

Johann Sebastian Bach and the Fortepiano

The keyboard music of J.S. Bach (Johann Sebastian Bach, 1685-1750) was mostly intended for the harpsichord. At that time, this instrument had a central position in the musical world, and had reached a state of high perfection. However, because it used a plucked string mechanism, it was not possible to express nuances on the keyboard, by playing loud or soft.

The clavichord, on the other hand, another very popular instrument, functioned by striking the strings, thus making different expressive nuances possible. Unfortunately, this instrument had a small range, and an extremely discreet sonority, which makes for a particularly confidential usage: it could hardly be used for public concerts.

For that reason, the idea arose of replacing the plucked string system of the harpsichord with another, newly developed mechanism using hammers, which would strike the strings and thus make it possible to play with different dynamics. This was the system developed by Bartolomeo Cristofori (1655-1731), *circa* 1700 in Florence, Tuscany. Over the years, he developed and perfected his invention to a level of complexity which made his instruments expensive. Simplifications were made soon afterwards, only for the complex designs of Cristofori to reappear later in yet more highly developed pianos. This is a sure sign of his exceptional creativity.

The simplified mechanism was introduced by Gottfried Silbermann (1683-1753), a well-known German organ builder, who had shown an interest in Cristofori's new piano. During the mid-1730s, Silbermann had presented his simplified instrument to J.S. Bach, who was at that time not well pleased; he is said to have complained about the pinched sound in the high notes, and the heavy touch required.

Later, in 1747, when the composer was aged 62, he again encountered Silbermann's fortepiano in the Royal Palace in Potsdam in the presence of the King of Prussia. On that occasion, J.S. Bach appeared better satisfied with the instrument (which had been improved in various ways), and he immediately improvised a fugue in three voices based on a theme supplied by the King - who played it himself as an introduction. The fact that J.S. Bach could perform so well on the court fortepiano, said to be exceptionally difficult to play, suggests that he had had the opportunity to familiarise himself with the instrument. Or did he own one himself? There is no clear evidence on that point, but it is known that he possessed several harpsichords. Furthermore, the same word ("clavier", "clavicembalo" or "clavecin") was used at the time to refer not just to instruments using the plucked strings mechanism but also to those with struck strings. It may be supposed, moreover, that, when composing part of the "Musical Offering" in 1747, Bach must have had the sound and the touch of the fortepiano in mind. In the same way, it is possible that the keyboard concertos composed in Leipzig during the last period of his life may also have been performed on that instrument.

Whatever the precise details, it is clear that J.S. Bach did have the opportunity to play the fortepiano, even though he encountered the instrument late in life. It may therefore be considered that, in using it for performances of Bach's works, one is still respecting the sound of the composer's original conception, while avoiding the very different sonorities of the modern grand piano.

The fortepiano used for this recording is a copy made by Christopher Clarke in 2004 of an instrument constructed by Anton Walter at the end of the 18th century. It is made entirely of wood, with no metallic reinforcements: its harmonic structure and its measurements are thus close to those of the fortepianos which J.S. Bach had used half a century earlier.

The programme proposed here includes two *Partitas* (n° 4 and n° 6), the first of which precedes, and the second follows, two other works: the *Fantasy and Fugue* in A minor, and the *French Suite* n° 5 in G major.

Partita n° 4, which opens the programme, has seven movements, including an *Ouverture* and a suite of dances in the conventional form for the time: *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande* and *Minuet*, to which the composer has added one of those pieces he called "galanteries" which were not used for dancing, in this case the *Aria*, which is placed between the *Courante* and the *Sarabande*; the group concludes as usual with a *Gigue*.

The *Fantasy and fugue* in A minor demonstrates both solemn power and sweet melodic writing, with remarkable stylistic contrasts.

The fifth *French Suite* played here is also made up of a series of seven dances: the first four are typical of the time, the *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, and the *Gavotte*: but these are followed more surprisingly by more a *Bourrée* and a *Louré* (dances which were then fashionable at the Court of Versailles), before the series ends more conventionally with a *Gigue*.

Partita n° 6 again includes seven movements, also made up of a suite of dances, beginning this time with a *Toccata*, followed by an *Allemanda* and a *Corrente*, and then a “galanterie” (entitled *Air*), before coming back to the more conventional form with a *Sarabande*, a *Tempo di Gavotta* and a *Gigue*.

Yoko Kaneko serves Bach’s music with her delicate touch and her sensitive phrasing, which bring out the harmonic richness, the brightly sparkling sonority and the fullest sound the pianoforte can produce.

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Tuning and temperament

I began in principle with a temperament based on five fifths reduced by one fifth of a Pythagorean comma between C and E, plus the fifth F# - C#, the remaining fifths being left pure*. Then later, when trying out the different groups of pieces according to the order given on the recording, I introduced various modifications to accommodate the different tonalities and the modulations in each piece, or group of pieces, simply following what I could hear, based on my understanding of the text, without attempting to preserve the basic temperament. In general, I was aiming for a rich and calm basic sonority, with the purest possible acoustic consonances, the secondary tone being a little less calm, and the more distant harmonies more tense. This principle is more or less evident according to the characteristics of the music.

* Notes by Quentin Blumenroeder concerning an organ built by Andreas Silbermann.

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Yoko Kaneko

Following her studies in two of the most famous institutions of advanced musical study, first at the Toho Gakuen school in Tokyo, then at the French National Conservatoire (CNSM) in Paris, *Yoko Kaneko* is now recognised as a musical artist and virtuoso who is both an accomplished pianist and player of the fortepiano. She is considered today as one of the most sensitive artists of her generation. She has appeared throughout her career with the most distinguished, internationally recognised, musicians.

Her determination to discover the quintessence of each work so as to obtain a truly valid interpretation, taking account of the specific style of each different composer, has led her to study with several great masters of music. Her teachers have included Germaine Mounier, Michel Béroff and Yvonne Loriot-Messiaen for the piano, and Jean Mouillère, Menahem Pressler, Jean Hubeau and György Kurtag for chamber music. Her encounters with two of her predecessors, Masahiro Arita and Jos van Immerseel, both experts on authentic performance-styles, have had a decisive influence on her musical development.

A enthusiastic performer of chamber music, especially the lesser known repertoire, she has made six records with the Gabriel Piano Quartet, which include works by Guillaume Lekeu, Reynaldo Hahn and Antonin Dvorak, as well as Camille Saint-Saëns and Joseph Jongen. Works by Gabriel Fauré and Ernest Chausson, have been issued by MA Recordings.

As a player of the fortepiano, *Yoko Kaneko* has recorded the Mozart two-piano concerto with Jos van Immerseel, as well as pieces by Johann Benjamin Gross with the baroque cellist Christophe Coin. She has also recorded the Beethoven sonatas for piano alone, as well as “Works of the Golden Age” by Mozart, also for MA Recordings.

Her recordings have achieved recognition from the most authoritative publications, and have received notably a “Choc” from the “*Monde de la Musique*” magazine, a “Grand Prix” from the “Nouvelle Académie du Disque”, a “Diapason d’Or”, the “Prix d’Arte”, the “Editor’s Choice” and a “Record of the Month” from the British magazine “*The Gramophone*”. She has also received a “Prelude Classical Award” in Holland, and a “Geijutsu-Records Prize” in Japan.

In recent years, she has attempted to unify the concerto performance style with the spirit of chamber music, so as to integrate the soloist as completely as possible in the orchestral ensemble. This approach has enjoyed great public success in performances of concerti by Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven with the “Anima Eterna” Orchestra of Bruges, the “Toulouse Chamber Orchestra” and the English “Haydn Orchestra”.