

OBOE MASTERWORKS

Jeremy Polmear and Diana Ambache play lesser-known pieces by better-known composers

Listening to the beautiful, arching oboe phrases and clearly argued passagework of the first movement of **Bach's Sonata in G minor, BWV 1020**, it is hard to acknowledge that it may not have been written for these instruments, and may not be by Bach.

Surviving copies are signed as being by 'Bach', which covers a multitude of musicians. Scholars dispute the exact authorship, but the most common explanation is that this is an early work of C P E Bach, supervised by his father. All seem agreed that the work is spurious, but I still find this hard to take, mainly because of its sheer musical quality. From the opening phrases on keyboard and melody instrument you know you're in for something special, and throughout this first movement the instruments combine and re-combine with that mixture of creative inventiveness and technical control which is a hallmark of Johann Sebastian.

The slow movement is a real original; a long, slow oboe tune floats gently over a rocking piano figure. The melody is expressive of a state of mind, rather than of movement. True, some tension is generated as the movement progresses, but the melodic line soon settles gratefully back to the long E flat with which it began its excursion. The third movement is perhaps the least innovative of the three, but it is full of energy, with much lively writing for both instruments.

As to the instrumentation: the keyboard would have been a harpsichord, not the piano as here. The melody instrument was specified as a violin, but the music does not correspond to the range of the violin, nor are any string techniques, such as double-stopping, employed. Flute players have long claimed the piece, but the range is more that of the oboe. Furthermore, the long notes of the slow movement surely point to the use of the oboe with its narrow reed aperture, where a lungful of air can go a long way.

Overall, then, a Sonata for which oboists are grateful; and going back to the authorship of the work, when I am performing it I feel as if I am playing Johann Sebastian, whatever the scholars may say. Perhaps young C P E wasn't on good form that day, and the parental revisions were more extensive than usual; so that the work finally handed in was more a product of the father than the son.

The authorship of the **Sonata in D, Op 16 no 1** is not in doubt. It is **Johann Christian Bach**, youngest son of Johann Sebastian. Nor is the instrumentation, for the title page survives: the keyboard is for harpsichord or piano (J C Bach was one of the first composers to prefer the latter), the melody instrument is for violin or flute. It has to be admitted that the tessitura is a little high for the oboe, but the charm of the piece earns it a place in the repertoire.

It was written around 1779, towards the end of J C Bach's life. He had spent most of his time in London, had created

a career there, and is known as the 'London' Bach. (He signs himself John rather than Johann on the title page of the piece.)

There are two movements - a lively Allegro and a graceful Minuet with two Trios. The first movement, like his father's works, features an interplay between the keyboard and the melody instrument; but the second movement is different - led by the melody, and with a more simplified accompaniment. This is the 'galant' style, adopted (though not pioneered) by him. At the time, some critics were upset at this apparent dumbing down of music, abandoning the divine complexities of Johann Sebastian's time. But it proved a fertile approach to writing Opera, and indeed helped set the stage for the Romantic era. This can best be seen in the second Trio at 2:38.

J C Bach was not a pioneer of the galant style, but **Georg Philip Telemann** was. A contemporary of J S Bach, he was even more prolific, travelled widely, and composed operas too. He was sometimes looked down upon at the time as being a 'lighter' composer than J S Bach, but he was better-known; and this little **Fantasia, TWV 40:2-13 no 8**, demonstrates his skills.

One of a set of twelve, it was again written for the flute, but here the tessitura feels perfectly comfortable on the oboe. The beautiful first movement seems most like J S Bach, with wide intervals giving a sense of spaciousness, and the phrases follow each other with a natural logic. The second movement (2:05) is a kind of fugue for single voice, with strands of melody tailing off, to be replaced with others. The last movement (3:15) is a folk-like dance.

The title of **Beethoven's Adagio for a Musical Clock, WoO33/1** gives away the instrument it was originally intended for. Musical clocks - clocks combined with a mechanical instrument which played music - had been common in Europe for centuries, and were prominent during the 18th Century in London, Berlin, and Vienna, where the young Beethoven made his name. Little is known about the circumstances of this piece, but it is thought to have been written in 1799, a year before his first major public concert (which included the Septet and the First Symphony).

Beethoven has written a delightfully elegant tune, which responds well to being played non-mechanically.

Jeremy Polmear 2009, revised 2024