

The Identity of Bach's Clavier

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Giants were on the earth in those days . . . These were the mighty men that were of old, the men of renown.
Genesis 6:4

In an essay on the relation of Bach with the other German musicians of his culture (*The English Harpsichord Magazine*, October, 1978) I explained why German baroque music was different from the music of other countries, and why this organic difference demanded the construction of a different kind of harpsichord, or more properly, *Clavier*, than what is commonly supposed and is now generally in effect among music schools and recording studios. In this context it is logical to continue with some observations about the ways in which Bach's music differed from that of his contemporaries or was an expansion of it, and then to consider what this music tells about the exact nature of Bach's instrument.

As I explained previously, this question of the precise nature of the Bach Clavier has been strangely ignored at a time when it would seem to demand an answer. So much has been achieved in musical archaeology in recent years, but why has there been no effort for the reconstruction of Bach's Clavier? Is it only because there seems to be no documentation? How can this be when we have volumes of it in Bach's music, and enough surviving instruments from his time to provide the answer?

I know of no question in music as fascinating and as important as the unsolved mystery of Bach's Clavier. Since my first hearing of the complete works I have wondered at the failure of Bach's sons to preserve this mystic marvel, and I ranked that lost curiosity among the vanished wonders of the world, surpassing, in its importance to the evolution of the spirit, the Great Pyramid and the hanging gardens of Babylon. Says Pope in the *Essay On Man*, "What can reason but from what we know?" Enough is known to make some conclusions.

To begin, the modern harpsichord revival has yet to progress further into some more logical developments than it has reached at the present time. Here and there progress is probably realized within isolated individuals, but there is more to be done. What we have among builders and musicians now is the newer development of a trendy purism in the reconstruction of a few historical instruments. This limited historical approach began as a reaction to the poor piano type harpsichords that were constructed

often with a dull 16', a metal frame, and a very poor tone. This swing to historical reconstructions has, like any revolution, led to extremes and a certain fanatical simplification, including the French harpsichord as an ideal type, and the total elimination of the abused 16'. This is good enough for certain types of music, but when one comes to Bach, there is a credibility gap that widens to an abyss. Something is very wrong. There are some instrument reconstructions, but there is yet no reconstructed Bach. Why? What is missing?

One argument is that the harpsichords of the 17th century provided Bach with the models for his own art. This argument advances: 1) there are no German harpsichords from the 17th century; 2) Flemish instruments were exported everywhere by international trade. This argument is very easily demolished: 1) all of Bach's work represents an expansion of the art of his predecessors in Germany and this expansion logically demands an expanded instrumentation; 2) Flemish builders created an international type of building which, though admirable and certainly valid then and now, was not formulated with any particular reference to German music. If we have no German Claviers from before 1700, one probable reason is that the existing ones wore out with use in a culture that was creating more and better music and musicians than anywhere in history. This phenomenon, with the gradual recovery from the Thirty Years War, led to the German Clavier which was contemporary with Bach and Handel.

The oldest German Clavier in existence is a large Hass double with a 16' from 1710. This is significant for it is at this date that both Bach and Handel began to write their best works for the harpsichord. Precisely what relation the composers had with the Hamburg builders is unknown, but both Bach and Handel were familiar with that place as the musical new Jerusalem of their time. In addition to the builder, Hass, Vincent Liibeck and Telemann were also there at the same time, and all of them were, in their own way, building big. Since at least the 17th century, giants in Germany were not new, they were simply getting bigger, even if they had become more scarce.

The appearance of the large Hass Clavier early in the 18th century is entirely consistent with the development of music in Germany. The splendid classical culture of the 17th century

with its diffusion of a society of brilliant musicians who shared a common consciousness and a clearly definable landscape with small, provincial towns, had become in the 17th century the land of a few musical giants, increasingly isolated and anachronistic. In this setting Hass and his huge harpsichords matched the development of his culture perfectly, for like the best musicians of his time, he and his productions were singular, monumental, and final statements of the Great Age.

The instruments of Hass are now dismissed as freaks and historical curiosities and experiments. Because Hass was the only builder who could construct a 16' or a Clavier with three keyboards, he is therefore ignored as a deviation. We must have a standard type; we can not have deviations, exceptions, and unprecedented achievements (first commandment for pedagogues and administrations).

One reason for the dismissal of the Hass ideal is that the development of the 16' was of too little importance to consider seriously, and because the 16' was so badly constructed in modern harpsichords, it must be totally eliminated. The Hass was never understood, and the modern instruments led to a reaction against a very important innovation in German music. We live with this reaction now: all harpsichords must now be constructed on historical principles but in reference to only certain builders. Other historical examples must be excluded, and Bach must fit in where we want him. It all sounds like the dictum of a department chairman.

An example is Howard Scott who, in *Playing The Harpsichord*, warns that the 16' adds little to music but mud, that it can not really be considered a historical development because nearly all harpsichords were constructed without it, and that he had never heard an instrument with a good 8' that included the 16'. There are unmentioned reasons for this reaction: 1) very few modern instruments with a 16' had it constructed in the Hass manner with a separate bridge; 2) this separate bridge is needed for clarity; 3) most instruments did not include the 16' because of its cost, the size of its construction, and because almost no published music demanded it. In addition, a modern instrument with a bad 16' is as likely to have bad tonal qualities everywhere else, for such is the nature of the beast.

But when one comes to the music of Bach, there are contradictions to historical theories. There is first the expansion beyond all known limits, and an inexhaustible variety. The whole nature of music is ENLARGED, and this is exactly what the large Hass Clavier signified as a construction contemporary with the musical developments in Germany. The 16', properly constructed, expanded the whole range of tonal possibility, and this is the development, in

addition to the formal elements, that Bach exploited in a way different from that of his contemporaries and predecessors. The tonal ideal of a 16' was not new with Bach; it had been achieved with an 8' and a 4' an octave lower. Now with a separate 16' it was possible to have combinations of 16'8'4', 16'8'8', 16'8'8'4', or that dazzling combination, 16'4'. The older music of the 17th century never demanded all this, but I think that it is no coincidence that the 1710 Hass is a monument to the new age of music in Germany and that it marked the innovations which became the essence of the new development in Bach. Of course it was not commonplace. There was nothing commonplace about what Bach did; everything was the exception, the only of its kind, the ultimate beyond which no one would go, and Hass seems to have had the same idea at the same time. This is why Bach playing is in some ways singular, even in the context of his German music culture.

The cost of such an instrument would not have stopped Bach from owning one, for Bach stopped at nothing in any achievement, and even death was only a temporary interruption in composing *The Art Of The Fugue*. We know from the inventory of his will that he owned enough musical instruments to supply a small orchestra, and the unique quality and quantity of his output for the Clavier is a testament to an art, and I think an instrument as well, that had expanded to vast new dimensions. A large Hass would have been more than 9' long. We consider this large, but to Bach's habitual condition an instrument of this size would be merely minimal. It is the standard since then that has become petty and cramped. The evidence of this Clavier is everywhere in the music. It is most obvious in the opening Grave sections in the partitas and the French Overture, in the suite Sarabandes in general, in the repeated sections of the suite Gígues, frequently in the toccatas, and numerous places in the Well Tempered Clavier and the other preludes of fantasias and fugues. Experimentation with Bach's works on a large Hass or a similar construction would reveal the many ingenious ways that the 16' was worked into the music as part of the tonal standard everywhere in Bach's universe. A few modern musicians such as Wanda Landowska, Fernando Valenti, and Martin Galling give hints here and there, and the Bachophile can learn from them all.

In contrast to the stop combinations that were used by the other German composers in their suites, a Bach suite would have been based upon the following foundation pattern: Allemande — 8'8'; Courante — 8'4'; Sarabande — 16'8'8'

(8'8' in a double); Gigue — 8'8'4', with 16'8'8'4' in the repeated sections. The Allemande in the third Partita must have used 16'8'8', for it is not a usual kind of Allemande, and there would also be the contrast with the Prelude (only an 8') and the Courante (8'4'). In the first Partita the sequence is rearranged: the Prelude, contrary to what might seem in the score, begins big with 16'8'4', the gigue-like Courante is big and brilliant with 8'8'4' and adds the 16' in the repeated sections (just for a shocker), and the lightweight Gigue ends with a mere 8'4' all the way through while one hand does crossover acrobatics. As with the other German baroque composers, one can expect exceptions to the general patterns also in Bach. Life is more interesting that way. In the fabulous D major Toccata Bach must have intended this sequence (Kalmus edition): measures 1-10, 16'8'8'4'; measures 11-64, 16'8'4'; measures 64 (third beat)-68, 16'8'8'4'; measures 69-81, 16'8' (use 8' nasal with buff on upper keyboard at tremelo ad lib)-, measures 81 (at the beginning of the fugue)-96, 8'8'; measures 96 (beginning with the first sixteenths in right hand)-103, 16'8'8'; measures 103-118, 16'8'8'4'; measures 110-162, 8'8'4'; measures 163-179, 16'8'8'4'. The instrument intended obviously had a 16' 8' 4' on the lower keyboard and an 8', probably with a buff, on the upper. This score affords one of the most important testaments to the kind of instrument for which Bach was writing. The stop combination sequence can be altered for a smaller instrument with no 16' and one keyboard, but the result is a patched up affair of complications and compromises the more closely one attempts to realize what is so obvious in the score. One could consider this toccata a very good manual of Bach's style. I find it significant that it was written in 1710, the year of the Hass double. Is that only coincidence?

These principles may also be applied with advantage to the music of Handel whose suites also demonstrate an enlargement of the German Clavier tradition. That Handel may or may not have owned a large Hass is not the point, though it is possible that he did, since a drawing of the top of his instrument shows a rounded end like that of Hass or Zell. The Clavier tradition during the time of Bach and Handel was expanding into a final statement of itself, and it can even be argued that a reinterpretation of the older music in terms of the new standards, since they are an extension of the old ones, is justified. Handel's organ music, for example, always sounds best on a North German baroque organ, though Handel never had one in England. In some types of music there is a kind of absolute Art that transcends the instrumentation immediately

at hand (or at Handel), and I suspect that with Handel and the Clavier suites this is probably the case, for like Bach he would have been familiar with Hass and the new developments of his time. Because of the German innovation the interpretation of Clavier music in terms of the best that was evolved can be justified, even though the interpretation is not strictly historical. A recording of Purcell's suites, for example, on a very Hasslike instrument by Eric Herz sounds, to me at least, an exciting innovation. This Germanized Purcell is surprising, unorthodox, controversial, and brilliant. It is not what Purcell heard, for it is even more interesting than that. The 16' is used everywhere to advantage so that a suite would follow this typical sequence: Prelude — 16'8'8'4'; Allemande — 16'8'8'; Courante — 8'8'4'; an additional dance movement — 16'4' or any appropriate combination according to the demand of the score.

All this does not mean that Bach can not be played upon more modest instruments or that the music of the 17th century needs to be reinterpreted upon something that probably did not exist at the time. But it does demonstrate that if Bach's probable intentions could be understood, their adaptation to the smaller instruments with two 8's and a 4' and one keyboard can be made by means of the principles of Clavier playing that Bach learned from the other German musicians of his time, as I explained in my previous article. There are thus at least two sets of principles that can be applied to the interpretation of the German Clavier music of this time: the principles of the tradition that was understood before Bach, and the expanded approach that Bach, and probably Handel, evolved as a final statement for German baroque music in general.

What happened to Bach's Clavier, which must have been a large Hass, is an interesting speculation. Claviers, when they survived, went on usually as art treasures or conversions into pianos. With consideration of the personality of Bach, I doubt that his instrument was ever decorated with the landscapes, angels, and nude cherubs that we see on museum examples. With Bach there was no nonsense, and he was consistent in every detail. The wood was probably stained in oak, not too dark, with a fine varnish. (I could never accept the notion that Bach would have settled for a paint job.) This instrument was probably so big and heavy that no one wanted it as a baroque curiosity, for by 1750 baroque was unfashionable and futureless, and in any case the tuning of four sets of strings was probably not much fun, even though Bach himself could accomplish it with alacrity. There may

have been technical problems with its conversion into a piano, probably because pianos in the 18th century were not yet Steinway size, so that the extra length and the long strings of a huge Hass were not a practical consideration. By the time pianos grew to that proportion, metal frames and wide keyboards were all the rage, and in any case there was no demand for a piano with two of them. Bach's Clavier must have passed its last sad days in neglect with a vase upon it as a kind of funeral memorial. In the end some carpenter probably took a liking to its varnished sides and cut it up into bookshelves. Thus, Bach's fabulous Clavier went the way of the many cantatas that Wilhelm Friedemann also managed to lose. And yet, perhaps in some secret recess or halcyon hall of a happy castle or a dying dukedom, someone is hoarding *the* Clavier, which, when revealed at the last trumpet, will yet shock the world of resurrected "Musick" down to its socks.

An American builder constructs an instrument based upon the 1710 Hass for the sum of \$18,000 (hurry before prices go up), but there are still other possibilities for less. A practical kit version of something similar would open new dimensions if it could be worked out, and with the necessary expansion of consciousness, perhaps it may yet be. (Among builders there is a certain bloodymindedness yet to be overcome.) It is in these isolated efforts of a very few independent builders and artists that we find the clues to the Lost Art, so that somewhere within the distractions of space and time we may yet hope for the reconstruction of the "authentick" Johann Sebastian.

Of all the arts music is the most inexhaustible and the most transcendent of the limitations of language and geometric form. It may be compared with a circle where there is no ending point and which continues to expand forever as long as there is a consciousness somewhere to comprehend and expand with it. Yet contrary to popular doctrine, Bach did not exhaust all the possibilities, for if one returns to the music of about the year 1700 as a point of departure and innovates from that advantage, as did Bach, new dimensions open again, as I have found in the suite form that I developed and in which I can compose when I have the mind for it. There are still some things that even Bach and Handel missed, as there is very much more that the modern baroque revival still ignores as long as its controllers find it convenient to do so. There is a certain satisfaction with being in the *know* about all this and in exploding the neat little limitations that would beat one down with "we can not compose thus" or "we will not build that" because no-one else is doing it. That no one else has dared is precisely one of the charms in the art of surprising the new discoveries that are waiting to be made. If music demonstrates the advancing consciousness, then one must expand the perceptions of what has been before there can be the realistic expectation of what is greater yet to come. For this much one need not go beyond the period of Bach, for he has demonstrated forever that baroque principles are not temporal but perennial if one has the necessary *Geist* to perceive them and that higher mind to which they lead, and if one has the courage to go that way.

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Vol. 2 No5 1979

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