

J. C. BACH 6 Sonatas, op. 5 • Bart van Oort (fp) • BRILLIANT 94634 (56:01)

It could perhaps be said that without Johann Christian Bach, there may not have been a Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. This may, of course, be stretching a point too far, but there can be no doubt that Bach gave the young boy of nine years immense encouragement and help by taking him under his wing during a visit to London. Johann Sebastian's youngest son was, by all accounts, a talented composer and generous mentor, whose musical style was clearly a model from which the young child learned a great deal. So much so that he even set three of Bach's keyboard sonatas, part of the set recorded here, as concertos, and when Johann Christian passed away suddenly in 1782 Mozart lamented his loss to his father.

One should, however, not always equate Bach and the child Mozart in a single breath, for the former was already regarded as one of the main composers of the age when they first met. Unlike his brother Carl Philipp Emanuel or his father, he wrote operas and, along with his friend Karl Friedrich Abel, created a public concert series in London that was widely known for its innovations and progressive music. The six Op. 5 sonatas from 1766 were Bach's first published keyboard works in London. As with other sets of the same type, they were no doubt meant to appeal to the knowledgeable amateur, especially those from whom Bach could expect future patronage. As the music master to the British royal family, he had the credentials to obtain a wide following in Britain, and he further made the works accessible by noting on the title page that they could be played either on harpsichord or fortepiano, the latter of which was becoming the instrument of choice for most well-to-do households. Finally, he chose to include a breadth of styles and techniques that would provide something for everyone, meaning that they were meant primarily for the salon instead of the concert hall.

It should be clear from the start that the set has no real unifying features. The degree of difficulty ranges from the simple and perhaps even naïve First Sonata in B \flat Major, with its easy-listening first movement and rather stately minuet second, to the rather eclectic Fifth in E Major, with an opening theme that is positively perpetual motion, a second movement whose lilting lyricism depicts a gentility, and a finale dance that simply reeks of his brother's keyboard technique. The odd ball is the final sonata in C Minor, where a slow French-style *Grave* leads directly into a truly impressive fugue which would have pleased his father for its intricacy. There is more than a little nod to Rameau, especially in the elfin quality of the final gavotte. We are in an earlier world here, and when one contrasts this with the full-

voiced symphonic Sonata in D Major (the second of the set), it is apparent that the composer was bringing together something that would appeal to everyone, from the elder generation used to the galant style to the fiery, thick-textured world of the latest works. No wonder the young Mozart chose this work, and the two that followed, for his “revision” into keyboard concertos in K 107. If one is transported by the aria-like second movement of the D-Major, then one should likewise be prepared to be awed by the larger architecture of the E^b-Major work, with its extended development section in the first movement, and its highly-ornamented rondeaux second that recalls the best of Rameau.

The performance by keyboardist Bart van Oort is flexible and contains an intimacy in his phrasing that brings out Johann Christian’s lines, whether they be complex or simple. His performance of the fugue just mentioned is clear and precise, supporting the old-fashioned flavor of the movement, but as he is smooth and emotional in the preceding *Grave*, the contrasts are quite appropriate and draw the listener into Bach’s sound world. In short, even though these are hardly pieces to rank even close to the great sonatas of the period, his performance gives them a nice lightness and precision that pulls forth considerable detail from the music. For anyone interested in the role that such salon pieces played in the development of music of the period, this would be a wonderful disc to add to your collection.

Bertil van Boer

This article originally appeared in Issue 37:6 (July/Aug 2014) of *Fanfare* Magazine.

J. C. BACH Keyboard Sonatas, op. 5/1–6 • Sophie Yates (hpd) • CHANDOS 762 (67:48)

Youngest son of Johann Sebastian, Johann Christian Bach (1735–1782) was 15 when his father died in 1750. His elder brother, Carl Philipp Emanuel, took the boy in, becoming his *de facto* guardian. As the young Johann progressed musically, however, it was he who possibly influenced Carl more than the other way round; for up until then Carl had vacillated between emulating the learned style of his famous father and advancing the newer expressive *empfindsamer* style. But the young Johann was enamored of the competing *stil galant* that would eventually lead, through him, Carl Friedrich Abel, and others, to Mozart and the full-fledged Classical period.

In searching the *Fanfare* Archive, it came as a bit of a surprise to me to find that the last entry for J. C. Bach’s op. 5 set of keyboard sonatas was a dozen years ago in 22:1, in a review by Brian Robins of a fortepiano version played by Harald Hoeren on cpo. But then, even more to my surprise, I found that there just aren’t that many competing recordings of these sonatas out there. In fact, the only other

recent one beside this Chandos disc that is also performed on harpsichord is with Olga Martynova on a Caro Mitis SACD, which, unfortunately, I do not have in my possession for comparison purposes.

It was still early in Bach's career when he had these sonatas published in 1766, designating them on the title page for "Piano Forte or Harpsichord," the assumed preference being for the piano based on the given order of the instruments named. At this late date, the harpsichord was well on its way to being eclipsed by the piano, whether one called it a fortepiano or a pianoforte; and being that Bach was a young man clearly moving with the times and anxious to engage the future, it does seem slightly anachronistic to present these works on harpsichord. Still, Sophie Yates, an exclusive Chandos artist, has graced the label with several recordings on harpsichord of late Renaissance and early Baroque keyboard music by composers whose works some might say would be more appropriately realized on virginals, clavichords, and spinets. The medium, however, is not the message here; it's Bach's music, which comes across on this recording with great charm and elegant poise.

Formally, these early sonatas are still groping their way toward formal Classical structures. Lingering elements of binary form vie for ascendancy against ternary models, development sections are rudimentary, and the sonatas divide evenly between two- and three-movement works. Stylistically, however, Christian Bach's sonatas are closer to the *stil galant* that emphasized melody over polyphony, a less chromatic, more tonic-dominant oriented harmonic vocabulary, shorter phrases of regular length, less reliance on the all-important bass line, and fewer excitable dramatic gestures. In other words, it was a reaction to the excesses of the Baroque, a reaction that led to an idealized Apollonian Classical style, which, if it ever existed at all, was very short-lived. It is not in the nature of music to dwell in peaceful calm, unaroused to ecstasy and rage by Apollo's brother Dionysius. It didn't take long for Bach to go from the sweet ear-whisperings of the Sonata No. 1 in B \flat -Major to the wild ranting of the Allegro assai in the E-Major Sonata (No. 5), and to the passionate outpouring of the Grave in the C-Minor Sonata (No. 6). The booklet note tells us that Yates regularly plays on original instruments from the Royal College of Music Museum's Benton Fletcher Collection at Fenton House, and also from the Russell Collection in Edinburgh and the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands Park. The specific instrument she plays on this recording, however, is not identified. It's not a particularly big-sounding harpsichord, though that may be Yates's interpretive choice. The instrument has a pristine, bell-like sound that is pleasing to the ear, and it maintains its pitch throughout.

Johann Christian Bach would go on to write solo keyboard sonatas more advanced than these, not to mention a great deal of chamber music combining keyboard with various instruments. These early sonatas may not be music you will listen to often, but Yates does them justice, and makes them well worth hearing.

Recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 33:4 (Mar/Apr 2010) of *Fanfare* Magazine.

Johann Christian BACH (1735-1782) - MusicWeb Review

Sonata in G Op.17 No.1 [10:12]

Sonata in C minor Op.17 No.2 [11:04]

Sonata in E flat Op.17 No.3 [10:03]

Sonata in G Op.17 No.4 [6:34]

Sonata in A Op.17 No.5 [7:55]

Sonata in B flat Op.17 No.6 [13:29]

Bart van Oort (fortepiano)

rec. 25 June, 30 September 2013 Capuchin Monastery, Velp, The Netherlands

BRILLIANT CLASSICS 9461 [59:22]

In terms of pure output alone, Johann Sebastian Bach would seem to overshadow the achievements of his four nonetheless immensely-talented sons. However, they all played an equally decisive role in the history of music during the 18th century. Johann Christian, the youngest, is arguably one of the more crucial composers of his day. His move to Italy in 1755 where he studied with Padre Martini in Bologna, occasioned an evident change in style. Under the name 'galant' – with the emphasis on simplicity, immediacy of appeal and elegance, in lieu of the earlier Baroque's dignified seriousness and impressive grandeur – this looked forward to the soon-to-emerge Classical period.

J.C. Bach was the first to champion the fortepiano in concert, and by the time he came to write his Six Sonatas Op.17, the instrument was well on its way to dominance. He was often referred to as the 'London', or the 'English' Bach, due to the time spent living in city from 1762 onwards. 'Fortepiano' denotes the early version of the piano, from its invention by the Italian instrument-maker Cristofori around 1700 up to the early 19th century. It was the instrument for which Haydn, Mozart and the early Beethoven wrote their piano music. Starting in Beethoven's time, the fortepiano began a period of steady evolution, culminating in the late 19th century with the modern grand piano. The earlier fortepiano then became obsolete and was absent from the musical scene for many decades.

The present CD is the second instalment by Dutch fortepianist, Bart van Oort. The previous issue, on the same label (94634), presented the earlier set of Six Sonatas Op. 5. Mozart was, in fact, one of J.C. Bach's admirers, and it is highly likely that some of the works recorded here were played to the young prodigy when he visited London in the 1760s. Given this influence, it comes as little surprise that the present six sonatas, perfect examples of the 'galant' style – with

its wit, charm, brilliance and good humour – look towards the earlier sonatas of the Salzburg composer. I say this while noting that they do not possess quite the same insight or unique depth of expression that Mozart could muster.

One obvious difference is that, whereas all Mozart's piano sonatas – with the exception of the somewhat spurious K 547a in F – are fully-fledged three-movement works, in J.C. Bach's Op. 17 set, all but the second and sixth have just two movements. This would seem more an outcome of experimentation rather than simple omission – for example, the second movement of the first in the set is a *Minuetto con Variatione*, the second interpolates a middle *Andante* after an *Allegretto* opening, the third has two *Allegro* movements, the fourth and fifth have *Allegros* followed by a faster *Presto* and *Prestissimo* respectively, and the sixth returns to the central *Andante* slow-movement design, but with a first movement *Allegro* and *Prestissimo* finale.

The first sonata, in G major, opens with a declamatory theme, contrasted with a more lyrical melody, showing extensive use of an Alberti-bass accompaniment, so frequently encountered in the music of Haydn and Mozart. The ensuing Minuet serves as a theme for a set of variations which very much confirm that J.C. Bach was, like his father and older brothers, something of a keyboard virtuoso as well as a composer. Altogether, it's a cheerful work as would be expected from something written in this key in the 18th century – a companion here would be Haydn's three-movement Sonata in G major, Hob.XVI:27.

The second sonata, in C minor, could not be more different from the first, not only because it's a large-scale three-movement work, with each one in sonata form. It also shares all the drama and pathos of those later works in the same key by Haydn (Hob.XVI:20), Mozart (K 457), and Beethoven (Op. 10 No. 1) and, the later *Pathétique*, and his final essay in the form, Op. 111. The middle movement evokes an operatic duet, while the finale – in 12/8 time – is a breathless *moto perpetuo*, which brings to mind the similar movement from Schubert's C minor Sonata, D958.

The third sonata, in E flat major, has none of the epic qualities of its predecessor, with its two cheerful and sunny movements, and the fourth returns to the key of the first, although it shows a somewhat different character, and where, as in the next sonata, the finale has echoes of Scarlatti about it, with its often virtuosic style.

According to the sleeve-note, in the 18th century, the key of A major was often used to denote innocent love, and trust in God. The opening movement of the fifth sonata would certainly seem to confirm this, as well as making some significant technical challenges on the way.

The final sonata of the set, in B flat major, reverts to the three-movement design, where each one is on a grand scale, with consequent greater demands made on the performer. The opening *Allegro*, for example, starts in lyrical fashion, but there soon appear elements of symphonic, concerto-like writing. After an *Andante* with its chain of thirds in the right hand, the final 12/8 *Prestissimo* not only rounds the sonata off with a technical *tour de force*, where both hands fully explore the fullest range of the instrument, but also brings the Op. 17 Sonatas to an end in a manner of which his revered father would very much have approved.

A modern instrument by Chris Maene (Ruisseledé, 2000) after Walter (c.1795) is used.

With excellent sleeve-notes, van Oort's consummate technique and expressive interpretative qualities and a fine recording which captures every nuance, this further investigation of the composer's keyboard music is well worth getting to know.

As a transitional figure, Johann Christian Bach isn't quite the finished product, with Haydn and Mozart more than just waiting in the wings. This bargain-priced CD could still prove hard to resist, especially if you're an aficionado of prototype piano music.

Philip R Buttall

J. C. BACH Keyboard Sonatas: op. 17/1–6 • Alberto Nosè (pn) • NAXOS
8.570361 (79: 28)

While by no means in the same league as his illustrious father J. S. or his genius brother C. P. E., Johann Christian was still a Bach, which means that he knew how to write music well and, therefore, was virtually incapable of producing a bad or irritatingly mundane piece. Yet at a time (1774) when Wolfgang Mozart was writing music in a similar vein that was far more complex, J. C. decided to write a six-pack of sonatas designed for his own very limited keyboard technique. The result, as British music historian Dr. Burney pointed out, was that he "was never able to reinstate it with force and readiness sufficient for great difficulties, and in general his compositions for the pianoforte are such as ladies can execute with little trouble."

But as I say, he was a Bach, so no matter how technically easy these sonatas may be, there are features of interest, particularly in his use of counterpoint (show me a Bach who *didn't* know counterpoint!) and, except for the very first sonata in the

series, which tends towards sameness in the variations, he allows his musical mind full play in developing his material.

The opening Sonata in G is almost an inconsequential prelude to the "real" set, despite some truly lovely moments. The Sonata No. 2 in C Minor is just marvelous, utilizing not only extremely clever and quicksilver minor-major key shifts but also rhythmic twists to keep interest up. J. C., in effect, substituted dance-like rhythms for inventive complexity in his keyboard sonatas, but the overall structure of each movement of this sonata is extremely well thought out. It may indeed reveal a weakness of the composer's technique, but not a weakness of mind to sustain interest, just as the "simple" arias and scenes in Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* are not a deterioration of the more complex style he wrote in *Don Giovanni* or *Idomeneo*. The final Prestissimo is surely not the equal of Mozart's or his brother's movements in the same tempo, but it doesn't need to be. The clever downward chromatic passages in the bass line keep up the listener's interest, and his later recapitulation actually turns out to be a variation on the opening theme. J. C. understood how *not* to repeat himself too much.

The Third Sonata, in E \flat , uses an upward step pattern and sudden shifts into minor in its first movement. The left hand is very busy here, alternating Mozartian arpeggios with running bass lines. This is also one of his most emotionally involving movements; I really loved it. The two very different variations beginning at about 3:25 and 5:42 are among his most colorful and imaginative; this is good music, folks, technically simple or not, and unlike the two movements of Sonata No. 1, this movement never seems redundant despite its being more than eight minutes long. By contrast, the second-movement Allegro is light and airy, also using a busy left hand but in swirling 6/8 patterns rather than in chromatic counterpoint. (I almost feel like trying to learn to play this sonata myself, that's how much I like it, and since I am a lady, I'm sure I can execute it "with little trouble," right, Dr. Burney?)

Sonata No. 4 starts in a very Mozartian vein, lyrical and charming, and here J. C.'s experience in counterpoint comes to the fore, along with wonderful staccato touches in the right hand. (One of the claims of this album is that J. C.'s sonatas influenced Mozart, but I'm sure the influence worked both ways.) The middle development section, in minor, dovetails nicely into the framework of the piece. The brief concluding Presto assai likewise sets up a whirling rhythmic dance in 3/8 time, though in this case the "sonata" seemed to me Scarlatti-like and not really developed in what we think of as true sonata form.

The A-Major Sonata has a gentler start, the opening Allegro being almost like an Allegretto. I felt that, structurally speaking, this sonata was not as strong as the three that preceded it, and was the most like a parlor piece. Oddly, the concluding Presto is far more interesting than the preceding movement and, also being in 3/8, I could almost hear this as a more satisfactory conclusion to the previous sonata. The last sonata leads off with yet another Mozartian melody, not as fine a one as Sonata No. 4 but the development, beginning at 3:21, has its own charm and

features of interest. The rather long (for him) Andante is very fine, however, being almost symphonically developed with subtle, elongated crescendos and broken arpeggios in thirds interrupted by tremolos in the minor, and the Prestissimo finale almost comes as a shock. Here, after being almost genteel in the first two movements, J. C. breaks loose with a fiery series of triplets in the right hand and pushes the left hand into the lowest reaches of the keyboard, and the assigned key of B \flat subtly shifts to D \flat (key of the minor third) about a half-minute into the movement. When we move back to major, we find ourselves in F, not B \flat ! During the development, we suddenly discover ourselves in D Minor (2:13), though within a half-minute we're suddenly returned to B \flat . This kind of subtle brinksmanship continues throughout the movement and, though the interludes in D \flat are in the major, they somehow seem very dark in mood, even when contrasted with the minor passages.

I was not previously familiar with the playing of pianist Alberto Nosè, but he is really excellent. Not only is his technique crisp and well balanced in all of his fingering and phrasing, but he produces a singing tone that works wonders in this music. The sound quality of the CD is simply perfect for a piano album, pearly without being too resonant. You may or may not feel a need to own this disc, but if you have any interest in Johann Christian at all, you'll not regret adding it to your collection. **Lynn René Bayley**

This article originally appeared in Issue 31:6 (July/Aug 2008) of *Fanfare* Magazine.