

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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BACH TRANSCRIBED:

Part Three

by Pamela Nash

As we have already seen, Bach's practice of instrumental re-invention was, among other things, an opportunity to further exercise his imagination - to find a new channel of expression. This was not so much that he sought to improve upon a work, but rather that he found in its content a sort of self-sufficiency, a generality in the musical ideas which could transcend the instrumentation. That he chose to transcribe a particular work was a certain indication of how highly he prized it in its first incarnation and not just because of its inherent possibilities; in particular such varied use of the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin must reflect their central importance within Bach's oeuvre. In the transcription (BWV 964) of the Sonata in a minor for solo violin BWV 1003, Bach used the medium of the harpsichord to reveal the larger scale, 'full score' version of the work, evoking a spectrum of qualities which are inherent in the notes but which the violin can only suggest. Although of obvious value to the harpsichordist, the transcription has also a revelatory significance to the violinist, not least as a lesson in how Bach conceived the harmonic and contrapuntal structure of the music in relation to the melodic line.

The Prelude from the Violin Partita no. 3 in E Major BWV 1006, appeared three more times in Bach's output: in his adaptation of the Partita for the lute - the Suite in E BWV 1006a, and in two of the cantatas, most notably as the Sinfonia for organ obbligato and orchestra from Cantata BWV 29, *Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir*. Although unquestionably violinistic in idiom, the Prelude does not depend on any particular generic convention of composition to make its point, being a particularly obvious target for keyboard adaptation and requiring little additionally-composed contrapuntal material.

Although it is clearly beyond the scope of this article to explore and compare all three of Bach's transcriptions of the Prelude, the organ Sinfonia is referenced briefly alongside a new adaptation of the Prelude for two harpsichords in order to illustrate the ease and directness of conversion to the keyboard, whilst at the same time throwing up a number of questions about the relative effect of the Prelude on the violin. The use of two harpsichords is particularly dynamic, not least because of the sonic intensity of the combination which in this case serves to magnify Bach's allusion to Italianate Vivaldian concerto writing - to reveal a kind of bombastic virtuosity that the violin Prelude on its own does not completely divulge.

Partita in E for violin, BWV 1006

Ex. 1 Prelude

Violin

piano forte

1 5 10 15 20 25 29

Indeed, Bach reveals the concerto aspect in the organ Sinfonia, turning the violin Prelude on its head with a no-holds-barred expansion of the work. Considering the use of resources in the Sinfonia (including the additional dimension of the separate figured continuo part for harpsichord), the choice of two harpsichords is at least theoretically feasible.

Ex.2 Prelude

[Since the original violin key centres the notes too high above the harpsichord's natural playing compass, the transcription is transposed down a fifth from E to A.]

Ex.3

Sinfonia, Cantata 29

SINFONIA.

Presto.

Tromba I. 

Tromba II. 

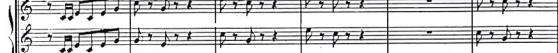
Tromba III. 

Timpani. 

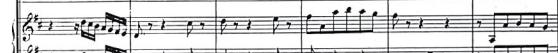
Oboe I. 

Violino I. 

Oboe II. 

Violino II. 

Viola. 

Organo obbligato. 

Continuo. 

5 

15 

20 

It is not difficult to account for Bach's derived bass in the Sinfonia, or for that matter, to imagine any continuo player improvising a suitable bass part below the violin line. However, in conceiving a written realisation for harpsichord, Bach's lute transcription of the Prelude could perhaps suggest a more organic starting-point, and since it is notated in two systems instead of traditional lute tablature, it can in itself be used directly at the keyboard. The speculation that Bach's lute works were in fact intended for the lute-harpsichord - whose sound could apparently deceive even lutenists as to its real identity - prompts the notion of the harpsichord as a logical channel for the Prelude (and indeed for all the lute repertoire); we know at least that these works were performed on the lute-harpsichord and that Bach himself possessed two such instruments. However, given the sparsity of Bach's added bass in the lute Prelude, as seen in Ex.4a, it is evident that Bach did not consider this version to be entirely suitable for keyboard performance, and it seems little more than a sketch compared with Bach's extensive treatment of the organ bass in the Sinfonia as shown in Ex.4b. So whilst the lute Prelude is playable as a skeleton realisation, the organ Sinfonia is a fully-developed keyboard version, the organ part comprising a complete transcription in itself. Less perhaps an instrumental concerto than a solo with an additionally composed orchestral accompaniment, it demonstrates the simple logic of Bach's approach: how easily keyboard transcription emerges out of the original Prelude, with the right hand taking over the entire violin solo and the left carrying the added bass.

An essential difference in reconstructing the Prelude for two concerted harpsichords, however, is that whilst still allowing for the fullest possible realisation of the musical elements inherent in the violin line, all of the musical rhetoric is kept within the sound of a single instrumental timbre, in contrast to Bach's Sinfonia where the organ solo is presented against an orchestral background. The use of two instruments facilitates other aspects of the Prelude, perhaps most significantly by pointing up the antiphony, which, by definition, neither the violin Prelude nor the Sinfonia can fully disclose. The antiphonal aspect of its structure suggests a kind of dialogue treatment of the instruments - thereby marking a real point of

departure from Bach's procedure in the Sinfonia - so that, rather than cast the second harpsichord as continuo accompaniment to the solo role of the first, the thematic and harmonic material is exchanged between instruments more or less equally, as in Bach's concertos for two or more harpsichords. The double Concerto in C Major, BWV 1061 - one of the few harpsichord concertos that is not a transcription of a previous model - can be performed "senza ripieni", ie a concerto duet for the two harpsichords alone, and this suggests the idea of a balanced treatment of the instruments in relation to each other: an ideal medium for exposing the Prelude's 'inner dialogue'. In fact, Bach's brilliant show of instrumental force in the

Sinfonia transcription, whilst emphasising the exalted passage-work and *Fortspinnung* of the movement, eclipses the antiphonal quality emerging between the alternating groups of notes with their echo dynamic indications in the violin (and lute) score. The use of four hands across the spectrum of two balanced instruments can point up the exchanges of these groups, particularly if the density and texture is varied in controlling the dynamics, and the timbral contrast afforded by the upper 8ft registers of double harpsichords can of course be exploited to emphasise the effect of *piano* vs. *forte*. (Ex.5) Bach's antiphonal use of harpsichords is, of course, found throughout the double concertos, for instance in the opening of the C Major double Concerto, (Ex.6) and in the development of the thematic motif later in the movement where Bach's use of alternating *piano* and *forte* dynamics indicates the exploitation of the timbral contrasts practicable between duo harpsichords. (Ex.7) In fact, the signs implying antiphonal treatment of the material beyond that suggested by Bach's violin dynamics in the Prelude are frequent

and obvious, and therefore may also be expressed by the antiphonal use of the harpsichords, as shown for instance in bars 51-54 of Ex.5.

So, whilst the Prelude makes no real structural reference to concerto form, its allusion to the concerto can be emphasised in the duo harpsichord context; the continuous alternation and off-setting of the instruments evokes a sense of concerto, magnifying the Italian virtuosic concerto style which was Bach's original compositional reference. This continuously colouristic treatment of the phrasing produces a different sort of dramatic impact than that produced by the violin solo and indeed by the mono-dynamic effect of the Sinfonia where the process of alternation which alludes to the concerto has no grounds to exist.

The textural and sonic density created on two harpsichords by broken harmonic figuration such as in Ex. 2 (Bar 17 onwards), is found in Bach's double concertos, particularly in similar passages where harmonic activity is static, for example over a pedal. This way of amplifying the sound on two harpsichords (magnified further by the players' use of over-holding the notes of the broken chords) gives a sort of luminosity of resonance to the harmonic intensification. This passage also illustrates the transcriber's concern to preserve the contour of the violin notes, even when corresponding passages in the Sinfonia do not; Ex.3 shows how Bach instead superimposes a counter-melody and re-organises the broken chord figuration.

Ex.5 [Prelude]

The mere existence of the harpsichord bass-line also generates a greater propulsion of the pulse, and releases the rhythmic buoyancy strongly inherent in the continuous semiquaver movement.

Ex.4a 105 Prelude
Partita in E for lute, BWV 1006a

Ex.4b 105 Sinfonia, Cantata 29

The excitement generated by these passages in their keyboard context has also much to do with the facility of speed and its relationship to the harmonic scheme of the Prelude. The harpsichords effortlessly propel the intrinsic harmonic rhythm of one-in-the-bar, whereas the sheer physicality of playing bariolages and continuous string-crossings on the violin inhibits the natural speed of progression, in effect slowing it to a three-in-the-bar pulse.

This is important in allowing the extraordinary pedal points in the Prelude to emerge more clearly. These pedal points support much of the virtuosic passage-work and account for well over half the Prelude's length; the first 32 bars are suspended entirely over a E pedal, prolonging expectations of a harmonic goal, yet without actually reaching it. The effect of the passage on the violin is ambiguous, partly because the pedal cannot be supplied in sustained sound, but also

because of the nature of the bowed arpeggiated passage-work on the violin which distracts the ear from the actual harmonic stasis, and thereby creating the illusion of harmonic activity.

It is clear then that certain kinds of musical facilitation arise from the transcription: the illumination of the Prelude's structure, the clarification of its harmonic scheme, the greater freedom to release the motoric drive and inherent virtuosity of its concerto character. In so exposing the Prelude's potential, do we find that the violin in a sense imposes upon it, whereby the original becomes a compromised version of the work? Is it that the transcription, with its comparatively brilliant effect, is ultimately a more satisfactory and exciting vehicle for the Prelude - simply by virtue of the constitution of keyboard performance?

Ex.6 Concerto in C for two harpsichords, BWV 1061

Ex.7 Concerto in C for two harpsichords, BWV 1061

Whatever the music may gain in transference from string to keyboard, there are also inevitable trade-offs: principally in superseding the intrinsic resonance and shimmering beauty of violin sound which are fundamental assets in the Prelude's original context. We might even say that the less facile, harmonically constrained medium of the violin lends, by default, a certain weight and tension - an illusion of grandeur even - to what is otherwise simply a fantasy of technical conceits.

This is the last of three articles by Pamela Nash about Bach transcriptions for harpsichord. She can be heard playing some of these pieces with Jane Chapman at this year's Brighton Festival .(see Soundboard)