

TIDBITS: 29th June 2008

1. Mozart Quartet in C, K157

Late in October 1772 the Mozarts (just Wolfgang and his dad Leopold) set off from Salzburg for Milan. The Milan opera house wanted another opera from the boy-wonder. Although Wolfgang was only 16 this was his 3rd trip to Italy. On the way they spent a night in the town of Botzen. Wolfgang wrote:

To my sister in Salzburg, 28/10/1772

We are now already in Botzen. Already? Only! I'm hungry, I'm thirsty, I'm sleepy, I'm lazy, but I am well. Here is a poem of someone who was totally fed up with Botzen and is angry:

*Before I come back to this Botzen place
I'd rather smack myself in the face.*

Botzen is a shit-hole.

What does one do as a bored teenager? Well in Botzen it rained heavily, and Leopold wrote that Wolfgang "out of sheer boredom" wrote a string quartet ... we're not sure which one it was, but it may just have been this one.

2. Bach Sonata for Solo Violin in A minor (Andante & Allegro)

Bach composed his 6 works for solo violin in 1720, while employed at the court of Cöthen. Here Bach enjoyed great artistic freedom, having no need to write full programmes of church music week by week. He also enjoyed a good salary - twice that of his predecessor. Just occasionally musicians get well paid! This security, and the feeling therefore of being highly valued, contributed to the freedom that enabled him compose much wonderful instrumental music. This included the cello suites, the Brandenburg concertos, violin/harpsichord sonatas, the violin concertos, the French and English Suites, many smaller works for chamber ensemble and students - and the remarkable set of unaccompanied pieces for violin.

It is a puzzle as to who Bach intended to play these works, which still tax the skill of the violinists today. Spiess, leader of the Cöthen orchestra, was an excellent player and a good candidate, as were Pisendel and Volumier at the Dresden Court. But, just perhaps, Bach wrote these for himself. According to his son Carl Phillip Emanuel: "in his youth, and until the approach of old age, he played the violin cleanly and powerfully".

3. Mozart Duo for Violin and Viola, K423

Mozart was a former colleague of Michael Haydn (brother to the more famous Joseph Haydn) at the court of the Archbishop of Salzburg, and greatly admired his music. Mozart, on a visit to Salzburg in 1783, found Haydn unwell and unable to complete a commission from the Archbishop for a set of six violin and viola duos.

"Mozart sat down and wrote for his afflicted friend with such indefatigable industry that the Duets were finished in a few days, and were given out under Michael Haydn's name. In later times we have often delighted ourselves with these marvellous works of charity, the original of which our master preserved as a sacred relic."

Scholars have argued this way and that, but no-one seems quite sure if this is true or not! Good story though ...

As a keen viola player himself, Mozart naturally gave that instrument a more equal share in the texture, releasing it from the role of accompanying the violin.

Stoke up the fire, pop on your slippers, for this is simply delightful music by Mozart at his most relaxed.

4. Contrapunctus I from The Art of Fugue

Bach's The Art of Fugue consists of 14 works based on the same theme. In no 14 Bach introduced these notes **Bb – A – C – B**, which in German is B – A – C – H. But in the (apparently) final movement the music breaks off abruptly before it has finished and we see the following words in Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach's hand: "At the point where the composer introduces the name *BACH* in the countersubject to this fugue, the composer died."

Nice story ... though, for various reasons, undoubtedly untrue this time! Quite why Bach didn't finish the piece has kept several musicologists in work, but of course no-one really knows! Except me!! (not really, just kidding).

You might be wondering what a fugue is. Fugue is a style of composition where the theme is played on its own at the start, then each other part enters playing the theme until everyone is playing.

In The Art of Fugue Bach begins in this way and then weaves his extraordinary magic around variants of this tune and other fragments which fit with the tune. In some of the pieces it becomes extremely complicated, with more than one fugue going on at once, and with mirror fugues where the music can be played inverted – it's a real tour-de-musical-composition-force. This might sound a little dry and intellectual, and indeed some people see the music that way – more as music to be studied than played. But this definitely was music that was intended to be played (probably by an organ or harpsichord originally). Of course it's quite possible to play it in a dull and academic manner. But for me the genius of the music is the effect of beautifully interwoven lines creating a different feel in each piece, with the incredible compositional skill holding it together. If you feel this music to be dull go on the internet to You Tube and watch Glen Gould playing this first Contrapunctus. It's one of the most extraordinary and moving musical performances I have ever, ever seen.

5. Contrapunctus II from The Art of Fugue

6. Mozart Palindrome Duo

Talking about inverting music ... here's a fun piece by Mozart which works both way up! One performer plays looking at the music from one side and another performer faces the first and so plays the music the other way up!

7. Bach 3 Three-Part Inventions

Again we're going to play some of Bach's keyboard music. A collection of 32 short keyboard compositions was called Inventions and Sinfonias, or Two and Three Part Inventions which Bach wrote as exercises for his students. He called them:

"A faithful Guide, whereby admirers of the harpsichord are shown a plain Method of learning not only to play clean in two Parts, but likewise in further Progress to manage three Parts well and correctly; but above all, to obtain a singing Style of playing, and together with this to get a strong Foretaste of Composition."

By the way, the 2 Two and Three Part bit indicates the number of parts playing at any one time ... 1, 2, 3, 4 ... well I guess one of us will get some time off now and again!

8. Mozart String Quartet in Bb, K172

After the 5 month trip to Milan I spoke about earlier the Mozarts had a 4 month gap. They then headed for Vienna. Here the 17 year old Wolfgang renewed his knowledge of Viennese music, especially the string quartets of the 41 year old Joseph Haydn, whom he greatly admired. This bore fruit in 6 quartets, which he wrote in quick succession, one of which we will play you to finish our concert.

WeddingSheetMusic.com gives this piece a difficulty of 7 out of 9 ... I think I should have chosen something a little easier!!