

## John McKean

### Bountiful Bach

In the title-pages to each of the four parts of J. S. Bach's *Clavier-Übung*, the composer offers his keyboard works to music lovers as a means of 'refreshing the spirit' (*Gemüths Ergötzung*). Bach could hardly have imagined the extent to which these works, and others, would

proliferate in the centuries following his death. Now, more so than ever before, we are confronted with a profusion of fine performances of this repertory that are both historically grounded and of the highest artistic calibre. In this light, the task of choosing from a variety of recordings can, at times, seem more overwhelming than refreshing.

In the case of Léon Berben's recent CD **Fantasia & Fuge** (Myrios MYR001, issued 2010, 62'), the choice is somewhat less daunting, for this recording features an array of works (all of them fantasies and/or fugues) that many listeners will not already have in their collections. Apart from the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue BWV903 and perhaps the Fantasy and Fugue in A minor BWV904, these are more obscure pieces that one typically encounters—if at all—individually, in ancillary roles: as a curiosity thrown into a recital programme of more familiar works, for instance. Needless to say, it is quite 'refreshing' indeed to see these captivating pieces placed centre-stage for a change. The extreme, otherworldly chromaticism of the Fantasy and Fugue in C minor BWV906 is especially shocking, while the plaintive, miniature Fantasia in B minor (BWV *deest*) conveys a feeling of intimacy that is rare for this otherwise extroverted genre. Berben's playing is exemplary, as is his instrument—a copy (by Keith Hill) of a 1728 double-manual harpsichord by Christian Zell whose colourful timbral palette has a seamless transition from a zesty, focused bass to a sweet, silvery treble. On occasion, Berben's ornamentation sounds slightly indiscriminate, the result of compulsion rather than of judicious embellishment, but his creativity and imagination remain the most salient features of his performance. The CD's sound quality is excellent, the liner notes are informative and well written, and the overall presentation is first rate. As the first release of Myrios Classics, this new label will be one to watch.

**The complete Clavier Suites of J. S. Bach, vol.2** (Lyrichord LEMS8068, rec 2009, 75') is the second volume in harpsichordist John Paul's projected set of seven and features French Suites IV and VI BWV815, 817 alongside Partita VI BWV830. While Lyrichord's characteristically gaudy packaging and generally mediocre production quality are off-putting, this is actually a rather nice CD. As with Paul's other Lyrichord recordings, this one features that arcane and enchanting keyboard instrument known as the *lautenwerk*. Although no originals survive, there are numerous 18th-century descriptions of 'lute harpsichords' and Bach himself is known to have possessed two at the time of his death. J. F. Agricola later described his teacher's *lautenwerk* as 'smaller in size than

a normal harpsichord, but similar in all other respects. It had two courses . . . of gut strings, and a so-called Little Octave of brass strings. In its normal setting—that is, when only one stop was drawn—it sounded more like a theorbo than a lute. But if one drew the lute-stop . . . one could almost deceive even professional lutenists.’ It appears that this is precisely what John Paul intends to do. The *lautenwerk* used for this recording was designed and built by Anden Houben with the disposition described by Agricola above. In spite of this, Paul employs the same single 8’ *peau de buffle* registration throughout, stating in the liner notes that ‘the choice of this stop to record all of the Bach Suites was made with a desire to express them in terms of the lute’. Although he masterfully draws upon the timbral palette this unique stop offers, I find it regrettable that he does not use the instrument to its full potential; it would have been nice to hear a variety of registrations that included the second 8’ and the 4’ choirs. Paul’s commendable advocacy of this wonderful instrument is thus slightly at odds with his vicarious use of it as lute. Regardless, recordings of Bach on the *lautenwerk* are always welcome, and Paul’s highly expressive rendition of these pieces makes for very enjoyable listening indeed.

While the absence of an original *lautenwerk* prompts instrument-makers to let their ingenuity and imagination alone guide their efforts, there are also antique harpsichords of such extraordinary quality that builders have been inspired to copy them time and again. The famous 1624 double-manual harpsichord by Johannes Ruckers in the Musée d’Unterlinden (Colmar, France) is one such example, and it is this very instrument we have the pleasure of hearing in Lisa Goode Crawford’s excellent recording of the **Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue; Partita no.4; English Suite no.3** (Naxos 8.572309, *rec* 2008, 62’). Crawford is widely recognized as the preeminent North American pedagogue of her generation, and as one of her former pupils I know first-hand the breadth of her knowledge and skill in this capacity. However, it is her profound artistry as a player and depth of experience as an interpreter of Bach that stands out in these performances. The juxtaposition of Crawford’s mature, staid reading of the D Major Partita BWV828 and that of the exuberant (though earnest) G minor English Suite BWV808 not only highlights the unparalleled diversity Bach achieved within the formal parameters of the keyboard suite, but also showcases the tremendously colourful and robust sound of the Colmar Ruckers. Crawford’s rapture with this special harpsichord is evident throughout the CD, but it is in the Prelude to the English Suite that the full cohesion of performer and instrument produces an especially

unforgettable performance. The dynamic nuance of her rich, orchestral sound ranges from arrestingly hushed passagework to thundering crescendos and everything in between. Crawford similarly galvanizes the contrasting features of the third work featured on this recording—the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue.

Whereas the capricious and improvisatory *stylus phantasticus* of the Fantasy presupposes a large measure of freedom from the performer, the rigorous counterpoint of the Fugue calls for rather more discipline. In spite of this apposition, however, both movements share a common grounding in rhetoric to achieve their respective effects (or affects), and it is this aspect of the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue that Pascal Dubreuil evokes with such success in **Clavier-Übung II** (Ramée RAM1001, *rec* 2008, 65’). This is a truly outstanding recording and I highly recommend it. Dubreuil’s playing is imbued with an exhilarating mélange of gesture and finesse, and it comes as no surprise to read in the liner notes that he has undertaken an intensive study of 17th- and 18th-century musical rhetoric, from which he produced the first French translation of Joachim Burmeister’s treatise *Musica Poetica* (1606). ‘Poetic’ is, indeed, a fitting description for Dubreuil’s playing throughout this CD, whether in the virtuosic Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, or in the more lyrical Prelude, Fugue and Allegro BWV998, for which Bach’s manuscript actually reads ‘Prelude pour la Luth à Cembal’. As such, it is frequently cited as a crossover piece that was, perhaps, conceived for the idiomatic sound of the *lautenwerk*. This notwithstanding, one cannot fault Dubreuil’s equally effective reading of this work on the harpsichord—in this case a copy by Titus Crijnen of the 1624 Ruckers mentioned above. While most recordings of harpsichord music seamlessly (though artificially) progress from one track to the next, this production includes the unobtrusive sound of Debreuil’s changes of registration between movements—a decision I heartily applaud. Not only does this seemingly minor detail further transport the listener into the world of the recorded performance, but—as Debreuil doubtlessly realizes and intends—it also contributes to the performance’s rhetorical fabric, thus underscoring my belief that silence between movements is as much a part of the music as the notes themselves. In addition to the two works already mentioned, this CD features the Italian Concerto BWV971 and the French Overture BWV831, which make up the *Clavier-Übung II*. In contrast, Alexander Weimann’s recording of **Clavierübung II** (Atma ACD2 2603, *rec* 2008, 47’) presents only these two works without the supplementation of others to fill out the CD. His highly virtuosic playing is

characterized above all else by clarity and precision, qualities that allow Bach's complex and multi-layered keyboard textures to build up without the slightest hint of murkiness or congestion. Weimann, who is especially well known for his brilliance as a continuo player, is a true polymath, having studied theatre, musicology, medieval Latin and jazz piano (among other things) in his native Munich. This sophistication is reflected in his playing, though at times a greater degree of flexibility would be welcome. All traces of stiffness are cast aside in the concluding Echo of the French Overture, however, and Weimann's sense of humour comes to the fore with an electrifying rhythmic *inégalité* (or is it a jazzy swing?) that brings to mind the wry smile he sports on the CD's cover.

Francesco Corti's recording of **Partiten BWV825–830** (Berlin Classics 0300039BC, *rec* 2010, 154') offers a fresh and especially vivacious take on these bastions of the keyboard repertory. This is the young harpsichordist's second solo CD, following on the heels of his 2007 debut recording of suites by Louis Couperin. Corti is hardly a newcomer to the recording studio, however, and can be heard as a continuo player on a variety of CDs of orchestral music that have arisen from his regular engagement with Les Musiciens du Louvre (among other renowned European ensembles). With his exuberant sound and seemingly effortless virtuosity, Corti's performances present a balanced interpretation: they are imaginative but not self-indulgent, free of academic pedantry but not unorthodox. And while this CD may not dramatically challenge your overall conception of the partitas, there are plenty of eyebrow-raising surprises to be heard in its details. Subtleties such as the clever registration of the Rondeau in Partita II, the brilliantly improvised flight of notes at the end of the Corrente in Partita V, or the demure *agrément*s slipped into the repeats of many of the sarabandes betoken Corti's ingenuity. The Italian's tempos are decidedly caffeinated and often engender a sense of urgency, but he masterfully channels this driving energy through each partita and regularly tempers it with equally unhurried and meditative movements of repose. The engineers at Deutschlandradio have done a particularly fine job in capturing the delectable sound of Corti's harpsichord—yet another reproduction of the 1624 Colmar Ruckers, this time by Matthias Griewisch. The one shortcoming of this otherwise exemplary production is the CD's liner notes, which consist only of an informal interview with Corti. While this interview captures a youthful, off-the-cuff side of the performer that is, perhaps, somewhat endearing, it is not commensurate with the depth and maturity of his work at the keyboard. Nevertheless,

this is a fine recording and we can surely look forward to much more to come from this rising star.

In contrast to the relatively explicit musical text of the partitas, *The Art of Fugue* BWV1080 confronts any would-be interpreter with a host of fundamental performative issues, ranging from the ordering and arrangement of its movements to the question of which instrument (or instruments) to use. Peter Kofler presents one possible configuration of what is arguably Bach's most cerebral work in his recording of **Die Kunst der Fuge** (Raumklang RK3004, *rec* 2010, 78'). Kofler pursues an entirely orthodox reading of the work as manifested in the first edition of 1751, making no concessions whatsoever to the text. He thus freely admits recourse to the 'legitimate possibilities of modern recording technology' in order to achieve the otherwise humanly unplayable passages in the mirror fugues, and concludes the CD by breaking off the final *Fuga a 3* mid-phrase at the point where Bach died. His performance is divided between two instruments: a 1782 double-manual harpsichord by Karl August Gräbner and a modern *organo di legno* loosely patterned on the organ in the Innsbruck Hofkirche. Both have a clear, refined sound that is well suited to the complex contrapuntal texture of *The Art of Fugue*, but Kofler is demonstrably more at home on the organ; his heavy-handed harpsichord playing produces an unpleasant 'thumping' throughout. In spite of this, he does an admirable job breathing musicality into a notoriously introverted work and achieves a delicate balance between his expressive prerogative as a performer and the untouchable compositional perfection that has often led to the work's characterization as 'Augenmusik'.

To the extent that *The Art of Fugue* serves as 'eye music' for some, the *Inventions* and *Sinfonias* BWV722–801 might qualify as 'finger music' for others. Although Bach initially composed these pieces for the musical edification of his son Wilhelm Friedemann, they have become mainstays of keyboard pedagogy the world over; nearly everyone who has taken piano lessons will have encountered one or more of these affable pieces along the way. But just as *The Art of Fugue* must not be dismissed as a purely theoretical work unfit for meaningful performance, so too should these pieces be appreciated as more than mere études. Along these lines, Peter Watchorn's recording of the **Inventions & Sinfonias** BWV722–801 (Musica Omnia MO0208, *rec* 2007, 57') succeeds in his stated aim 'to show unequivocally that they are the antithesis of dry, pedagogical exercises, and are in fact fully equal in artistic quality to Bach's finest abstract counterpoint found in the *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and *The Art of Fugue*'. As a

veteran interpreter of this repertory, Watchorn is speaking on good authority—his performances of Bach earned him the Erwin Bodky prize in 1985—and this CD represents only one small part of his ambitious project to record the complete solo and concerted harpsichord works of Bach for Musica Omnia, the independent, non-profit label he co-founded and directs. The *Inventions* and *Sinfonias* join Watchorn's previously released recordings of the English Suites, Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and, more recently, **Das Wohltemperierte Clavier: Book II** (Musica Omnia MO0202, *rec* 2009, 187'). Although there is still much to come in this series, Watchorn has already set the highest of standards. His virtuosic and expressive playing is complemented by an equally profound knowledge and understanding of the music that, although clearly heard, is also manifest in the exceptionally informative liner notes accompanying each of his recordings. In the case of Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, he not only provides an overview of the work and its history as a whole, but also offers thoughtful reflections on each of the preludes and fugues, detailed information about the remarkable instrument he plays (a harpsichord by Alistair McAllister after the Saxon builder J. H. Harrass), and even a short essay by Bradley Lehman on the so-called 'Bach tuning' that was first reported in this very journal. Although the authenticity of this tuning has not gone uncontested, this recording reaffirms its worth as an aesthetically pleasing and highly musical solution to the problem of temperament. Perhaps the most striking feature of this performance, however, is Watchorn's historically sound decision to make use of a pedal harpsichord. From the moment we hear the positively explosive 16' pedal point in the opening C Major prelude, the pedal harpsichord's capacity to add (in the words of the performer) a 'distinct third dimension to the sound' is self-evident. But Watchorn does not reduce this unique feature to a gimmick and resists the natural temptation to overuse it; rather, he judiciously incorporates the pedal harpsichord in tasteful, subtle ways. While he acknowledges the influence of other great interpreters of Bach—most especially his teacher, the great Isolde Ahlgrimm—Watchorn's is a deeply personal interpretation. As he so eloquently states, 'it is the measure of this work's greatness that it allows many different approaches and still yields its secrets'.

I wholeheartedly agree. There are instances where quantity and quality are not mutually exclusive, and we can rest assured that performers will never fully exhaust the bounty of Bach's keyboard legacy. We can therefore delight in the ever-growing abundance of fine recordings of this repertory, for the variety it engenders is not only

enriching, but—for lack of a better word—refreshing as well.

### Websites

*Atma* [www.atmaclassique.com](http://www.atmaclassique.com)

*Berlin Classics* [www.edel.com/de/audio/klassik](http://www.edel.com/de/audio/klassik)

*Lyrichord* [www.lyrichord.com](http://www.lyrichord.com)

*Musica Omnia* [www.musicaomnia.org](http://www.musicaomnia.org)

*Myrios* [www.myriosmusic.com](http://www.myriosmusic.com)

*Naxos* [www.naxos.com](http://www.naxos.com)

*Ramée* [www.ramee.org](http://www.ramee.org)

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