

The Eight Short Preludes and Fugues of J. S. Bach (BWV553-560)

Introduction

Who does not love these pieces? By Bach?

These pieces are the first attainable “island” in the “ocean” of Bach’s music.

These wonderful musical miniatures impart to both player and listener alike the impression that they are partaking of the “great organ music.”

Albert Schweitzer – “no better organ school has ever been written”

He was also of the opinion that Bach had written these pieces—the doubt of Bach’s authorship stems from voice leading problems one notices already in the C Major Prelude and also in the B-flat Major Fugue. These are very unusual and, according to the registrations selected can sound more or less problematic.

When playing these pieces on a pedal harpsichord, however, the doubling of the bass voice serves to strengthen the overall musical effect (and we know that a pedal was frequently added to stringed keyboard instruments, particularly the clavichord—it was a very common “practice instrument” in the 17th and 18th centuries. It might also be noted that there is the same kind of bass doubling in the last variation of Bach’s Partita *Christ, der du bist der helle Tag*. This would support the conclusion that instead of being a compositional deficit, this practice is characteristically associated with the style of pedal clavichord music.

The “eight” comprise a compendium that leads one into matters of musical interpretation.

Use of the Pedal

It is possible to play all sixteen pieces *manualiter*—in which case some of the bass doublings and octave spacings (for example when the left hand and pedal are playing the same notes) must be left out and some of the octaves rearranged. Only in m. 23 of the G Major Fugue must one span the interval of a tenth in order to give a complete chord (one might note, however, that keyboards in the 18th century generally had a smaller span, i.e. the keys were narrower).

It is also possible to play all the bass lines with the pedal (as has been suggested in various editions, albeit the original manuscript is all written on only two staves—something not uncommon in baroque keyboard music). It is possible to take the pedal indications as they appear in the main MS source, Mus. Ms. Bach P 281 adn. 4, as they are printed in the Bärenreiter edition Nr. 6497. It is also quite possible to make one’s own choices.

Through this approach, the “Eight” can be played on every keyboard instrument, from a one-manual Positiv, harpsichord or clavichord, up to larger instruments with multiple manuals.

Division between Manuals

It is possible to play some of the pieces using more than one manual (as for example, in the Preludes in B-flat and F Major, and perhaps to some degree in the C Major and D Minor preludes. In any case, manual changes are possible in the D Minor, F Major, G Major, A Minor, and B-flat Major preludes.

Registration

Registration choices seem to be tightly related their relationship to expressing the “Affekt” or the ‘affection’ of the music, as they are discussed in Johann Mattheson’s *Neu-Eröfnete(m) Orchestre* (see page 231 ff.). In this publication of 1713 Mattheson describes the “character” of individual keys, and they seem particularly appropos to the Eight Short Preludes and Fugues:

- E minor – introspective, deep in thought (hardly something cheerful)
- F Major – a pleasing “grace” (*bonne grace*), (capable if expressing the most beautiful sentiments in the world)
- G Major – engaging (amy lend brilliance)
- G Minor – graceful, lovely and pleasing (with a lively sense of delight)
- B-flat Major – splendid, majestic

Other Considerations

The “Eight” offer a wonderful spectrum of “Affects.” The almost “*galant*” character of some of the preludes has influenced the consideration that these pieces may have been written by the young Bach...these *galant* elements appear every now and then in pieces written when Bach was very young (e.g. *Neumeister Chorales, Partitas*). Bach’s rejection of the tendencies toward the *galant* style in later works (e.g. the *Orgelbüchlein*) makes this seem perhaps even probable—especially when one remembers that the choice of keys in the “Eight” is still completely in the tradition of the 17th century.

The “Eight” provide a compendium for the learning of musical interpretation. They offer an example of how the musical repertory might be adapted to the instruments that were played then (and now). This may also be seen as the player may need to adapt one of these pieces to whichever instrument one has to play. The interpretive “ideal” is often rather elusive, but happily we are in a position today (through technology and travel possibilities) to learn about the “ideal” interpretive factors.

Perhaps the “Eight” were indeed written by the young Bach. Why do these pieces evoke such a fascination among young organ students? Is this music for teenagers written by a teenager? In any case, it is music for those who remain young in heart! This is music that every person can understand. Music that doesn’t lose its charm, no matter how much one practices to perfect and “conquer” its challenges. Music for everyone.