

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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BACH TRANSCRIBED:

Part Two

by Pamela Nash

Transcription revived ?

Throughout the past quarter-century, historically-informed performance practice has found itself proscribing contexts and ideas which might have taken 'historical information' a step further. The practice of transcribing Bach's music, for instance, has been recognised not so much as a continuation of Bach's own precedent in this field - a living, contemporary context for Bach authenticity - but rather as an irrelevant, if not licentious, exercise in parody. Even Leonhardt's harpsichord transcriptions of Bach two decades ago were not widely embraced within the context of his contribution to authentic practice because they detracted from the most literalistic principles of the authenticity movement.

I first encountered Bach harpsichord transcription in 1985 at a performance by Edward Parmentier of his new version for harpsichord and pedal harpsichord of the Prelude from the Partita in E for Solo Violin. It was a fitting salute to Bach's experimental character, inspiring conjecture of what Bach might have produced had he adapted the work for this instrumentation, particularly as he himself owned a pedal harpsichord. However, at the time of the 1985 Bach tercentenary, the idea of adapting an existing work for different instruments was still somewhat out of step with the general mood of the early music populace. The lack of recognition for the practice of transcription as a direct and literal approach to the music was perhaps compounded by the predilection in the wider musical mainstream for popular (and sometimes unscrupulous) arrangements and by the interchangeable use of the terms 'transcription' and 'arrangement'. But it was also that the prevailing climate still cultivated an air of censorship over those activities which, whilst of obvious integrity, happened to fall wide of the approved parameters of authentic pursuit.

Happily, the current climate breeds a far less proscriptive approach to 'alternative' performance contexts such as the growing trend for the practice of Bach transcription. But is the new permissiveness trying too hard to applaud ever more anachronistic and maverick treatments of music - including radical approaches to Bach under the broader mantle of the authentic movement? Has the pendulum swung too far, where the authenticity and authority of Bach's music becomes diminished through subjugation to the art of the performer/transcriber?¹

Whatever the debate over what constitutes an intrusion into the authenticity of a piece of music, at least there is now greater emphasis on conviction of performance as well as on the historical basis for its creation, and we are judging performance by listening for the music as well as to the sound.

Bach's prodigious recycling of his works (and those of others) shows that his sense of the music was not always exclusively identified with the sound of the instrument for which it was originally cast. Our experience of listening to Bach proves that, unlike for example the works of Couperin, our sense of the music is not identical to or dependent upon the sound of the medium through which it is speaking. So it is with the use of the harpsichord in transcribing Bach's solo string works. It does not distort the reality of the music but rather provides an insight into how it might have sounded under different circumstances, bringing other possibilities in the music to our attention. Through the varied use he made of his Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, Bach endorsed and explored the notion that a work of single line origin can be redefined by putting it into the medium and language of the keyboard: to be reconstructed and 'amplified' by added contrapuntal activity and harmonic texture.

The first part of this article showed how Bach exemplified the art of transcription in his keyboard version

of the a minor Sonata (BWV 1003/964). We find here the culminated evidence of Bach's extemporisation of his violin solos on the clavichord, and where, "in so doing, he recognised the necessity of a sounding harmony, such as in compositions of this sort he could not more fully achieve".² This was not therefore one of those systematic re-uses of his music which Bach carried out in the interests of time and economics, but rather it signified something more musically interesting: his recognition of, and solution for, the difficulties in performing the music in its original form. Since all of Bach's works for solo violin were of an unprecedented technical challenge in their time, and given the restrictions of the violin as a polyphonic instrument, they would have made for treacherous learning and, probably, some painful listening. Bach would not have expected even the great violin virtuosi to execute the most difficult passage-work with a uniform control of intonation or with the kind of rhythmic regularity and precision possible in keyboard performance. Therefore, transcription offered a purely practical and technical solution: an alternative medium unfettered by instrumental constraints. On another level, in the process of expanding the music through the idiom of the keyboard, the transcription revealed the macrocosm of the original work - the 'full score' - whereby, conversely, the original represented its 'reduction'.

The Partita in D minor transcribed for harpsichord

The following extracts illustrate some further uses of this principle in creating harpsichord music from the Partita in D minor for solo violin (BWV 1004). Since a full exploration of its transcription would require a lengthy dissertation, the examples given are merely a brief introduction to the transcriber's approach. Wherever possible, the original line is preserved; transposition by octave or alteration of the melodic contour are used rarely and momentarily, either in order to create a less disjunct line or to provide technical feasibility.

The creation of a bass line naturally forms the first stage of the transcription process and is the first strand of keyboard line which the ear 'supplies' in revealing the work's imaginary parameters. Although it is the main structural input of the transcriber, the bass-line is in many ways the least problematic element, being essentially a reconstruction based on Bach's original line from notes which are either existing or implicit. In Bach's transcription of the a minor Sonata, illustrated in Part One, the creation of the bass is sometimes derived or extracted from the existing multiple textures - for example in the Fugue, and in the opening Adagio where the violin also contains harmonic support for its cantabile melodic line.

The approach to transcribing the d minor Partita relates to simpler musical forms which, aside from parts of the Sarabande and Chaconne, adopt a single-line texture and where the creation of the bass-line is less a process of extraction and more a realisation: an independent strand of sound functioning as a basso continuo to the melodic strand of the violin. With the exception of the Chaconne, the Partita comprises the four core dance movements of the dance suite format, in contrast to the *da chiesa* pattern of the a minor Sonata. It suggests a comparison with Bach's French Suites for harpsichord from the same period, both in terms of proportion and style as well as in melodic predominance. The Allemande, for example, resembles the stately Allemandes from the first, fourth and fifth French Suites; the opening bars of the first can be compared to the Partita's Allemande (Ex.1), with its simple processional quaver bass growing out of a sustained tonic pedal.

Ex. 1a
Allemande Bar 1

Violin Partita No.2 in d, BWV 1004

Violin

Transcription

Violin

Transcription

Ex. 1b
Allemande Bar 1

French Suite I in d, BWV 812

Harpsichord

Transcription

In places where the violin line poses a question of harmonic ambiguity, there may be more than one indication for the bass-line solution. However, the principle must always be to underpin the line with what is most strongly implied, and which should produce the kind of economy of line and movement so predominant in Bach's keyboard writing. In considering the first two bars of the Allemande, for example, a low A could have replaced the pedal D on the third beat of Bar 1, but would have pre-empted the necessary dominant harmony in Bar 2 - a move that is rarely found in Bach. Much more idiomatic of Bach's writing is the use of a sustained tonic pedal with a rise to the dominant, which can be compared to the opening bars of the Allemandes from the first and fourth French Suites. (Ex.1 & 2)

Ex. 2
Allemande
French Suite IV in F#m, BWV 815

Bar 1

Harpischord

The construction of the bass in the Courante has as much to do with developing the dotted and triplet rhythms as with realising the harmony. The result parallels Bach's solo keyboard writing in the Italian-type courantes, such as those of the first Partita, and of the fourth French Suite (Ex. 3), which indicates the importance of left-hand prominence in providing balance and rhythmic propulsion.

Ex. 3a
Courante
Violin Partita No. 2

Bar 50

Violin

Transcription

Ex. 3b
Courante
French Suite IV

Bar 31

Harpischord

As to the treatment of the violin line itself, its single-line texture is often in fact a consolidation of voices - a reduction, if you will, of an implicit polyphonic structure. The continuous semi-quaver movement of the Allemande occasionally divides into a two-part texture, revealing a dialogue between 'alto' and 'soprano' voices. Again, we look to Bach's original harpischord writing to find this type of division (Ex. 1b) and we can compare Bars 6 and 7 of the Allemande from the 4th French Suite with Bars 6 and 7 of the Partita's Allemande (Ex. 4).

Ex. 4a
Allemande
Violin Partita No. 2

Bar 6

Violin

Transcription

Ex. 4b
Allemande
French Suite IV

Bar 6

Harpischord

The Chaconne's potential for polyphonic activity can exploit the contrapuntal resources of the keyboard. Ex. 5 and 6 (see over) show how additional lines can be derived from the violin, and how octave transposition of the lower 'voice' can produce a counterpoint between bass and treble: one of several possible textural variations in the Chaconne.

The process of extraction in the Sarabande relates to Bach's own procedure in his transcription of the Adagio of the a minor Sonata, although the Sarabande's stately, essentially homophonic movement differs from the Adagio's declamatory, ornamental style, and from the active rhythmic detail characteristic of Bach's keyboard Sarabandes. Even so, the violin's multi-stopped texture in the Sarabande necessitates a degree of interpolation in order to create a coherent harmonic translation to the keyboard. The extraction

and redistribution of Bach's notes is balanced by the necessary alteration of some of the existing voice-leading, and by the addition of notes and resolutions in places where they could not have been supplied by the violin. It is particularly significant that the reconstructed bass is now a continuous melodic entity, free from the disjunct effect of the sudden harmonic omissions and octave displacements in the violin. (Ex.7)

Ex. 7
Sarabande Bar 1

Violin

Transcription

It is important to note that all tempi will be quicker as a result of the transcription: not just in terms of articulation, tonal sustain or in the interests of digital facility, but rather as the sign of an organic change in the music, brought about by the greater power of the pulse and the fundamental rhythmic continuity which are generated by the harpsichord bass-lines.

Violin

Transcription

Ex. 5
Chaconne Bar 33

Violin Partita No.2

Violin

Transcription

Ex. 6
Chaconne Bar 53

Violin Partita No.2

Violin

Transcription

57 58 59 60 61

The Gigue requires a greater simplicity of treatment than the other movements of the Partita. It is based more or less around transferring its more monophonic violin line directly into the right hand, whose continuous technical activity is supported rhythmically and tonally by a buoyant, running bass. The resulting rhythmic energy indicates a faster optimum performance speed on the harpsichord than on the violin. (Ex.8)

Ex. 8
Gigue Bar 1

Violin Partita No.2

Violin

Transcription

3 4 5

The continuation of this second instalment on 'Bach Transcribed' appears in the next issue of *Harpsichord and Fortepiano* and will explore the transcription for two harpsichords of the Prelude from the Partita in E Major for violin solo (BWV 1006), its relationship to Bach's concerto writing, and the transcriptions Bach himself made of the Prelude.

1. For a continuation of this discussion, see the review of *Bach & Vivaldi: Concerti and Praeludia* in this issue.
2. J.F.Agricola notes this in 1774: *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* 32, p.527.