

C. P. E. Bach and the Keyboard Concerto

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and the keyboard concerto—a lifelong relationship, challenging and exhausting, altogether fruitful, brilliant, and even spectacular into the bargain. As a 19-year-old (under the eyes of his father, so to speak) he wrote in Leipzig his first keyboard concerto; at the age of 74 in Hamburg he finished, in the year of his death, his last example of the genre. In-between lies a treasury of fifty keyboard concertos, colossal and fathomless.

It is a wonder that this uncommonly rich and stylistically influential genre of the composer is only now coming to light. Of all the genres of composition, C. P. E. Bach's keyboard concertos have guarded their secret longest as unpublished music—that is, precisely the genre of works that qualify as the most personal and most advanced of his compositional oeuvre. He himself says of this: “Because I have had to create most of my works for particular persons and for the public, I have therein always been more constrained than with the few pieces which I prepared just for myself. Among all my works, especially for keyboard, are just a few...concertos, which I composed with total freedom and for my own use.”

Only three concertos were printed individually during his lifetime, an extremely paltry figure for someone who was very adept in matters relating to self-promotion. (One need only think of the sales success of his works for solo clavier!) In anticipation of his departure from the concert podium, only later in Hamburg (1772) was a cycle of six concertos printed, self-published. Did Bach, as the one-and-only interpreter of his keyboard concertos, want to keep the offering scant—like Vivaldi, who also only published his *Four Seasons* very late? The fact is, in any case, that only in the last few years do we possess performance materials for C. P. E. Bach's keyboard concertos. (My most sincere gratitude for this is owed to the fantastic editorial team of *C. P. E. Bach: The Complete Works*.)

Of those three concertos printed early on (Wq 11, 14, and 25), Emanuel Bach must have held a high opinion. All three are in a major key and are distinguished by an effervescent joy in playing; clearly on this occasion an uncompromising virtuosity comes to the fore. In some passages Bach requires, occasionally, up to fourteen attacks per second. Among the peaceful middle movements, however, the heavy-hearted *Poco adagio* of the Concerto in E Major, Wq 14 transports the listener into a depressing state of mind.

A stylistic trait of Emanuel Bach that can always be seen is his playing with the expectations of the listener: anyone can observe the sudden interruptions or unexpected passages. Experimentation with formal processes is found over and over again. For example, the Concerto in C Minor, Wq 43/4 is unusual for its four-movement structure, which furthermore at its conclusion brings together the themes of all the movements (an idea of integral composition that Franz Liszt would adopt many years later in his E-flat major concerto). In the Concerto in E Minor, Wq 15 the opening movement offers an exciting exchange between a soloist perpetually ready to improvise and an unyielding orchestra; at some point the one listens to the other, and the dialogue is saved. In the slow movement of the Concerto in C Minor, Wq 31 the podium becomes stage: an opera scene that lacks not a whit of emotion, nor decisive gestures. The

opening movement of Wq 31, on the other hand, can claim for itself the fact that two contrasting themes have been treated equally: more than just a hint of the Viennese classical style.

A further license which Emanuel Bach takes in his keyboard concertos is the gradual freeing of the soloist from his/her bond with the orchestra. In Johann Sebastian Bach's concertos, the soloist generally plays along in all *tutti* sections; with the son, one observes a gradual tendency to thin out these textures. The soloist goes from something of a "first among equals" to a protagonist, and receives more thematic responsibility and more clearly defined solo sections. It must wait, however, until Beethoven's fourth piano concerto for the soloist, and not the orchestra, to open the concerto.

What is the specific meaning of all this? Upon what is the interpreter to focus?

1. A rhythmic tension, up to and including a pianistic barrage, can be expected. The final movements, for instance, of the Concerto in E Major, Wq 14, and above all the Concerto in D Minor, Wq 22, speak an unequivocal language. A tempo, once set in motion, feeds on itself and carries the listener along with it.
2. The thoroughly demanding ornaments—once thought of as extending a too-quickly fading tone (Couperin)—now receive a direction, requiring a crescendo or a diminuendo, according to the context; long trills that flow into a forte entrance of the orchestra become crescendos.
3. The precision of dynamic markings increases steadily over the course of the years, all the way up to perfect dynamic independence of the hands. Simply take a look at the second movement of the Concerto in C Major (for solo keyboard), Wq 112/I, with its 109 dynamic markings!
4. Wide, completely "un-singable" intervals create a new form of purely instrumental melody. For example, the first two measures of the Concerto in D Minor, Wq 23, effortlessly span two-and-a-half octaves.

For many concertos Bach left behind his own cadenzas. There still remain, however, a great number for which he delegates the responsibility for the cadenza to the interpreter. These indeed do not yet possess the same scope as in concertos by Mozart, nor yet the motivic consistency of Beethoven, but demand from the first note onward the spirit of the free fantasy and the self-possessed creativity later seen in the Viennese classical period.

As diverse as are the moods and personalities in each of the keyboard concertos of Emanuel Bach, equally diverse are the demands on tone production. The ability to allow a tone to bloom warmly, and in the next moment to close it down again in such a way that it contains the highest rhythmic potency: nothing less is required with Emanuel Bach, for he is a master of separating and uniting feelings. His *Empfindungen* necessitate a touch of utmost suppleness, ever-poised in readiness to feel out new ground; always dynamic, never static. He thus formulates an agogic of most lively tension which is allowed to forget the tempo for the decisive moment, in order to be able to give the tone its due. Bach intends nothing else when he writes in his *Versuch*: "A freedom belongs to it, which excludes anything slavish or mechanical. One must play from one's soul, and not like a trained bird."

Be the shadow of the father ever so great, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach steps out from behind it quasi-*improvisando*, and in doing so demonstrates how, creative and unburdened, he dealt with the great legacy. In this regard his concertos play a considerable role for his own typical instrument. Revering the greatness of the father in counterpoint, he discovers his own entirely individual pianistic style: fluency not as ornament, but as bearer of rhythmic energy; opposing accents and ornaments that contain within themselves the seed to neutralize the meter; choice chord progressions as a “chordal life force.”

All these observations and thoughts show that C.P.E. Bach is the composer of the Enlightenment, who takes for himself the liberties that he needs. Perhaps he is so important for our time also because of the fact that his music has not been greatly integrated into concert life, and thus is not hackneyed. We may add to this a very personal rhythmic language (one review mentioned a “Rococo Beat”) that speaks directly to the listener.

I had the priceless opportunity of speaking with Nikolaus Harnoncourt about the keyboard concertos of C.P.E. Bach. His enormous insight, paired with an unpretentious attitude, and his always palpable enthusiasm for the music, impressed me deeply. In the end he said to me, in order to quash immediately all doubt about recording the Bach keyboard concertos on a modern piano: “Do that, do that absolutely; and if you can manage to get something rolling with it, I will be the first to congratulate you.” What generosity, but also what a responsibility!

Michael Rische

German pianist Michael Rische has made numerous recordings of keyboard concertos. His more than twenty CDs with EMI, Universal, Sony, and Hänssler attest to his broad repertoire—from Mozart and Beethoven to 20th-century composers such as Antheil, Gershwin, Copland, Schulhoff, and Ravel. In October Rische will record a sixth and final CD of C.P.E. Bach keyboard concertos, including Wq 11, Wq 24, and Wq 43/4. His recording of Wq 44 has been streamed some 3 million times on Spotify. Click [here](#) for a more extensive biography and discography.