

Bach&Italy – vol. 2

Even though a piece of music needs no translation and can be appreciated by people from all cultural backgrounds, undeniably there are specific musical idioms which developed in particular geographical and historical situations. One such idiom is that of Western Baroque music, which in turn assumed particular features – or one might say “dialects” – in different places and social contexts. Thus, to listen or to play pieces of music bearing the mark of another culture was to embark on an artistic journey, to visit the soundscape of another country, to get an insider’s knowledge about its characterising features and individual traits.

Therefore, it may be said that Johann Sebastian Bach “knew” Italy, even if he never set foot on Italian soil; his knowledge of Italian music was deep, extensive, and creative, since Italian music was for him not just an exotic idiom, but rather a cherished instrument for the expression of his own genius-like fantasy.

On the other hand, the music written by Bach represented a fundamental source of inspiration for later Italian musicians, who ceaselessly engaged with his creative ideas, in the form of editions, arrangements, transcriptions and original works.

The project “Bach&Italy”, now at its second volume, aims at exploring the dialogue between Bach and Italian culture, as revealed in the pieces he wrote under the influence of Italian models and in those written by Italian artists as a homage to Bach.

Along with the “Italian Concerto” (see “Bach&Italy”, vol. 1), the “Aria variata alla maniera italiana” BWV 989 bears a title which explicitly alludes to Italian models. The theme is a touching,

intense and moving chorale-like piece, followed by ten variations of an increasingly virtuoso style; the cycle seems to anticipate, under many viewpoints, the later “Goldberg Variations” (see “Bach&Italy”, vol. 1, in Busoni’s version). The theme of both is exquisitely simple and of admirable beauty and purity; it is repeated at the end of both cycles (identically in the case of the “Goldberg Variations”, with slight modifications in the “Aria variata”. In Busoni’s version, the “Aria da capo” of the “Goldberg Variations” is transformed into a chorale-like piece in turn). Each variation is finely crafted, with a number of surprising traits: in particular, a lively sense of humour can be observed in many of the variations on this CD, with unexpected accents, grotesque syncopations, brilliant dance-rhythms. The “Italianness” of this piece (written probably around 1709, and thus by a still young Bach) is found in its references to the great tradition of Italian keyboardists: in particular, Bach’s admiration for the organ works by Girolamo Frescobaldi is well known, though this Aria also seems to pay homage to the harpsichord works by Bernardo Pasquini. In fact, this Aria is ambiguous in its instrumental destination: the unusually wide chords and the prolonged, chorale-like sounds encourage its performance on the organ, whereas the brilliancy of its lighter passages suggests to play it on the harpsichord or clavichord. Performed on the piano, as in this recording, this Aria acquires still other qualities, which of course Bach could not imagine, but which enable it to reveal some of its hidden and fascinating potential.

In the same years which probably saw the composition of the “Aria variata”, Bach was actively engaged in studying the Italian models, particularly as concerns the form of the “concerto”. He transcribed for the harpsichord and organ several solo concertos and “concerti grossi” by Italian masters: while this process enabled him to fully master this quintessentially Italian form, it also represented a creative stimulus with important consequences for his later activity. On the one hand, in fact, while Bach manages to

completely maintain the typical traits of his Italian models, the touch of his own personality is clearly discernible (e.g. in the treatment of polyphony and counterpoint); on the other hand, the most ripe fruits of this study will be harvested in later compositions such as the Brandenburg Concertos or the solo concertos for violin or harpsichord.

In this case, as happened in the transcription from an oboe concerto by Alessandro Marcello recorded in “Bach&Italy”, vol. 1, the original violin concerto by Vivaldi (op. 3 n. 12) is transformed and yet respected by Bach: the transformation regards the increased density of the contrapuntal structure and the shrewd treatment of the solo/tutti opposition which is evoked by different timbres on the keyboard instruments; the respect is constantly shown in the lively and brisk musical textures, which preserve the typically Venetian “*joie de vivre*” found in Vivaldi’s work, and even increase it by exploiting the keyboard instrument’s own resources.

If the slow chordal passages of the “*Aria variata*” clearly alluded to a chorale-like writing, and therefore strongly suggested a spiritual and religious atmosphere, the reference to sacred music becomes explicit in the Chorale Prelude transcriptions found in the second half of this CD.

The Chorales were – and still are – the idiosyncratic form of sung prayer of the Lutheran Church; literally, a Chorale is “just” its tune (which may come from preceding Catholic models or from devotional and even secular songs), while later the term began to indicate the typical four-part harmonization (and it is in this sense that the “*Aria variata*” resembles a Chorale). However, Lutheran composers employed Chorale tunes also in a number of other musical forms (Chorale Partitas, Cantatas, and many others), including so-called Chorale Preludes: these were organ pieces performed as an introduction to congregational singing, and they

normally made use of the Chorale tune as the germinating principle of their elaboration.

Ferruccio Busoni selected ten of Bach's organ Chorale Preludes and gathered them in a collection of piano transcriptions. It can be said that Busoni epitomizes the Italian Bach-cult, since a conspicuous portion of his creative output is related, more or less closely, to Bachian models. In particular, Busoni theorized the very process of transcribing organ works for the piano: even though he drew inspiration from the transcriptions realized by Liszt and Tausig, his own style was pointedly different from that of either of them, and constituted a reference point for several later epigones.

Among the Ten Chorale Preludes selected by Busoni, some are very commonly performed (particularly "Wachet auf", of which two versions by Bach survive, one as an organ prelude and one as a Chorale elaboration in the eponymous Cantata BWV 140; "Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland" and "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ"), while others are relatively less known. A variety of pianistic techniques, moods and styles is found in this collection, ranging from the extreme virtuosity and brilliance of "Nun freut euch" to the powerful sonorities of "Komm, Gott Schöpfer", from the intense pathos of "Ich ruf zu dir" to the joyful explosion of "In dir ist Freude".

Indeed, "In dir ist Freude" is a further link between Bach and Italy, since the Lutheran Chorale on which it is based comes from an Italian model, "A lieta vita", a secular song by the sixteenth-century composer Gian Giacomo Gastoldi. On the other hand, the influence of the stile severo liturgical models of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina's Catholic polyphony is clearly observable in the Fugue on "Durch Adams Fall": Bach would intensely study the Italian Palestrina's works until the very last years of his life, and particularly when he was composing the B-minor Mass.

The Chorale tune found in the first of Busoni's Preludes, "Komm, Gott Schöpfer", is in turn derived from a Catholic model, the Pentecost sequence "Veni Creator Spiritus"; thus, it is possible to surmise that Italian composers felt a particular interest in Bach's elaborations of Gregorian tunes which were part of their own musical heritage. This might explain the reason why Luigi Perrachio also wished to engage with this same model, even though Busoni had already created a convincing piano transcription. By comparing the two versions, both recorded on this CD, the differences between the two composers' styles are immediately evident: Busoni favours an extremely virtuoso style, with full sonorities and constant octave doublings, whereas Perrachio chooses a lighter and more luminous approach, possibly mirroring the particular brightness of the feast of Pentecost. In general, Perrachio's transcriptions are technically less demanding than Busoni's and the sound is more intimate (and notwithstanding the fact that Busoni's transcriptions are labelled, somewhat ironically, "in the chamber style"). In spite of this (or precisely by virtue of this), Perrachio's Chorale Preludes are extremely interesting, with a fascinating blend of thick chordal textures and lighter embellishments.

Both Busoni's and Perrachio's transcriptions sound particularly well on the Borgato grand piano used in this recording: this hand-made instrument, with its extremely large size which creates truly organ-like resonances, and with its "split pedal" (which allows the pianist to selectively choose which part of the keyboard should be undampened) is the perfect piano for transferring the organ's magniloquence on a keyboard-only instrument.