



THE KEBLE EARLY MUSIC FESTIVAL

J.S. Bach & Sons
Some Musical Relations

EDWARD HIGGINBOTTOM
organ

Friday 28 February 2025 at 1.00pm

With thanks to the Warden and Fellows of Keble College

**THE KEBLE
EARLY MUSIC
FESTIVAL**

FESTIVAL DIRECTOR Christian Wilson

FESTIVAL ADMINISTRATOR Pippa Thynne

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Edward Higginbottom *organ*

J.S. BACH

Toccata in e (BWV 914)

[intrada] – un poco allegro – adagio – fuga

C.P.E. BACH

Sonata in g (H 47)

allegro – adagio – allegro assai

W.F. BACH

Sonata in E flat (BR-WFB A7)

allegro ma non troppo – largo – presto

J.C. BACH

Sonata in A (Op 17/5)

allegro – presto

J.S. BACH

Toccata in D (BWV 912)

[presto] – allegro – adagio – [fuga] – con discrezione – [gigue]

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

Today's family's succession lies in farming rather than music, or did so until the Chancellor decided on a change. The musical dynasties of the 17th and 18th centuries tell a different story. The Couperins topped the poll in France, as did the Scarlattis in Italy. However, the dominant dynasty was undoubtedly the Bachs, whose musical family-tree burgeoned for well over 100 years. At its apex stands J.S. Bach, not only on account of his matchless contribution to the canon, but also for his immediate progeny. Four of his numerous children became outstanding composers and performers in their own right: Wilhelm Friedemann (1710–1784), Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–1788), Johann Christoph Friedrich (1732–1795) and Johann Christian (1735–1782). This is no accidental circumstance. Johann Sebastian took unusual care in providing the highest quality of domestic musical training. In particular, the keyboard music specifically written for W.F. stands out as a remarkable testimony to J.S.'s pedagogical spirit. But it went further than music written for domestic use: the *Clavierübung*, J.S.'s most extensive publishing project, indeed the only one of scale, was wholly didactic: its purpose to teach musicians far and wide all that was to be known about keyboard playing, ending with that greatest monument to keyboard practice, the Goldberg Variations. Given this background, J.S.'s sons could only but turn out as highly competent keyboardists. Such indeed was the case.

This recital celebrates the work of three of them, W.F., C.P.E., and J.C., set in a paternal context. J.C.F. we must leave for another time. Let's start with Wilhelm Friedemann, the eldest boy. From his early years, we have a collection of keyboard music assembled by father and son in the form of the *Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*. This repository of 'improving' material was extended by the two and three-part Inventions, and the trio sonatas for organ. For the acquisition of good and nimble habits, nothing better could have been devised. It has been suggested that his father's *Aria mit verschiedenen Veränderungen* (BWV 988 – aka Goldberg Variations) was written with W.F. in mind. No greater affirmation of one's keyboard prowess could be imagined. W.F.'s output is not limited to keyboard music: there are a goodly number of church cantatas to his name. However, the focus clearly lies in the keyboard domain, with a mixture of sonatas, polonaises, suites, fugues, dance movements, and fantasias to his name.

W.F. went on to have a distinguished career as organist, with eventually a prestigious post in Halle, although it was a career that eventually ran into the sands – he may have had a difficult personality. David Schulenberg suggests that "he was evidently less willing than most younger contemporaries to compose fashionable, readily accessible music". The evidence of his keyboard sonatas points in another direction, however. The Sonata in E flat (BR-WFB A7) is an extremely accessible work, written in an inviting Rococo idiom: a melodic right hand dominates, graciously turned and decorated, conversing from time to time with the left hand, displaying a modicum of virtuosity to entertain the crowd, but conveying enough subtlety to please the connoisseur. Simple binary structures underpin the movements. The C minor Largo is serious without being lugubrious. This is music from the pen of someone whom you would enjoy having a drink with. Bach Digital proposes a date of composition in the mid 1740s, just before W.F. took up the post at the Liebfrauenkirche in Halle in 1746. Elements of the sonata are shared in other of his compositions.

The contrast with his younger brother's work could not be more marked. Charles Burney's description of Carl Philipp Emanuel at the keyboard comes to mind: 'His eyes were fixed, his underlip fell, and drops of effervescence distilled from his countenance'. A man possessed in his improvisatory trance. C.P.E.'s Sonata in G minor (H47) reveals something of this disposition. In the first movement, improvisatory flourishes intrude at regular intervals, sometimes resembling a wordless recitative. A strong poetic impulse inhabits the Adagio, whose rhapsodic decorations roam across the keyboard. If the music retains an elegance, it imbues it with a deep seriousness, and at times with a panache pushing at the boundaries. The third movement, a presto in everything but name, may remind the listener of Domenico Scarlatti in one of his moods. It's impossible to say that this music is simply agreeable: it's both challenging and exhilarating.

No wonder C.P.E. carved out for himself the most successful career of any of his siblings, with prestigious posts in Berlin and Hamburg, succeeding in 1768 Georg Telemann (his godfather) as Hamburg's Kapellmeister. Duties there led to his cultivating a broad range of compositional genres. But in amongst them, his keyboard output remained the most substantial contribution, numbering over 200 sonatas as well as other forms. In addition, his treatise on keyboard practice, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, confirmed his reputation as the leading European authority on the subject. His was in every way the worthy successor to his father in this domain.

If in C.P.E. we encounter what has been called the *Emfindsamer Stil*, a style of abrupt mood swings and exaggeration, in the music of Johann Christian Bach we meet the galant style in all its poised elegance. J.C. settled in England in the mid 1760s, becoming the 'London Bach', and music master to Queen Charlotte. In 1764, he met the young Mozart, and for a short time was his composition tutor. Mozart later referred to his mentor with warmth and gratitude. One might be tempted to hear something of Mozart in J.C.'s work. But the opposite is the better truth. The opus 17 set of six keyboard sonatas by the Anglicised 'John Christian Bach', was published in 1780, although when composed is another matter.

So, how does the music of the father relate to the music of his sons? The first thing to say is that we need to turn to J.S.'s keyboard toccatas to make fair comparison, since his sonatas are a matter of trios and chamber music, not solo keyboard music. The keyboard suites are similarly distant in format. The seven cembalo toccatas that have survived date from J.S.'s early years, quite likely the years before the move to Weimar in 1708. They possess that mid-baroque North German air of contrast, effect, exuberance, virtuosity, and fugal enterprise. They are more sectional than the sonatas we have been discussing, ranging over various rhetorical devices, notably quasi recitative sections. Within J.S. Bach's canon they reveal a composer concerned less about succinctness than about bravura and witty ideas: the work of a young and agile musical mind. These qualities are perhaps most clearly echoed in C.P.E.'s compositions. But all three sons display their father's keyboard fluency and zest for musical character. Understandably, each went his own way, but in that journey the debt they owed to their father's teaching and example shines through. Competence, imagination, fluency, purpose.

A final question: what is this music doing in the hands of an organist? Arguably, the sons' music belongs to the fortepiano. The father's most likely to the harpsichord. Either of these instruments in Keble Chapel would be ineffectual. So, one answer is that the medium is tailored to the place. Another answer is that J.S. Bach in particular did not always differentiate between idioms. You need only compare BWVv 914 and 534, and 912 and 532 to see a common keyboard language. A third answer is that the simple dynamic inflections of this music can be as easily managed on the organ as on a period stringed keyboard instrument, and that the range of articulations remains pretty much the same, the organ having the advantage of a sustaining capacity (not to be overworked, that's for sure), and an engaging choice of timbre. None of the Bachs would have been shocked.

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EDWARD HIGGINBOTTOM

Edward Higginbottom has for many years been at the forefront of choral performance. His work as director of the Choir of New College Oxford (some 120 CDs, major awards, numerous concert tours – Brazil, USA, Australia, Japan, and most European countries) has brought him global recognition, his musicological research profoundly influencing his music-making (reviving neglected works, shaping period styles). His freelance career now embraces orchestral as well as choral direction, keyboard performance and coaching. Over recent years concert tours have taken him to France, Luxembourg, Spain, Germany, Montreal and the USA. He has conducted the Academy of Ancient Music, the European Union Baroque Orchestra, the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, as well as ensembles outside the UK. He is chief conductor of the Oxford-based period orchestra Instruments of Time & Truth, a group rapidly gaining recognition in both the UK and abroad (recently touring Spain with acclaimed performances of Handel and Bach), as well as of the Oxford Consort of Voices. Oxford University made him its first Professor of Choral Music. He has been awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal College of Organists, and holds Honorary Membership of the Royal Academy of Music. The French government has given him the title *Commandeur de l'ordre des arts et des lettres* in recognition of his contribution to French musical culture. In 2023, the Worshipful Company of Musicians made him a Lifetime Achievement Award. His most recent CD release (2023) is entitled *Rameau Re-Imagined*.



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