

CD „Classics of the Baroque“



All what you have to do, is to touch the right key at the right time

Johann Sebastian Bach

The Beckerath Organ “Opus 1” in St. Elisabeth in Hamburg

“Anyone who wanted to hear something exceptional in the field of music came to Hamburg,” wrote Karl Franz Friedrich Chrysander, Handel’s first biographer. The mercantile city on the banks of the river Elbe was the first city in Germany to have its own public opera house, the “Opern-Theatrum” opened in 1678, and together with a wide range of musical concerts in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries must have seemed like a magnet both for musicians and for society as a whole. The organs of Hamburg’s main churches and the musical performances that took place in them played a hugely significant role in the status of Hamburg as a city and centre of music.

This remains the case to this day: with well over 300 organs of all sizes and eras, Hamburg is currently one of the leading organ cities in the world. The organ of the Catholic church of St. Elisabeth in the Hamburg urban district of Harvestehude holds a special place in this league: The instrument is the first one – hence the denomination as “Opus 1” – built by the Hamburg organ builder Rudolf von Beckerath, who in 1949 founded his own organ-building company and went on to establish a reputation for himself that went far beyond Hamburg, indeed became global. Originally planned with 27 stops, the specification of the “Opus 1” organ was reduced to save costs in 1951 to 11 stops and two manuals (Great and „Brustwerk“) with mechanical action. In 1956 the organ was then expanded to 18 stops and remained in that specification until 2019. By that time, a complete overhaul was overdue and there were some urgently needed repairs to be made, and so in 2020 the instrument underwent a programme of restoration and repair alongside a customisation to accommodate the growing demands on the organ. That said, the intention was to preserve the original “Opus 1” despite the enhancements made, and for it to be made playable as originally intended. This aim was achieved by installing a unique “double” console, the only one of its kind in the world: on one side there is the two-manual console of the original Opus 1, which enables the original instrument to be played in new splendour and in its original configuration of 1956 using the original keyboard. Directly opposite – integrated into a large joint console – is the console with four manuals, from which the Opus 1 can be controlled incorporating the expansions, as a sort of “new Opus 1”. This comprehensive solution therefore encompasses a restoration of the original instrument plus an innovative but sensitive enhancement that succeeds in achieving synergies between the traditional and the modern. The recommissioning of the instrument took place after a ceremony of organ consecration of December 13, 2020. Its varied timbres – as solo instrument as well as in chamber music – are demonstrated in this recording with also varied Baroque music pieces.

Classics of the Baroque

Since Hamburg was also an important centre of music in the Baroque era, it is hardly surprising that the best known German composers of the time actually lived in Hamburg or at least had a connection with the Hanseatic city. This CD features well known works by the “superstars” of the Baroque, in many cases with a special link to Hamburg.

Georg Philipp Telemann and later his godson Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach – who in his lifetime was in fact more famous as best “Clavier-player” and composer than his father Johann Sebastian – held the post of Music Director over decades, which meant that they were responsible for the music in the city’s main churches and for directing the opera house orchestra. George Frederic Handel, a good friend of Telemann, spent many years in Hamburg before leaving for England. According to one story that has come down to us, there was even a duel between Handel and his rival at the Hamburg Opera, Johann Mattheson, which took place after a performance and which – according to historical sources – Handel only just survived ...

Johann Sebastian Bach would also dearly have loved to have served in Hamburg. Already at the age of 16 he had travelled on foot from Lüneburg to Hamburg, a journey of some 32 miles, in order to gain some initial experience of playing the organ. Years later, he applied for a post at St. Jacobi, one of the city’s main churches, but did not take the job because he was either unwilling or unable to pay the “entry fee” required.

English and French Baroque music provide an interesting contrast to the eighteenth-century music of Protestant (Lutheran) Germany. Marc-Antoine Charpentier’s *Prelude* to his *Te Deum* as the first music piece of this CD is a fine example of French Baroque music. Composed as a peace anthem after a battle between England and France, it has been used for nigh on 70 years as the Eurovision fanfare for Europe-wide television broadcasts.

Typical for English Baroque music are the pieces from Handel and Clarke. Handel’s *Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* is an orchestral work for two oboes and strings from the oratorio *Solomon*, which was premiered in 1749 in London. On the present transcription for organ solo the oboes are played on the organ’s “Hautbois” and “Dulcian” stops, accompanied by the typical organ principal stops as string imitation. The “Trumpet Voluntary” on the other hand employs the “Trompette Harmonique” (Swell), and the “Trompette” (Great) is heard in the Trumpet Tune. The two voluntaries are not linked to a specific form. Jeremiah Clarke did not compose out the pieces; he only specified the melody and bass voice – which means that the scope of the arrangement and performance is left to the organist in question.

Handel's aria *Ombra mai fu* – better known as Largo – shows that even during his time in England he maintained his ties with German Baroque music. Handel's aria is taken from his satirically ironic opera *Serse*, based on reports from the time of the Persian King Xerxes I in the fifth century BC.

The *Toccatà in C major* as one of the greatest works for organ from J.S. Bach stays in clear contrast Handel's Largo. Written in 1708 in Weimar, it is clear how much the young composer, then 23 years of age, had progressed in his musical development regarding earlier pieces. The fast and brilliant manual solo at the beginning is followed by a technically very demanding pedal solo that requires very fleet feet of the organist; Bach never wrote a more demanding pedal solo. The work closes with both hands and feet delivering a musical firework display in the Italian concerto style in the formal frame of a North German organ toccata.

His most famous son, C.P.E. Bach goes almost eighty years later a few steps further with his *Hamburg Sonata in G major for flute*: there are frequent, surprising twists and turns and rhythmic changes in melodies that clearly bring out his emotive writing – a musical expression of "Sturm und Drang" in the era of enlightenment with "true and natural" feelings and the transitional period to the Classical period in the style of Haydn and Mozart. With this, he continues the epoch of "Empfindsamkeit" (sentimental style) as early stage of "Sturm und Drang", which was for instance already reflected in the chorale *Jesu, bleibet meine Freude* (Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring) composed by his father Johann Sebastian. It takes part with its frugality and perfection as one of the most popular and most arranged musical pieces worldwide. The second, vibrant tune that Bach composed for the chorale (played here on Krummhorn 8'), is the one that has actually brought it such lasting fame.

There is also a euphoric sense of change and early enlightenment on the way in Telemann's *Concerto for Viola in G major*, not least because with his four-movement concerto (the very first solo concerto for viola ever!) he created a new musical genre, a fact which set him clearly apart from contemporaries such as J.S. Bach.

Charles François Gounod composed an additional melody (played on the "Flûte harmonique" on the present recording) to the Prelude in C major from J.S. Bach's Well-tempered Clavier which brought Bach's strictly structured work into the Romantic era. The melody was supplemented by Gounod years later with the lyrics of "Ave Maria". Although the Bach-Gounod *Ave Maria* is not truly a "Baroque Classic" it does in essence complete what many Baroque composers such as J.S. Bach, Telemann, Handel and C.P.E. Bach had – in revolutionary fashion for the time – introduced: expressing human emotions in music – especially in terms of sensibility and affections.

The *Concerto IV* from J.S. Bach is based on a string concerto by Prince Johann Ernst of Saxe-Weimar, also – as the *Toccatà in C major* – composed in the style of an Italian concerto. In his transcription for organ, Bach employed 60 organ keyboard changes – unique in the world of organ music of the day – in order to represent the dialogue between the string instruments in the original.

Similar to the chorale *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, in the aria *Schafe können sicher weiden* (Sheep may safely graze) Bach placed a memorable and emotive theme next to the actual melody. Along with the music that is immediately captivating, what lingers is the reminder that a shepherd (this would apply in current times to those in leading positions of all kind in society) must always take care and employ wisdom to deliver the responsibility expected of them.

One of the most popular and loveliest chorale arrangements by J.S. Bach is the *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, which was composed as a trio in which the three individual voices come together with a sense of independence. Also here, a catchy, individual theme in the upper voice (played in the present recording on the Rohrflöte 8') precedes the actual chorale melody (on Dulcian 8' combined with Clarabella 8' and Nachthorn 4').

During his first term of employment in Arnstadt, beside his duties like playing for church services and teaching scholars, J.S. Bach was following his musical affections and was experimentalizing with organ compositions. "The" *Toccatà and Fuge in D minor*, written around 1705 by the 20 year`old Bach, was probably one outcome of his eagerness to experiment. Though it is sometimes doubted whether the piece was truly written by Bach, it is doubtless with the famous beginning the most well-known work for the organ of all time.

Jens Christian Ludwig