



Johann Sebastian Bach

BACH & ITALY VOL. 1: MARCELLO, BUSONI, BRAHMS

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Though Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) never visited Italy, he was constantly interested in Italian music throughout his life: he meticulously studied the style of Italian composers of the past (such as Palestrina and Frescobaldi) and of his own time (such as Vivaldi and Pergolesi). His numerous transcriptions and arrangements from Italian models date not only from the years of his compositional apprenticeship, but constitute a red thread leading up to the very last years of his life, when he still took inspiration from Italian masters and their work. Conversely, many of the most interesting figures of the Italian musical scene were fascinated and intrigued by Bach’s opus and style: from the admiring words of Bach’s contemporary, the erudite Bolognese scholar Padre Martini, to Busoni’s unforgettable piano transcriptions, Bach’s impact on Italian music may be not immediately apparent, but is nonetheless deep and influential.

This CD collects a series of keyboard works which offer a fascinating overview on this two-sided relationship. Bach’s Concerto in D-minor BWV 974 is one of the several keyboard transcriptions from Italian solo concertos realized by the German composer; in this case, the original work was an oboe concerto by the Venetian patrician Alessandro Marcello (1673-1747). This exquisite piece has a rich melodic vein, which reaches heights of intense and touching beauty in the well-known slow movement. The challenge faced by Bach in this and in his other transcriptions was to transfer the timbral and dynamic variety of orchestral works to the less-nuanced instrumental medium at his disposal. His masterly knowledge of harmony, counterpoint and texture allowed him to choose compositional solutions whereby neither the mellow and penetrating sounds of the solo oboe, nor the gorgeous

and warm timbre of the string orchestra get – so to say – lost in translation.

The experience acquired by Bach through his careful transcriptions seems to blossom in his own *Italian Concerto*, which could be described as one further keyboard arrangement of a virtual and imaginary Italian orchestral model. The compositional form of the solo concerto, observed in countless examples by Vivaldi and others, is faithfully respected; the contrast between *solo* and *tutti*, between *concertino* (the soloists' ensemble) and *concerto grosso* is mimicked through the use of harpsichord registration and of textures of varying density. Bach's *Italian Concerto* shares with Marcello's the elegiac and lyrical beauty of the second movement, framed by the brilliant and lively vivacity of the first and third. In spite of the "Italianness" of the work, however, the German master's touch is clearly discernible: not only in the rich contrapuntal writing, but also in the thematic use of a chorale tune fragment ("*In Dir ist Freude*", "In Thee is joy") in the third movement, as if suggesting that the radiant felicity of this work springs from a spiritual and supernatural source of joy.

Chorale tunes interweave in a yet more pervasive and structural fashion the sublime *Chaconne*, as recently demonstrated by Helga Thoene. This dance, originally concluding the Second Partita for solo violin, is made of a series of variations on a bass: throughout the piece, however, a series of hidden Chorales builds up an extraordinary spiritual itinerary, in which the Chorale sequence possibly represents Bach's response to the loss of his first wife, Maria Barbara. If the first Chorales depict the unavailability of death and the human attempt to flee it, later the Christian believer enters into a spiritual dialogue with Christ and his Passion. Thus, in a moment of unforgettable musical beauty (when the key shifts from D-minor to D-major), God's response does not fail the praying man: the only answer to human grief and to the questions

it poses is, for the believer, Christ's incarnation, through which our very sorrow is assumed by God. Therefore, even in the midst of extreme suffering, joy becomes possible: the violin imitates trumpet sounds, which evoke – at one and the same time – both a festive climate and the resurrection of the dead, announced by heavenly fanfares in the Bible. When the minor key reappears, therefore, it does not represent a return to reality after a dreamlike illusion; rather, it is the extremely human experience that faith does not exclude the grief of mourning, giving it, instead, a new meaning. Thus, the last Chorales rehearse the abandonment to God's will and the trusting faith in a life after death.

The arduous spiritual itinerary sketched by the Chorales corresponds to the transcendental difficulty of this piece on the technical and performance plane for the solo violinist. Whereas Busoni's well-known piano transcription emphasises the spectacular component of virtuosity, Brahms' more intimate version for the left hand alone transfers to the piano the strenuous efforts of the violinist and the extreme technical demands posed by the piece, so that the almost ascetic experience of its performance mirrors the complexity of the spiritual content.

Similar to the *Chaconne*, the so-called *Goldberg Variations* are built on a dance bass, and represent a keyboard version of the catalogue of technical challenges found in the violin piece. In this monumental work, moreover, every three variations one is a canon (on intervals increasing progressively and corresponding to the position of the variation in the cycle), one is a "character piece" and one virtuoso movement with crossing of the hands. The last variation is a *Quodlibet*, a contrapuntal piece made of tunes of various provenance: it includes a homage to Buxtehude (who in turn employed the Italian tune of the *Bergamasca*) and another Chorale quote, whose text affirms that "What God does is well-done" – seemingly paying homage to God as the source of all

creation at the end of one of the supreme creative achievements of the composer. After the *Quodlibet*, Bach's original version prescribes to repeat the first Aria, whose transfigured simplicity and transcendent beauty are one of the highpoints of classical music of all times.

Performed with repeats and in their entirety, the *Goldberg Variations* last approximately eighty minutes, which is much more than any average audience of the early twentieth century could appreciate. Struggling between pragmatism and fidelity, Ferruccio Busoni (a great concert pianist and composer, and possibly one of the most perceptive Bach interpreters ever) proposed a shortened and revised version of the *Variations*. The most controversial aspect of his arrangement is, of course, the suppression of many pieces, most of which are canons: consequently, the masterly compositional structure of Bach's work is utterly destroyed. Moreover, to modern ears, the replacement of the ultramundane purity of the *Aria da capo* with a spectacular Finale and with a majestic, organ-like Chorale is hardly acceptable. On the other hand, some of the many changes made by Busoni on Bach's score are extremely sensible and technically valuable (for example, in the redistribution of virtuoso fragments between the two hands, in response to the challenges posed to the pianist by Bach's writing for a harpsichord with two manuals). Even the harshest critics of Busoni's version, nonetheless, should acknowledge the historic value of this arrangement, as a valuable witness of Bach reception and interpretation, and as a first step for the popularization of his works. Those less prejudiced, however, will undoubtedly appreciate the unique beauty of the resulting composition: a beauty unlike that of the original, of course, but – at the same time – an artwork with a stringent consistency and a musically convincing structure. A work, in sum, which never fails to achieve its particular and admitted goal: to spread the knowledge and appreciation of

Bach's music among those who would otherwise ignore its beauty, its depth, its fascination.