

"Clavichord Music of Johann Kuhnau and C. P. E. Bach" Joan Benson, clavichordist.

E. Eugene Helm

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Reviews of Recordings

Joan Benson, "Clavichord Music of Johann Kuhnau and C.P.E. Bach." Focus 881 Stereo. A production of the Early Music Institute, Indiana University School of Music, 1987.

Side 1: Johann Kuhnau, Second Biblical Sonata, "Saul's Madness Soothed by Music" (3 movements: "The Depression and Fury of the King," "The Refreshing Song of David's Harp," "The Calm and Happy Mind of Saul")

Side 2: Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Rondo in B-flat Major, H.267; Rondo, "Farewell to my Silbermann Clavichord," H.272; Fantasia in C Minor, H.75

Johann Kuhnau and Emanuel Bach are not strange bedfellows, and they are both well served by the clavichord on this cassette. When Sebastian Bach succeeded Kuhnau in 1723 as Cantor of St. Thomas, Emanuel was a precocious nine-year-old, already well schooled in the music of his father's immediate predecessors. Kuhnau obviously considered the clavichord a logical medium for the Biblical Sonatas; the edition of 1710 says that they may be played *su l'Organo, Clavicembalo ed altri Stromenti somiglianti*, and here and there are the kind of dynamic markings that seem to call for the clavichord ("piano" and "più piano" in the middle movement of the Second Sonata, for instance). And for the last two Emanuel Bach pieces on this cassette, dynamics, ornament (e.g., *Bebung*), and affect make the clavichord the first choice, while the B-flat Rondo, part of the fourth collection "For Connoisseurs and Amateurs" and thus nominally specified for the new fortepiano, is equally appropriate on Emanuel Bach's favorite instrument.

We know now that Kuhnau's six Biblical Sonatas are not the first "sonatas" for solo keyboard, but they remain unique experiments in combining abstract structural principles with program music. Kuhnau tells six biblical stories in the kind of tone painting that is usually described as "charmingly naive," and he also provides elaborate verbal descriptions of the programs, during which he is at great pains to demonstrate his own erudition in mathematics, languages (he spoke six),

philosophy, and law. But the music survives even these long stretches of arid prose because Kuhnau — unlike many another composer of program music — could not bring himself to compromise musical structure for the sake of storytelling. Thus "Saul's Madness Soothed by Music" is pervaded by the spirit of prelude-fugue pairing, toccata, fantasia, chorale prelude, and trio sonata, in masterful balance; and in the present recording Joan Benson follows the composer's lead in being guided above all by factors purely musical. Those factors properly include much that is not notated: Saul's "depression," for instance, is performed as metrically free and his "fury" as metrically strict; and while Kuhnau portrays Saul's madness with parallel fifths, Benson enters into the spirit of things by changing an antepenultimate seventh chord into a delicious, if illegitimate, ninth chord.

Emanuel Bach's rondos are more variable harmonically and thematically, less propulsive, and formally more amorphous than the rondos of Haydn and Mozart. In a deliberate rejection of high-Classic structural principles and for the sake of a more personal expression, he often chose to present the rondo theme in the "wrong" keys amid harmonic excursions, and to vary or develop it in the process, as in both rondos heard here. Personal feelings are carried even further in the second of these rondos, a slow, meditative, regretful-sounding movement seemingly designed to contradict the standard Classic rondo-affect of cheerfulness and insouciance. The occasion for this "Farewell" was Bach's transfer of a favorite clavichord to a favorite pupil; one wonders why his careful indications of *Bebung*, so appropriate to the sentiment and to the instrument, are not observed in the performance. (The *Bebung* indications in the C Minor Fantasia are likewise ignored.)

Even more personal and anti-Classic than Bach's rondos are his fantasias. The largely unmeasured and tonally adventurous C Minor Fantasia, which first appeared in 1753 as one of the *Probestücke* in Part I of the *Versuch*, seems to carry a deep, perhaps tragic, inner message; but unlike Kuhnau, Bach does not tell us just what the message is. That task was undertaken years later, without Bach's direct participation, by the Danish poet von Gerstenberg, who underlaid two separate texts, thus transforming this eminently clavichordal piece into a kind of lied or melodrama. In one text von Gerstenberg expresses his passionate admiration of both Emanuel Bach and Shakespeare by paraphrasing Hamlet's soliloquy; in the other he imagines Socrates's last words as he drinks the cup of poison. Even though these texts are no proper part of the C Minor Fantasia, they truly illustrate the goal of unbridled emotion held in common by the composer and his Danish admirer.

A suitable characterization of Joan Benson's performances on this cassette might be that they successfully invoke the privilege of long experience with early music. Thus they avoid a too-literal interpretation of the details of the written page in favor of preserving its central affect with admirable understanding, maturity, and imagination. Still, their freedom of interpretation in rhythm and tempo would be more effective if it were set off by more passages whose rhythms and tempos are strict, wherever that could be appropriately done. And after awhile the listener becomes aware that too many notes, in both slow and fast tempos, are left too quickly, sometimes so quickly that one hears only a thump rather than a pitch. This is hard to avoid on the pedal-less clavichord, but, as Bach put it in the *Versuch*, to "leave the keys too soon, as if they burned" is a mannerism devoutly to be avoided wherever possible.

The quality of the Early Music Institute's recording is excellent, particularly in the fiery and powerful arpeggiated passages so obviously relished by the performer. One might expect that the EMI would take special pains with minutiae in the liner notes, but apparently the tradition of avoiding all suspicion of pedanticism in such notes still holds sway even here, so that the capitalization and punctuation are quirky, one title is incorrectly worded, and Socrates is represented as having written a work entitled "Last Words before Taking Poison."

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