Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach

Prussian Sonatas

Susan Alexander-Max, Hofmann Grand Piano
Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (1714–1788)

C.P.E. Bach was the second son of Johann Sebastian Bach’s first marriage and the most famous of all the sons of Bach. He was, of course, excellently grounded in music by his father; he studied law. His one chance of foreign travel, as tutor to the son of Count Keyserlingk, was relinquished for the sake of employment.

In 1738, when I had completed my studies and travelled to Berlin, I received a most propitious invitation to escort a young gentleman on his travels abroad; an unexpected gracious summons to Ruppin [fifty miles north-west of Berlin] from the then Crown Prince in Prussia, now King, caused me to abandon this plan. Conditions were such that I did not formally enter the service of His Majesty until His accession to the throne in 1740, when I had the honour of accompanying on the harpsichord [...]. From this time onwards until November 1767 I was continuously in the service of the King of Prussia. [...]1

We see, in his own words, that from 1738 to 1767 C.P.E. Bach was a chamber musician in the Berlin court of Frederick the Great. He gained much from his experiences at the court and was skilled in various styles of accompaniment. It would have been necessary for him to be familiar with the lighter galant style, fashionable at this time, as well as with the heavier and denser polyphony previously favoured.

Bach had the determination and the ability to go his own compositional way. His musical style manifests itself in both adherence to past elements and originality in compositional approach. In his first years in Berlin he composed two collections of keyboard sonatas. In 1742 he completed Sei Sonate per Cembalo, Wq49, known as the Prussian Sonatas and in 1744, Wq49, the Württemberg Sonatas. The two collections of sonatas represent some of the most significant examples of the stylistic changes that were taking place. They illustrate the way Bach’s creativity was evolving and how he was integrating his inheritance of polyphonic repertoire with new expressive aims.

The slow movements of Bach’s keyboard sonatas that best demonstrate his proclivity for empfindsamer Stil. He was seeking to achieve the ideal of ‘musical speech’. In the F minor slow movement of Prussian Sonata, Wq48 No. 7, he compose an intensely emotional instrumental ‘recitative’ that combines expression with inventiveness. By contrasting two different types of sonority he creates the impression of a dialogue. Beginning with a sustained, smooth-flowing cantilena, he creates a harmonically interesting and rich melodic line. This is followed by the recitative. The alternation of recitative and arioso establishes the contrast of mood and the significance of rhetoric in the movement.

Another example may be seen in the Adagio of Sonata No 3. The even rhythmic flow produces unity of Affekt, an elegant style that was characterised by an emphasis on subtleties of the expression of numerous sentiments within one movement of a composition. At the same time Bach is surpassing the boundaries of the past with dynamic contrasts and bold, sometimes unconventional harmonies which suggest new possibilities for the treatment of the melodic line.

C.P.E. Bach remained at the court of Frederick the Great until his appointment in Hamburg when he succeeded his godfather Telemann as musical director in Hamburg’s five principal churches. He was, by this time, the most famous keyboard player in Europe. Now in the freedom and liveliness of the great Hanseatic city-state he could forget the conservative atmosphere of Frederick’s court. He served in Hamburg from 1768 until his death in 1788. When the celebrated, English music historian Charles Burney visited Bach in Hamburg in 1772, Bach confessed his embarrassment about the comparatively primitive level of Hamburg music; notwithstanding Hamburg’s relative lack of musical sophistication, and in spite of the difficulty of being in charge of the decaying tradition of church music, Bach earned the lasting respect and admiration of his fellow citizens. He enjoyed a greater reputation during his own lifetime than any other member of his family, including his father, Johann Sebastian.

It has become a cultural blunder to speak of this composer as simply the forerunner of Haydn and Mozart, and a mere bridge between his father and the Viennese Classicists. Today, we view C.P.E. Bach in his own terms and as a leading player. By the age of thirty, he was already demonstrating a mature style of composition, with considerable power of invention, and intent on bringing expressivity associated with vocal music to the keyboard. In his Versuch he refers to the ‘speaking’ passages in his music. The power of emotion and the element of surprise on the listener are carefully planned and, in his own words, aimed “to stir the heart of the listener into a gentle emotion and thence to lead him wherever he wishes”. (Versuch, Ch. III)

In addition to his important keyboard literature, C.P.E. Bach is most remembered as the author of the renowned Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen (Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments), in which he documents the experiences and knowledge achieved during his first years in Berlin. He discusses ornamentation and the conventions of music of the day. This treatise has become an invaluable source for historically informed performance of eighteenth-century music.

As the Mozart biographer, Hiermann Abert, says of C.P.E. Bach, the keyboard composer:

The popular slogan ‘galant style’ does not remotely do justice to the art of this remarkable man, in whom features of the old-style Enlightenment are constantly crossing paths with the spirit of Sturm und Drang, and even of the later Romantic movement. [...] Bach demands much more from the listener in these sonatas, he frequently wrenches him away through strange heights and depths, and forces him, like a true son of J. S. Bach, by means of a harmonic vocabulary which is often almost wildly daring, into areas of the soul which were quite unknown [...].2

The instrument used for this recording is the Grand Piano by Ferdinand Hofmann (1796–1828), Vienna, ca. 1790, a beautifully preserved cherry-wood piano made in Vienna between 1785 and 1790. It is one from the permanent collection at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Hofmann, an organ and piano builder, was a leading member and president (1808) of the civic keyboard-maker’s association, and a recipient of a court appointment in 1812. This piano is one of his earlier efforts in a production history spanning from 1784 to 1825. His twenty existing grand pianos document the development of Viennese piano technology between Mozart’s later years and the death of Schubert. The keyboard has a five-octave range, FF–F3. The sound may be altered by a hand stop moderator [mute] centred above the nameplate, or by knee levers below the keyboard that lift an undivided damper rail. Having the privilege to play such an instrument gives one insight into the early performance practices as well as the aesthetics of both piano design and sound during the late 18th century.

C.P.E. Bach was a chamber musician at the court of Frederick the Great for nearly three decades. He was also one of the greatest keyboard players in Europe. His compositional mastery is exemplified by the six ‘Prussian’ Sonatas of 1742, works of great expression and stylistic interest. His desire to explore ‘musical speech’ was accompanied by bold contrasts, tremendous dynamism, and acute sensitivity for the shaping of slow movements. These reveal his inventive, forward-thinking harmonies that both acknowledge the past but also strike out in vivid new directions.

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Prussian Sonatas, Wq48

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Producer & Engineer: Phil Rowlands ∙ Booklet notes: Susan Alexander-Max

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