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"The Music of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach" by David Schulenberg

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Book review: Schulenberg, David. *The Music of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2010. ISBN: 978-1-58046-359-1

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“The Enigmatic Bach” is the apt title of David Schulenberg’s first chapter and prospective readers may wonder if this book will provide any solution to the enigma. Biographical details are sparse and whole areas of Friedemann Bach’s life are virtually undocumented. Reports of his character by Marpurg, Reichardt, Zelter, and others are warped by the raconteur’s wish to make a good story out of his supposed reclusive and rebarbative nature and have provided material for imaginative and novelistic readings of his life. As with his father, our main impression of Friedemann as a person must come from the music and Schulenberg rightly concentrates on that, as his title emphasizes. But there the enigma continues, with problems of attribution, formal peculiarities (including, for example, uncertainty whether or not some of the keyboard fantasias are actually complete in the form we have them), an urge to revise and recycle (keyboard sonatas with up to four different versions dating from different times), and the fact, amply attested by contemporaries, that his main talent was in improvisation, which we can never experience. Added to this, the very attractive, not to say raffish, image presented in the portrait by Wilhelm Weitsch, reproduced on numerous CD covers and even as frontispiece in the new Complete Works, is almost certainly not of Friedemann but of his fourth cousin and pupil, Johann Christian Bach (the “Halle Clavier-Bach,” not Friedemann’s half-brother the “London Bach”), an important transmitter of his works. One wonders if the frumpy character in the two authenticated drawings of P. Gölle (reproduced in Martin Falck’s life and works) will ever take its place.

This is one of few full-length studies of Friedemann Bach to be published since Falck’s, almost one hundred years ago.¹ Falck is still of value since his treatment of the life is something of a documentary biography, where Schulenberg’s is a much briefer descant on the evidence. Falck was thorough, even putting Friedemann’s class exercise books from the Thomasschule under the microscope in the search for character traits. But, as Schulenberg points out, as far as the music is concerned Falck, although giving much sound and sensitive

¹ Martin Falck, *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Sein Leben und seine Werke mit thematischem Verzeichnis seiner Kompositionen und zwei Bildern* (Leipzig: C.F. Kahnt Nachfolger, 1913; Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, R/1977). Of two recent books in German, Ulrich Kahmann, *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach: Der unterschätzte Sohn* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2010) is mainly biographical; Daniel Hensel, *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach: Epigone oder Originalgenie, verquere Erscheinung oder großer Komponist?* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2011) deals in detail with sources and the solo keyboard works.

judgment, was a man of his time with a Riemannesque view of Viennese Classicism as a culmination, to which all previous developments led and by which they were to be judged. As far as Friedemann's character is concerned, Falck is sensitive and sympathetic in interpreting the evidence. Of various black marks against Friedemann's reputation, his effort to discredit the helpful Kirnberger with Princess Anna Amalia of Prussia stands out. Falck attributes this to ill-judged pressure from friends and supporters on a man in financial difficulties and a depressed frame of mind, which at least makes it understandable. Schulenberg shares Falck's kinder judgment of a complex character open to misinterpretation.

Good as Falck is, much has happened since 1913, notably Peter Wollny's 1993 Harvard dissertation, the next major research event.² Wollny has continued to publish important work and is currently editing the Complete Works, of which (at the time of writing this) four of a projected eleven volumes have appeared.³ Schulenberg is excellently placed to summarize the current position, with a record of front-line work on both C.P.E. Bach and J.S. Bach. Strong impetus has been given to new thinking by the resurfacing of Berlin sources in Eastern Europe. The autograph of the keyboard polonaises became available again in Cracow in the 1980s, in time for Andreas Böhnert's edition (1993), but not for Richard Jones's (1987).⁴ Jones relied on Griepenkerl's edition of c.1819, which purports to transmit Friedemann's performance style as passed on to Griepenkerl by his teacher Forkel. Opinions differ as to the value of Griepenkerl's markings, but Schulenberg is surely right to be skeptical. Friedemann spent a couple of months with Forkel in 1773, Forkel found the polonaises difficult and unrewarding, and by 1820 so much time had elapsed that it is very difficult to believe in the accuracy of all those detailed performance indications.

The return of the Berlin Sing-Akademie collection after 2000 has enabled much reassessment. Wollny has drawn attention to the significance of counterpoint sketches exchanged between Friedemann and his father in the later 1730s. Schulenberg has been able to reassign a flute concerto, rejected by Falck as "Quantzish," to Friedemann. Not evidently a great piece, but the G minor *Clavicembalo* concerto that Falck bills as "unsicher" on grounds of style, Schulenberg accepts as "arguably the greatest of all Friedemann's concertos." That this judgment can be made of a work that is not quite certain is part of the Friedemann enigma. Fortunately we can judge for ourselves since Schulenberg has provided a complete score of this and other hitherto unpublished works on his personal website, together with audio files and commentaries.⁵

² Peter Wollny, "Studies in the Music of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach: Sources and Style," (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1993).

³ Bach-Archiv Leipzig, ed., *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Gesammelte Werke* (Stuttgart: Carus-Verlag, 2009–).

⁴ Andreas Böhnert, ed., *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Twelve Polonaises* (Munich: Henle, 1993); Richard Jones, ed., *W.F. Bach. Twelve Polonaises* (London: The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1987); Nos. 1–6 are autograph, Nos. 7–12 copied by J.F. Hering.

⁵ <http://www.wagner.edu/faculty/dschulenberg/wfb.htm>. The website also has audio files for all music examples in the book, and a page of updates.

Schulenberg is very conscious of the necessarily provisional nature of any integrated assessment of Friedemann as a composer at the moment, when so many volumes of the Complete Works have yet to appear and so much has yet to be weathered in performance. I wondered how much repeated comments about “rambling” and inadequate reprise elements reflect formal concepts that do not quite match those of the composer. The discussion of the eight fugues for keyboard (1778) concentrates on specific aspects: the F-minor fugue, the similarity of some subjects to ones used by Sebastian, and the prevalence of appoggiaturas. But the F-minor one is an atypical exercise in a type of *stile antico*, and subjects in themselves are often traditional commonplaces. Another commentator has criticized the fugues for neglecting their subjects in favor of self-indulgent, pre-Romantic episodes.⁶ This reflects a modern, academic attitude to fugue. Friedemann is taking elements of his subjects and evolving ever-new galant-style ideas from them. His father had, in the Inventions, aimed to develop ideas (“selbige wohl durchzuführen”) in a systematic way; Friedemann in the fugues has moved on from the systematic approach and reveals his own original genius, with different stylistic goals. In this, he shows a flexibility and invention that sharply divides him from the efforts of Kirnberger, Marpurg, or Mattheson.⁷

The weight of influence of the father (whether in continuation or reaction, or something of both) throws the strength of Friedemann’s originality into relief. Some of Friedemann’s best and most characteristic works are among the keyboard sonatas, notably his first published work, the Sonata in D major F.3 (1745). It seems likely that he intended to publish a set of six sonatas individually, as Sebastian had published his six keyboard partitas individually between 1726 and 1730, though Friedemann was to get no further than two published sonatas. The final movement of F.3 (*Vivace*) exemplifies Friedemann’s position. He came to artistic maturity at a time when Italian opera, violin, and keyboard composers were flooding German courts with a new, highly irregular, asymmetric style, something he was excellently placed to observe in Dresden. In one way, the *Vivace* refers to the type of final gigue in Sebastian’s partitas, but it is totally recast in terms of the new style. Friedemann fuses this style with the depth of his inherited tradition in a uniquely sophisticated blend, making no allowances either technically or conceptually, beyond anything the Italians were to achieve. His fate was to remain with this moment of artistic vision when the world moved on to *la phrase carrée*.

As far as performance is concerned, Schulenberg rightly stresses the importance of the conceptual aspect: it “must combine great technical control with insight into the counterintuitive structure of the music” (p. 24). Points relevant to performance in general and in detail are therefore endemic throughout the book. Useful cadenza models are suggested, by C.P.E. Bach for the keyboard Fantasia F.19 and for the E-flat major Duo for two flutes based on a trio-sonata cadenza attributed to C.H. Graun. Something might have been said about

⁶ Paul Simmonds, booklet notes for *W.F. Bach. Polonaises & Fugues* (London Independent Records LIRO14), 2007.

⁷ The Eight Fugues are the only definitely authentic works in the two volumes of ‘Organ Works’ published by Edition Peters. The entire second volume consists of dubia, and of the three extra fugues in the first volume only one is likely to be authentic; one is a section of the Overture to Handel’s *Esther* (1718).

arpeggiated sections in the keyboard Fantasias, since there are elaborate and varied patterns given for works of C.P.E. Bach by Emanuel himself and by J.C.F. Rellstab.⁸ An appendix of “Notes on Performance” deals with specifics, though as Schulenberg states, it consists more of questions than of answers, healthily so since discussions of performance practice can have too many answers. He has an open mind on keyboard instruments, not excluding specialty instruments, though as one would expect the clavichord and pianoforte are to be preferred. Keyboard technique is the mixed old and new represented by C.P.E. Bach (1753) and the *Clavier-Büchlein* that Sebastian started for Friedemann in 1720. Schulenberg sheds a novel sidelight on the importance of improvisation in keyboard and composition training, in the expense of paper, and the effort of making one’s own ink, things of which Sebastian was very conscious.

Most fun in this discussion are Schulenberg’s sharp comments on recorded performances. One, of the Sinfonia from the “church piece” F.88, a concerto movement, was recorded without the solo organ part, which has been lost, with consequent glaring lacunae, notably at the end of the opening ritornello. The one-to-a-part implication of surviving sets of parts for vocal and ensemble pieces is present here as with Sebastian. This has not been absorbed in what one assumes are the “official” recordings of church works issued by Carus, publishers of the Complete Works, using Wollny’s scores. The first disc uses separate soloists, a choir of 7-6-7-7 and a string band of 5-4-3-2-1.⁹ The Weitsch portrait of the wrong Bach is much in evidence. The performances are good, but one has to ask how they can be considered “authentic.” Another of Schulenberg’s targets is the vogue for very quick tempi, something by no means limited to works of the Bach family, at the expense of the very subtlety of articulation and expression that is the supposed gain of period instruments and clear singing.

It may be that increased exposure resulting from the eventual Complete Works will clarify our view of this highly original, if uneven, genius. Further exploration of what Richard Taruskin has described as “a historiographical black hole,” the 1730s to 1760s, will no doubt yield a firmer analytical hold on the music.¹⁰ Meanwhile Schulenberg has given us a highly sympathetic assessment, as rich in incisive views and insights as one would expect.

⁸ See Christopher Hogwood, ed., *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. The Complete Works Series I Volume 4.2* (Los Altos, CA: The Packard Humanities Institute, 2009), Appendix; and Peter Schleuning, ed., *The Fantasia I. 16th to 18th Centuries* (Cologne: Arno Volk Verlag, 1971), 111-13.

⁹ *Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Kantaten I* (Carus 83.362), 2010.

¹⁰ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music Volume 2: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 400.