

Preclassic literature written originally for four hands – one piano

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Abstract: *Before the era of J. C. Bach and Mozart, the most important contributions to the four-hands repertoire were Nicholas Carleton's „Verse for Two Play on One Virginal or Organ” and Thomas Tomkin's „Fancy for Two to Play”. The first work dates from the 16th century and the second from the 17th century. The oldest published original four-hand pieces are by Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), whose works are direct precursors of Mozart's four-hand piano works. The affinity between W. A. Mozart and J. C. Bach, and the examination of J. C. Bach's compositions will indicate a similar affinity between the works of these two masters. An analysis of J. C. Bach's scoring will prove that it is not a mere reduction of an orchestral score but, on the contrary, that it is unmistakably a duet for two performers of equal importance.*

Keywords: *Preclassic; J. C. Bach; Piano duets; Sonata; Nicholas Carleton;*

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore and analyze the wealth of intrinsic value that is to be found in compositions originally written for piano duets (two performers at one piano). Only compositions originally conceived for piano duets will be considered. This research is concerned with the literature for piano duets which is of a caliber transcending pure pedagogy. Another object of this research is to show what a remarkable amount of art has been cast in the form of piano duets literature.

It is to be hoped that, after extensive study of the Preclassic literature, will be thoroughly convinced that music for piano duets is of considerable scope and importance, and it is to be hoped that the existence of professional duet teams will be encouraged. In very recent years performing artists have become aware of the worth of the extensive literature for four hands. Ralph Berkowitz says that “for a truly rewarding experience pianists should, of course, play and study this type of ensemble music for themselves”.²

1. The Preclassic Era

From not only the historical standpoint but also the musical, the survey of originally composed piano duet literature starts with Nicholas Carleton (around 1550) and Thomas Tomkins (1573-1656). Nicholas Carleton was an English composer who lived in the forepart of the sixteenth century. He was known for his arrangements of some of his vocal compositions for

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² Berkowitz, Ralph. 1944. “Original Music for Four Hands”. *Etude* 62, no. 1, p. 61.

organ or virginal. It is not known which works were originally conceived for the keyboard and which works were originally conceived for voices and then transcribed for the keyboard. But, owing to his composition of *A Verse for Two to Play on One Virginal or Organe*, he becomes a most important historical figure for this writing, as this duet is one of the earliest specimens of four-hand music for a keyboard instrument. This particular piece has another historical significance: “is the only English cantus firmus composition for which a medium of performance is designated and here we are given a choice of instruments.”³

Whether Carleton or Thomas Tomkins has the distinction of composing the very first piano duet originally for four hands is impossible to conclude; it is not known exactly when Carleton lived or when Carleton’s “*Verse for Two to Play on One Virginal or Organe*” and Tomkins “*A Fancy for Two to Play*” were composed.



Fig. 1: Musical fragment from “*Verse for Two to Play on One Virginal or Organe*” Nicholas Carleton

“In conclusion, we need only say that, in addition to the historical interest of these earliest keyboard duets, their intrinsic musical interest, and their quaint charm are factors that undeniably contribute to their artistic merits and that raise them well out of the class of mere curiosities. For these reasons, they are quite acceptable music for concert performance.”⁴

2. Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782)

According to Preston Ware Orem, the oldest published original four-hand pieces are by Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782), whose works are direct precursors of Mozart’s four-hand piano works. Others say that Burney’s *Four Sonatas or Duets for Two Performers on One Pianoforte or Harpsichord* (1777) and Theodor Smith’s *Nine Sonatas* (Berlin 1780) are the earliest to be printed. It should not be stated dogmatically that one composition was the first to appear in print. The following information, however, is considered authoritative: “An eighteenth-century difficulty in playing harpsichord duets is mentioned by Burney himself. He says that “the ladies at that time wearing hoops, which kept them at too great a distance from one another, had a harpsichord made by Merlin, expressly for duets, with six octaves, and goes on to say that such duets then being composed by all the great master of Europe, the extended compass became general.”⁵

³ Hugh M. Miller. 1943. *The Earliest Keyboard Duets*. Oxford University Press, p. 440.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 440.

⁵ Scholes, Percy A. 1938. *The Oxford Companion to Music*. Music Library Association, p. 721.

The J. C. Bach Sonatas in C Major, A, and F foreshadow the Mozartian clarity of design and the freshness of his melodies and harmonies. Christian Bach and Joseph Haydn were the two best friends of Mozart, so it is not surprising that in Mozart's admiration of Bach, Mozart inherited the fabulous imagination, the abundance of his melodic ideas, and his somnambulistic awareness of balance and form. Thus, these J. C. Bach sonatas (also Adagio and Allegretto) occupy a unique position in the field of piano duets; they are the earliest available published music of this species and are the direct precursors of Mozart's four-hand compositions.

Since the affinity between Mozart and Bach has been mentioned, an examination of Bach's compositions will indicate a similar affinity between the works of these two masters. The three sonatas by Bach are superior to the sonatas in D Major (K. 381) and B flat Major (K. 358) of Mozart because the later sonatas can best be described as "a reduction of an Italian symphony, a symphony in which individual groups of winds and strings, of tutti and soli are quite sharply distinguished."⁶

Only the adagio of the sonata K. 358 exemplifies the great refinement of melody and voice leading in an accompaniment of which Mozart is capable. An analysis of Bach's scoring will prove that it is not a mere reduction of an orchestral score but, on the contrary, that it is unmistakably a duet for two performers of equal importance.

3. C Major Sonata Op. 18, no. 5 – J. C. Bach (First movement)

It's evident that in measures 1 and 2 both players double each other for a strong announcement of the principal theme of the movement.



Fig. 2: Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – primo

Bars 5 and 6 of the secondo concern themselves with imitating at the octave bars 3 and 4 of the primo. The first eighteen bars consist of a double period with a measure extension at the end of each period.

⁶ Einstein, Alfred. 1945. *Mozart, His Character, His Work*. New York: Cassell and Co. Ltd, p. 271.



Fig. 3: Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – secondo

Manual interferences such as occur at bars 21 and 107 indicate that Bach must have composed the sonata for a two-manual harpsichord. Thus, the performer must play the note that ends the phrase with the right hand and release the key in time for the left hand to play it again. In measure 19, as in measure 16, there is an example of the real monophony that Bach adopted as he turned his back on his venerable father's intricate polyphony.



Fig. 4: Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – primo

At measures 23 through 27, the two performers have a charming dialogue consisting of a half-measure figure which is in imitation.



Fig. 5: Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – primo



Fig. 6: *Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – secondo*

So, the London Bach, or Milanese Bach, could not completely escape the influence of his father's music. J. C. Bach once remarked that anyone could write polyphonic exercises if he put himself to it. Bars 28 and 29 consist of a duet between the right hands of both performers, the same figuration a major tenth apart. At measure 30 the music assumes a primarily polyphonic style of composition until measure 51, at which point the secondo echoes measure 47-51 of the primo. From the end of this echo – measure 55 to measure 65 there is a closing section and a double bar. The first half of the binary does not refer even as it closes, to any thematic material heard before. On the next page, however, the initial figure reappears but in the key of G Major, dominant of C. Only two measures of this initial figure are heard, when at bar 68 in the primo a rhythmic derivation appears which is sequentially reproduced in measures 69 and 70. By the process of imitation, bars 69 and 70 in the secondo are like bars 68 and 69 in the primo.



Fig. 7: *Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – primo, secondo*

Suddenly, at measure 72 a figure appears which corresponds to a similar figure in measure 30. Measures 76-78 are reminiscent of measures 68-70. From the beginning of the second half of the movement to measure 104, there is a development-like section. Measures 105-114 are identical to bars 19-28 in part one. Two measures then lead to a passage (bars 117-127) which is of parallel construction to bars 45-55. A figure derived from measure 3 appears in measure 127; the third beat of measure 131 begins the repetition of the four preceding measures. A two-and-one-half measure codetta ends the second half of the first movement. At the end of the first part, a repeat mark is found after the movement.



Fig. 8: Musical fragment from J.C. Bach Sonata, Op. 18, no.5 – primo

The second movement, a rondo, contains nothing that requires analysis. The most significant fact concerning these two movements is that in the case of Domenico Scarlatti, a sonata contains but one movement; J. C. Bach's sonatas contain two movements; finally, in W. A. Mozart there are three and four movements.

4. Conclusions

The J. C. Bach Sonata in C Major is almost an unknown work, but it has been analyzed for two important reasons: is it one of the very first sonatas written and published for piano duet; with its companions, it forms the basis upon which Mozart erected his masterpieces, and these, in turn, became a model for later composers. Although the Nicholas Carleton and Thomas Tomkins duets are useful for recital, they fall short of the three Sonatas of J. C. Bach which, in turn, are somewhat dwarfed by the Mozart works. The compositions of Beethoven also are shy of the mark made by Mozart. Hence the entire Preclassic and Classic Eras of piano duet music are dominated by the figure of Mozart, the giant in whose shadow rests the works of the other masters. It is to be hoped that, after extensive study of the Preclassic literature, will be thoroughly convinced that music for piano duets is of considerable scope and importance, and it is to be hoped that the existence of professional duet teams will be encouraged. In very recent years performing artists have become aware of the worth of the extensive literature for four hands. Ralph Berkowitz says that "for a truly rewarding experience pianists should, of course, play and study this type of ensemble music for themselves". If this trend should continue until pianists, professional and amateur alike, rediscover the immense amount of beauty and mutual enjoyment to be had from performing or just playing over these works, then the writer will know that the aim and purpose of this thesis will have been more than justified.

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