as well as those of other composers. And as Agricola reported, "He often played (his Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin) on the clavichord, adding such harmonies as he found necessary." Bach reused the first movement of the E major Partita as an "Organo obligato" in the sinfonia of the Cantata "Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir" (transcribing it into D major and adding trumpets, timpani and oboes!). Jovanka Marville, taking the tradition one step further, has discreetly added a few bass notes from the Cantata to the keyboard version heard here.

Let us now put historical considerations aside. Though they contain valuable information and afford fascinating insights, they should not be taken as the bottom line or allowed to dictate musical behavior. We should ask not only "*Did Bach use the clavichord, and if so, how?*", but also and especially "*Do we like it today?*" Players and listeners are increasingly answering yes to this question (and convincing performances will doubtless also help musicologists to take the clavichord more seriously), and albums like this one can only help to further the instrument's cause.

Marcia Hadjimarkos

With thanks to Patrick Ayrton, Sylvain Cornic and Brian Robins