

PROGRAM NOTES

These extraordinary works by Bach, not nearly as available for savoring in the concert hall as they should be, provide a rich and engaging tour through early 18th-century instrumental writing. The chronology of these pieces is a bit vague because the oldest remaining source dates from ca. 1740, though not in Bach's hand. Most scholars have chronologically placed the works between 1717 and 1723 while Bach resided in Cöthen, but recently the trend has put them in Bach's Leipzig years, specifically ca. 1725-26. The 1774 quote from Emanuel Bach below implies the earlier chronology ("date back more than fifty years"), but hyperbole is not out of the question. The earlier date also places the sonatas amongst a rich harvest of chamber music; the later date amongst a rich harvest of cantatas and other works.

Bach often composed in sets of six; consider the six works for unaccompanied violin, the six cello suites, the Brandenburg concerti, the keyboard partitas, the French suites, the English suites, the organ trio sonatas, the six parts of the Christmas Oratorio, and so on. Less well known among these classics are the six sonatas for violin and keyboard.

In 1774, his son Carl Philip Emanuel Bach wrote of these sonatas, "The six Clavier Trios are among the best works of my dear departed father. They still sound excellent and give me much joy, although they date back more than fifty years. They contain some Adagios that could not be written in a more singable manner today."

This is a revealing statement in a number of ways. Implicit is the dramatic style changes that had taken place in the time that had passed. The younger Bach also refers to the works rather anachronistically as "clavier trios" – keyboard trios, as they were entitled in the copies that have come down to us (there is no manuscript in J.S. Bach's hand) – because all of the faster movements and a few of the slower are composed in trio sonata texture, the norm for instrumental music in the 17th and early 18th centuries. In these movements, the violinist plays one of the upper voices, the right hand of the harpsichordist the other, while the left hand handles the bass. In many of the slower movements, however, Bach experiments with a variety of other textures, thereby lending each sonata a distinct quality. Sometimes the harpsichord is just a florid accompanist to the violin's lyrical cantilena (e.g. the first movement of sonata in E major). In the F minor sonata, the third movement represents a kind of early minimal music: both violin and keyboard elaborate on the harmony, but there is no real melody (though the listener may well hear one implied!). The G major sonata went through a metamorphosis -- there are three different versions, featuring several different movements. We are doing the first version, which includes both a solo harpsichord movement and one for violin and continuo, unlike all other movements in the sonata set, in which the harpsichord part is "obbligato," or written out explicitly.

The sonatas are in six different keys -- three major and three minor -- and all six have one movement in a key other than the home key. Finally, the astute listener will hear many different styles of fugal writing in the faster movements, where the counterpoint is relentlessly even-handed. As in many other of his sets of six, Bach attempts to be wide-ranging, even comprehensive, in his inclusion of many aspects of style.

Bach thus meets the formidable challenge of creating maximum imaginable variety despite the limited colors of the two instruments. The challenge to the players is to inflect with dynamics and rhythmic flexibility so as to illuminate the wide range of moods, musical styles and contrapuntal ideas.

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