

dissertations

Beth Anna Mekota—*The Solo and Ensemble Keyboard Works of Johann Christian Bach*

Ann Arbor: University Microfilms (UM order no. 69-18,059, 1969. 309 pp., University of Michigan diss.)

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For many years the music of Johann Christian Bach, the youngest and favorite son of Johann Sebastian Bach, was eclipsed not only by the fame of his father and his contemporaries Mozart and Haydn but also by the renown of his two older half-brothers, Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann. The dissertation of Beth Anna Mekota on "The Solo and Ensemble Keyboard Works of Johann Christian Bach" now gives evidence of increased interest in and knowledge of this composer's music. In addition to the 1967 second edition of Charles Sanford Terry's biography, with corrigenda and foreword by H. C. Robbins Landon,¹ a dissertation on J. C. Bach's liturgical choral works was completed in 1969, and dissertations on his chamber music and his late keyboard concertos are now in progress.²

At the outset of her dissertation Dr. Mekota describes Johann Christian as the "most adventurous" and "cosmopolitan" of the eleven Bach sons, as well as "perhaps the most talented" (p. 1), and many other modern scholars of 18th-century Classicism support her viewpoint. H. C. Robbins Landon maintains that while C. P. E. and W. F. "occasionally had bursts of fantasy, even genius . . . on the whole it is Johann Christian who is the better balanced composer."³ In material prepared for the *New Oxford History of Music*, Jan LaRue ranks him as "England's greatest symphonist" and puts him "in the select company of those who at times equalled Haydn and Mozart."⁴

Dr. Mekota's dissertation, organized into six main divisions (plus a conclusion, two appendices, and a bibliography), presents biographical information (chapter 1), a survey of the solo and ensemble keyboard literature (chapter 2), and detailed analyses of the music (chapters 3 through 6). Her primary purpose, as noted in the preface, is a stylistic examination of the music.

An investigation of the first two chapters affords us a look at Dr. Mekota's treatment of secondary sources. She acknowledges her debt to Charles Sanford Terry's *John Christian Bach*⁵ "for the greater portion of the material in Chapter I" (p. ii). Indeed, the forty-six pages of text represent essentially a summary of Terry's 169-page biographical section—and it seems a questionable practice to base approximately one-fifth of a dissertation on a readily available English source.

Throughout chapter 1 Dr. Mekota consistently cites the first rather than

the second edition of Terry's biography (both appear in the bibliography). For the most part, this presents no problem, since the text of the second edition remains unaltered except for the addition of a foreword and corrigenda by Robbins Landon. At one point, however, Dr. Mekota's information seems to be at variance with Terry's text. Without direct reference to her sources, she states that "in 1754, after four years in Berlin, Johann Christian departed for Italy. The date of his departure, the manner in which he traveled and the purpose of his trip are unknown" (p. 6). Terry, on the other hand, offers considerations pointing to 1756 as a possible departure date rather than 1754 and furnishes a romantic motive for the later date.⁶ We can only conjecture then that Dr. Mekota's source was Landon's corrigenda to the second edition in which he summarizes Heinrich Miesner's arguments for a 1754 departure date (pp. xxiv–xxv). Miesner's viewpoint originally appeared in a review in 1934 of the first edition (not included in Dr. Mekota's bibliography), consisting of seven pages of additions and corrections.⁷

In chapter 2 under the heading of "Bach's Performance Media," Dr. Mekota discusses the accompanied keyboard sonata, the most numerous species of published Classic sonatas. For those attempting to use the dissertation as a guide for further research into this major genre of the 18th-century, Dr. Mekota offers little help. Although the literature is meagre, a starting point is William S. Newman's article "Concerning the Accompanied Clavier Sonata,"⁸ as well as two sections in his *The Sonata in the Classic Era*⁹ (pp. 98–105 deal with the genre in general, pp. 703–11, with the works of J. C. Bach in particular). Dr. Mekota cites pages 91 and 683 of the latter work (which make only passing references to the accompanied keyboard sonata) but neglects the two other more important sections. The accompanied keyboard sonata originated in the 18th century but soon declined when the great Classic composers started writing piano and violin sonatas in which each instrument was on an equal footing. In chapter 2 Dr. Mekota might have dealt with the origins of the form, as well as the question of why the violin remained subservient to the clavier for at least half a century, even though it had dominated during the basso continuo era.

According to Dr. Mekota, Bach composed forty-four duos for keyboard and accompanying instrument. However, the seven duos of the Italian period do not qualify as true accompanied keyboard sonatas (Newman includes them in his list of Bach's works of this genre),¹⁰ because the musical materials allotted each instrument are so interlocked "that unlike its usual role in an 'accompanied sonata,' the violin here becomes an indispensable voice in the ensemble" (p. 106). The one sonata of this group that Dr. Mekota includes in the appendix tends to confirm her viewpoint, though not unequivocally. Although the violin shows an independence unusual for accompanied keyboard sonatas, the two parts are not truly equal.

In chapter 5 Dr. Mekota discusses in some detail the ways in which the optional instrument accompanies the clavier in thirty-four sonatas (employing either violin or flute) dating from the London years. She points out that

these duos were intended for wealthy dilettantes in the upper strata of society. For background material in this chapter she might have included the fact that C. P. E. Bach (with whom Christian studied for at least four years) published two sets of accompanied sonatas by subscription in 1776 and 1777 (W. 90/1-3 and 91/1-4). In a letter of 25 September 1775, C. P. E. wrote that the violin and cello parts could be left out of these seven "easy" sonatas.¹¹

Chapters 3 to 5 include a stylistic study of Bach's solo and ensemble keyboard works composed in Berlin (before 1754), Italy (1754-62), and London (1762-82). Each chapter is divided into sections on form, harmony, texture, melody, and rhythm. In the discussions covering form Dr. Mekota's principal point is that "the emerging sonata form can be traced in the course of Bach's keyboard composition" (unpaginated abstract preceding dissertation). Among transitional figures between the Baroque and Classic eras, Bach played a major role in the evolution of this form, as well as of the early Classic style in general.

Dr. Mekota describes the Berlin works as being "for the most part binary in form." Some, however, "contain two tonal areas and hint at bi-thematicism, thus foreshadowing later sonata form" (Abstract). She attempts to fit the majority of the first movements of the Italian and London works into a "textbook" sonata, a variant of the "textbook" type, and a "classic" sonata. The "textbook" sonata she describes in part as having an exposition containing "two contrasting themes or groups of themes in two strongly established tonal areas" and the "classic" sonata as one in which "themes may not contrast sharply, but tonal areas are well-established" (p. 93). Although the author appears to derive her terminology from Leonard Ratner's article "Harmonic Aspects of Classic Form,"¹² she has somewhat diluted his emphasis on tonal contrast as the basic criterion. Ratner disagrees with what he terms the typical "textbook analysis" used by theorists during the past century, in which they "regarded classic sonata form as being constituted from two principal themes." He proceeds to give convincing arguments that "bi-thematicism, thematic contrast, and well-defined areas of statement and development are not valid as basic formal criteria" (p. 160). Buttressed by quotations from Classical theorists, he shows that sonata form is essentially a structure based on key areas. Dr. Mekota herself states that many of the London keyboard works that she has classified as sonatas are at variance "with one or more aspects of sonata structure" as she describes it (p. 133).

Her discussions of melody, texture, rhythm, and harmony do not always maintain equal depths of critical analysis. The sections on texture, however, contain many valuable observations. For example, she maintains that "texture in Bach's music serves primarily to delineate form. Each new musical thought, whether it be a principal theme or subordinate idea, is usually set forth in a sonority that contrasts with its surroundings" (p. 229). Her harmonic analyses are also extremely thorough, covering such items as harmonic relationships among movements, modulatory procedures, cadential

formulas, harmonic rhythm, use of pedal tones, and harmonic vocabulary. She makes the useful comment that, although consistent within a given movement, the harmonic rhythm of the Berlin period is “highly variable.” In the Italian and London compositions the harmonic rhythm is more controlled, and changes often coincide with new structural subdivisions (p. 227).

On the other hand, her discussion of rhythm is incomplete. Here a point could be made for including harmonic rhythm under the sections on rhythm—especially since there is so little material on the subject. In fact, rhythm is not discussed for the Berlin works. One might note, for example, that the relatively undifferentiated rhythmic style of the Berlin compositions shows the influence of C. P. E. Bach and the Baroque background. Under the Italian works we find remarks such as: “Most of the rhythmic patterns . . . offer little that is distinctive for their time. Melodies rarely involve any figure more complicated than that of a dotted eighth and sixteenth” (p. 112). Yet without resorting to complex patterns, Bach is among the first to give rhythmic profile to the phrase.

A seeming contradiction also arises in Dr. Mekota’s discussion of Bach’s melodic structure; she points out that Bach is commonly considered to be “one of the first composers to place emphasis on contrast within a composition” (p. 229). At the same time, however, she concludes that “[his] melodies, although graceful and pleasing, are not often distinctive” (Abstract).

In appendix 1 under the chronological listing of works written in London between 1762–81, we see *Sonata* [in F], which comes from a collection of “Six Sonatas for the Piano-Forte composed by Bach, Benda, Gzaun [sic], Wageneil [sic], Hasse & Kernberger [sic]. London: Harrison, Cluse & Co., [1799]” (material in brackets added by Dr. Mekota). Apparently the names of the composers appear only on the last three sonatas of the collection. According to Dr. Mekota, “since these last three sonatas are by the last three above-named composers in the order in which they occur on the title page, it seems reasonable to assume a direct correspondence between the first three sonatas and the first three names on the title page” (p. 239). Most researchers in 18th-century music will find this a risky assumption, and the gross spelling errors in the title page scarcely inspire confidence.

Backtracking through the dissertation in search of fuller information, we find on page 50 that Dr. Mekota actually feels—contrary to the *British-Union Catalogue*¹³—that the sonata was probably composed by C. P. E. Bach, since the other five composers appearing on the title page were men whom C. P. E. had known at the court of Frederick the Great. It is surprising to read, therefore, that “because of the uncertain attribution the sonata has been included in the study” (p. 50). Here the author might well have attempted to determine the correct composer by means of stylistic analysis, a resource entirely absent in her discussions of authenticity.

Turning to appendix 2, we find four compositions transcribed into modern

edition. The inclusion of these works is particularly valuable, since they exist only in manuscript or 18th-century editions and represent the three major periods of Bach's output.

One of the accomplishments of the dissertation is a chronology for the sonatas that places them in either the Berlin, Italian, or London periods. Also valuable is the charting of the evolution that occurred in Bach's style during these years, supported by well-chosen examples.

The most obvious unsolved problem of the dissertation is its lack of a critical musical evaluation of Bach's solo and ensemble keyboard works. Dr. Mekota's concluding statement—" . . . his compositional technique generally reflects practices current in his lifetime"—tells us little about his significance and contributions to the 18th century. The question of how his solo and ensemble keyboard works differ from those of, for example, his brother C. P. E. Bach, or numerous other contemporaries, remains unanswered. J. C. Bach's influence over Mozart receives only passing mention. Dr. Mekota notes that Mozart constructed concertos from Christian's Op. 5 sonatas at the age of nine, but we miss any reference to Edwin J. Simon's important article on the subject, "Sonata into Concerto: A Study of Mozart's First Seven Concertos."¹⁴ She might also have mentioned Mozart's letters in which he recommends Bach's sonatas to his sister in 1774 and speaks of using them for teaching purposes in Mannheim in 1778.¹⁵

For one evaluation of J. C. Bach's music, we can turn to Jan LaRue, who points out that Bach's evolution of formulas as early as 1770 "to relate and control the heterogeneous elements of a new style was in itself a novel and notable accomplishment."¹⁶ Professor LaRue goes on to say that one of the composer's most important contributions lay in his coordination of all the elements "to a common task of expression," thus resembling and influencing Mozart.¹⁷ In addition to Bach's thematic contrast (Burney was the first to comment on this), he broadened the internal structures of the themes themselves by expanding their building blocks or modules. In opening themes in particular he "perfected a compound structure of fanfare balanced by a contrasting response."¹⁸

It is hoped that future work on Johann Christian Bach and his solo and ensemble keyboard works, some of it perhaps to be carried out by Dr. Mekota herself, will broaden and deepen our understanding of his music along stylistic-analytical lines.

NOTES

¹ Charles Sanford Terry, *Johann Christian Bach*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967).

² Following is a list of Ph.D. dissertations, both completed and in progress: Edward O. D. Downes, "The Operas of J. C. Bach as a Reflection of the Dominant Trends in Opera Seria, 1750-1780" (Harvard University, 1958); Marie A. H. Vos, "The Liturgical Choral Works of Johann Christian Bach" (Washington University, 1969); Joseph A. White, Jr., "The Concerted Symphonies of Johann Christian Bach" (University of Michigan, 1958);

Delores J. Keahey, "The Chamber Music of Johann Christian Bach" (University of Texas); Oscar D. Yancey, Jr., "A Study of Style and Form in the Late Keyboard Concerti of Johann Christian Bach" (Indiana University).

³ Terry, *Bach*, p. xxiii.

⁴ "The Early Symphony," *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. 7 (in press).

⁵ London: Oxford University Press, 1929.

⁶ Terry, *Bach*, p. 13.

⁷ *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 15 (1934): 182–88.

⁸ *The Musical Quarterly* 33 (1947): 327–49.

⁹ Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963.

¹⁰ *The Sonata in the Classic Era*, pp. 704–05.

¹¹ Carl Hermann Bitter, *Carl Philipp Emanuel und Wilhelm Friedemann Bach und deren Brüder*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Wilhelm Müller, 1868), pp. 209–10, as cited by Newman in *The Sonata*, p. 102.

¹² *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 2 (1949): 159–68.

¹³ *The British Union-Catalogue of Early Music Printed before the Year 1801*, vol. 2, ed. Edith B. Schnapper (London: Butterworths Scientific Publications, 1957), p. 964.

¹⁴ *Acta musicologica* 31 (1959): 170–84.

¹⁵ *The Letters of Mozart and His Family*, ed. and trans. Emily Anderson (London: Macmillan, 1938), vol. 1, p. 364, and vol. 2, p. 711.

¹⁶ LaRue, "The Early Symphony."

¹⁷ LaRue, "Concerto," *New Oxford History of Music*, vol. 7 (in press): see also his *Guidelines for Style Analysis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1970), pp. 142–43.

¹⁸ LaRue, "The Early Symphony."