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BRILLIANT CLASSICS

BACH FAMILY

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- Johann Ernst

COMPLETE ORGAN MUSIC

Bach and the Organ

Born in Eisenach on 21 March 1685, Johann Sebastian Bach was one of the four children of Johann Ambrosius Bach and Maria Elisabeth Lämmerhirt who did not die at an early age. After the deaths of his mother (in 1694) and his father (a year later), Bach and his brother Jacob were taken in by their elder brother Johann Christoph. It was as an instrumentalist – in particular as an organist – that Bach first established a reputation. He was not only a prodigious performer on the organ, but also, by his mid-20s, an expert on organ-building. It is likely that he was taught the organ by Johann Christoph, but there is no clear evidence on this matter, and neither can we be sure how he gained his expert knowledge of organ-construction, except through his own experience. From the age of 18 Bach travelled to many German towns to inspect organs, write reports and offer recommendations for their improvement. As Christoph Wolff has written: ‘When the organ [of St Boniface’s, Arnstadt] was finished in the summer of 1703, Feldhaus arranged for its examination ... For outside expertise the burgomaster invited none other than Johann Sebastian Bach to come from Weimar. Although there were more senior and experienced Bach family members available for this purpose, Feldhaus chose the 18-year-old Bach ... even at this early stage in his career, Bach was reputed to possess such a phenomenal understanding of organ technology that other family members could be passed over for this task without offending anyone.’

Bach’s early interest in the North German organ tradition is illustrated by his copying, at the age of 13, a piece by Buxtehude. As a boy he had already copied pieces by composers such as Froberger and Pachelbel from central and southern Germany. Improvisation was an essential art in Bach’s day. (Although it is much less common today, it survives more healthily in organists than in other instrumentalists.) However, even then, Johann Adam Reincken, the greatly senior Dutch/German composer and the most celebrated organist in North Germany, was concerned about the general decline in improvisatory skill. In 1720, aged 77, hearing Bach improvise for an hour on the chorale ‘An Wasserflüssen Babylon’, Reineken was moved to say ‘I thought this art was dead, but I see that it lives in you.’

Although Bach composed organ music throughout his career, much of his extensive contribution to the instrument’s repertoire dates from his periods of employment as organist at Arnstadt, Mühlhausen and Weimar. As is typical of this period of music, numerous works attributed to

Bach are of doubtful authorship. In many cases they exist in copies only, rather than the original manuscripts, and have been judged to be the work of another, unknown composer. Nevertheless, the number of organ compositions clearly identified as the work of Bach runs into several hundreds.

Preludes/Toccatas, etc. and Fugues

During his long career Bach developed the existing form of prelude and fugue into a work comprising two sections of roughly equal weight. Bach is not generally regarded as an innovator. The prelude-and-fugue format already existed, for example, in Johann Caspar Ferdinand Fischer’s cycle of preludes and fugues for organ in 20 different keys, published in 1702. In the form Bach inherited from the current North German model, the prelude was indistinguishable from the toccata – i.e. a multi-sectional piece of free structure and rather improvisatory character. Bach’s early examples of the organ prelude and fugue – such as **BWV531** and **BWV532**, in C major and D major respectively – illustrate this similarity as well as revealing Bach’s models, whether German, French or Italian. Indeed, Bach drew upon these different stylistic influences throughout his music, assimilating them into his own personal language. The North German tradition which significantly influenced Bach’s earlier organ works was represented by composers such as Georg Böhm, Johann Reincken and the Danish-born Dieterich Buxtehude. Bach wrote dozens of works comprising a prelude or toccata with following fugue, though some begin with a fantasia or, in one magnificent example, a Passacaglia. More than 20 are entitled ‘prelude and fugue’, while a handful are described as ‘toccata and fugue’, but the differences between such genres are not striking. In addition there are many independent fugues and fantasias – such as the Fugue in G major (in gigue style) **BWV577**, the Fugue in C minor **BWV574** (on a theme by Legrenzi), the Fantasia in C minor **BWV1121** (formerly listed as **BWV Anh.205**), the Fugue in C minor **BWV575** and the Fantasia in C major **BWV570**. Among the pairs of pieces (preludes and fugues, toccatas and fugues, etc.) the Toccata and Fugue in F major **BWV540** is an extraordinary work, one of numerous masterpieces, large and small, with which Bach enhanced the organ repertoire. Beginning this large-scale work, the Toccata itself is remarkable not only for its enormous dimensions but also for its economy of material. Peter Williams describes it as ‘a combination, or rather pairing, of pedal toccata and ritornello form’. The Fantasia and Fugue in C minor **BWV537** is another major work, noble and profound. A number of composers or conductors – including Schoenberg, Respighi and Leopold Stokowski –

have made orchestral versions of some of Bach's organ works. Elgar, also, completed a very grand orchestration of **BWV537** in 1922. The Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C major **BWV564** is a spacious work – a toccata with thrilling scale passages, a sublime adagio in Italian-concerto style, and a fugue based on a lively subject built from a succession of short phrases. This is one of the dozens of Bach compositions which Busoni transcribed for piano.

The celebrated Toccata and Fugue in D minor **BWV565** is believed to date from before Bach's Weimar period (1708–17). Many scholars have observed features very untypical of Bach, while others have even questioned the authenticity of this famous work. However, Bach expert Christoph Wolff has commented that the piece is 'structurally undisciplined', but nevertheless 'refreshingly imaginative, varied and ebullient'. Some (including Dutch violinist Jaap Schroeder) have explained the violinistic writing (known as *bariolage* – the alternation of notes on adjacent strings) by suggesting that the composition may well have been originally written for solo violin. The opening toccata is showy, dramatic and typically improvisatory, but the culmination of the fugue leads to another toccata-like passage of rapid notes alternating with big chords, and the work ends with a spacious plagal cadence. In every genre to which Bach contributed he achieved astonishing variety.

The Brandenburg Concertos are the most familiar example, but also within the prelude-and-fugue format – and every other kind of organ composition – he was able to draw upon his phenomenal imaginative resources and a compositional technique which allowed an inexhaustible variety of invention.

In the Fugue on a theme by Corelli **BWV579** (probably earlier than 1710) Bach uses two themes from the Vivace in Corelli's Trio Sonata Op.4, but he recomposes the original movement by elaboration and lengthening, and by adding a fourth part.

The Passacaglia in C minor **BWV582** is such a tremendous work that it is often allotted a separate section in scholarly books. This again has been described (by authority Peter Williams) as 'a kind of prelude and fugue'. Schumann commented on its '21 variations [actually 20 plus a fugue], intertwined so ingeniously that one can never cease to be amazed'. Although one might mistake the Passacaglia for a work from Bach's maturity, it is believed to date from 1708–12, and thus must be considered as one of his greatest compositions to date. The work builds to a climax, relaxes, then builds a second time before running directly into the fugue.

Fugue itself is one of the forms which Bach perfected to an unimaginable degree over the course of his lifetime, culminating in the exemplary sequence *The Art of Fugue*, completed c.1742.

Miscellaneous Pieces

Bach wrote a number of pieces which do not easily fit into a particular category. The Pastorella (or Pastorale) **BWV590** is a curiosity, a four-movement work apparently connected with Christmas. Once regarded as spurious, it is now more widely accepted as a Bach composition. However, its date is still debated, most scholars assigning it, on account of its galant characteristics, to Bach's late period, while others place it much earlier. In the first two movements Bach employs the *piffero* style – a tradition, common in the Baroque period, which originated as an Italian Christmas ritual in which bagpiping, gift-bearing shepherds processed into cities.

The *Pièce d'orgue* **BWV572** is also known as the Fantasia in G major. Of the three sections, the central part is a majestic essay in five-part writing. The piece has some characteristics of the French style, as well as French tempo markings.

Trio Sonatas

The term 'trio sonata' in relation to Bach's six pieces **BWV 525–530** is a familiar description, but Bach himself called each work 'Sonata for two keyboards and pedal'. The six works (in E flat major, C minor, D minor, E minor, C major and G major) are believed to date from around 1727, during Bach's Leipzig period, but much of the musical content originated in earlier works. It is likely that only the sixth sonata was a completely new work, the others being an amalgam of reworkings of music from cantatas, organ works and chamber compositions, together with some newly composed movements. Each of Bach's sonatas is in three-movement form, and thus more closely related to concerto form than to that of the sonata. Also, the *ritornello* structure employed in the Vivace of the 2nd Sonata, the outer movements of the 5th Sonata and the Vivace of No.6 shows the direct influence of Vivaldi's concerto style.

Orgelbüchlein

For the *Orgelbüchlein* (Little Organ Book) Bach originally intended to write 164 chorale preludes (spanning the entire Lutheran liturgical year) but completed only 46, catalogued as **BWV 599–644**.

On the title page Bach wrote that the *Orgelbüchlein* was intended to give guidance ‘to a beginner organist in how to set a chorale in all kinds of ways...’ It also provided Bach with an opportunity to hone his skill in this genre and to deliberately create a remarkable degree of diversity within its apparently limited confines. Many of these chorale preludes are small in scale.

Schübler Chorales

The group of six chorale preludes **BWV 645–650** is named after Johann Georg Schübler, who published the collection in 1747 or 1748. Five of these pieces are transcriptions of movements from Bach’s cantatas – three arias and two duets. **BWV645**, for instance, is adapted from a tenor aria in ‘Wachet auf!’ (Cantata 140).

Concertos

Bach was fond of transcribing other composers’ works which he admired. In this way he arranged several organ concertos (**BWV 592–7**) after works by Vivaldi, Johann Ernst of Sachsen-Weimar and others. Probably the most familiar of these is **BWV593**, Bach’s reworking of the popular Vivaldi Concerto in A minor for two solo violins, No.8 from *L’estro armonico*. This illustrates Bach’s usual method in such recompositions, his judicious enriching of the texture with additional contrapuntal lines.

The Chorale Prelude

Bach wrote more than 200 examples of the chorale prelude – a type of composition based on a Lutheran chorale. They form a thread which runs throughout Bach’s career. The genre had a history stretching back to Pachelbel, Buxtehude and Samuel Scheidt. One of its various possible functions was to introduce a chorale to be sung by a church congregation, or it may have been played as an interlude between verses. The Lutheran chorale itself was central to Bach’s work, multiple examples being included in his 200–300 church cantatas and his Passions. It has been suggested that ‘Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her’ **BWV700** and ‘Gott, durch deine Güte’ **BWV724** may be among Bach’s very earliest works.

The so-called ‘Great 18 Chorale Preludes’ **BWV 651–668**, dating from Bach’s Leipzig period, were compiled from earlier works which he wrote at Weimar. Compared with the relatively miniature chorale preludes of the *Orgelbüchlein*, these are on a much grander scale. In the range of styles and forms which they encompass, they may also be compared with the 48 Preludes and Fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The so-called Neumeister Collection, the manuscript of which was discovered at Yale University in 1985, contained 31 previously unknown chorale preludes by Bach, constituting a significant addition (**BWV 1090–1120**) to his already extensive list of works in this genre. The collection also includes two pieces by Johann Christoph Bach and more than 20 by Johann Michael Bach.

The Chorale Partita is simply a set of variations on a chorale melody. Bach’s examples are ‘Christ, der du bist der helle Tag’ **BWV766**, ‘O Gott, du frommer Gott’ **BWV767**, and ‘Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig’ **BWV768** (an early work begun around 1704–5). ‘Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen’ **BWV770** is a work of doubtful authenticity.

Clavier-Übung III

Bach collected various works into four groups entitled *Clavier-Übung* I-IV. Books I, II and IV are collections of harpsichord pieces (Book IV comprising one piece, the Goldberg Variations), while Book III, published in September 1739, comprises diverse works for organ. These organ pieces include further examples of preludes based on chorale melodies, each one serving as the basis for two or three settings (or chorale preludes). Thus ‘Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit’ is the basis of both **BWV669** and **BWV671**, ‘Christe, aller Welt Trost’ is set twice as **BWV670** and **BWV673**, etc. In these different pieces on the same chorale, Bach achieves a wide variety of approaches to the chorale material. Peter Williams has illustrated Bach’s vast expressive resources by comparing two pieces based on ‘Vater unser im Himmelreich’: **BWV682** is about eight minutes in duration, while **BWV683** is only one and a half minutes. The two pieces – the first in 3/4, the second in 6/8 – have completely different musical content and character. The much shorter, more straightforward **BWV683** has semiquavers running almost constantly throughout, but **BWV682** is a far more elaborate and intricate piece in which Bach also incorporates canonic writing. This is probably the most complex of all Bach’s chorale preludes. It is also open to interpretation regarding possible symbolism. Throughout his musical output Bach often seems to reflect particular words or ideas

in a given text with musical pictorialism, but this is a highly subjective topic. The original text here is Martin Luther's transformation into verse of the Lord's Prayer. Another of the larger-scale chorale preludes is **BWV686**, the longer of the two based on 'Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir'. This is a rare example of a composition in 6 contrapuntal parts.

Also included in *Clavier-Übung* III is the Prelude and Fugue in E flat major **BWV552**. It derives its nickname, St Anne, from the eponymous hymn tune by William Croft, simply because of the close similarity between the fugue theme and the Croft theme. Bach's magnificent and monumental prelude – with **BWV540**, one of his two longest – contains three distinct themes. As recorded here, it was originally separate from the fugue. It was Mendelssohn who advocated the joining of the two pieces, a practice which is now common. Also included in this Book III of the *Clavier-Übung* are four duets **BWV 802–5**. The inclusion of this rather incongruous group has caused much scholarly debate. *Clavier-Übung* III is regarded as a landmark in Bach's work. Gregory Butler has written: 'In some sense it marks a turning inwards, and as such stands on the threshold of the late period. In it are forecast many of the preoccupations which dominate the works of the last decade: a concentration on the techniques of fugue and canon; an adherence to the variation principle; a style-consciousness manifest in the sharp contrast between pieces in the *stile antico* [a manner typically associated with 16th-century polyphony] and others in a modern style; an interest in highly abstract, *recherché* musical thought; and a preoccupation with saying the last word in a given genre with an attendant monumentality of conception.'

Canonic Variations

Bach composed his Canonic Variations on 'Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her' **BWV769** in 1747 when he was admitted to membership of Lorenz Mizler's Corresponding Society of the Musical Sciences. The work comprises five variations on a Christmas hymn by Martin Luther. There are two versions – the autograph manuscript (as recorded here) and the printed edition – differing chiefly in the order of the variations. In 1956 Stravinsky arranged a version of **BWV769** for chorus and orchestra, adding extra contrapuntal parts. Bach's set of canonic variations may be grouped together with other works of his last decade as examples of an approach to composition which may be described as art for art's sake. In several of these late works – especially *The Art of Fugue* – Bach becomes more preoccupied with perfecting his compositional craft and leaving models for posterity. (See Gregory Butler's remarks at the end of the above section on *Clavier-Übung* III.)

Bach's most gifted son, **Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–1788)**, was born in Weimar. He became a composer of great individuality, even eccentricity, and is generally regarded as the most outstanding of Bach's offspring. He wrote only a handful of works for solo organ, including five sonatas and several fugues. This limited output was partly due to the fact that he never held an appointment as an organist, but there are other factors: the Church's influence as a major patron of music had waned, as public concerts, salons and domestic music-making burgeoned. Also, the organ had been a natural medium for polyphonic music, but was less suitable for the newer homophonic style. The first four of C.P.E. Bach's organ sonatas, dating from 1755, were composed for Anna Amalia, Princess of Prussia, a player of limited technique. Her inability to use the pedals explains why they are written for manuals only. Although C.P.E. is much better known for his abundance of harpsichord works, these organ pieces do illustrate – albeit to a lesser degree – his typical idiosyncrasies and imaginative qualities.

Johann Ernst Bach (1722–1777), son of Johann Bernhard Bach, was born in Eisenach and studied with J.S. Bach at Leipzig. His output includes religious vocal works and only two fantasias and fugues for organ.

Second cousin of Johann Sebastian, **Johann Bernhard Bach (1676–1749)** was born in Erfurt. His limited number of surviving works are instrumental, including four orchestral suites which J.S. Bach valued highly enough to have them copied. His organ works include a chaconne and a group of chorale preludes.

Johann Lorenz Bach (1695–1773) was born in Schweinfurt and musically trained by his father Johann Valentin and by Johann Sebastian Bach. His only surviving work is the Prelude and Fugue in D major.

Johann Friedrich Bach (1682–1730), the son of Johann Christoph Bach, attended Jena University before succeeding J.S. Bach as organist at St Blasius in Mühlhausen in 1708. A fugue in G minor is his only surviving organ work.

Uncertainly attributed works

A tremendous quantity of music by lesser composers of Bach's time was published under a more famous name, to improve public reception and commercial sales. This practice was widespread, leading to numerous works being attributed to Bach, but scholars have often disputed their authenticity. One such work is the Fantasia and Fugue in A minor BWV561.

Born in Weimar, the first son of Bach and his first wife Maria Barbara, **Wilhelm Friedmann Bach (1710–1784)** was a composer of great talent who sadly failed to fully develop his potential. Professor Robert Hill has described him as: 'a genius who was unable to fit into the career paths available in his time.' He also suffered from alcoholism and was burdened by a difficult disposition. He was a virtuoso performer on the organ, renowned for his improvisatory skill. He held positions at major churches of Dresden and Halle.

Born at Wechmar, **Heinrich Bach (1615–1692)** was the father of Johann Christoph and Johann Michael. From 1641 until his death he held a position of organist in Arnstadt, but of his compositions for organ only three of his chorales have survived.

Johann Christoph Bach (1642–1703), born in Arnstadt, played an important role in the musical education of his nephew, Johann Sebastian. He was very highly regarded within the family, C.P.E. Bach describing him as 'a composer of depth'. Among the organ compositions which have survived are '44 Chorales with Preludes' and one Prelude and Fugue in E flat major, while the *Aria variata* and Aria 'Eberliniana' with variations are more substantial works. His organ music generally shows a taste for chromaticism.

Johann Michael Bach (1648–1694) was born in Arnstadt. In 1665 he succeeded his brother Johann Christoph as organist at the chapel of Arnstadt Castle. Eight years later he was appointed as the town organist of Gehren. His organ music consists of numerous chorales, of which 'In dulci jubilo' was long attributed to J.S. Bach. Most of these chorales, along with two composed by his brother Johann Christoph, are in the Neumeister Collection at Yale University, while others from the same manuscript source are attributed to him.

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