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Keyboard Music of the German Baroque

The picturesque title, coming from the cover of the collection arranged by Carl Philipp Bach, could be replaced by a number of other ones. The composers' names, forms and contexts of the pieces make up a jigsaw puzzle which looks a bit different from every side and can be read by means of different keys. The one that comes to mind most immediately could be concealed under the title:

Stylus fantasticus – rhetorical music

The thoroughly rhetorical fantastic style (or perhaps the fanciful style) developed on the ground of German music though having its roots in Italian toccatas as well as preludes of French harpsichordists and lutenists is the music of gestures, figures. Its inherent features consist of drama, improvisationality, sophisticated harmony, rhythmical freedom and virtuosity.

The interpretation which is to reflect the composer's intention does not mean a literal score reading. The notation which is defined metrically and used by German (and Italian) composers in the pieces in the fantastic style is the result of a current convention. Precisely noted melodic and rhythmical figures make up rhetorical figures such as arpeggio, trill or tirata. The performance is not really a mere playing of notes but reflecting a musical gesture which frequently has a significant meaning in a rhetorical form of a piece. Such notation might be ambiguous for us. The key lies in unmeasured preludes by French composers which are noted without bar lines and rhythmical values. Time relations between sounds are shaped by harmony and melody as well as, to a certain extent, a graphical layout of the score.

The timbre result seems surprisingly similar. One of the most explicit instructions can be found in *Prelude in A minor* by Louis Couperin which in the first few lines is an exact transcription of Froberger's *Toccatà in A minor* in unmeasured notation.

Toccatà in A minor by Weckmann which opens this CD recording is the only preserved toccata by this composer that does not contain fugue fragments. It resembles laments, meditations and tombeau by Froberger. However, its rhetoric comes from Frescobaldi's toccatas. Together with *Ricercar* by Froberger (his peer and friend since the time of a famous confrontation of both musicians in Dresden) it refers to the baroque concept of juxtaposing oppositions – free prelude and strictly regulated fugue. This juxtaposition which had already been described by Athanasius Kircher who defined the fantastic style had its climax in Bach's DWK.

Plainte faite à Londres pour passer la melancholie which opens the Suite in a very characteristic of Froberger way realizes the principles of *Stylus fantasticus*. The composer who traveled across Europe could learn from local masters. It came to fruition in a very original and personal sound language. Characteristic program miniatures most often in the form of allemande belong to the most outstanding achievements of keyboard art and not without reason the names of Chopin and Froberger are mentioned together.

Traveling across Europe in the 17th century was an opportunity to gain different experience, not only connected with communing with art. London's melancholy that the composer experienced was caused by a group of buccaneers who raided the ship with the composer on board while sailing across the La Manche Channel. The second reason was a British organist who gave a newcomer a strong kick, throwing him out of his place. (All this biographical information was noted down by the composer himself in the margins of the score)

Prelude in G minor by Buxtehude is a classical example of how *stylus fantasticus* was understood by the German organ composers. Improvisatory fragments are interwoven with three fugues which, characteristically of Buxtehude are developed in a very economical way. They make use of a minimal number of out-of-thematic material and they lack internal, modulatory linking fragments. Their function is performed by very virtuoso and harmonically sophisticated free fragments.

Prelude to Suite in E major by Handel refers to the fantastic style only superficially. The first bars could be the opening of elaborate toccata. However, the composer rejects this idea and creates a homogenous, freely imitative form. He comes to more dramatic improvisational style at the end, in cadenza chords whose mode of performance – *arpeggio* depends on the performer.

The climax of the program is Bach's **Tocatta in F sharp minor**. The early work, evidently inspired by Buxtehude. A twenty-year-old Bach outdistances his master, first of all, in the harmonics of the piece.

The echo of toccata virtuosity reverberates in **Sonata** by Carl Philipp, especially in the first movement. Fast sequences of sounds and passages lose their important rhetorical function – after all, it is the music of early Classicism, *empfindsamer Stil*. Some arabesque ornaments in high register are a quiet announcement of *brilliant* style.

Looking at the composers' names in this CD recording one could think of another title:

All around Dietrich Buxtehude's music

Perhaps it is not a bad headline, yet, some people could express the wish to distance themselves from the excess of impressions provided by the works of the master from Lubeck, bearing it in mind that last year was devoted to his music. Therefore, another CD recording with his pieces might not necessarily be something they dream of ...

However, there is no denying that **Prelude in G minor** is in the centre of the program; the dates of Buxtehude's birth and death likewise because in terms of chronology they are right between Weckmann, Froberger and Bach. In Buxtehude's works the influences of the earlier masters are clearly visible and they are even more obvious in his influence on Bach.

On occasion of his trips to Hamburg where he visited Reincken (another important North German organist), Buxtehude probably met Weckmann. Thanks to him he had an opportunity to know Froberger's music.

On another page of the chronicle one can see young Johann Sebastian traveling, as the legend says, on foot across half of the country only to meet a North German master. There is also a famous story about the master's daughter who must have had either a nasty character or not very impressive looks if young Bach rejected a good position and a great

organ deciding not to marry her (this marriage was a condition that Buxtehude made for candidates who wanted to be his successors).

Young Handel, who came to Hamburg because of the thriving municipal opera theatre (the only one in Germany at the time) must have come across the North German organ tradition. He was only a few hours by stagecoach from Lubeck.

There is also one more, less evident reason for this title which honors Buxtehude. ***Toccata in F sharp minor*** by Bach, when analyzed carefully brings to mind the interpretation recently suggested by Pieter Dirksen. The piece probably composed in 1707 is a kind of tombeau – a monument, expression of gratitude and recognition for Buxtehude given by young Bach. A rhetorical form of the piece resembles a simple form of baroque gravestones. Descending parts of fugues (the parts of the first fugue – if it can be classified as fugue – and of the third fugue which descend chromatically), *refutatio* in the form of a one-bar motif revolving in the labyrinth of multi-sharp keys in the middle part of the piece, and finally the main key – at the time of not equally-tempered system not many pieces were composed in F sharp minor. A famous prelude by Buxtehude (BuxWV 146) was one of the first one and the most famous one. Choosing this key Bach clearly made a reference to the older master.

***Stile misto* – Italian and German influences**

This title has been provided by Johann Joachim Quantz who in the treatise *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* published in 1752 touches upon a number of problems dealing extensively with national styles. The mixed style was born thanks to German composers who created a synthesis of two leading baroque styles – French and Italian, choosing what was the best from each of them.

It was not only Quantz who noticed this feature of German music. Earlier, it was examined by Mattheson. This observation is quite obvious and it does not need careful studies. It is not even necessary to look at the score. It is enough to analyze the biographies of the composers and the names of the musicians in the ensembles of the German court. After a destructive 30 Year War, German language territories were recovering with a surprising tempo. Foreign artists, especially those from Italy and France were the sign of prestige and wealth of the court. They were employed gladly and their fees were high. German musicians who wanted to satisfy the tastes of their patrons (and the same their own financial needs) had to learn from their Italian and French colleagues. Many of them traveled to the cradle of 'real' art.

Johann Jakob Froberger was one of the most important composers in the post-war generation. Thanks to his studies with Girolamo Frescobaldi (financed by the Viennese court) he acquired profound knowledge about Italian music. During his stay in Paris he met Louis Couperin and Jacques Ch. de Chambonnières.

Quantz considers Frescobaldi as one those artists who refined German instrumental music to such an extent that it ceased to be called with contempt: *giusto barbaro*

Ricercar in D minor is the result of careful research into Italian music. The piece will become an inspiration for Johann Sebastian Bach as a visible sign of a great talent, and very good adjustment to the idiom of keyboard counterpoint. Having adapted the counterpoint rules to major-minor and well-tempered system, it was probably only Bach who surpassed Froberger.

Courante, Sarabande and Gigue from the **30th Suite** are the top-class French music.

The same concerns *Allemande* and *Courante* by Handel – the composer who mastered all styles of his epoch. Although Italian opera was close to him, in his pieces he could juxtapose different genres and styles in a very successful and colorful way. It is noticeable in his *Suite in E major*, where apart from the aforementioned French dances, the opening constitutes Italian-German *Prelude* and the end English *Air with Variations*.

Toccata in A minor by Weckmann, *Präludium* by Buxtehude and *Toccata in F sharp minor* by Bach are the development of Frescobaldi's ideas. They make up a chronological sequence in which every element is the result of a preceding one. In this way a German tree grows from the Italian roots. It is significantly influenced also by a particularly well-developed art of organ playing in the baroque Germany.

Sonata in B flat major by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach comes from the collection of 6 *Prussian Sonatas* from around 1742. The influence of Italian *bell canto* is obvious here. The French features are deeply hidden ...

Finally, the beginning ...

Keyboard Music of the German Baroque

German noun *Klavier* resembles English *keyboard* and means the instrument with keys. At the time of Froberger and Buxtehude it might have been a harpsichord, clavichord, virginal or spinet and – in certain contexts – an organ. In the 18th century a group of *Klavier* instruments was expanded to include the first models of pianoforte and Tangentenflügel. Only the idiom of Froberger's *Suite* is explicitly 'string-like.' *Sonata* by Carl Philipp could sound very well both when performed on the organ and harpsichord for which it was originally composed. The same concerns *Suite* by Handel. The other pieces: *toccatas*, *Prelude*, *Ricercar* and *Contrapunctus* are written both for an organ and any keyboard instrument.

Coda: when writing about music of the German baroque, it is impossible not to mention its biggest treasure:

The way to Bach

This noble title taken from Bohdan Pocij's writing shows another side of the puzzle. Different ways, more or less overgrown. Some of them going clockwise, the others – on the contrary following the same direction as the thoughts of the historian and musicologist, the others less metaphoric, visible on the maps as this one between Leipzig and London or as the impassable one between Halle and Eisenach.

Handel is probably the most exterritorial composer on the program. He chose a career in a big city. The world of opera, the world of dramatic changes as well as the Italian sun in the greyness of London. He was nowhere near Bach.

The words about brilliant eclecticism and prophetic inventiveness of the Leipzig Cantor have already been noted down so many times before that their next repetition might dangerously overstrain the links between the syllables. Froberger – Bach, Buxtehude – Bach, Bach – Bach, etc.