

**JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH**  
VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON



Deutsche  
Grammophon

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**Prelude and Fughetta in G major BWV 902**

**1** *Prelude*

**3:26**

**2** *Chorale Prelude* BWV 734

**"Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein"**

*(Transcr. by Wilhelm Kempff)\**

**1:51**

**Prelude and Fugue in E minor BWV 855**

*(The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, No.10)*

**3** *Prelude*

**2:03**

**4** *Fugue*

**1:17**

**Organ Sonata No.4 in E minor BWV 528**

**5** *2. Adagio*

*(Orig. Andante; transcr. by August Stradal)*

**5:27**

**Prelude and Fugue in D major BWV 850**

*(The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, No.5)*

**6** *Prelude*

**1:03**

**7** *Fugue*

**1:46**

**8 Chorale Prelude BWV 659**

**"Nun komm der Heiden Heiland"**

*(Transcr. by Ferruccio Busoni)*

**5:04**

**Prelude and Fugue in C minor BWV 847**

*(The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, No.2)*

**9 Prelude**

**1:24**

**10 Fugue**

**1:38**

**"Widerstehe doch der Sünde" BWV 54**

**11 Aria**

*(Transcr. by Vikingur Ólafsson)\*\**

**4:26**

**Aria variata (alla maniera italiana)**

**in A minor BWV 989**

**12 Aria**

**1:51**

**13 Variation 1**

**1:10**

**14 Variation 2**

**0:56**

**15 Variation 3**

**0:55**

**16 Variation 4**

**0:56**

**17 Variation 5**

**0:59**

**18 Variation 6**

**2:06**

**19 Variation 7**

**0:47**

**20 Variation 8**

**0:49**

**21 Variation 9**

**1:08**

**22 Variation 10**

**1:47**

**23 Aria da capo**

**1:19**

24 Invention No.12 in A major BWV 783

1:19

25 Sinfonia No.12 in A major BWV 798

1:24

Partita No.3 for Violin Solo in E major

BWV 1006

26 3. Gavotte

(Transcr. by Sergei Rachmaninov)

2:48

Prelude and Fugue in E minor BWV 855a

27 Prelude

(The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, No.10;  
transcr. to B minor by Alexander Siloti)

3:00

28 Sinfonia No.15 in B minor BWV 801

1:19

29 Invention No.15 in B minor BWV 786

1:12

Harpichord Concerto in D minor BWV 974

(After Alessandro Marcello's Oboe Concerto)

30 1. Andante

2:17

31 2. Adagio

4:10

32 3. Presto

3:31

33 Chorale Prelude BWV 639

"Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ"

(Transcr. by Ferruccio Busoni)

3:08

Fantasia and Fugue in A minor BWV 904

34 Fantasia

3:55

35 Fugue

5:14





## REFLECTIONS ON BACH *REFLECTIONS ON BACH*

*By Víkingur Ólafsson*

"Bach is a free country", a wise man said to me a long time ago, when I was a young piano student starting to look for my own way in his music. These words have stayed with me ever since. They have served as a helpful reminder when I have found myself secretly hoping for a nod of approval from a small statue of Bach which I keep by the piano - a plaster bust that looks like wisdom incarnate, stern-faced and majestic in its wig. Needless to say, the statue never budes. And that is as it should be, because my real conviction is this: I believe Bach's music is greater than any individual, any generation, any school of thought. Indeed, Bach's music is greater than Bach himself.

When you open a score of Bach's music, a paradox immediately reveals itself: the

music is incredibly rich and strikingly sparse at the same time. The musical structures are very detailed, but there are hardly any indications as to *how* you should go about shaping them in performance. Every element is up for debate: tempi, dynamics, proportions, articulation - the list goes on. We performers must weigh our knowledge of period style against our individual and inescapably contemporary sensibility; our faithfulness to what we believe to have been the composer's intention against our freedom to discover possibilities in the music that the composer could never have foreseen - some of them made available by the modern instrument. There is no single, correct solution. This is a strangely liberating realisation: with one of the greatest creators in music history,



it is simply unavoidable for the aspiring performer not to become something of a co-creator. For this reason, I love to hear how other people perform Bach's works. It seems to reveal in a particularly clear way how they listen to and think about music - not just Bach's music, but all music.

### **Bach, Our Contemporary**

Through its inherent openness, Bach's keyboard music has become something of a musical mirror for different generations of pianists in the modern age, clearly reflecting the tastes and values of each period. While some works go in and out of vogue, others enjoy a stable popularity but undergo radical changes in the way they are understood and interpreted. Bach today generally sounds quite different from Bach 30 years ago, and still more different from Bach 50 years ago. In that sense his music is contemporary rather than classical. It has the potential to feel more or less as new today as it did 300 years ago.

I have been drawn to very different schools of Bach performance at various stages in my life and have told myself more than once and more than twice that *this* is how one should play his music. I was 13 when I discovered Edwin Fischer's recordings from the 1930s and something clicked within me. What had previously seemed abstract became sensual and poetic. Soon thereafter I got to know Rosalyn Tureck's recordings from the 1950s and, fascinated by her extremely pure counterpoint, naively decided that Fischer had after all been over the top in his expression (I was wrong). Then I discovered Dinu Lipatti's serene Bach and that became my new ideal, before Glenn Gould took over my life for a year or two. Even though I often saw things differently from Gould, I felt his unique approach taught me to listen to music in a completely new way. I heard Martha Argerich's Bach album from 1980 and it opened my eyes to further dimensions. And so on. Each of these approaches has its merits, its special beauty. And, even if Bach were alive today, his interpretation



wouldn't be the truth either. Great art always transcends the artist.

### **A Kaleidoscopic View**

I have always had a tendency to think of Bach mostly in the colossal sense, as the architect behind glorious cathedrals of sound no less impressive than their counterparts of stone, wood and stained glass. It is easy to forget that the man behind the *St Matthew Passion* and the *Goldberg Variations* also excelled at telling great stories in just a minute or two of music. In the smaller keyboard works, various facets of Bach's complex character are on display. These works reveal his sense of humour, his rhetorical flair and penchant for provocation, in addition to his philosophical depth and spiritual exaltation. They display emotions ranging from mischievous lightheartedness to grief, rage and exasperation. Through them, we encounter not only Bach the composer, but also Bach the keyboard virtuoso, Bach the master of improvisation, and Bach the

meticulous teacher. Some of the works on this album could be called *études* - Bach wrote his Inventions and Sinfonias for his students, and the preludes and fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* were written to test not only the limits of the instrument in its newly improved temperament, but the virtuosity of its performers. Like the best of *études*, these compositions are also autonomous and delightful works of art, poems or short stories. This is why I love presenting them independently, rather than as parts of the large sets of works to which they belong.

### **The Ultimate Teacher**

Bach was not just a teacher to his own students. Throughout music history, discovering and studying the works of Bach for oneself has been an unofficial rite of passage for composers from Mozart to Mendelssohn, from Chopin to Stravinsky. For present-day music students, composers and performers, I think the same applies: for so many, there comes a time when

one has to face Bach, and find one's own way in his music. While Bach's works were part of my pianistic upbringing from very early on, this time came when I had just finished my studies in New York and moved to England, where I had no connections and hardly any concerts ahead. After over two decades of weekly piano lessons and the ever-intensifying pressures of performing, I suddenly found myself quite free, and without a teacher. That was when I immersed myself in the works of Bach and became a kind of student of his, at least in my mind. I found that Bach was just the teacher I needed: the kind that teaches you to be your own teacher.

This is no coincidence. For most of his life, Bach was also his own teacher, having had his formal training cut short at the age of fifteen by the death of his brother. As an autodidact, Bach still remains the gold standard. He was relentless, even as a child. Before his brother's death, Bach's earliest biographer Forkel recounts, he

would steal into his brother's study at night to copy - by moonlight - from a book of advanced music his brother had refused to lend him. A few years later he famously travelled 400 kilometres from Arnstadt to Lübeck, mostly on foot, to listen to Dietrich Buxtehude, staying for months without notifying his employers. When he finally did return to a not-so-warm welcome, he transported with him several manuscript copies of Buxtehude's music. Like all the other great composers in history, Bach learnt by copying, and continued to do so throughout his life - just as other composers have copied him ever since.

### **The Art of Borrowing**

In deciding what to record on this album, I found myself pondering the meaning of what is original and what is borrowed - copied, and sometimes augmented, reworked, transformed. I decided to include quite a few transcriptions of Bach's works in addition to original versions. Here, too, each generation has something to say. There are Busoni



and Stradal transcriptions that emphasise lush, organ-like sonorities on the piano, while Rachmaninov brought in golden-age pianism and flirted with jazzy elements in his transcription. Siloti (Rachmaninov's teacher) explored sound and texture in his, while Kempff tested the technical limits of the performer. I made my new transcription of the aria from Cantata 54, "Widerstehe doch der Sünde", to see where I would get with one of my favourite cantatas on the piano. The album also contains an example of Bach's own transcriptions: his wonderful keyboard arrangement of Marcello's Oboe Concerto (BWV 974). This concerto, previously thought to be by Marcello's fellow Venetian Vivaldi, belongs to a group of works that opened up a new world to Bach during his second Weimar period. Encountering the music of Vivaldi - and Marcello - for the first time, Bach transcribed several concertos for keyboard. This was his way of getting intimately familiar with the melodic elegance and articulation of the Italian style, absorbing elements he would later put to use in his own

*Italian Concerto* and in many other works. For Bach, as for so many others, copying paved the way for novelty.

Bach frequently borrowed from himself as well, using the same or very similar motifs in different, sometimes contrasting works. In many ways, I have put together this album by ear - allowing myself sometimes to highlight unexpected thematic familiarities and connections. One example of a family resemblance is the very first measure of the album, the playful and carefree G major Prelude, which has the same motif as the opening measure of the last work on the album, the tragic and existential A minor Fantasia and Fugue. The discerning listener will no doubt spot many other links, echoes and parallels.



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**Credits:**

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Executive Producer: Christian Badzura

Recording Producer / Tonmeister & Editing: Christopher Tarnow (GENUIN recording group)

Recording Coordinator: Malene Hill · Repertoire Coordinator: Anusch Alimirzaie

Product Manager: Marc Fritsch

Project Coordinator: Corinna Höhn

Piano Technician: Sigurður Kristinsson

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