THE ORGAN WORKS
of
JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
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Prelude and Fugue in D major, BWV 532
Fantasia and Fugue in C minor, BWV 537
Prelude and Fugue in B minor, BWV 544
Toccata and Fugue in E major, BWV 566

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Bach's contribution to organ music has never been equaled. His impressive list of organ music includes six trio sonatas, numerous preludes and fugues, toccatas, fantasies, a Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, the Orgelbüchlein, various sets of choral preludes and chorale variations (or "partitas"). The prelude and fugue are two musical forms which most clearly convey the purely instrumental inspiration of Bach, the organist. The prelude is the freer of the pieces. It can be called a fantasia when it is made up of an ensemble of diverse episodes and can be classified as a toccata when there is present more virtuosity and rhythmic dynamism. This distinction is quite unclear at times. For instance, Bach's first toccatas—those for harpsichord and the one in E major for organ (BWV 566)—are often considered fantasies. In these works, there are sections where instrumental recitatives and virtuosic passages alternate with very free fugal sections. Often Bach seems confused in his naming these pieces. One such prelude is subtitled "fantasia" and another "toccata." But there is no esthetic uncertainty here. On the contrary, it is the richness of the stylistic elements which makes the classification inadequate. Sometimes, there are cases where a prelude will be more rhythmic than a toccata, and a fantasia as strictly contrapuntal as a fugue. Bach's contrapuntal style was derived from Buxtehude, who developed the free forms or organ music and the fugue. From the beginning to the end of his career, Bach remained a virtuoso. And a fugue as concise as the one which follows the Dorian Toccata is only conceivable under the fingers of a prodigious artist, even if it is less effective than the brilliant toccata preceding it.

The Prelude and Fugue in D major (BWV 532) was composed in Weimar c. 1709. Because of its brilliant tonality and virtuosity this is a true triumph of the concept of an organ concerto. The prelude springs from the toccata (the beginning is much like the toccata for keyboard instrument BWV 912) with its Buxtehudian scales, arpeggios, tremolos, and French rhythms. The central part is a compact Alla breve with a persistent beat which passes from voice to voice in broken thirds. The toccata style reappears in the concluding section with its melting tones and some surprising chords which Bach liked to place before his final cadences. The paradox of this work is in the movement which follows. This fugal section contains as much decorative spirit as the Alla breve contains polyphony. Here again we see the confusion of style. The subject of the fugue is only the proliferation of the ornament called "grupetto" which is followed by a series of mordants. Similarly, the countersubject is formed by a slow trill followed by sharply accented notes. The four voices rarely sing at the same time and when they do, one dominates and the others merely accompany them or echo. One Frenchman called this piece a "fugue of speed." There is much gaiety and humor in this work.

The above work is very different from the following Fantasia (or Prelude) and Fugue in C minor (BWV 537, Weimar c. 1716). The Prelude, noble and moving, is already full of rigorous fugal writing. The da capo fugue which accompanies the Prelude is an example of Bach's architectural skill. The Italian da capo form was unknown at the conservatories, but was practiced by Bach. Three fugues follow: the first fugue in the original key is based on an instrumental theme of a beautiful, expressive design (similar to the theme of the Musical Offering). The second fugue in the dominant key (G minor) is based on a new subject which is a fragmentation of a chromatic scale. The third fugue, except for the conclusion, is a reiteration of the first fugue, thus carrying out the da capo idea.

One is immediately struck by the vastness of the Prelude and Fugue in B minor (BWV 544, Leipzig c. 1730). In the grandiose principal theme of the Prelude one imagines the effort of hiking over a rugged countryside of bold mountain peaks and twisted canyons. The effort is dramatic in the Prelude and savage in the Fugue. The melancholy principal subject of the Fugue combines three descending counter-subjects accentuating the oppressed character of this imaginary scene.

It is, on the other hand, the light of youth which brought about the Toccata (or Prelude) and Fugue in E major (BWV 566) written at Arnstadt c. 1707. The Toccata begins by rapidly exploring the widest possible range of sound. A development follows in which a short rhythmic motive reappears in each voice. The remainder of the work ought to be entitled toccata, since this section is full of Buxtehudian capriciousness, with its unceasing contrasts: the decorative with the contrapuntal, and the lyric with the fugal. Following the Toccata is the first fugue with a staccato subject. A fanciful recitative of uninterrupted chords comes next. Finally, the second fugue begins modifying the rhythm of the first subject, thus, bringing to a close this movement in ternary form.

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