

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D minor BWV 903

1	Fantasy	9'44
2	Fugue	5'59

Italian Concerto in F major BWV 971

3	(...)	4'18
4	Andante	6'09
5	Presto	3'25

Partita No. 2 in C minor BWV 826

6	Sinfonia. Grave. Largo.	5'43
7	Allemande	3'55
8	Courante	2'24
9	Sarabande	3'26
10	Rondeau	1'27
11	Capriccio	3'41

Prelude and Fugue in B minor from Well-Tempered Clavier - book 1 BWV 869

12	Prelude. Andante.	7'31
13	Fugue. Largo.	10'56

Total time: 68'35

Irakly AVALIANI piano

Temple Cortambert, Paris, September 2000
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This disc contains a collection of some of the major works composed for the keyboard from 1717 by Johann Sebastian Bach while he was Kappellmeister at Köthen.

Irakly Avaliani's playing of Bach on this disc is without doubt really excellent, and shows that he is not just a pianist, but a complete musician in the full sense of the word. He is able to clearly express the diverse aspects of Bach's music, from truly virtuoso passages to those that reflect the most profound inner feelings.

Irakly Avaliani begins by interpreting the **Chromatic fantasy and fugue (BWV 903)**, a work that starts with a virtuoso statement, and is virtuoso also in its freedom of composition. Its characteristic writing and pianistic qualities did not escape the attention of Ferruccio Busoni who made it one of the favourites of the grand repertoire of our time. Other pianists like Hans von Bülow (who compared the Well-Tempered Clavier with the Old Testament) made various adaptations of it during the 19th century. Despite the solemnity of the great central fugue, composed by Bach at Leipzig around 1723, the work seems almost to have been written for the century of Wagner. Irakly Avaliani, however, lets us hear the original manuscript (Urtext) version, stripped of its romantic ornamentation.

On a personal note, the *Chromatic fantasy and fugue* has always fascinated me because of the way in which Bach harmonises the principal subject of the fugue at each entry. The real key of each subject or counter subject only appears at the end of each subject statement. For example, the first subject, in D minor, is harmonised in C major and then in G minor, a very long way from the real key of the whole subject. The result is a sort of suspension and a captivating expectation that I find quite troubling. It could all seem rather upsetting for an ear not sufficiently trained. But no, the ambiguity of the keys is a great enrichment, and perfectly illustrates what one could call "to think far ahead through music", as Bach imagines how the subject of the fugue may evolve. To think of the future may not seem relevant, but it is of great importance to the visionary that Bach became.

The disc continues with the **Italian Concerto (BWV 971)**, published in 1755 by Christophe Weigel in Nuremberg. With its Overture in the French style, it has become a celebrated work. Incisive and jubilant in the manner of a cheerful Vivaldi, it contains so much joyful innovation that a critic of the time called Scheibe (unfortunately particularly critical of Bach) went so far as to write an eulogy in his revue: "a work of this type arranged in the best possible way". This was extraordinary since Agricola noted in 1771 "since the abuse of Scheibe against this great man, people considered his work music for cats". However, today this concerto is one of Bach's most performed works, and the joy it expresses is apparent to everyone. Nevertheless, the work presents many difficulties for the performer. It demands great firmness in the way the chords of the first movement are played, much dexterity in the final movement and a great declamatory intelligence in the middle movement which is so expressive, *cantabile* and so full of introspective feeling. This work requires the eloquence of a Chopin nocturne, or that of the most beautiful of Bach's recitatives and cantatas. Happily, Irakly Avaliani possesses this marvellous quality and uses it well.

The **2nd Partita in C minor (BWV 826)** was published by Weigel at the same time as the *Italian Concerto*, but had been previously published in Leipzig in a complete collection of *Clavier-Ubung*. It is a work of majestic noblesse, and with the *6th Partita* is without doubt one of the grandest and most serious of all the Bach partitas. It is interesting to note that the particularly dramatic effect produced in the introduction by the key of C minor, ornamented by a diminished 7th chord, is also found both in the choral finale of the *St Matthew's Passion* and in the subject of the *Musical Offering*. Bach also used the same structure in the *Chromatic fantasy and fugue*, here found in D minor. The character of the Bach's collection of partitas is revealed by the title he chose in 1731: "*Clavier-Ubung*" which generally means "study". However, as Albert Schweitzer pointed out, it should be taken here to mean "divertissement". The character of a divertissement will progressively temper the solemnity that is almost impressive at the beginning of this beautiful Partita. It continues with an **Andante** in the Italian style in a bantering rhythm, which is fluid, modest and vocal, and seems infinitely tender... Then after a vigorous cadence there is a brief episode in 3/4 time, which jolts us from our reverie. It seems to be in the spirit of the celebrated *Badinerie* for flute in the **2nd Suite for Orchestra in B minor (BWV 1067)**. Soon the **Allemande** brings back the meditative atmosphere without noticeably modifying the rhythm or key of the **Andante**, as if one had to continue a conversation with an angel that had been temporarily interrupted.

The voices of the angel then become a canon, like a duet of angels echoing each other, until they finally become infinitely reassuring with strongly marked cadences. Bach continues with a **Courante** in a more intellectual French style, and then by contrast a **Sarabande** imbued with a profound certainty, marked by the progression of the bass in regular intervals. Then there is tension and suffering as Bach uses the augmented second (bars 14 and 16) or Neapolitan harmony that gives rise to images of the human condition. Finally, after the **Rondeau** that reminds us of Couperin, Bach concludes with a final **Capriccio**, light and fast, which requires great dexterity.

This disc began with a piece by Bach which is almost theatrical, and it ends with a work which is profoundly inward-looking, the **24th Prelude and Fugue of the first book of the Well-tempered clavier, in B minor (BWV 869)**. This work, which ends the first book, is one of Bach's most beautiful compositions and one finds in it the same gravity as in the Bach *Passions*. One cannot help noticing that at the start of this *Prelude and Fugue*, and only here, Bach believed it necessary to give an indication of the tempo and character of the work. Bach indicates **Andante** for the *Prelude* and **Largo** for the 4-voice *Fugue*, indications that do not appear anywhere else in the *Well-tempered clavier*.

"Andante" means literally "to advance" or "moving along". What other words could better suggest the kind of ecstatic march with which this *Prelude* straight away imposes its certitude? The simple rise of the B minor scale at the beginning, which is a progression of three voices on three distinct levels seems to me to be an image of the unshakeable faith of J.S.Bach and is witness to the fact that he was a great believer. The *Prelude* is in a minor key, and we at first think that Bach's musing is essentially nostalgic. But such an interpretation would be wrong, because here Bach appears to be detached

from all human sentiment, passion and mundane, worldly preoccupations. What is depicted in this *Prelude*, particularly by the characteristic crochets in the bass, is an expression of a universal law at a higher level than our human passions, a law that goes beyond us and that we have to accept with humility. This law is that of God, and Bach seems here to be contemplating this message that was dictated to him from on high, in a sort of ecstatic state. "*All music that is not a glorification of those on high is but useless chattering*", he said one day. This remark applies, in my view, particularly to this *Prelude*.

Paradoxically the **Fugue** that follows evokes the opposite question. Did Bach have doubts? Did he question his faith and know inner torment?... This *Fugue*, with its four voices, seems, right from the first note, to be full of drawn out dissonance, as though suggesting that the heart of the master was inhabited by conflicting sentiments. Soon after the first note there is a *C natural*, a note that is very distant from the main key of B minor. The subject of the *Fugue* turns on itself, exactly like someone who becomes prey to his own doubts and tries to find a way out. However, this same subject, from the *F sharp* (first note) to the *G sharp* (last minim), contains all the notes of the twelve note chromatic scale, used much later by that illustrious Viennese, Arnold Schönberg! This is a disturbing fact, and reveals an astonishing exploit and most perfect achievement at the heart of this tortured *Fugue*: the use of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. In my opinion, this is its symbol of Bach's vision of the future.

Bach's music is thus an image of the biggest of all mysteries. It is a profound questioning about the human condition, its contradictions, our certitudes and our eternity as expressed by our faith and is also its statement of the imperfection of our consciences when doubt overtakes us.

"Think far ahead through the music," was what we said at the beginning about the *Chromatic fantasy and fugue*. This idea seems to me to resume the general message of this disc and what it contains. Architect of the future, modern for his century, a man ahead of his time, and a musician perfectly in tune with the present day, J.S.Bach is the visionary of music, and the great man of faith, intelligence and the richness of the human soul.

Alexandre Sorel

Translated from French by Sheila Llewellyn

Irakly Avaliani was born in Tbilissi, Georgia. He began his musical studies at the Tbilissi High School of Music and then went on to Moscow Tchaikowsky Conservatory. After winning the highest awards there, he continued his studies with Ethery Djakeli who introduced him to the work of Marie Jaëll and, over a period of five years, completely reconstructed his piano technique. Today he is one of the few pianists to have explored this path, as did also Albert Schweitzer, Dinu Lipatti and Eduardo Del Pueyo. Irakly Avaliani has lived in Paris since 1989. Irakly Avaliani's recording career, consistently lauded by the music press, has been patroned by Mecenat Group BALAS since 2000.