

Reviews

J.S. Bach

Six Sonatas and Partitas BWV 1001–1006

Transcribed, arranged and embellished for clavicembalo by Winsome Evans

Pocket score, A4 study score and facsimile, CD

Berlin: ERP Musikverlag Eckart Rahn (GEMA), 2007, xiv, 147 pp. + facsimile (42 pp.)

ISMN M 700252 25 0, ISMN M 700252 29 8, Celestial Harmonies 14268-2

Eckhardt Rahn and his admirable Celestial Harmonies label have done Winsome Evans proud in the presentation of her harpsichord transcriptions, with embellishment, of J.S. Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin. A book-sized box of firm structure contains a CD case holding two discs of Evans' own performance of her transcriptions. She plays on a copy, made by Alastair McAllister of Melbourne, of a much-prized and richly decorated double-manual harpsichord (held by Hamburg's Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe) from 1728, the work of the Hamburg master Christian Zell. Accompanying the discs in the box is a pocket score of Evans' harpsichord edition of the set, complete with editorial preface and notes and—a very welcome extra, this—a forty-two-page facsimile of Bach's 1720 autograph of the original score. No musically literate listener or reader will find it difficult or inconvenient to compare Evans' solutions and starting-points. An optional extra is an A4 version of the edition and facsimile. This larger volume is likely to appeal to listeners or readers tempted to play the transcriptions in whole or part on any available keyboard.

Readers of this journal will not need to be told that Bach's Six Sonatas and Partitas, 1001–1006 in the Schmieder catalogue, have attained an almost mythic status in the collective imagination of violinists and music-lovers generally. There have even been suggestions that some listeners are inclined to put on a special 'unaccompanied Bach' face, compounded of intensely serious frown marks and a general intimation of worshipful receptiveness, for hearing them. Composers of high rank have certainly felt obliged to come to terms with them. Mendelssohn provided a keyboard accompaniment in 1841 for the famous *Ciaccona* of the D major Partita (BWV1004); not, it appears, because he deemed it incomplete, but because he was worried that it might be misunderstood by an audience that had lost touch with the tradition of solo violin music contributed to by Biber, J.J. Walther, Benda and others. Schumann, twelve years later and for a similar reason, provided simple but by no means unstylish piano parts to go with all six of the Sonatas and Partitas as well as Bach's six cello suites. Brahms arranged the *Ciaccona* for a pianist's left hand in order to simulate the digital and artistic challenges presented by the solo violin part. Busoni and others arranged this movement for modern grand piano with the object of fulfilling nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century ideals of how to realize the majesty they perceived in it.

Evans' reasons for embarking on her harpsichord transcriptions conform to none of the above. She wishes, on her own admission in her CD notes and in her editorial preface, to make the essence of the music contained in them available to harpsichordists; to enlarge, in other words, the harpsichord repertory with works of unchallengeable repute and substance

translated into the idiom of an historically appropriate keyboard instrument. 'Translation' is, indeed, a word she uses, with some justice, to describe her approach to the task of taking the music from one medium to another. In this she is doing no more than echoing the evident practice of J.S. Bach in transcribing and re-casting so many of his compositions, as well as compositions by other composers, for different forces and purposes. The arrangement for lute, for example, of the third of the partitas in the set of Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin (BWV1006 in E major) is currently accepted as the work of the composer himself. The opening *Preludio* of this same partita was also requisitioned as the driving force of an elaborately scored introductory *sinfonia* for the cantata *Wir danken dir, Gott, wir danken dir* (BWV29), prepared for the church service marking the inauguration of the new Leipzig town council in 1731. Its thematic substance in that work becomes an organ solo with orchestral accompaniment.

Evans points to a persistent tendency on Bach's part to transcribe violin solos, whether these were his own music or the work of other composers, for keyboard. In support of the claim that contemporaries of Bach refer to occasions on which he is supposed to have played his own keyboard versions of the Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, she quotes from an anonymous article that appeared in the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* journal in 1774 (XXIII, 527). The author picks up a reference by J.F. Reichardt to Franz (František) Benda's caprices for solo violin and asks in a passage from which Evans quotes:

Why does the author not rather instance the much more difficult six violin solos without bass of *Joh. Seb. Bach*? They are certainly even harder and harmonically richer (*vollstimmiger*) than Mr. Benda's *Capriccios* . . . Their composer often played them on the clavichord, adding as much in the nature of harmony as he found necessary.

This translation is printed in the supplement attached to the revised edition of David and Mendel's *The Bach Reader*, where presumably Evans found it. Perhaps she did not notice that two pages earlier the editors quote Erwin R. Jacobi's conclusion, based on evidence provided in a publication by the grandson of the *AdB*'s proprietor, Friedrich Nicolai, that the anonymous 'Z' of the *AdB* article was J.F. Agricola (1720–1774),¹ who had studied with J.S. Bach for some years from 1738 and who collaborated with C.P.E. Bach in writing the influential obituary of Bach that appeared in Mizler's *Musikalische Bibliothek* in Leipzig in 1754. This attribution, assuming it to be correct, gives the author's reminiscence of Bach playing his solo violin music in a version for keyboard much more weight as evidence in support of her own project.

She tells us that the first of her transcriptions or 'translations' was of the second (D minor) Partita BWV1004 (the one ending with the celebrated *Ciaccona*) and that this was inspired by hearing the eminent harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt play his transcription of one of the solo cello suites in Sydney Opera House. It was her professor and mentor at the University of Sydney, the late Sir Peter Platt, who urged her to undertake transcriptions of the complete Sonatas and Partitas and to embody them in sound recordings and a performing edition. Many musicians might have contemplated such a project; few would have brought it to completion.

Evans possesses obvious assets for her chosen task, among them an exceptionally high level of musicianship and, from an early age, a well-developed keyboard technique. I recall

¹ Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (eds.), *The Bach Reader. A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*. Rev. ed., London, 1967 (Norton: New York, 1966), 445.

her including a piano concerto of the classical period in her graduation exercises. She has played as a solo and continuo harpsichordist with a large number of leading Australian ensembles, in the process taking part as a soloist in all of J.S. Bach's concertos for one, two and three harpsichords. Her prowess on the keyboard may have been obscured for some people by her prominence as career-long director of the Renaissance Players from 1966/67 and as player (according to her biographical note) of more than thirty instruments revived from medieval and renaissance times. Her stamina as director-soloist of this enterprise has been matched by the inventiveness with which she has scored ensemble performances of some two and a half thousand pieces of music that would have been partly or almost wholly improvised in their time of origin. The thought has occurred to me more than once that her vast output of fully realized performance scores of medieval and later music should earn her a firm place in the gallery of Australian composers.

If Evans' leadership of the Renaissance Players has caused her to be specific (in a distinctively calligraphic way) in much of her scoring for successive waves of young musicians, her view of what she has produced in her edition of the Bach Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin gives an impression of being much more relaxed and flexible, an attitude no doubt prompted by her awareness that only keyboard players of high professional attainments are likely to use the edition as a basis of public performances. She acknowledges that her published and recorded edition is only one of the possible ways of transcribing this music, and offers as an ideal recommendation that keyboard players should combine her solutions in realizing the harmonic and polyphonic implications of the original with alternatives drawn from a return to Bach's autograph, found at the back of the score under its original title of *Sei solo* [sic] *a Violino senza Basso accompagnato*. She assumes that concert and recorded performances will use a double-manual harpsichord and that contrasts of *forte* and *piano* will be made by switching from one manual to the other. She is scrupulous for the most part in retaining Bach's essential spellings (while admitting to converting Bach's consistent use of *Partia* to the more customary *Partita*), in keeping editorial suggestions in square brackets and in pointing out those places where even a return to the autograph can maintain doubt about the precise identity of individual notes or the placing of slurs.

Editorial notes indicate where dotted rhythms have been over-dotted or 'swung' as triplets, where thematic material has been transposed down to avoid the thin end of an eighteenth-century harpsichord's higher pitch limits and, on occasion, where Evans as editor has changed a note to fit the new transcription's pattern or consistency (while leaving performers with the knowledge and means required for restoring any such change). The layout of the transcriptions for the hands of a performer at all times reflects the practical experience and judgment of a skilful keyboard player. Principles and sources for ornamentation (French-style *agréments*) based on or around individual notes and additional to what is indicated in the autograph are set out for the edition and demonstrated with conviction on the discs. What will strike most readers and listeners as one of the outstanding features of edition and recording, however, is the persuasive brilliance of Evans' realization of those elements of embellishment often referred to as *passaggi*: the invention of divisions that render the original patterns of the music much more florid and profuse, and make of them a species of variation. The editor has provided examples of this kind of passage in full for those points in the original solo violin score where Bach has simply used a repeat sign. Evans tells us that her *passaggi* are based on a prolonged study of those used by Bach in his own keyboard works, both transcribed and original; and the same applies to her introduction of such effects of texture as alternating chordal patterns for both

hands in close proximity. So, for example, she identifies two such passages of chordal alternation in the *Preludio* of the Partita No. 3 as modelled on the textures in Variation 29 of the *Goldberg Variations*. This conforms with her stated wish to keep her transcriptions, where appropriate, at a level of difficulty comparable with Bach's major solo works for keyboard, particularly the *Goldberg Variations* and including the keyboard Partitas, the English Suites and the Italian Concerto.

All of which inevitably raises a listener's expectations of what Evans as performer will provide as an aural equivalent of her intentions as editor. These expectations, I suggest, will not be disappointed. Evans' playing is marked by technical control and poise even in passages of thrilling velocity. Her aim is a bold and volatile reading and is largely attained. Here and there, the release of hands from stretched positions slightly delays the onset of a new phrase by comparison with the fluent transitions more consistently possible in the solo violin original, but the success of a version for keyboard has to be judged in terms of the inherent qualities and limitations of the new medium. The recording successfully renders the detail of the part-writing and passage work with exemplary clarity, and responds, in matters of sustained tone, to playback at a considerable level of intensity.

The development and relative ubiquity, in these times, of computer programs capable of reproducing images of printed music notation in fine detail might suggest that such a versatile musician as Evans is likely to have sat at a computer keyboard to deliver the master copy of her keyboard transcriptions for publication; but that is something Evans quite deliberately does not do and does not want to do. Anyone who saw Bob Connolly and Robin Anderson's 2001 documentary film about Sydney University's Music Department, *Facing the Music*, may recall the scene in which Evans, while agreeing to serve as department head, did so on the understanding that she would not have to use a computer. It may have seemed a forlorn act of resistance to music staff members who have long accepted that their jobs become almost impossible if they try to work without computers in present-day universities, but Evans' graceful clarity in drawing music notation with a pen must have made the task of Johannes Gebauer, the music typesetter for this publication, as straightforward and rewarding as possible. The result of this collaboration is outstanding in its clarity, spacing and balance.

A 'complimented' instead of an intended 'complemented' in the CD notes is probably a result of some hiatus between proof-reading and correction of a kind likely to occur when text is being printed in another country. There are inconsistent spellings of *Ciaccona* in the editorial notes. The only word that made me wince—and this will be taken by some readers to indicate an addiction on my part to old-fashioned pedantry—occurred in the passage in Evans's CD notes where she confessed that the 'enormity' of her project was not initially apparent. Dictionaries these days countenance the use of this word to mean something of overwhelming size by giving it as a third or fourth option, but I cannot rid my mind of its standard meanings until recent times of something outrageous, monstrously offensive or grossly abnormal or irregular. Winsome Evans has certainly produced something out of the ordinary in her translation for keyboard of Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for solo violin, and her project was undoubtedly of a scope and size fit to be considered daunting; but its delivery is free from moral deviance or offensive abnormality and is, I believe, one of the finest recent achievements of applied musicology.

Author Biography

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