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CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH AS THE 300TH ANNIVERSARY OF HIS BIRTH APPROACHES

Abstract: The lecture deals with an important figure in European music, C. P. E. Bach, on the occasion of the upcoming 300th anniversary of his birth. It discusses his influence on the development of European music, especially on piano performance and piano teaching. It refers to his compositional legacy in works devoted to keyboard instruments. It gives reasons for the use of the fortepiano as the ideal instrument for the performance of his works. It recalls the important musical composers of the classicist and romantic periods whose work was inspired by that of C. P. E. Bach.

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The Legacy of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

We are approaching a major anniversary of a person who influenced in a most remarkable way the development of piano composing and interpretation and of piano teaching. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was born on 8th March 1714, so we will soon be celebrating the 300th anniversary of his birth.

The 300th anniversary of the invention of the fortepiano by Bartomeo Cristofori was regarded as a noteworthy event in the wider European context and this fact was widely commemorated in exhibitions, lectures and publications. C. P. E. Bach composed during the transition from the high baroque to classicism - and it is worth saying, in view of his artistic credo - and on to romanticism. For pianists his significance is unique in that in a natural and very creative manner he constructed the bridge for the transition from the clavichord to the fortepiano. The harpsichord, not greatly favoured by him, then stands out as a separate and independent instrument, in the way it vindicated the development of keyboard instrument interpretation in the 20th century.

C. P. E. Bach's compositions are conceived for an instrument, which reacts to the performer's artistic personality. In the early phases of his work this was the sensitive and subtle clavichord, then later, in its beginnings the equally subtle fortepiano, the developing refinement of which gathered pace in relation to the demands of the time for dynamics, technical possibilities and artistic expression.

Generally well-known and quite often quoted is the negative assessment of the fortepiano made by Carl Philipp's father Johann Sebastian at his first encounter with the instrument in 1736. J. S. Bach's quite opposite view from 1747 is far less often quoted. At the end of his life he tried at the Sanssouci of Friedrich II in Potsdam a new consignment (according to Bach's biographer Johann Nicolaus Forkel) of fifteen grand pianos with Christofori – Silbermann mechanism. He spoke positively of the pliable tone which, although still weak, reacted to the performer's demands, including the scope for a pleasant cantilena.

Espressivo, a delicate sensitivity and great sentimentality are typical of the works of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. An important role is played by expressive pauses. Irregularity in the construction of a motif, phrase and of an entire movement is common, a result of striving for the greatest possible fullness of content. He introduces more frequent dynamic and performance indicators. The compositions from his later period are characterised by marked dynamic and tempo contrasts, a tendency towards story-telling or psychological content, and dramatisation not according to the movement norms of basso continuo, but in the spirit of emotional melodic espressivo and dramatically growing harmony (although in his mature compositions he does not hesitate at times to use a figured bass).

Thus the ideal keyboard instrument to perform the works of Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach is unequivocally the piano and not the harpsichord. The latter is not suitable for the performance of melody as conceived by the composer, with its demands for dynamic differentiation using the registers, and not in spite of them. The attempt to revive his extensive repertoire for keyboards was not successful because of the choice of the harpsichord, but if we play his works on the piano, the sensitive, expressively original work of Bach's personality opens up before us, together with the possibilities for a supremely creative interpretive approach.

The corpus of work which C. P. E. Bach left is very wide-ranging. His compositions are catalogued in two ways. The first complete catalogue was prepared and published in 1906 by Alfred Wotquenne, with the designation Wq. In 1989 Eugene Helm issued a revised catalogue. Compositions are designated with the letter H. This catalogue gives a total of 876 numbers, covering 914 items, including fragments and compositions which are documented, but lost.

With some exceptions, the first 500 items in the Helm catalogue are devoted to compositions for keyboard instruments. Just briefly - C. P. E. Bach composed a total of 67 piano concertos and a further 2 concertos for two keyboard instruments - one however is entitled directly concerto for two

harpsichords, the other for harpsichord and pianoforte, so here the choice of instruments is clear and his intention well-defined. In addition there are over 200 sonatas and sonatinas intended just for the piano. The sonatas have a three-movement structure (quick - slow - quick), the first movement already clearly inclining to a three-part structure and to the classic thematic and tonal plan. A great number of minor compositions for solo keyboard are then a journey through the composer's trains of thought and his sources of inspiration. Except for dances, rondos, chorales, fugues and other minor works marked only for tempo, these are mainly programme compositions of very wide-ranging scope - personal portraits, psychological studies, situation story pictures. As proof of his compositional growth in the area of interpretive possibilities, fantasies occupy a special place.

Of the less wide-ranging variation works, of note are the remarkable variations on the *la Folia d'Espagne*, created on the generally very popular old European harmonic-rhythmic-melodic model, originally from the Iberian peninsula. Bach's way of reworking this theme was the main inspiration for Ludwig van Beethoven's unique 32 C minor piano variations.

And here we come upon the greatest legacy of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach - his influence on the generations which followed and on the development of European music.

Bach's extensive sonata works were a great source of inspiration for the founding figure of the classic sonata form, Joseph Haydn. In his correspondence he put it this way: "Everything I know, I owe to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach". Getting to know these sonatas opened up a new world to him, and he did not hesitate to rework his own style, to give up basso continuo and to work in the spirit of the new *espressivo*. In his sonatas Mozart takes Bach's three-part form directly. C. Ph. E. Bach was a significant inspiration to Jiří Antonín Benda, František Xaver Dušek, to the Mannheim school, and in particular to the significant cosmopolitan personality and musical prophet of romanticism, as he was called by the English musicologist Eric Blom, to Jan Ladislav Dusík (1760 - 1812). The latter knew Bach personally, during his stay in Hamburg in 1783. He considered himself his pupil. The inspiration he took from him he fashioned into the romantic sound of his piano compositions, which F. Chopin, for example, drew on for technique and sound. One should also remember Bach's influence on the sonata works of Muzio Clementi, an important figure, *inter alia*, in the development of the English mechanism and in piano teaching.

Bach's influence was not limited to his contemporaries or his direct successors. It reached as far as Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and Carl Maria

von Weber. Johannes Brahms valued him greatly and published some of his work.

When we read assessments of the time, they seem exaggerated to us. However it is undeniable that C. P. E. Bach was the foremost personality of his day in the world of the piano and that his influence persisted deep into the 19th century.

And if during his lifetime some negative criticism arose, it is immaterial when looked at both through our eyes and those of the day, both in terms of his personal development, but also in terms of musical growth. Both Ludwig van Beethoven and Robert Schumann expressed their reservations, but value his person and his work highly, only by that stage certain of Bach's principles had been recast into a more progressive musical and instrumental expression. At that time comparison of the incomparable also took place. The work of Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Sebastian Bach was compared. In terms of today's assessment this should definitely not be taken as a reason to overlook the compositional, performance and teaching legacy of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.

I have not yet mentioned one fundamental, indeed epoch-making mark left in the area of piano performance art, and that is piano teaching and methodology. With both his extensive piano repertoire and his two-part piano course *An Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (in original *Versuch ueber die wahre Art das Klavier zu spielen*), C. P. E. Bach became the leading figure of the 2nd half of the 18th century in this field. His textbook is devoted both to the harpsichord and to the clavichord, which was the instrument of his heart, especially in the early days. Here there is the first reference to the fortepiano, to which he inclined towards the end of his artistic and teaching career, after the instruments were perfected and overtook the clavichord in technical and acoustic terms. The book is not a basic course, but rather a compendium for teachers and experts, very detailed and comprehensive for its time. More than his own music teaching, the author had in mind the general status of the piano within musical culture. In his book *A History of the Art of the Piano*, Václav Jan Sýkora, the Czech musicologist, uses the term philosophical pedagogy, nowadays we incline to the term didactics.

I consider it important to present here the size of the debt which piano performance art owes to him, not just from a musicological and pedagogical point of view, but in performance terms also. I have brought with me a recording by the outstanding Russian pianist Michail Pletněv. So I will conclude my lecture with one very short sonata. The length of Bach's piano sonatas varies between 5 and about 15 minutes. This one is from the great

six-volume cycle entitled *Piano-Sonatas and free Fantasies besides some Rondos for Connoisseurs and Lovers* (in the original *Clavier-Sonaten und freye Fantasien nebst einigen Rondos fuer Kenner und Liebhaber*). This E minor sonata from the 5th volume Wotquenne 59/1, Helm 281, is in three movements (Presto-Adagio-Andantino) and illustrates perfectly the composer's compositional purpose and indeed everything that fascinated the composers of the rising classicism and influenced the growth of the piano sonata as the crucial form of the European musical system.

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