

Bach and the German Clavier

by D. E. Dodge, M.A.

When compared with the harpsichord, the piano is an iron monger's instrument...

—Voltaire

The shaking air rattled Lord Edward's membrana tympani; the interlocked malleus, incus, and stirrup bones were set in motion so as to agitate the membrane of the oval window and raise an infinitesimal storm in the fluid of the labyrinth. The hairy endings of the auditory nerve shuddered like weeds in a rough sea; a vast number of obscure miracles were performed in the brain, and Lord Edward ecstatically whispered 'Bach!'

- *Point Counter-Point*, T. H. Huxley

The leading American musician, if he went to Leipzig, would be put to copying out drum parts and polishing trombones.

— *On Being An American*, H. L. Mencken

When one approaches the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, it is, if one is in tune with his type of consciousness, an overwhelming experience; the vast complexity of his Art is like an enormous puzzle, the pieces of which come to relate to a colossal synthesis that is in some ways dazzlingly unique, but in other ways not as singular as is supposed. The more that one enters this music, the more one comes to be exasperated at what has been

done to it by the cult of institutional pedagogues and, in many cases, the woodmongers of certain musical instruments. The purpose of this essay, which must be too short for the analysis of Bach and his Art that is really needed, is to reconstruct the basic principles of some aspects of Bach's culture in Germany. A much larger analysis would be better, but until there is the possibility of its publication, the observations here will, I hope, do something to bring back into music and life the authentic Johann Sebastian, the baroque German who, I am convinced, no one really understands, and to whom the very few such as Albert Schweitzer and Wanda Landowska have best approached. I hope that this work will prove to be an extension of their best achievements which have come to be obscured and ignored by a battery of institutional influences such as the Bach culture could not have anticipated. My analysis will be directed toward the mystery of the precise nature of the Bach Clavier, a question that is so obvious that it has eluded pedagogues, pundits, performers, and instrument builders so entirely that it has not even been asked.

If one is to approach Bach and his culture, it is first necessary to throw off the misconceptions about it that have been perpetuated by institutions that did not exist in Bach's time and which really do not

relate in any vital way to the life of Art. An example would be the teaching of the baroque keyboard tradition in the form of the Couperin-Rameau-Scarlatti-Bach combination. The more one approaches Bach, the more one is impressed with how little he really relates to his French and Italian contemporaries. The Bach consciousness is an entirely different *Geist*. If one takes a larger survey of German music, it becomes obvious that this musical culture works as an organic whole with certain national traits that set it apart from any other. I recently had the curious experience, for example, of conversing with a musician who was very much interested in 17th-century French harpsichord music. (This frilly folly has never impressed me). Our meeting was something as if two contemporaries from about the year 1700, one French and one German, had accidentally met to compare notes about their Art. The meeting, to my surprise, only accentuated the fundamental differences between two such musicians of that time, for the approach to music, the theoretical questions, and the values in general were notably different. I am impressed with the fact that the key to the mystery of Bach's music and its historical instrumentation begins in his native German culture and in the line of German musicians that culminated in him. In terms of the Clavier tradition they include Dietrich Buxtehude, Johann Pachelbel, Johann Jakob Froberger, Vincent Lubeck, Johann Ferdinand Fischer, Johann Kuhnau, Johann Krieger, Georg Bohm, Johann Christoph Graupner, Gottlieb Muffat, Georg Philipp Telemann, and Georg Friedrich Handel. Most of this music is unknown and ignored, except by a few specialists in Germany. It is not inferior Art, it is the organic Clavier tradition that evolved in Germany during the period from about 1650 to 1750, especially after 1680. Both the quality and quantity of this music is also strikingly different from what one finds in France, Italy, and England. Whatever this music says — and that it does speak as definitely as literature or philosophy is a basic question that is also ignored — it says in terms of itself, and not in terms of Couperin or Scarlatti, or in the character of the different types of instruments that were built for them. In addition, most of these musicians were church organists, and the basis of music in Germany during the baroque period was set upon the background of the North German organ, the nature of which I have already discussed in another published work, 'The North German Organists: Some Notes On Their Art And Their Revival' (*The American Organist*, April, June, August, 1970). The German organ was likewise a very different instrument from what one would have found in Italy or England, and the music for it was totally different from what was written in France. These national differences are of critical importance in understanding what Bach's musical culture was saying and also the practical means of bringing it to life after a period during which it totally disappeared.

These national differences are also accentuated in harpsichord construction, as Frank Hubbard explains somewhat in his well-known book. Another book by Wolfgang Zuckermann also explains the differences between harpsichord construction in baroque and modern times. Hubbard seems not to understand the German harpsichord at all, and dismisses it as a historical phenomenon that he calls 'trendless'. In this spirit he went on with the building of French harpsichords after the example of the famous 1769 Taskin, a mistake which so many builders continue to perpetuate to the present time. It is still commonplace to hear Bach on a French harpsichord or a Neupert, and no one is aware of what is wrong. Yet in the books of Hubbard and Zuckermann there is neither a single note of music nor even a reference to a musical work as an example of what a baroque instrument must have demanded. Zuckermann calls the modern German production harpsichord a 'plucking piano' and he is right. The German Clavier has thus come to be identified with these modern abortions of it with their weak, dull sound, their pedal lyres, and their thin, tapered legs that are too modern to offend. These instruments are heard at conservatories and in the recordings that come from Germany where the same mistake is endlessly repeated. It is also forgotten that Wanda Landowska glorified her French Pleyel by lowering the recording microphone down to the strings. A live Pleyel is a different thing.

The resolution to the mystery of what the German baroque Clavier was in general, and Bach's Clavier in particular, is in the music that was written for it. Vital also is an understanding of what musical values were assumed by these musicians as organists and religious composers of a very devout nature, but devout as understood in terms of the German religion of its time, which might be called high church pietism and which comes to be different from any other form either then or now even in modern Germany. Each was an organic part of that culture, and in the Couperin-Rameau-Scarlatti-Bach misformulation that culture is totally misrepresented. Likewise, the modern harpsichord is, in general, another misrepresentation of the instrument that Bach and his contemporaries knew. Hubbard lists twelve surviving German harpsichords of Hass, Zell, Grabner and Silbermann (not the organ builder). What is the precise condition of these I do not know except that the one Zell double of 1728 has been restored and copied by Martin Sassmann in Germany and Carl Fudge in Arlington, Massachusetts. The Zell double in an interesting revival;! have heard both Bach and Rameau played on it by Fudge himself with one of his copies. The tonal qualities are clear, dry, and resonant in the way that a Schnitger organ can be. Upon this Zell double Rameau sounds better than on a French harpsichord, and I am sure that Purcell would go as intended, and probably better than with anything

that Purcell is likely to have known in England. (How many would recognize Purcell's organ-style A major *Toccata* to be as North German as Buxtehude?) I am not convinced, however, that this Zell double is what Bach knew, or that it was necessarily typical. It is a fine instrument, very expensive to reconstruct, not only one example of the unique music that was happening in Germany about the year 1728.

The musician of Bach's culture would have first demanded an instrument with a big sound like the sound like the fabulous organs with many stops, striking tonal contrasts, and ingenious combinations for which Bach finally came to be most notable. The quality of their music demands an instrument with a bright, clear, vivid effect, and like the German organs, there would have been a strong bass which must be supplied by the lower keyboard notes. (The pedal Clavier was an oddity and not really relevant here. Bach is the only one who wrote for it). The instrument would have needed to afford vividly contrasting tonal resources, for the Clavier was conceived as another side of the organ Art. For this reason the suite form Allemande-Courant-Sarabande-Gigue was the most practical plan, because this traditional sequence of moderately slow, moderately fast, slow, and fast could also display the possibilities for technical ingenuity by both composer and performer. It was a form that was most suitable for the German Clavier as for no other instrument. (It should be noted here that the tempo of the Allemande varies with the composer and the example, as may be seen in the contrasts of Buxtehude, Handel and Bach). Likewise, the toccata and prelude-fugue forms were formulated with similar intentions. Like their organs, the Germans would have devised an instrument with a bright clear treble and a strong bass. Bach, for example, praised a Schnitger organ in Hamburg because its pedal notes sounded like thunder, and he was impressed with another organ because of the variety in its sixteen reed stops (not stops of merely 16' pitch). These musicians would have preferred instruments with at least two keyboards, and that Bach owned one such instrument for which he composed most of his music is evident from the inventory of his will. With a double there would be the possibilities of tonal contrast and dialogue between the two manuals, as between the two 8's or the 8'4' and the upper 8', especially with a buff. From another approach, there are technical advantages of putting all the stops on one keyboard so that coupling and extra key pressures are avoided. The two 8's are actually used more together than separately, so it is thus more logical to combine them over the same set of keys. This construction is also cheaper, and in all ages, money is a consideration. That Germany was not the backwater of harpsichord building that it has been alleged to be is evident first in the music that was written there and also in

the surviving examples, especially of Hass, who built the largest, most complex harpsichords anywhere. It was Hass who invented a Clavier with three keyboards (like the great organs in Hamburg) and who added the 16', but on a separate bridge. The existence of this 16' is important for different reasons than has been supposed, for while very few historical instruments had it, and while it has been abused in modern production harpsichords, the Hass experiment demonstrates that the German manner of playing demanded those low tones and a strong bass consistently enough to justify a separate 16' stop on its own bridge as a plausible resolution of something.

If one applies these basic observations to the reconstruction of how baroque German Clavier music was understood and performed (never in public or for tickets to a stage, a joke that Bach would have considered obscene in a very personal way), it becomes evident that the suite form in general must have been formulated with these tonal resources: Allemande - 8'8', Courante — 8'4', Sarabande — 16'8' (played an octave lower with the same 8'4'), Gigue - 8'8'4'. In this way it was possible to end a complex composition with a brilliant conclusion for the full instrument. This object is especially evident in the suites of Buxtehude for whom the Gigue form must have been the favourite (as also in the organ partitas, *Auf meinen lieben Gott* and *Wie schon leuchtet der Morgensterri*). What is more logical than to use triple time with all three stops? This suite form created the contrasting tonal variety that is possible only on the harpsichord (in contrast to the clavichord, virginal, or piano), and only two stop changes are necessary during the course of a typical suite. Thus it may be realized why the execution of these Clavier works on clavichords or pianos is such a misguided effort of pedagogical futility. The stop changes must have been made from draw-knobs like the German organs; the Flemish type wrest plank stops would have been an inconvenience and a distraction invented at a time before music expanded to the proportions of the German tradition. The deviations from this traditional suite pattern are interesting and significant; the extra movements, especially of the English Suites, used stop combinations of various types, including the buff. The first movement of the Clavier part in the Sonata No. 5 for violin and Clavier must have been intended for the 16' and 8' which was achieved with the 8' and 4' played an octave lower. The Allemande in Handel's Suite No. 11 must certainly have used the same combination, and the cheerful nature of the short Gigue in that same suite suggests only an 8' and 4' rather than the full instrument that would have been typical in the larger type of Gigue. This Handel suite would thus be played with only one change in the Sarabande, where a single 8' would be used in the first variation (the nasal 8' and

possibly with the buff), and on a double Clavier no stop changes could thus have been needed at all. To go on with the musical examples would require a separate treatise. These few should be enough to demonstrate the basic principles. In the music of Bach one might take the fabulous D Major Toccata as a kind of manual of style for which the following stops would be required as is evident in the manner at which the score proceeds (Kalmus edition): measures 1 — 10, 8'8'4"; measures 11—64, 8'4"; measures 64 (third beat) - 68, 8'8'4"; 69-81, 16'8" (use 8' nasal with buff at tremolo ad lib); measures 81 (at beginning of fugue) — 96, 8'8"; measures 96 (beginning with first semiquavers in right hand) — 103, 8'8'4"; measures 103 (beginning with the *con discrezione* semiquavers) — 110, 16'8" (use nasal 8' with buff on tremolo); measures 110 (beginning with Presto) — 111, 8'4"; measures 111 (forth beat) - 118, 16'8"; measures 119 (right hand goes up an octave while left hand stays where it was at the first beat only) — 177, 8'4"; measures 178-179, 8'8'4".

There are also many instances when the bass note in a score implies the extension of the octave below it, so that the lowest notes are actually used much more than the notation immediately reads. Again, this practice would be consistent with the organ whose bass notes continually sounded at octaves. The most obvious example is the final chord in the first movement of Bach's Italian Concerto; the score reads four notes in the right hand but only one in the left. Musically this does not make sense, the proportion is totally wrong. But if the bass note is extended to the octave, the movement ends on a brilliant F major chord that includes the lowest possible note, and this is a most logical way to end, especially this particular work with its big effect. Similar musical examples are numerous. Thus the range of this instrument would have needed to extend below bass C as on the organ, and on the surviving examples of German harpsichords from this time, this is what one finds, for the keyboards go down to the F below bass C, as on the 1728 Zell.

In summary, the German Clavier as Bach, Handel, and their contemporaries understood it would have demanded a trio of contrasting tonal qualities: a flutey 8' principal, a nasal contrasting 8', and a brilliant 4' that would have been a kind of equivalent to the mixtures in the baroque German organ. The 4' would have served as an 8', when played an octave lower with the principal 8' (and probably also the nasal 8' in repetitions for contrast, as in the Sarabandes which really need the variety to keep them alive). The 4% octave range of the 1728 Zell double from F to D is exactly right for the music of its time, and the low F sharp also comes into regular use for the 16'8" combination. The German instruments were finished in wood stain as often as they were painted, and stop drawknobs were typical. The classical Clavier was also fashioned with square ends at the keyboard, and the instrument rested

solidly upon a sturdy trestle stand, unlike the modern instruments that are contrived to wobble upon screw-in toothpick props. Hass and Zell constructed their instruments with rounded ends, and a contemporary drawing of the lid to Handel's harpsichord also traces the same type of rounded end. The implications would be worth exploration. Grabner and Silbermann, in contrast, built mitred ends, and their location in central Germany could have influenced Bach. The 1728 Zell had a buff on the upper 8', and I think that this example, in addition to its effectiveness in the scores, is evidence enough that the stop existed in Germany at the time of Bach, and probably before. Unlike the plunkey buff stops on many harpsichords, which sound like a sick lute, the Zell buff gives a bright, clear effect very different in quality and with a result that is brilliant and pleasing, so that one is tempted to use it at every possibility. This is consistent with the German approach to the use of contrasting tonal qualities as distinct from the other national styles of writing and performance (at home, not in public). It needs to be understood that German music is a complete formulation in terms of itself, and that Bach's origins and approach to music is in Buxtehude, Pachelbel, Kuhnau, Bohm and others of their line, not in Couperin or Scarlatti who, it seems to me, really did write several hundred sonatas one monotonous way.

Very much is yet to be realized in the music of this period. The German Claviers that still survive should be restored to their original condition and made accessible to musicians, builders and recording experts. There is only one recording of Bach's complete works, (a misguided effort on a German factory production instrument with a dull, weak quality that is typical of its type), and Bach's Clavier works should be recorded on the restored German instruments of his time, or copies of them, somewhat in the way that Walter Kraft recorded Bach on 20 historic organs in Germany. An economical concert Clavier based upon a German historical model is yet to be achieved. There are still no practical editions of Kuhnau, Krieger (Handel had the highest praise for his Clavier suites), Handel's complete 76 Aylesford Pieces, and most of the Graupner suites (there are 43 in existence), and a reprint of the 1738 Nuremberg edition of the 24 preludes and fugues in all keys by Georg Andreas Sorge is yet to be seen. There is probably much more that is lost or otherwise ignored in manuscript form. So much was achieved in Germany during this time, that no one musician there could have been aware of it all.

These efforts will not proceed from the cult of institutional pedagogues. Like all the real advances in Art and consciousness, they will be made outside of certified stultification (state endowed) by authentic Artists, however isolated and few in number during the inane age of the corporate state until, hopefully, they can take new roots in the clear air and the restored landscape of the post-industrial epoch. A spacious mind demands a spacious world. It remains for us, in the uncertain conditions at the beginning of this revival, to reconstruct these pieces of a world that has been lost.

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