

LIR CLASSICS

LIR014 - PROGRAMME NOTES

Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, 1710 - 1784 12 Polonaises (Falck 12) - 8 Fugues (Falck 31)

Considering his stature as a musician, it is astonishing how little of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach's compositional output was printed during his lifetime, and indeed is available today. He was, by all accounts, an exceptional improviser and perhaps committed little to paper for this reason, but that alone cannot explain the few slim volumes which account for his surviving output for keyboard instruments. In 1745 the first sonata of a projected set of six appeared in print, and was not well received. Modernists found it old-fashioned with its predominantly three-part contrapuntal texture, but it also failed to find favour with the more conservative musical public, who found it technically demanding and difficult to understand. The more approachable second sonata in E flat, published in 1748, fared better, but not well enough to encourage publication of the full set of six. The Twelve Polonaises, written between the years 1754 and 1765, were possibly intended to win back public approval. Polonaises for keyboard instruments were at this time fashionable. The public wanted them. J.G. Goldberg's 24 Polonaises in every major and minor key were technically accessible, and their galant style matched the taste of the Dresden public. Other composers to publish pieces in the genre were J. G. Löhlein (1765), J. L. Albrecht (1760) and G. G. Ziegler (1764). It is understandable that Friedemann should think he was on to a winner, but although the pieces were widely circulated in manuscript form amongst connoisseurs they were not printed during his lifetime. A fair copy seems to have been prepared, the first six in W.F.'s hand, the remainder, probably later, in the hand of a professional copyist, but they were clearly considered technically and musically too difficult for the wider public. The composer, conductor and writer C. F. Zelter, writing in 1820 found them tiresome and contrived. Muzio Clementi published them, some transposed, in the early 1800s, but it was only in 1819 that Peters produced the first serious edition, under the editorship of Friedrich Conrad Griepenkerl (1782 - 1849). This edition followed the fair copy quite closely, and included an enthusiastic and, for the time, enlightened introduction wherein the editor recommends the clavichord as preferred performance medium. Peters reissued this edition periodically, minus the introduction and with an increasing overlay of slurs and dynamics, well into the 20th century. The fair copy, which had been housed in Berlin (P699), was considered lost for many years until its rediscovery in the 1980s, when it formed the primary source for Henle's new edition.

Griepenkerl studied with Forkel, who was himself a student of Friedemann Bach, so his preface is not to be dismissed out of hand. Much like the Polonaises of Chopin, Friedemann's Polonaises are stylised dances, preserving only the "inner rhythm" of the true polonaise, which is most closely approximated by those in Eb major and F major. The D minor he considered would have the fastest tempo, the Eb minor the slowest.

With regard to the F minor polonaise, he mentions that neither Friedemann nor Forkel played all the prescribed ornamental turns identically, instead "playing nearly every one different from the others, often in slower-moving notes which sounded as if they belonged to the main melody".

The depth of expression encompassed by the twelve pieces is great, and the musical and technical demands placed on the performer are not inconsiderable, so it is hardly surprising that publishers were wary of them. Ironically, the Eight Fugues would probably have been a publishing success. They were announced in 1778 but only one printed copy was made, dedicated to Frederick the Great's sister, Anna Amalia, with whom Friedemann was attempting to curry favour. Forkel remarked, probably rightly, that the reputation attached to the Polonaises and Sonatas discouraged their wider publication, although the general public's mistrust of them was unfounded. The Fugues are all in three parts, and certainly present the player with no greater technical challenge than, for example, the Sinfonias by Friedemann's father. Stylistically they are a curious mixture of old and new, and as such mirror the character of their composer; Friedemann became increasingly eccentric in his old age, at one time attributing his own pieces to his father, at another appropriating Sebastian's pieces as his own. No doubt the expectations heaped on him as firstborn by his father had a lot to answer for. The naive simplicity of the subjects of the C minor and Bb major Fugues is strongly reminiscent of Sebastian's Invention subjects. The F minor Fugue recalls Sweelinck's Fantasia Chromatica from an even more distant past. On the other hand we have the rhythmic quirkiness and jagged chromaticism of the D minor fugue and the yearning sensibility of the Eb major and E minor subjects. That all these pieces are products of the Age of Sensibility is very soon audible. Even the most conservative of themes is often abandoned for many bars

in favour of episodes of pre-Romantic indulgence, with the composer returning to it, as it were, reluctantly, needing to remind himself that he is, in fact, writing a fugue! These pieces by their schizophrenic nature are thus little mirrors of the complex character that was Wilhelm Friedemann Bach.

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