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Peter Watchorn Plays J.S. Bach's Inventions & Sinfonias



J.S. Bach: Inventions and Sinfonias, S. 772-801; Peter Watchorn, Harpsichord; [Musica Omnia](#) MO 0208, ©2008, 57:07, \$11.99.

Harpsichordist Peter Watchorn's new recording of J.S. Bach's Inventions and Sinfonias, S. 772-801 on the Musica Omnia label (co-founded by Watchorn) is a generous production. The cover is graced with an uncredited drawing of a cross-eyed Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, appropriate because these pieces were composed for his instruction in composition as well as keyboard playing.

The accompanying booklet contains several essays concerning the instrument, its tuning, the music at hand, and the performer. The specific intervals used in the tuning are explained in detail in an essay by Bradley Lehman whose interpretation of a diagram at the top of the title page of Bach's *Well-Tempered Klavier* results in a system of almost but not quite equal temperament.

The sound of the harpsichord and the recording's natural-sounding ambience are most impressive. (The disc was recorded by the excellent Boston engineer, Joel Gordon). The instrument, built by an Australian maker, Allastair McAllister, is a copy of a 1709 German harpsichord by Johann Heinrich Harraß with two manuals and five octaves. Its sound is transparent yet somehow full and able to produce a singing tone.

The performance is a careful and caring one. Watchorn clearly elucidates each musical line and allows the music to breathe. However, I feel that there is more variety in these pieces than Watchorn's interpretations allow, more exuberance, and more contrast between them.

In the use of the two most important expressive resources available to the harpsichordist – rhythmic freedom, and choice of tempo, Watchorn is quite conservative. "Too much rhythmic freedom results in the momentum and structural integrity of the piece being undermined," he writes in the liner notes. Yes, but the question of how much is "too much" is highly subjective! In my opinion, his performance of the two-part Inventions in E and Bb, in particular, would be improved by more sense of movement and just slightly greater rhythmic freedom to provide the lilt that is the essence of their character. When he plays with more flexibility, as in the particularly beautiful Sinfonia in E b, the performance becomes more affecting.

In his notes, Watchorn reiterates the idea that a vocal manner of performance determines his manner of playing. He explains that his "tempos are moderate, illuminating my belief that Bach's complex counterpoint requires more time than it is usually given to it..." But again, the nature of a vocal line is a subjective determination. Certainly there are speedy vocal lines in Bach's cantatas, motets, and masses, and plenty of movements in which dance influences supersede song. I wished that Watchorn had opted to let some of the more brilliant, gigue-like pieces such as the Sinfonia in b move faster.

The program notes refer to the Invention in f and two of the Sinfonias as being "*Andantes*" but since Bach left no tempo indications for these pieces, this is a bit misleading. *Andante* is Watchorn's preferred tempo choice for many of these pieces, and sometimes, as in the sequence of the first four Sinfonias, it becomes slightly monotonous. When he takes a notably slow tempo, the results are compelling, as in the Sinfonia in f, and I think that a strong case could also be made to interpret the Invention in f at a slower tempo based on the intensity of the music's affect and the uncommon, long slurs that Bach marked to indicate legato. This would also result in a more interesting contrast with the rapid Invention in F that precedes it.

I am not suggesting that Bach intended that the Inventions and Sinfonias be listened to in sequence, as a cycle, performed "complete" or even performed in concert or recital at all! But it is difficult for me to imagine that Bach, a keyboard virtuoso, would not have also wished that Wilhelm Friedemann and other pupils explore occasional extremes of tempo in these pieces that are otherwise so compositionally ingenious and varied.

Nonetheless, I would recommend this recording, part of a projected series of the complete Bach works for harpsichord by Watchorn on Musica Omnia, for the lovely sound of the harpsichord, scholarly presentation, and thoughtful, if (to my taste) rather staid performances.

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