

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 26, No. 2 Spring, 2022

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# 1741: Three masterworks of diversity

Claudio Di Veroli

## Two golden decades in 18<sup>th</sup>-century music

In the Preface to his fascinating *Mozart: The golden years 1781-1791*, H. C. Robbins Landon observed that this decade was ‘a golden era for all the history of music ... an extraordinary decade where on average twice a month a new masterpiece was born at the hands of either Haydn or Mozart’. He proceeded with an admittedly incomplete list of 244 works, of which about a hundred are still in the present day repertoire. If Robbins Landon singled out 1781-1791 as the heyday of the Viennese Classicism, no less impressive was an earlier decade, 1733-1742, the culmination of the late Baroque musical era. Just to mention works that are still performed nowadays (listed by year of publication or, if unpublished, presumed year of composition):

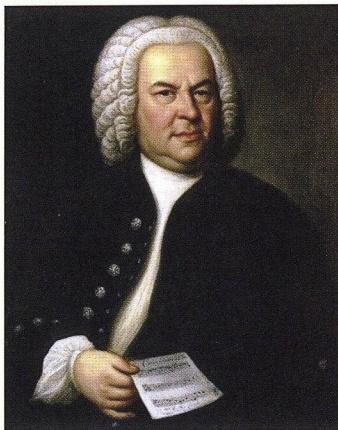
- ▶ 1733 Pergolesi, *La Serva Padrona*  
J. S. Bach, Mass in B minor  
Rameau, *Hippolyte et Aricie*  
Telemann, *Tafelmusik*
- ▶ 1734 J. S. Bach, Christmas Oratorio,  
Coffee Cantata, *Harpsichord Concerto nach italienischen Gusto* and *Overtüre nach französischer Art*  
Handel, Concerti Grossi, Op.3
- ▶ 1735 Rameau, *Les Indes Galantes*
- ▶ 1736 Pergolesi, *Stabat Mater*
- ▶ 1737 Rameau, *Castor et Polux*
- ▶ 1738 Handel, *Serse*  
Scarlatti, 30 *Essercizi per Gravicembalo*
- ▶ 1739 Rameau, *Dardanus* and *Les Fêtes d'Hébé*
- ▶ 1740 Handel, Twelve Concerti Grossi, Op.6  
and Organ Concerto in F,  
‘The Cuckoo and the Nightingale’
- ▶ 1741 J. S. Bach, Goldberg Variations  
Rameau, *Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts*  
Handel, *Messiah*
- ▶ 1742 J. S. Bach, *Die Kunst der Fuge* (first version)  
C. P. E. Bach, Prussian Sonatas,  
Württemberg Sonatas 1 and 2

## 1741 - three musical worlds co-existing

Within these years, from 1733 to 1742, the harpsichordist is likely to single out 1741 as certainly highly exceptional in the history of music for keyboard. At the time and for just a few years, three very diverse styles coexisted throughout the Western musical world: late Italian Baroque, late French Baroque and early Rococo-Classicism. In 1741 two great masterworks of the literature for the keyboard saw the light of day: Johann Sebastian Bach’s *Aria mit Verschiedenen Veränderungen*, nowadays known as the ‘Goldberg Variations’ and Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts avec un violon et un viole*. At the same time, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was composing his Prussian Sonatas and Württemberg Sonatas 1 and 2, which would be completed in 1742. Three completely different musical worlds co-existing in the triangle Leipzig, Paris and Berlin in the year 1741.

## 1740s – Bach, father and son

Let us start our comparisons with the obvious: J. S. vs. C. P. E. Bach, father vs. son, Baroque vs. Classical. Much has been written on this, possibly the swiftest stylistic change in the history of music, when—mainly during the 1740s—the different Baroque musical styles were superseded throughout Europe by the new Rococo-Classical style. Let us briefly revisit the well-known musical conflict between J. S. Bach (illus.1) and his sons: the latter’s education had been lovingly cared for by their father, and they would begin their composing careers by following his style (to the point of composing in their youth Baroque-style masterpieces later attributed to their father). However, soon both C. P. E. and W. F. (not to mention their younger brothers) would fully embrace *Empfindsamkeit*, the initial stage of the so-called ‘Classical’ era. Earlier than 1741, hints at the new style are already found throughout Europe, for example in the very successful *Stabat Mater* by Pergolesi, composed in Naples in 1735; yet it is with C. P. E.’s Prussian Sonatas, and mainly the masterly Württemberg Sonatas, that the new and revolutionary style makes its *grand entrée* into the keyboard musical world.



Illus.1 Johann Sebastian Bach in 1746, oil on canvas by Elias Gottlob Haussmann (2<sup>nd</sup> version, 1748), now in the Bach-Archiv, Leipzig. All illustrations Creative Commons

This new musical style certainly raised more than one eyebrow among the older generation of harpsichordists: we can only guess the myriad objections they would make to the most ‘shocking’ new features, such as the frequent ‘stop and restart’ fermatas, dramatic changes of mood and other pensive traits, far away from the uniform mood and rhythm found in most Baroque works. It is no coincidence that these new works by C. P. E. Bach were composed shortly after his arrival to Berlin, where for some decades he would play keyboard at the court of Frederick the Great (illus.2). The king had ascended the throne of Prussia in 1740 and would be a great patron of the arts and flautist himself, for decades having as mentor Johann Joachim Quantz, an outstanding representative of the transition from Baroque to Classical. Within a few years the new style would be embraced by the whole European musical world, and we find echoes of the dramatic style of the Württemberg Sonatas in quite a few movements Haydn composed decades later, for example in the Largo of the Sonata Hob.XVI:37; Haydn once acknowledged that he owed a lot to C. P. E. Bach.



Illus.2 *Flötenkonzert Friedrichs des Großen in Sanssouci*:

Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, plays a flute concerto accompanied by his court musicians, with C.P.E. Bach at the harpsichord, presumably in the 1740s. Although modern harpsichordists are familiar with this often-reproduced painting, and one is led to take it as an historical document, this is actually a purely hypothetical reconstruction, painted by Adolph Menzel in 1852, a good century after the facts

### 1741 - Italian vs. French late Baroque, Bach vs. Rameau

Unlike the Bach father-and-sons discussion, much less has been written about our other comparison, of paramount interest for harpsichordists: J. S. Bach vs. Rameau (illus.3) in 1741, both producing outstanding examples of late Baroque works. Let us revisit the main differences between national Baroque styles in keyboard music, well known to harpsichordists: the Italians preferred the Concerto/Sonata form, the French the Dance Suite form. The Germans often composed keyboard music based on counterpoint, in a ‘keyboard-range neutral’ way, while the French were fond of small rhythmical gestures, the expressive stress of repeated notes and fast trills, and striking rhythmical effects in the extreme bass, where their instrument is at its best (illus.4).



Illus.3 Jean-Philippe Rameau holding a viola, oil on canvas, attributed to Joseph Aved (c.1728), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Dijon



Illus.4 A typical two-manual French harpsichord, by Henri Hemsch, Paris (c.1736), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

In modern times the two 1741 masterpieces have received unequal attention. Bach’s *Goldbergs* are preferred not because of any ‘superiority’, but perhaps because the

total output of Bach for the keyboard is about ten times larger than Rameau's. As a result, dozens of authoritative books are available about J. S. Bach, but very few about Rameau have been published ever since the often-quoted one by Girdlestone, notorious however for his serious shortcomings in harpsichord-related matters, though it has to be said in his defence that he fully understood the greatness of the *Concerts*, to which he devoted 14 pages.

We will not attempt here anything like abridging the current musicology on the Goldbergs and the *Concerts*: we just intend to briefly compare them from the point of view of the performing harpsichordist. However, before we deal with both masterpieces, a short digression is in order on the musical role of the harpsichord at the time.

### 1730-40s – the rise of the harpsichord as soloist in chamber music

Common to all the Baroque styles is the use of the harpsichord in two ways: the solo pieces and the extemporised continuo accompaniment of instruments and/or voices. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century powerful harpsichords with two manuals and three choirs become increasingly common: now a single voice on the harpsichord can hold its own against a melodic instrument such as a flute or a viol, and composing chamber music with a written-out (*concertato*) harpsichord part becomes a possibility. Perhaps the first such use is by J. S. Bach in a remarkable set of works, all of them composed during his Cöthen period from 1717-1723: the concertos for harpsichord and strings, and his 12 duets, where a written-out harpsichord part competes with a melodic instrument: three sonatas with viola da gamba, three sonatas with flute and six sonatas with violin.

This new way of treating the harpsichord soon found its way also to France: in 1734 we have the *Pièces de Clavecin en Sonates* by Mondonville, followed by the *VI Sonates pour clavecin et une flûte traversière* by Boismortier. The latter are undated but believed to date around 1740-1742, or equivalently circa 'our' 1741. This is very appealing music indeed, still occasionally played in public today, but certainly a far cry from the two impressive masterworks published on that same year by Bach and Rameau: let us then deal with Bach's Goldberg Variations and Rameau's *Concerts*.

### 1741 – Bach's Goldberg Variations

This work is widely seen as a pinnacle of the literature for the harpsichord. Typical of Bach is the meticulous overall symmetrical plan: an *Aria*, five sets of three variations

each, then (starting with an *Ouverture*) yet another five sets of three variations each, and finally the *Aria* again. Further, the ten sets of three variations share a common pattern: the second variation of each set (except for the first set) is a crossed-hands piece, and the third variation of each set (except for the last set) is a canon (Var.3 is a *Canone all'Unisono*, Var.6 is a *Canone alla Seconda* and so on until the *Canone alla Nona* in Var.27 and the multiple-canonical *Quodlibet* in Var.30). This is Italian-style Baroque music almost throughout, with just two exceptions. As we just noted, the work is divided in two parts: *Aria* with Variations 1-14 and Variations 16-30 with *Aria da capo*; and each part begins with a French-style piece: the *Aria* is a French ornamented Sarabande and the *Variatio 16 à 1 Clav. Ouverture* is also obviously French.

Two decades earlier, Bach's keyboard works had required a technical dexterity unparalleled by other contemporary composers, but this was much less so by 1741. On one hand, there is no evidence that the mature Bach's performance technique had incorporated the great fingering novelty, the universal use of thumb-passing. On the other hand, this is certainly not how most young readers of the score would play it at the time: just a few years later, with the new thumb-based technique in widespread use, Pascal Royer would publish impressive virtuoso pieces such as *Le Vertigo* and *La Marche des Scythes*, obviously meant for the new technique.

For modern harpsichordists, the Goldbergs provide an unending succession of musical marvels, variety and technical challenges. Finally they carry an important bonus: with his 'à 1 Clav.' and 'à 2 Clav.' markings, the composer adds significantly to the scarce information we have about how late-Baroque German harpsichordists employed the two manuals.

### 1741 – Rameau's *Concerts*

Rameau's *Pièces de Clavecin en Concerts* are considered the masterpiece of French Baroque chamber music. In 1741 the long reign of Louis XV (illus.5) was in full swing: he, his wife and his mistresses were patrons of the arts and music lovers, and his absolutism would last for 33 more years. It is therefore not surprising that the French musicians were significantly later than the Germans in adopting the new Classical style introduced by C. P. E. Bach and others. Compared with Bach's mostly-Italianate Goldberg Variations (and with C. P. E.'s new Classical style), Rameau's *Concerts* are almost strictly French Baroque music and, except for his adoption of the Italianate triplets, Rameau disdains the large-scale contemporary incorporation of Italian-style features by

younger French masters such as Jean-Marie Leclair and Michel Corrette.



Illus.5 Louis XV in Coronation Robes, oil on canvas by Hyacinthe Rigaud (1730), Palace of Versailles

In his *Concerts* Rameau prefers to employ a relatively new style, certainly reminiscent of his *Pièces de Clavecin* published in the 1720s, but with a new distinctive and appealing fashion, yet always within the French-style framework of short subjects, rhythmical contrasts and plentiful ornamentation. That said, we also find in the *Concerts* a few Italianate counterpoint touches such as the canons *all'ottava* in the *Tambourins* and the *fugato* sections in *La Forqueray*, as well as slow movements that are obviously echoing the recent German *Empfindsamkeit*, mainly in *La Boucon* and *La Cupis*.

For the performer, the *Concerts* yield a further difficulty compared with the Goldberg Variations: we can play the latter as they are, while the *Concerts* were published as a score for harpsichord with violin and viol, although the composer clarified that they were perfectly playable on the solo harpsichord. However, for this purpose an arrangement is highly desirable, and the composer added to the trio score a few movements rearranged for solo harpsichord, showing how he introduced the necessary—and sometimes sweeping—additions and changes into the original harpsichord part (ex.1a/b).

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**L'AGAÇANTE.**

*Rendement:*

*Reprise,*

Ex.1a Rameau, *L'Agacante*, first four systems, in the original trio version (p.14).

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**L'AGAÇANTE**

*Clavecin seul.*

*Reprise.*

Ex.1b *L'Agacante* in the composer's solo harpsichord arrangement (p.18). Among many interesting changes, note how the trio's bars 11 and 12 have been re-arranged as a single bar (this is the only instance of this type of change in Rameau's arrangement)

The present author has recently prepared, based on Rameau's examples, a complete arrangement of the Concerts for solo harpsichord, and the results really feel as if they were originally composed for the solo instrument.

### 1741 – Technical hurdles, Goldbergs vs. *Concerts*

From the point of view of keyboard performance technique, Bach's Goldbergs and Rameau's *Concerts* share some novelties, such as frequent hand crossings and keyboard-wide broken chord figurations, but also show the already-noted important differences. Based on the famous anecdote of Marchand avoiding a confrontation with Bach 24 years earlier, it has been said that in 1741 many a French harpsichordist would have found the Goldbergs' counterpoints and involved hand-crossings very hard to play. Conversely, many a non-French harpsichordist, unacquainted with the fast succession of trills and mordents in French works compounded by some very fast hand crossings in the *Concerts*, would have found many passages in the *Concerts* very tricky indeed.

### Historical influence and present-day fame of the Goldbergs and the *Concerts*

Although the Goldberg Variations had hardly any influence on contemporary composers, who were increasingly adopting the post-Baroque Classical style,

they have been certainly very influential in historical keyboard technique development, and infinitely more so than Rameau's *Concerts*. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, ever since the pioneering 1933 recording of Wanda Landowska, modern familiarity with the Goldbergs has made them immensely popular among harpsichordists, pianists and audiences. On the other hand, the first recording of Rameau's *Concerts* took place three decades later than Landowska's Goldbergs, and they are much less often performed nowadays.

Yet, the more you hear and study the *Concerts*, the more you realise their originality and huge musical appeal. I am a great lover—in equal terms—of Rameau, French Baroque, Italian Baroque, and J. S. Bach, but when it comes to selecting single pieces for recital encores, my choice more often than not falls on movements from Rameau's *Concerts*. They include stunning masterpieces such as *La Boucon*, *L'Agacante*, the *Menuets* in G, *La Timide*, the *Tambourins* in A, and *La Cupis*. This marvellous music deserves to be played in private, and heard in public, much more frequently.

*Dr Claudio Di Veroli is a harpsichordist and musicologist. For decades based in Buenos Aires (Argentina) and later in Bray (Republic of Ireland), he recently moved to Lucca (Italy). His many public performances and publications have been praised by leading musicians and favourably reviewed. Website <http://harps.braybaroque.ie/biog.html>*

### Notes

- 1 H. C. Robbins Landon, Mozart: *The golden years 1781-1791* (London, 1989).
- 2 Such as Haydn's 25 string quartets, the oratorio *Die Sieben letzten Worte des Erlösers am Kreuze*, his symphonies 73-92, some piano sonatas and the harpsichord concerto in D. In the same period Mozart composed the operas *Die Entführung, Le Nozze di Figaro, Don Giovanni, Così fan tutte, La clemenza di Tito* and *Die Zauberflöte*, most of his piano concertos, his four horn concertos, the clarinet concerto, six symphonies, several serenades, ten string quartets, seven string quintets, 43 sonatas and fantasias for the piano, and of course his unfinished Requiem.
- 3 Supposedly they were commissioned to be played by harpsichordist Johann Gottlieb Goldberg (barely 14 at the time) for the sleepless nights of Count Kayserling, and Bach was paid the handsome amount of 100 *louis d'or*. Unfortunately, this anecdote was reported by Bach's biographer Forkel almost seven decades after the facts, and reputable present-day scholars (Peter Williams among them) hold the story spurious. However, the nickname has survived into present-day use.
- 4 By comparison, only a few hints of the new style can be found in the works of J. S. Bach, for example in the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 2 (also composed in about 1741): Praeludium XXIV in B minor.
- 5 On the bookshelf, Rameau's complete keyboard music is 2cm wide, whereas J. S. Bach's is 20cm.
- 6 Most recently by the late distinguished organist and Bach scholar Peter Williams, in *Bach, A Musical Biography* (Cambridge, 2016). For a reading list, see Francis Knights, 'The Musician's Bookshelf: J. S. Bach', *Harpsichord and Fortepiano*, xxiv/2 (Spring 2020), p.32.
- 7 Cuthbert Girdlestone, *Jean-Philippe Rameau: His Life and Work* (New York, R/1968); he deals with the Concerts on pp.37-50.

8 Girdlestone (1968): '... all his pieces sound as effective on the piano as on the harpsichord ... I venture to say that many sound better on the modern instrument' (p.22) and 'I agree ... that Rameau's harpsichord music gains by being transferred to the piano ... let us cease considering him as a composer of boudoir music for a miniature instrument' (p.37).

9 Very exceptionally (and almost exclusively around the middle of the 18th century in German lands) up to three manuals and four or even five choirs are also known. See the article by Leonard Schick in this issue.

10 Marc Pincherle, Preface to J. Bodin de Boismortier, *Sonates pour flûte et clavecin op.91* (Paris, 1975), p.iv.

11 However, this cannot be said about the notation: the Lully-style *notes pointées* are written out throughout.

12 The present author finds no problem in performing the Goldberg Variations using the traditional fingering technique throughout.

13 We shall not attempt to abridge here the plentiful material written about them. For a recent appraisal, see Williams (2016), pp.400-407.

14 This arrangement was originally produced for recital use by professional harpsichordist Franz Silvestri in Milan. By the time this article is published, hopefully both Silvestri and the present author will have played the *Concerts* in solo harpsichord recitals. A future publication is also a possibility.

  
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