

JOÃO CARLOS

VOL. 6

# MARTINS

# Bach

The complete keyboard works of J.S. Bach on Labor Records

*Twenty pieces from the Notebook of  
Anna Magdalena Bach*

*Twelve Little Preludes*

*Six Little Preludes*

*Italian Concerto in F major*



The curse or maybe the blessing of a second Babel is upon us. Who quite grasps now what tower of orderly civilization our ancestors dreamed of building? After Joyce, Picasso, Stravinsky, Einstein, the old lines and levels no longer apply. Perhaps they never really did, but in our pluralist age, we are likelier than earlier generations to feel the loss. If this is freedom, its flip side is anarchy.

■ Our confusion is never greater than when we contemplate the titans of the past. Interpreting them begins with the decision, often tacit, of what to ignore. How can we find our way back to them? Works in a tangible medium, like painting or sculpture, suffer the physical ravages of time. As language changes, works made of words acquire and shed bits of meaning continually, imperceptibly, often in ways not even textual analysis can rightly sort out. Dances most often are simply lost for lack of suitable notation. Of the recoverable arts whose true existence lies only in performance, music may be the most slippery of all, for two reasons. First, though musical script looks impressively detailed, composers never spell out everything, and what was obvious to them is often what is hardest to recover. Second, the acoustic world keeps changing; in music from before the age of recorded sound, we can never know whether we are hearing the sounds the composers had in mind—but having heard so many sounds, musical and non musical, the composers assuredly did *not* hear, we could in any case probably not be able to hear their sounds the same way they did.

■ Thus the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, one of the supreme possessions of our heritage, remains perpetually and inescapably a blank. To play Bach is to write and sign, as before the mystic throne of judgment, one's sworn confession as an artist. Pending the blast of the last trumpet, wran-

gle as we may, sentences are all suspended.

■ Few musicians approaching the keyboard works of Bach would claim to lay open all of their secrets, but by the same token none is likely to deny that his own approach takes him furthest towards what he takes the music's essence to be. Posterity may wonder why Gounod superimposed his "Ave Maria" tune on the first prelude of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* for all the world as if Bach's concise protominimalist adventure (infinitely beyond minimalism, of course, in both its concision and its adventurousness) were nothing but accompaniment figures. One answer might be that the French composer heard spirituality in Bach's majestic design, that he thought his contemporaries would fail to, and that he resolved, therefore, to provide a gloss that would unstop their ears.

■ Always bearing in mind that ours is not notably an age of consensus, one of our dominant fashions (still flourishing) is the taste for original instruments. The virtues of the harpsichord, or so some of the familiar arguments run, rest in its spring-based action, conducive to pinpoint brilliancy; its lean, "objective" timbre, not apt to support anachronistic overlays of romantic effusion; and an even dynamic throughout its compass, which promotes clarity in contrapuntal textures.

■ Against such virtues one may easily enough line up some defects. Thus: the harpsichord's sound lacks body sufficient to project in a modern concert hall; the instrument lacks dynamic shadings and variety of color; it lacks staying power, which is why performers who observe authentic period style must continue to provide embellishments (in the historic style of the period) that actually have no structural, melodic, or motivic function

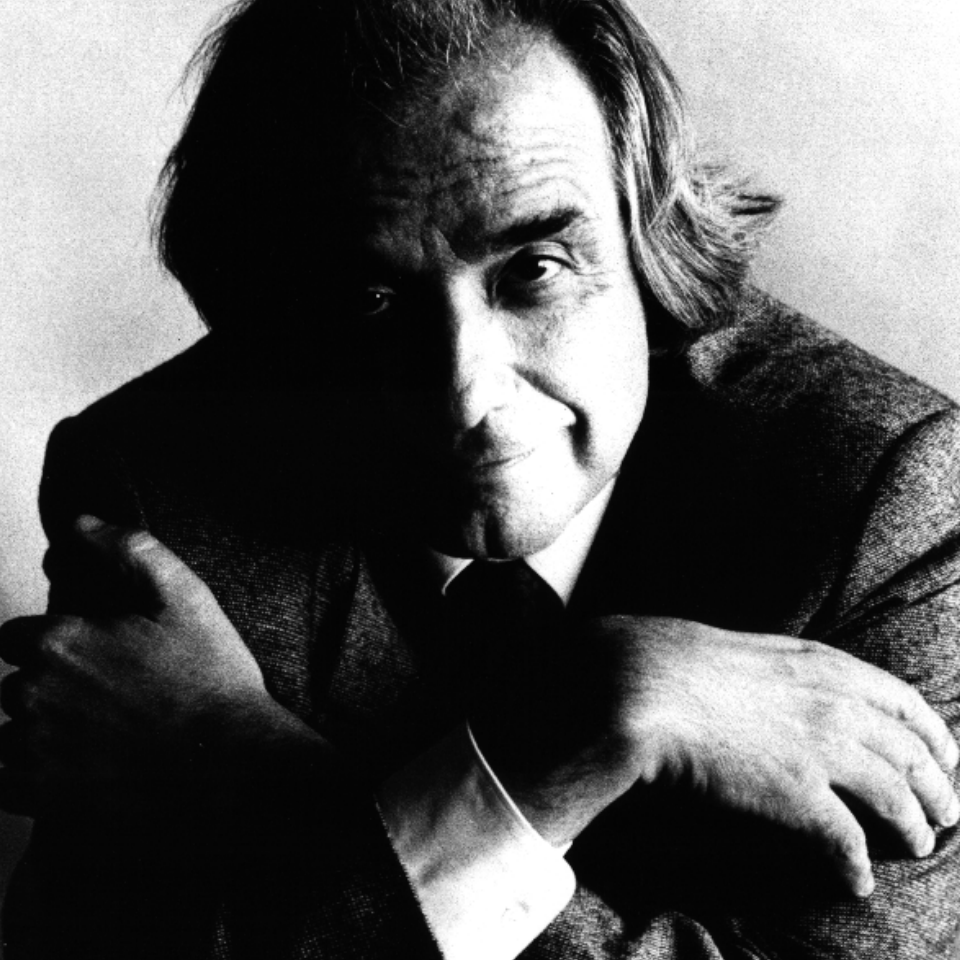
beyond preventing the early decay of pitches that without them cannot be sustained for a necessary duration. Depending on one's point of view, any one of these arguments might constitute grounds for playing Bach on a concert grand, or why not a synthesizer? And once that step is taken, what possible good can it do to ignore the possibilities of the new medium?

■ If in the end the original-instruments movement has had any lesson to teach at all, it must be that beyond an obvious threshold, musicians matter far more than instruments. The right demand to place on the executant of Bach's keyboard music, whatever keyboard that player may choose, remains invariant: that he engage his full imaginative resources in its exploration. For the grand encyclopedic works—*The Well-Tempered Clavier*, *The Art of the Fugue*, *The Goldberg Variations*—the recent bias has run in favor of formalism and analytic rigor. The alternating moods of gravity and smiling play in the suites and smaller-scale pieces have long encouraged a less cerebral touch. Since Bach's time, it is true, history has recast them in ways that might have baffled him. The selections heard on this album span a broad technical range—from sprightly dances well within the reach of a beginner, through more intricate though still exercise-like preludes, to the showy *Italian Concerto* (a runaway success since its first publication)—but each was intended as a vehicle for a player's own musical inquiry. In Bach's time and long thereafter, an amateur would have expected to discover the material through his own fingers. Except for professional musicians, no one in the late twentieth century much bothers to do that. Instead, one learns strictly by ear, attending to the professionals on the radio, on records, in concert halls. For a curious listener, the variety now available can prove, in its way, as enlightening a route to knowl-



edge as hands-on experience. If nothing else, hearing Bach played in many styles allows one to transcend one's own technical and aesthetic limitations. Under the right fingers, even a little musette will show a neatly joined structure, and the densest fugue will unfurl in bands of insinuating melody. As to the all-important beat, the order of Bach's designs seems to some ears to call for metronomic steadiness; to others, especially ears attuned to jazz, the richness of details emerges best over a freer, even a wilful pulse. More than Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, or Schubert, Bach disdains our question.

■ Given the tangle of choices a musician faces when playing Bach, one might reasonably suppose that the norm would be performances with a clear personal stamp. The reality is otherwise. Though players of Bach and even specialists in Bach abound, professionally competent performances tend to fall quite readily into only a handful of broad categories: the historicizing (usually on a harpsichord, variously austere or flamboyant) and the ahistoric (usually on piano, variously meditative or carefree). Truly distinctive performances come seldom—performances on the order of Wanda Landowska's, who blazed her own ways on the harpsichord; of Glenn Gould's, who in his late years spliced his arcane numerological glories together in the studio from bits of recorded tape; of Andras Schiff's, who sets out each phrase with the precision of a watchmaker, the flair of a jeweler, and affection and generosity of spirit, too. As much as he differs from each of them (who in turn differ so much from each other), João Carlos Martins shares with these outstanding artists one quality at any rate: the visionary impulse to go one's own way unfazed. Of the attributes of greatness, such originality is not the least.



■ The Brazilian-born João Carlos Martins has made his name as a pianist twice over. By the age of twenty-two, he had given a tumultuously received debut recital at Carnegie Hall. Eight years later, complications from an injury to his arm sustained during a soccer game, forced him to quit playing the piano at all. With determination and patience he recaptured his formidable technique—and his controversial reputation. In 1976, after a six-year absence from the stage, Martins resumed an active concert career.

■ From the first, Martins has been an ardent proponent of the music of Bach. He has undertaken the mammoth task of recording the composer's complete works for keyboard.

■ The startling independence he brings to Bach's compositions has earned Martins both adulation and fierce attacks. Perhaps the range of reactions is best summed up by the contrasting reviews of his reading of the six keyboard partitas (first released in 1981). In *Stereo Review*, Eric Salzman greeted the set as “the clearest, most articulated and vital keyboard playing you have ever heard...everywhere exercised in the service of [the pianist's] compelling musical conceptions.” In *High Fidelity*, the early-music specialist Nicholas Kenyon branded the same performance “wildly eccentric.” Bristling with personality and conviction, the performances of Martins are unlikely ever to leave a listener indifferent.

—*Matthew Gurewitsch*

*Matthew Gurewitsch is a writer living in New York City.*

**J**oão Carlos Martins' unusual career has brought him both ardent adulation and fierce criticism, but his stunning technical prowess and the intense emotional involvement he brings to all his performances have been acknowledged throughout his life.

Harold Schonberg of *The New York Times* said, "His technique sends fireworks in all directions...he does everything with extraordinary elan." The *Boston Globe* wrote of a Symphony Hall performance, "Some people left in the middle of the concert but everybody who stayed gave one of the greatest standing ovations..."

■ Brazilian-born João Carlos Martins attracted world-wide attention at the age of 20 when he gave a performance of the 48 Preludes and Fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* in his 1961 U.S. debut concert in Washington, D.C. The reviewers were ecstatic. His name quickly spread throughout the concert world—no surprise to concert-goers in Brazil, who already knew him as a child prodigy.

■ Born in 1940 in São Paulo, Martins began piano at the age of eight, studying with Russian-trained Josef Kliass, and one year later entered a piano competition sponsored by the Bach Society of Brazil. His formidable talents were recognized early on by the renowned pianist Cortot who said of the young Martins, "With his kind of tone, with the ability of his fingers, he could become very important for the history of piano playing." At age twelve, he performed Bach's *Two-Part Inventions* in public. At eighteen, he gave his first public performance of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and was among the first three Latin Americans to be invited to participate in the prestigious *Casals Music Festival* in Puerto Rico.

■ Three years later he made his New York debut, followed by engagements with all the major orchestras in the United States and recitals throughout the world, including sold-out performances at Carnegie Hall and Avery Fisher Hall. When he appeared in Toronto for a performance of an all-Bach concert, Martins was honored by the *Glenn Gould Memorial Foundation*.

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## **João Carlos Martins**

The complete keyboard works of Johann Sebastian Bach  
on Labor Records

The Well-Tempered Clavier (complete)

The Goldberg Variations

The Six Partitas

The French Suites; Overture in the French Style in C minor  
(first recording)

The Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook; 18 Little Preludes;  
Italian Concerto

The Two and Three Part Inventions

The English Suites; Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue

The Toccatas

The Concertos

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## *The Anna Magdalena Bach Notebook Little Preludes/Italian Concerto*

### Twenty pieces from the Notebook of Anna Magdalena Bach (Schott Edition) (23:24)

1 Menuet	6 Polonaise	11 Menuet	16 Polonaise
2 Marche	7 Choral	12 Marche	17 Menuet
3 Menuet	8 Menuet	13 Menuet	18 Polonaise
4 Aria	9 Musette	14 Menuet	19 Polonaise
5 Menuet	10 Menuet	15 Marche	20 Polonaise

### Twelve Little Preludes (11:42)

21 C major BWV 924	24 D major BWV 925	27 E minor BWV 941	30 G minor BWV 929
22 C major BWV 939	25 C minor BWV 926	28 F major BWV 927	31 G minor BWV 930
23 C minor BWV 999	26 C minor BWV 940	29 F major BWV 928	32 A minor BWV 942

### Six Little Preludes (8:32)

33 C major BWV 933	35 C minor BWV 935	37 E major BWV 937
34 C minor BWV 934	36 D major BWV 936	38 E minor BWV 938

### Italian Concerto in F major (12:27)

39 Allegro animato    40 Andante molto espressivo    41 Presto giocoso

Steinway Piano

Recorded in 1982 (Italian Concerto) and 1984

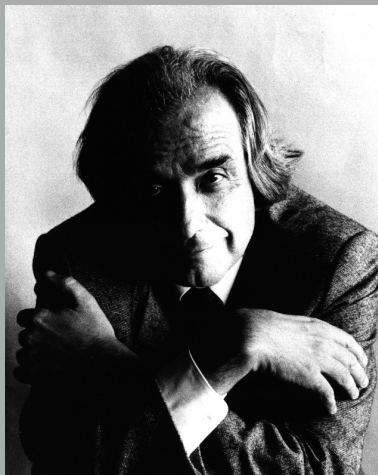
at Pomona College, Claremont, California

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**DDD**

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