

LIR CLASSICS

LIR012 - PROGRAMME NOTES

J.S.Bach, Clavierübung I & II

1685 was a vintage year for music in that it produced Handel and Scarlatti and above all J S Bach. Bach was born the second son of Johann Ambrosius Bach at Eisenach. He was to live in a German world that was in turmoil politically, ravaged by the wars that led to the gradual emergence of Prussia as a leading military power. It was also a German world that was deeply religious and largely Lutheran, even though Augustus the Strong, King of Saxony (which included Leipzig), made a strategic conversion to Roman Catholicism. J S Bach was part of an extended musical dynasty, for which music was a livelihood as much as a fulfilment. Nevertheless music seems to have meant much to him from an early age, for it was while living with his elder brother after his parents' deaths that he was impelled to seek out forbidden musical manuscripts at dead of night and copy them by moonlight. He had been orphaned at 10, for early death thinned out the numerous ranks of the Bachs remorselessly, and by the age of 15, his brother's limited circumstance and growing family put him to the necessity of supporting himself. He managed this first as a chorister at St Michael's, Lüneberg, where he almost certainly heard Georg Böhm. His further musical education consisted of minor appointments and journeys undertaken to gain wider experience from the most famous musicians in Germany at the time - notably Reinken and Buxtehude.

Most of his working life was divided between three main appointments, at the courts of Weimar (1708 to 1718) and Köthen (1718 to 1725), possibly his happiest years professionally, and thereafter as Kantor at St Thomas's, Leipzig until his death in 1750. Unfortunately much of his life was beset by stress and anxiety, and by personal tragedies such as the death of his first wife in 1720. More than half his children preceded him to the grave. There were humiliating disputes with his employers, and with colleagues and subordinates who were often incompetent or hostile, or both. At Leipzig his colossal workload seems at one stage to have extended to the teaching of Latin, as well as training up scratch choirs and instrumentalists and composing music for the weekly services, including the weekly cantata. Petty rivalries deprived him of competent musicians from the University, whose trained response might have given more satisfaction. Moreover people of Leipzig listened to his music Sunday after Sunday, year after year, without any one ever appearing to notice that here was music of a greatness several orders of magnitude beyond anything to be heard at that time - or almost any other.

He seems to have turned to the inner life of religion with music as the medium and expression of religious experience, and this seems to have provided him both with refuge from the world and the strength to continue within it. It is a paradox is that he was also a searching spirit with a life-long interest in musical developments throughout the civilised world; he never ceased experimenting with new combinations and cross

fertilisations of musical forms, infusing archaic styles with new life and making time to write music for its own sake, over and beyond what was required of him.

It was in Leipzig in 1725 that he began to follow the example of Kuhnau, his immediate predecessor, and publish his own work. He began with Partita No. 1 in B flat, the first of six Partitas for harpsichord, which he published at the rate of one a year, finally bringing them together as his Opus 1, with the title *Clavierübung Part I*.

Clavierübung Part I

The title page bore the inscription [translated], 'Keyboard practice, consisting of Preludes, Allemandes, Courantes, Sarabandes, Giges, Menuets, and other Galanteries, composed for the agreeable diversion of enthusiasts by Johann Sebastian Bach'. This was the unassuming description given by their author to six of his most outstanding achievements. The six works for unaccompanied violin are unlike anything else in the literature: similarly there is nothing like the six compositions for solo cello. The six Partitas of this Opus 1 are just as important to the harpsichord, and it is significant that it was these works that Bach, with much of his finest music already in existence, chose to publish first.

In the Partitas the formal perfection of Bach's thought achieves a level exceptional even in this most rigorous of composers. These are not the random assemblages suggested in Bach's title: each Partita is a close-knit musical organisation of remarkable integrity and power. But more than that, each is an odyssey of varied musical experience, as different from its companions as every symphony of Beethoven is different from any other. They differ in matters of balance, with the tensions and weight poised differently among the movements. Partita No. 1 turns on its central Sarabande: No. 3 has its culmination in the final Gigue. No. 4 hangs spread between its first and last movements. They differ, too, in the distinctive emotional response that each evokes. Each Partita also has its own recurring musical figuration and progressions, harmonic and melodic elements that re-echo through each work, but not in any order.

With some exceptions, notably the opening movement of each work, a common form predominates. Each movement is divided into two parts. The first half, which modulates into the relative major or into the dominant, is played over. It is then repeated in full. Then the second half, which modulates back to the tonic, is likewise played over and repeated. The repeats are important. Not only do they establish the formal balance and the proportion of each work, but the music sounds different the second time round. It sets up different resonances on repetition because it involves an abrupt switch, a return to the tonic from the dominant or relative major in the first half repeat, and a return to the dominant or relative major from the tonic in the second half repeat. These returns are rich in suggestion.

Although this is no place for a minute analytical discussion of the movement forms that constitute Bach's Partitas, perhaps a mention might be made of his use of the terms 'Courante' and 'Corrente', especially since some editions give 'Courante' in all six Partitas. This conceals the fact that Bach was giving an important pointer to performing practice in differentiating between the freshness and simplicity of the Italian version and the greater elaboration of the French.

Clavierübung Part II

In 1735 he followed up the six Partitas with Clavierübung Part II, consisting of the Italian Concerto and the French Overture which are tributes to foreign musical styles and yet, another paradox, are Bach at his most individual. They also provide guidelines as to Bach's broad architectural approach to performance, in that they contain explicit and unfussy registration markings for dividing the music between the two manuals of the harpsichord. These are the two works which begin this set of CDs, which is laid out so that each CD played through on its own makes a good programme.

Concerto in the Italian Style in F major BWV 971

Bach was often at his most appealing and accessible when writing in the Italian Style. The Brandenburg Concertos, modelled on the Italian Concerto Grosso, are probably his most popular works, and a characteristic of the Concerto Grosso is the ritornello structure found in many outer movements. The ritornello theme is given to the tutti, the orchestra. It is played in full at the beginning and the end of the movement, and elsewhere in partial form. In between these tutti appearances, a solo group branches off in countersubjects and elaborations. In the Italian Concerto, Bach ingeniously adapted this form for solo harpsichord. His dynamic markings show that he intended the lower 'forte' manual to take on the role of the tutti and the upper 'piano' manual that of the solo group. The steady opening movement is music of magnificent conviction, and it contains a number of Italianate characteristics, the ritornello structure, the sheer Mediterranean tunefulness, and the pulsating left hand chords with which Bach pushes forward in the first solo section. These repeated chords could have come out of a Scarlatti Sonata or The Four Seasons of Vivaldi.

The Andante touches great depths. A four-bar ground bass is played at the outset, and its free variations throughout the movement accompany a seamless melody in the right hand. This movement provides the perfect example for the decoration of a Baroque slow movement. In the first half, where the music winds elegiacally into F major, Bach makes an aspiring effect from the ever widening intervals between the melodic line and the dominant pedal-point in the bass. The effect is repeated towards the end with an added poignancy from the fact that the music is now in the tonic minor. This is a beautiful closing touch: generally the ground bass recurs at the end of such a movement unadorned, exactly as at the beginning, but here it is an octave lower, and Bach super-imposes onto it an expressive coda.

Bach's fast movements are mostly marked 'allegro' or left without tempo indication; when he wrote 'presto' he meant it. This Presto finale, another ritornello movement, is instantly alive with Italianate zest. As an expression of joy it has few equals in music; and it rounds off the perfect balance of one of Bach's most wonderful conceptions.

Partita in B minor BWV 831 (Overture in the French Style)

The B minor Partita is in fact Bach's seventh and last work for harpsichord in this form, and like the other six it consists of a set of dance movements preceded by the overture, which gives its name to the work as a whole. An earlier version of the French Overture exists in C minor, but B minor seems particularly appropriate for a work that has generally so much in common with Francois Couperin's *Ordre* in the same key and shares its peculiar blend of elegance and splendour. It is hard to imagine how he could have surpassed the drama of the opening movement or the work's other corner-stones, the Sarabande and the Echo.

The first movement is in three sections, the first of which is measured, music of weight and tension. Its ornaments are elaborate and propulsive, and the dotted rhythms of the French Overture emphasise the harmonic stresses within the polyphony. The tension continues through the second section, a driving fugue with extended interludes that Bach marked to be played on the upper manual. These interludes have their own musical material but they borrow a cadence from the fugue. The third culminating section is measured, mirroring the first and symmetrical with it, in that it has the same number of bars and uses the same musical material.

For once there is no Allemande to make a relaxed contrast and, as if to compensate, the Courante is more flowing and less angular than usual. Recent research into the steps that originally went with these dance forms has provided useful insights into the proper conventions for playing them. The Gavotte was traditionally a rather four-square dance, and Bach's musical lines are forthright, even solidly shaped to match. There are two Gavottes, the first of three sets of movements in this work that come in pairs. In each case the second movement of the pair acts as a foil to the first, somewhat like a trio. Gavotte II provides contrast in three ways; it switches to the relative major, to the tenor register, and to simpler two part counterpoint that is unlike the heavy chording of Gavotte I.

Both Passepieds are lighter, and the first of them has an attractive kick to the principle figuration. The second is the only episode in the whole partita that is in the tonic major - B major; the sharp rhythm of the Passepied softens, the tension lessens, and the writing glows.

The Sarabande, customarily the centre weight of a Bach Suite often consists of a single line over sustained harmonies, but in this instance it is in four-part polyphony. This complexity in combination with long note values creates a monumental effect. A more flowing figure adds its voice periodically among the heavy chords, but ceases at those junctures such as the concluding bars, where the interplay of parts is already too complex for further elaboration. Bach's two Bourrées have the traditional fleeting swiftness of this dance. The second of the pair has no change of key; Bach achieves a contrast by a change of metre.

The Gigue has its metre accentuated by its swinging runs. Its two-part counterpoint makes a leaner texture than usual; more often than not in Bach the Gigue provides a conclusion of weight and power, but here a more powerful movement follows, the celebrated Echo. The echo effects are in fact elaborated repeats on the softer, upper manual of phrase fragments played in a stronger form on the lower manual. Despite the thinner writing in these echoes, the movement leaves an impression of weight and tension and provides a conclusion of absolute finality.

Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903

Unlike the two works that make up Clavierübung Part II, the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue are not in a foreign style, even though the bi-partite form of the Fantasy echoes the outline of some Toccatas of Frescobaldi. An arresting opening drives headlong into a toccata-like section of great pace and formal freedom, a display of brilliant passagework. This gives way to arpeggios that shift and change like some harmonic kaleidoscope in modulations that have considerable breadth of expression. At length the music comes to a full close in the dominant. The Fantasy now begins its second half with an angular melodic line that stands out like a recitative over its accompaniment. It grows increasingly declamatory and pulls the music through a variety of strange keys. The final shift back to the tonic is so unexpected that some performers feel impelled to halve the tempo to lessen its disconcerting suddenness. However Bach's abrupt

switch and the effect of tonal instability are best not played-down as there follows a closing passage specifically designed to resolve it. Pedal point Ds anchor the music firmly in the tonic. Against these Ds repeated in the bass, the right hand has appoggiatura figures descending chromatically, which create grinding discords and indicate that this closing section is conceived as strong. This is an affirmation of the tonic, rather than a fade-out, a traditional view probably bequeathed by nineteenth century pianism.

The chromaticism of the Fugue subject represents Bach at his most uncompromising, and an energetic counter-subject balances its slow strength. This Fugue also has two 'interludes' and it is these interludes that set the tempo. If taken too fast, they simply rattle along. They need time to breathe in order to provide contrast, and it is only by allowing them their full expression that the fugue material can make its full impact at each re-appearance. This also brings out the sense of growth that the fugue has generated, continuing it right though to the left hand octaves of the closing bars.

Partita No. 1 in Bb major, BWV 825

Partita No. 1 in Bb major is music of strength and affirmation. It is not only in a major key; most of its principle motifs are made up of harmonically consonant figuration. The opening subject of the Praeludium is purposive, based on a rising scale, and it becomes the basis of a three-part invention that has considerable variety of expression. The sixth and final appearance of the subject clinches the impact of movement well beyond its short duration.

The Allemande takes up the G, A and Bb from the rising scale of the Praeludium, and sends a single melodic line twining round these notes. Bach creates the illusion of more than one part by means of the harmonies that he sets glowing and resonating in that line. When a second part does genuinely come in, it interweaves with the

first in a way that recalls the origins of the Baroque Allemande as 'an elaborate, elegant dance, involving the partners in the tender play and amorous language of the arms'.

The Corrente is in the lively Italian style implied by its name (as opposed to the French Courante). It takes melodic elements from the Praeludium and several progressions from the Allemande, and some of its own figurations will recur in the Gigue.

The Sarabande is the corner stone of the work. Its single melodic line is magnificently ornate, and where it borrows from earlier movements, it reaches onwards with increasing grandeur. The mood lightens more playfully in two Menuets (rather like a Menuet and Trio) that rearrange existing figurations in further new combinations. The Gigue that ends the Partita is one of its most singular features. Bach often produced a weighty conclusion, but this Gigue has a dragonfly quality, partly because of the very sound of the harpsichord flitting between widely separated registers, and partly because its rapid pace does not include a single chord of any kind, however many are implied there.

Partita No. 2 in C minor, BWV 826

Partita No. 2 is charged with dark undercurrents and a suggestion of tragedy. Its greatness of spirit is personal, but its force and rhythm come from Bach's fusion of the supple tensile quality of French writing for the harpsichord with the slab-like breadth of the North German organ style. The warm sonorities of Partita No. 1 have no place

here. Most movements are based on figurations that are harmonically dissonant if played as chords, and Bach concentrates on angular two-part counterpoint.

The tone is set at once by the drastic Grave Adagio, which opens the Sinfonia. The dotted rhythm of a French Overture and the full harmony make for magnificence and tension. There follows an Andante with a swaying, wandering melody over a rocking bass that comes to rest in the dominant without resolving any of the initial tensions. The resolution is left to the third section; a two-part Fugue whose wide interval skips and vigorous rhythms drive onwards to a sudden but conclusive end. The Allemande is flowing and it plays on the tensions set up between fourths and sevenths. The following Courante gains fire and poise from sharp cross-rhythms.

The Sarabande is in spare two-part counterpoint, and there is something drastic and inexorable about its progress, unmitigated by elegance or ornament. The Rondeaux that follow are a stroke of imagination, for Bach exploits the Rondeau-couplet form with a delicacy that is apt. Its fleeting will o' the wisp makes the strongest contrast to the Sarabande, and to the Capriccio that comes last.

The Capriccio has leaps of a tenth, the same figuration as the first movement of the Double Violin Concerto. It carries enough weight to balance the beginning of the Partita and its full textures and extended scale give the end a stark finality and conviction.

Partita No. 3 in A minor, BWV 827

The third Partita in A minor is marked by subtlety, intellectual concentration and understatement. There is tension but it lies beneath the surface.

The Fantasy that starts it avoids rhetorical emphasis and runs with steady drive, evolving an interest unusual for the spare form of a two-part invention, which is what it is.

The Allemande softens expressively, but the expressiveness is delicate and discreet. It draws on the limpid sonority of the harpsichord when the writing is rich in overheld notes and undamped strings. The Corrente takes fire from sharp rhythms and wide interval skips, and from a tendency to head for unexpected keys in unexpected registers.

The Sarabande makes a grave centrepiece. A profound yet oblique sadness lies in the main theme with its expressive triplets, but the bass treads on stoically. The music modulates with all the variety and harmonic intensity that Bach could draw from an elaborate three-part counterpoint, but always against that tolling bass.

Sharp and fleeting, the Burlesca is light in texture, but not in mood. The Scherzo in 2/4 is no contrast, but a forceful air, set over sharp chords that alternate with a running bass line. The Gigue comes as the fruition of what has gone earlier, and at first the powerful fugue subject places heavy insistence on the tonic. Then, in the second half, Bach is unusually strict in his inverting of the subject for a second fugue, and the result is modulation into remote keys at an ever-increasing rate. This heightens the tension and culminating effect.

Partita No. 5 in G major, BWV 829

This lovely work scales no peaks and plumbs no chasms, for its spirit is mildness and beatitude. Yet musically it is a Partita where nothing is quite what it seems, where Bach constantly devises the unexpected.

The opening Praeambulum starts Handelian and forthright, with an apparently deliberate pulse of three crotchets in a bar. Yet it proves to be a movement of scurrying semi quavers, with much crossing of hands - and of rhythm.

The Allemande is in triplets, the only one of the six to be so, and is one of the richest in polyphony, now in two, now in three voices, blending and flowing together. The Corrente again starts with Bach at his most Handelian and direct, much of it gleaming in high registers. But after the double bar, Bach transfers the original melodic line from the right hand to the left, where it becomes the bass for a completely new melody, which dominates the second half.

The Sarabande gives out a melody harmonised in thirds and sixths - and then, as the movement progresses, it becomes apparent that the 'harmonies' are counterpoints that branch off on independent melodic lines of their own. The almost continuous dotted rhythm is another feature unusual in the six Partitas. The Tempo di Minuetto crosses the 3/4 pulse with 6/8; and the use of a single melodic line to provide its own internal harmony adds to the ambiguity. Handel is again recalled by the Passepied, and there are moments when it sounds like a gigue.

The form of the Gigue itself bears some resemblance to that of Partita No. 4, in that the first half merges strict fugue with free polyphony, but the second half is completely unconventional. Towards the end of the first half, the voices in combination generate an insistent rhythm. In the second half Bach extracts this rhythmic figure with all the melodic associations that it has gathered to make a new motif. This motif is now given a trill conclusion, and established as the subject for a new fugue which launches the second half. The music takes in the Gigue's original subject as well, and an accumulation of stretto trills continues to enrich this complex music towards its fullest effect in the final bars.

Partita No. 6 in E minor, BWV 830

E minor often finds Bach at his most uncompromising: there is tragedy as in the B Minor Mass 'Crucifixus' and the great chorus that opens the St Matthew Passion: or there is the Gothic power of the 'Wedge' Prelude and Fugue for organ. The Partita in E minor has something of both worlds. It provides an exceptional display of performing and compositional techniques, but it makes its impact as some great Ode to Adversity. Its nodal movements, the opening Toccata, the vast Sarabande and the Gigue, are marked by the weight of Bach's chords and the granite power and clash of his harmonies.

The Toccata falls into three closely-linked sections, and all three are knit from common thematic elements. The first, with which it opens, is an arpeggio flourish rising to a powerful appoggiatura figure that incorporates the dotted rhythm of a French Overture. This is answered by a second thematic element of rapid passage work, and the two alternate until the music settles down into the dominant. Then the contour softens into the third element, a rhythmic but expressive figure that is to become the basis of the interludes in the movement's central fugue. The remainder of the opening section is built from these three elements, and it eventually closes in the tonic minor. Immediately the appoggiatura figure pushes forward in the left hand acquiring a trill and emerging as the main subject of the fugue. Though power is predominant, it encompasses some of Bach's most poignant music, and as mentioned earlier, the interludes are all drawn from the third element of the opening section. The final interlude eventually dissipates the fugue impetus in the dominant. It provides a natural lead into the music of the last section, which uses material from the first, much changed and varied. Superficially, therefore, the movement has taken an ABA form. But the interlude music is heard no more: the final section uses only two of the

three motifs from the first. The result is rigorous thematic cohesion and perfect balance without symmetry.

The Allemande carries on a dotted rhythm, and gives limpid sound to a melos of haunting chromaticism. Only Francois Couperin equalled the transparency and glow of Bach's harpsichord writing in movements like this.

The Corrente moves forward on restless syncopations that suddenly quicken into running demi-semiquavers, and Bach eventually combines both effects. A short Air is interpolated next, simple and plangent, alternating scales with wide interval skips and rounding off with a 'petit reprise', a coda that elaborates the closing bars of the second half. The Sarabande again takes up the opening motif of the Partita with its important dotted rhythm and, as Bach makes more use of the deep bass of the harpsichord, the effect is yet more sombre. This movement seems to look adversity in the eye: the dotted rhythm is at its most magnificent with the weightiest of chords. Against this, in sharp relief, Bach has thrown a melodic line of the utmost intricacy and declamatory freedom. The antithesis sets up passionate tension, the dialogue grows ever more complex, and Bach's harmony grows ever more daring. The Tempo di Gavotta is cast in two-part counterpoint, resembling the Air in varying songfulness with wide interval skips.

The final Gigue exemplifies a famous crux in Baroque performing practice - how binary notation should be played in a movement that traditionally implies triplet rhythm. There is no 'correct' answer. The Gigue is built on a jagged theme that makes the subject for a vigorous fugue. The pulse is driving but steady at first, then galvanises as shorter note values become prominent. The second half uses the inversion of the subject with a strictness of form not found in any other gigue among the Partitas. The startling harmony generated by the counterpoints against the strange intervals of the principal subject at one and the same time manifest Bach's technical command and his unsurpassable intensity.

Partita No. 4 in D major, BWV 828

The D major Partita is Bach's longest: and it is a particularly life-enhancing work. It starts and ends with movements that seem to be affirmations of dominion and power. Between these lie a broad sequence of movements that vary between tranquillity and active eloquence.

The Overture has an unusual form, with the first section cast like the stately beginning of a French Overture. Bach's rich polyphony combines in harmonies of gravity and strength, emphasised by the forward thrust of the dotted rhythm. Thereafter the polyphonies trail upwards into high registers and thin into two parts leaving a musical question mark in the dominant. This is answered by a full repeat from the beginning, the tonic reaffirming magnificence. But again the music trails into the dominant, and it is in the dominant that Bach starts a fugue that is remarkable for its shifts of pulse within a single tempo. Sometimes the pulse of dotted crotchets is prominent, bringing a rock-like firmness: sometimes there is the steady momentum of quavers, and sometimes the music is dominated by the exhilarating pace of semiquaver figures. At the end, Bach combines all three. This is one of his best fugues. Ever since Schweitzer some writers are bothered by Bach's tendency apparently to fall off towards the end of some fugues. This one goes from strength to strength, and it ends the movement. There is no repeat of the slow opening: instead of ABA form, Bach has given us AAB, but the balance of this asymmetrical structure is never in doubt.

The Allemande is music of serenity, with occasional shadows. Bach has spun a melodic line of extraordinary length and concentration, merging phrase seamlessly into phrase, and accompanying it with two consonant voices. The sonority has a gentle radiance. The Courante takes energy from its characteristic rhythm and the three-part polyphony blends diatonically.

An Aria is interpolated before the Sarabande, accompanied by simple harmonies or a single counterpoint, with a happy and artless effect. The Sarabande begins with a question which is posed twice more in the second part of the movement. Each time it provokes in response the same songful elaboration as marked the Allemande, with some figuration from the Courante and some progressions that echo both movements. The effect is an elegiac simplicity that yet touches great depths.

The Menuet recalls the artlessness and the harmonies of the Aria. In the Gigue, the Partita again rises to the scale and magnificence of the Overture. The movement sets out as a fugue, but develops in free polyphony. Indeed, the last eight bars of the first half are virtually repeated, transposed from dominant to tonic, at the end of the second. This breaks the general rule of gigue-writing where the second half is usually based on a strict inversion of the subject, but when the result is music of such sweep and conviction, it is time not to quibble, but to marvel.

Elizabeth de la Porte

The harpsichord used for Disc 1, tracks 1-15 is a two manual instrument by John Feldberg after Jean Goujon, a French builder active during the early eighteenth century. The harpsichord used for Disc 1, tracks 16-21, Disc 2 and Disc 3 is a two manual instrument by Michael Johnson after the Goermans-Taskin in Edinburgh at the Raymond Russell collection. As with originals of each instrument, there is a sliding coupler to the upper manual, which has a single 8 foot stop. The lower manual of each instrument has the customary 8 foot and a 4 foot stop, and additionally a Peau de Buffle (Buffalo Hide) stop, a special effect heard in the second Passepied of the French Overture. The harpsichord by Michael Johnson is tuned in a temperament devised by Andreas Werckmeister. This system differs from equal temperament in the particular compromises it employs to enable all keys to sound equally well, and it brings to certain chords and modulations an individuality and richness that are partly lost with modern equal temperament.