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C. P. E. BACH SONGS WITH CLAVICHORD

A Conversation with Norbert Meyn and Terence Charlston

C. P. E. Bach wrote over 250 songs, the great majority to devotional texts; although popular in their day, they have been little known and rarely performed in modern times. Among them are two important published collections, Geistliche Oden und Lieder mit Melodien, to words by C. F. Gellert (Berlin, 1758; Wq. 194, H.686), and Sturms geistliche Gesänge mit Melodien, to words by Christian Carl Sturm (Hamburg, 1780–1; Wq. 197/8, H.749 and 752). These two collections are among the first to include fully written-out keyboard accompaniments rather than figured basses.

On 28 July 2012 Norbert Meyn (tenor) and Terence Charlston (clavichord) performed a selection of the Gellert and Sturm songs in the Lady Chapel of St Peter's Church, Berkhamsted.¹ This recital was presented under the aegis of the Cowper Society with financial support from the BCS. It followed a presentation by the same artists at the Royal College of Music in September 2011 (reported in BCSN 51), and formed part of their preparation for a recording, which has now taken place.

Norbert and Terence here discuss the project with Peter Bavington.

PB: I thought we could start with the repertoire. How long have you known these songs?

*NM: Very early in my studies as a singer, I started to screen the song repertoire for things that I would like. That often meant going back in time and looking at eighteenth-century song. I've always been very much interested in language, in poetry, in the physicality and musicality of language, and these early *Lieder* were in a very similar idiom to what I was looking for. For me the earliest encounter [with the songs of C. P. E. Bach] was with the Peters edition.² I felt incredibly attracted to the melodic nature and the harmonic progression in the songs, and also the expressiveness of the *Empfindsamkeit* style, which goes with expressive declamation. So I then looked at the Sturm and Gellert songs in more detail: I went to the British Library and looked at the original published collections, which are available there, and made photocopies from them.*

PB: You were showing me the Peters edition. This includes just a selection of the songs, and one of the problems with it is that only some of the verses of each song are included. I wonder if you feel that there was a progression – there's twenty years or so between the Gellert Odes and the songs by Sturm. Is there a development in the style? Is there more freedom in the accompaniment? Something different about the melody?

NM: It's a very interesting question. I think the Gellert songs were such a success, and they were so popular for so long, that I think the style isn't dramatically different with the Sturm songs. Really, it is more the poetry

than the music that was considered: even when the Sturm songs were published, it was still the poetry that was the main thing for C. P. E. Bach. If you read the Preface to the Gellert Odes, it's being so moved and so impressed by the content and the quality of the poetry that made him set *every single poem* from the collection that Gellert had published the previous year. And I think that with the Sturm it's a similar story.

PB: Am I right in thinking that Sturm was influenced by the cult of 'naturalness', and was actually slightly disappointed with the settings – or at least, he said 'They're very beautiful, but I had in mind something simpler'?

NM: Well, I think that goes along with the general aesthetics of German song in the eighteenth century. There was this ideal that song should have a relationship to the folk heritage, and so be approachable to anybody. At the same time it should be refined: the melody was meant to be very subtle, and to fit the general atmosphere of the poetry. These ideas were widely spread.

PB: There's a bit of tension, isn't there, between a melody that is artful and expressive, and a melody that is related to folk song, is simple, natural, and useable by people without necessarily having a musical training. This brings me on to ask, how do you think these songs were used? I understand the Gellert songs were very, very popular, and were reprinted five times. How were they actually used? Were they mostly sung at home?

NM: Yes, I would think so. It's so interesting because there's also a tension between the aesthetic ideal that C. P. E. Bach must have been faced with, and the worship of him as an *Originalgenie* which had developed. He was certainly one of the most popular musicians in Germany at the time, and there was a newly emerged way of celebrating a composer as this 'inspired genius'. I think for him it must have been difficult to please both camps, and I think that's why the songs have a more elaborate and more artful nature than perhaps the songs of other contemporary composers such as J. F. Reichardt, who were trying to stick more directly to this aesthetic ideal.

TC: It's worth saying that some of the Sturm songs musically seem to move backwards in time in terms of the aesthetic of their settings; so if you take the example of *Jesus in Gethsemane*, to my mind that's a very harsh, chromatic, almost seventeenth-century, Sebastian-Bachian setting of the text, and I think it must have come as quite a shock to Sturm to be confronted with this piece, which is a really a sort of slowed-down version of the opening chorus of the St John Passion. It couldn't be further from the *Empfindsamkeit* style, actually, and so I think it must have been a huge shock. It's very tricky to play, of course, and it's extremely intense, possibly one might say *Sturm und Drang*. Then you can pick other songs, such as

Der Frühling which is the exact opposite; it's a perfect example of the *Empfindsamkeit* style, with a beautiful melodic line, perfectly shaped, giving a lie to the idea that C. P. E. Bach couldn't write a memorable melody.

PB: I'm interested in what led you to think of the clavichord as a possible accompaniment medium.

NM: Well, for me that goes back to the journey that I've had with these songs. About seven or eight years ago when I did my research in the British Library, I tried with a friend who is a very good song accompanist and pianist – winner of the Wigmore Hall competition, and a very wonderful pianist actually – but somehow we couldn't get this to work. It just felt wrong, the way the instrument projected, the way the phrases would turn out, and also the fact that it has a certain heaviness about it. If you hear a J. S. Bach fugue played on the modern piano, there is a certain steadiness, and the architecture of the piece comes out so well. But with these songs, the melody *leading* the performance, which is a consequence of using the modern piano, just somehow did not really make it possible for me to sing the texts with the necessary variation of colour, and the subtlety that I felt was there. And then I heard Fischer-Dieskau's recording with a *tangentenflügel*, which is a similar sound to a fortepiano.³ It was done at incredibly slow tempi, and it was a sort of celebratory way of producing the songs, and of course he only chose one or two verses of each song; so we do get the beauty of the music, and we do get the wonderfully produced vocal line, but what we *don't* get is the actual story of the poem.

PB: He's undermining the primacy of the text, which was part of the essence of the songs.

TC: And if you use a piano, that undermines it even further. It's simply a question of aural space, isn't it? If you have a big black piano, then there isn't room to declaim the songs without the full voice; it makes this aural space which you then have to *force* your way into. I think with these songs, the clavichord gives Norbert a much harder challenge, really, because there's so much space, aurally, for him to occupy. Or, to put it in another way, because you can come down to such a tiny level, the task is much harder; it's not about invading the space, it's as if the space is too big, and you have to actually take the interpretation to the size of space that's then generated.

PB: You had to work, I think, at vocal technique, in order to sing with the clavichord?

NM: That was also a journey. I remember the first time I tried it was with David Ward, a friend of both of us who is now a retired professor of fortepiano. He had a clavichord, and we chose to do three songs in a house

concert with about thirty people, and it was so quiet that we really didn't know if people could hear it. And I didn't really then yet dare to adjust my way of singing to the extent that I eventually did. The feedback was good, but I still think it was only after a quite long interval working on the songs with Terry that we reached the point where Terry said 'This is the way you should do this'. Of course being a tenor, we're trained to project, and to especially project the top of the voice, and with this particular repertoire that kills it, it really does. So after experimenting I started to feel 'Now I can really bring the colours of the text to life', and it means that the top is sung in a very gentle, very soft way, in a head voice, that is quite easily accessible once one dares to do that.

TC: I think we both agree that [originally] the songs wouldn't have been done like this: they wouldn't have been performed to an audience with the two of us, they wouldn't have been recorded; they were an internal, private experience. And for the keyboardist it's fascinating, because of course you play the music, but you also have the text to reflect upon or to internalize, or possibly even to sing in your own fashion as you perform the music; so each verse of the song will have a different sentiment or a different colour or a different expression or a different dynamic or whatever. C. P. E. Bach's music is notoriously difficult to interpret, so here I perceive a very useful tool to understand the aesthetic, or perhaps how C. P. E. Bach and a lot of other musicians in the eighteenth century understood their music, understood the phrases, the way they put the notes together, the choice of harmonies; and that's really valuable.

Another of the debates we had was, what do we do with the written text of the music? We've got the keyboard part, which has the melody part integral; so when we perform it, do we play that part, do we play the other parts, do we produce a continuo realization, do we do a combination of all those things? And, similarly, what does Norbert do about ornamentation? The big revelation for me was when Norbert read out the passage in Agricola where he gives four reasons about why one should ornament. These are so important for clavichordists, listen:

NM [freely translating from Johann Friedrich Agricola's *Anleitung zur Singkunst* (1757)]: The first [reason for ornamenting] is *to connect the syllables in the singing better with each other*. Especially with the appoggiaturas, I think it's really easy to connect the words in the line better. And the second one is *to fill out something that seems empty within the movement of the song*. The third reason, *to make the harmony even richer, and more manifold*.

PB: That is interesting, isn't it: it almost implies adding a different note somewhere.

The opening of *Prüfung am Abend*, from the original 1758 edition. The song is presented on two staves, with the words between them; the top line is sung. The German text is *Der Tag ist wieder hin, und diesen Theil des lebens* (The day has passed again, and this part of my life ...)

TC: A different pitch.

NM: And the fourth one, *to give more liveliness and 'shimmer' to the singing*.

TC: What's the German word, 'shimmer'? What's the original?

NM: It is '*Schimmer*' [it could perhaps be translated 'sparkle'- Ed.].

TC: That seems to me completely fascinating, because of the whole debate about what keyboard touch is in the eighteenth century, for example the extent to which Beethoven played a very special legato which was aurally different from the one that Mozart used. So this whole idea of what 'connecting the notes' means, and what the articulated and legato styles are, is very interesting, because we gain new terminology to discuss it. And this whole business of what he means by 'filling empty places': is he talking about a rhythmic aspect? Is he talking about actually filling rests and spaces? So that's a teaser. And then, this whole business of liveliness, and this wonderful word *Schimmer* - 'more *Schimmer* in your playing, please!' - that's one of the things I've thought about over the last two months quite a lot. So, in a way, it's giving an extra dimension: I'm beginning to understand what vocal style can bring to keyboard playing, but of course all the time being aware that this music isn't *just* vocal music, it isn't *just* keyboard music, it's also very devotional music, it's keyboard music with words - or is it words transported, the vehicle of which is the music? So it's just wonderfully 'manifold', to use Agricola's word.

NM: The introduction of the Gellert songs, of course, states explicitly that they are meant to be used as *Handstücke*, in other words as just keyboard pieces, as well as accompaniments to the voice.

PB: So you can play them, and as it were *think* the text?

TC: Yes.

PB: Using the text as a guide to the way you're going to play. One of the things [Agricola] *doesn't* say is that you use ornamentation as a way to differentiate the stanzas. In some of the songs there are many, many stanzas, aren't there? I wonder what you felt about that. I was very impressed at Berkhamsted with that very long song, *Prüfung am Abend*, one of the Gellert songs. Despite – I think it's fourteen verses –

NM: It is ten.

PB: Ten verses. Well, it seemed a large number of verses if you counted them, but I was very impressed with the cumulative effect, and also by a certain amount of variety that you achieved in the delivery. In the recording, am I right in thinking that you've decided not to abbreviate the songs, but to complete every song with all the stanzas?

TC: Only that song, in fact, is *very* long. There is great subtlety between the imagery of each verse: each verse leads very beautifully on to the next. It's not about contrast, it's about reinforcement, or going deeper into oneself; so it seems logical in that piece to perform the whole. The other [songs in the recording] happen to have slightly fewer verses.

NM: Six or seven verses. We did make the choice – certainly, in the beginning, a rather frightening choice for me – to go along with singing all the verses, and so we tried to steer clear of the ones with *twenty* verses [laughter]. There's very little, actually, in terms of ornamentation that is necessary to make the differentiation between the first and later verses more poignant. It is actually the colour, the taste for words, and then perhaps the dramatic context in which they are uttered which gives the variety. Having said that, I think there were a few moments where I decided to put an ornament on a certain word, just because I thought it would highlight the special choice of this word even more.

TC: There are some omissions as well, aren't there? There are some embellishments that are so peculiar to C. P. E. Bach's keyboard technique, and virtually nobody else's, and so unnatural perhaps to vocal style, that it felt right to omit them in favour of the simplicity of the melodic line. I can imagine Gellert and Sturm thinking, 'Quite right, a bit more line here' [laughter].

PB: Yes, there's obviously some scope for interpreting the top line in various ways, and the whole point is to interpret it in the light of the text.

TC: You might be interested to know that I came up with five different accompaniment types, which we explored in the concert and on the recording:

[1] It works perfectly well just to play what's there; play as written.

[2] There are quite a lot of three-part pieces, and there I often would play the lower two voices and leave the melody on its own for the voice.

[3] There are some songs where a continuo-style accompaniment seemed appropriate, so just playing the bass, and filling in the harmonies in a more improvisatory way: basically the through-bass style.

[4] Sometimes I felt it necessary to thicken the texture of what was written, particularly in the left hand, to reinforce it.

[5] And then, of course, some of the time one would take a composite of the previous four and run them all together. Some of the songs do have extreme contrasts in them, so you would have a different technique used between the verses, whereas the song we mentioned before, *Prüfung*, is a continuous sentiment, so I think I just played the whole thing in exactly the same way, more or less, and in the same spirit, for all ten verses.

The recording also includes a performance of the paraphrase of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be?' soliloquy which the poet Heinrich Wilhelm von Gerstenberg wrote to accompany C. P. E. Bach's C minor Fantasia (Wq. 63/6, H.75, last movement).

PB: Do you want to say anything about the Gerstenberg Hamlet? Sometimes it's done as a melodrama, with a spoken voice, and sometimes it's done with a singing voice.

TC: C. P. E. Bach didn't approve of the Gerstenberg Hamlet. The piece was not conceived with that particular interpretation in mind, and C. P. E. Bach is pretty keen, from what I understand, to demonstrate that the music stands on its own and doesn't need this support. But we thought it would be interesting to perform the piece because of this very issue. What do you do with it? Do you really sing it out? Do you, as you say, have it as a melodrama, or as some sort of Schoenbergian *Sprechgesang*? [laughter] And it seemed really logical and it felt right to come out of the religious songs, and to see this as a rather internalized response to a complex piece. It's purely an experiment, and it's an unperformable concept in a way, but it's wonderful to attempt to realize that very complex, difficult piece, there at the very end of the *Probestücke*, set as the *pinnacle* of what you can try to do. A piece of extraordinary contrasts: it has that middle section that's actually very witty, quite funny in many respects, with this wonderful *Empfindsamkeit* phrasing, chords of however many fingers you've got, extremes

of pianissimo and fortissimo, and little appoggiaturas and breaks in the line; and then you've got this other material which is a million miles away from the central section, so it adds to all this to interpret it through the text; it just adds to this great range of contrasts.

NM: It comes with this whole aesthetical debate at the time, this new dimension of music being programmatic. I think there were different camps: there were people who thought that [music] is purely an abstract pursuit, and others who foresaw [the possibility] of symphonic poems, and I think that when Gerstenberg wrote that text he just wanted to put some meat on the bone of that debate. He did very sensitively feel where the movements in the melody were, where the words could sit; he used the idea of Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' monologue, but his text is completely tailored to the music: it deviates, it's almost unrecognizable [as a translation of Shakespeare].

TC: In that way it analyses and interprets the piece.

PB: This was originally, I think, a research project, wasn't it? But it is planned to issue an actual CD?

NM: Well, the state of play is that the CD is being mastered now, and it'll be very interesting to see what people's reactions will be. To our knowledge, there hasn't been a complete recording of these songs with a clavichord that is professionally produced, and it's going to be very interesting to see if there is a record label who might like to take that on.

TC: It's been done archivally, as a sort of demonstration. But we would like to see it made available to people in CD form or as a download.

NM: We will be very happy for people to have a chance to listen to it, and then see what they think about it.

PB: Well, I can't wait to hear this recording, and thank you very, very much.

Notes

1. The instrument used was made by Peter Bavington in 2008, based on one by J. J. Bodechtel dating from around 1780.
2. '30 Sacred Songs', No. EP 3748 (see www.editionpeters.com): until recently this was the only available edition of C. P. E. Bach's songs. The complete Gellert and Sturm songs are now available in the Packard Humanities Institute edition of the composer's works, vols. VI/1 and 2; see www.cpebach.org.
3. C. P. E. Bach: *Odes, Psalms and Lieder*. Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau (baritone), Jörg Demus (tangenteinflügel). LP: DGG Archive 2533 058 (1971); CD reissue: ARCV 453168 (1996).