

# PLAYING THE PIANO

A musician busks on the streets. The music from his violin sounds strange and only vaguely recognizable. People pass him by. He carries on regardless because he loves the music and doesn't care what they think.

He appears in the novella *The Poor Musician, Der Arme Spielman* by Franz Grillparzer, considered one of Austria's greatest dramatists, a friend to Schubert who brought a similar character into the final song of *Die Winterreise*, not a musician however but a beggar organ-grinder. He plays other people's tunes. The violinist is a devoted amateur.

This poor musician has haunted me for years. Neither a beggar nor a busker I did once find myself in a similar situation. Not on the street, but trying to entertain some market stallholders who were attending a meeting in the house. Gathered round the piano they propped Rachmaninov's fifth prelude from the Opus 23 set in front of me, and without practice I launched into it with disastrous results. In the middle of the cacophony I heard one of the street traders say to another in hushed tones of shocked disappointment: 'But he can't play.'

From that moment on I knew my severe limitations as a pianist. After sixty years of playing the piano, assiduously trying to improve my technique and making progress but never of course achieving professional standards, I write this book to encourage other players like me and share tips, advice, experiences, stories and observations.

I came across the Arme Spielman once. Dressed in a dirty black overcoat and ragged trousers he used to stand outside the front gates to St James's Church on Piccadilly scraping on an old

fiddle with an empty cap by his feet. Like Grillparzer's busker he couldn't play and made an unpleasant scratching noise endlessly repeating a tune that vaguely resembled Danny Boy.

The German word 'Spielman' translates as musician, referring specifically to travelling players who are booked for weddings and other celebrations. The German 'arm' means poor, in the sense of impoverished but also pitiable, rather than untalented. The point of the story is that however poor this player might be, he is happy because the instrument gives him necessary comfort and pleasure.

This book is written by an 'arme Spielman' for others.

## MUSIC: LIFE AND DEATH

At a memorial service for a young man in the summer of 1985 when asked to play a few appropriate pieces I included the second of Schubert's *Drei Klavierstücke*. The man had died of AIDS. His surviving partner, young, handsome and numb with grief, fear and shock, and eyes swollen after too much weeping, came up to me when the service ended and asked specifically about that piece, which had followed the opening movement of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* and Busoni's sombre transcription of Bach's *Chorale Prelude Ich Ruf Zu Dir Herr/ I Call On Thee Lord*. The Schubert touched the young man most of all.

It also means a lot to me. The *Drei Klavierstücke* published as unfinished works and bearing no particular connection with each other can be played as a three movement sonata. Although they work well together the last of them seems slighter and much shorter than the other two. Its brevity may have been what Schubert intended: the energetic syncopated rhythm, percussive and aggressive rather than elated, frames a hymn-like section with a restful pulse which tries to calm the mood before the defiance returns and has the final word. The structure

is simple compared to the he first two pieces which are more substantial and contain at their heart two lengthy and strikingly contrasted interludes, whereas the final piece has just one. The first of the three pieces with its quick catchy rhythm can be heard on the radio occasionally, but the other two hardly ever. They don't enjoy the popularity of the composer's better known two sets of impromptus. The second piece is an Allegretto, i.e. not fast but not too slow either. A simple swaying theme leads to a significantly marked climax consisting of an anticipated forte contrasted immediately with a sudden pianissimo, like a heavy sigh leading to resignation. The two interludes bear little relationship to the main theme, but they give the piece its substance. The first interlude disturbs the calm, hinting with foreboding at life's traumas before returning soothingly through several poignant Schubertian modulations to the main theme, as on a gentle ebb and flow. The second interlude enters heaven. The rumbling bass of the first interlude, echoing the accompaniment of the *Winterreise* song *Im Dorfe/In the Village* with the dogs' chains rattling menacingly, is transformed by the second interlude into a consolingly steady throb above which Schubert floats one of his heart-easing melodies. Just before the climax there is transcendence which with an unexpected and therefore extra-radiant shift from minor to major, floods the music with light and hope before sinking with tranquil resignation into the final repeat of the swaying theme. Body and soul are released into eternity, at peace. That's why this piece is the one I would like to play at my own funeral, impossible of course, but not have it played by anyone else because it is my approach to the piece that makes it mean so much to me. Death will turn my body into dust: an infinitesimal part of the universe, less than an atom of a grain of sand on a sea shore. The spirit essence of me is hopefully expressed in my words, images and memories left to others. This music speaks of leaving the baggage of life behind and crossing the bridge into an infinite sunlit landscape without shadows, where perhaps the spirits of a few beloved pre-deceased will be there to greet me.

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Music is indeed mainly about life and death. It is also about love and conviviality. Listening to a performance that does a piece of music justice can be an experience for life. Playing it on the piano helps me enter the music deeper and further, beyond the experience of listening. I marvel perpetually at the mystery of composition, the emotion and imagination that brought it into existence.

The finite intensity is the essence of a musical moment: its fleeting nature. Silence that surrounds each piece deepens the mystery of time. One of the most treasured books given to me to read as a child, Vincent Van Loon's *History of the World*, opens with a preface that imprinted itself on my impressionable memory more than any of the many pages that followed. It tells an ancient story that tries to explain the concept of time, a fitting way to start a book about history. In the middle of an ocean is a rock a mile wide and a mile high. Once every hundred years a bird comes to sharpen its beak on the rock. When the rock has in that manner been completely worn away one day in eternity will have passed.

Cave paintings acknowledge the mystery of life's brevity and fragility: the creature that provided sustenance finds itself remembered for as long as the planet earth exists. In a different way the sound of a voice or an instrument also attends to this mystery, linking the momentary and personal with the silence of eternity around it. Listening to a live performance is eavesdropping on this mystery. Playing the music lives it.

Talking about music Shakespeare observed in one of his plays (I must research which one, but it might be *Loves Labours Lost*) the wonder of how scraping horse hair on catgut has the power to haul the soul out of the body. We could now make the same observation about the effect of a laser beam on a revolving disc of plastic. At school I wanted to play Shylock the Jew in *The Merchant of Venice*. It is a meaty role far more interesting than the ostensibly

attractive but devious smugly privileged characters with whom he has to deal. To my disappointment the part went to another boy and I ended up playing Lorenzo, the young man who elopes with Jessica, Shylock's daughter. Lorenzo, a minor character, is however gifted with one of the more famous speeches in the play, and certainly the most lyrical. It contains the lines: *The man that hath no music in himself, Nor is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds, Is fit for treasons, stratagems, and spoils; The motions of his spirit are dull as night, And his affections dark as Erebus: Let no such man be trusted.....* In a play through which anti-Semitism runs like a toxic stream, Shakespeare gives the best lines to the one person who falls in love with a Jew.

There are people who have no music in them. A friend once confessed this lack to me, and worried that Shakespeare's words might apply to him, which of course they didn't, this friend being one of the kindest most light-filled people I have ever known. Shakespeare did not observe how his description also fits those who profess to love music and yet devote their lives to *treasons, stratagems, and spoils* as any student of the history of the Third Reich and the Soviet Union will know. This is a theme I explore in my piece *The Lady with the Ermine*, also on this website.

## PERFORMANCE AND PLAYING

My respect for concert pianists knows no bounds, whoever they are and whatever their quality as musicians. To be able to memorise a complex composition and then to perform it faultlessly before an audience is a feat deserving applause and financial reward.

These pages are written for other pianists and explore the experience of playing the classical repertoire, not for performance but because our purpose is interacting with the music. It is not

just a matter of enjoyment but of indispensable spiritual and emotional sustenance. For me I cannot envisage any life at all without being able to play the piano. These private conversations with composers of the past inspire and support me. In times of crisis they are indispensable.

There is a world of difference between listening to a performance of a piece of music and playing it for oneself. Performers aim to be concert pianists because they want to convey and interpret the music for others. Players can be performers, and in a modest way I have taken part in concerts, but I do not claim to be a performer.

A critic snidely commented on James Rhodes calling himself a concert pianist rather than someone who plays the piano, implying that he falls short of the technical and artistic accomplishment of more revered pianists. The point about this gifted player with an exceptional life history is that he specifically wants to perform for people, who are in turn happy to listen to him. He is therefore a concert pianist. He gives note-perfect and committed performances to sold-out concert halls. In fact there are some pieces he interprets better than any of his peers. He brings such devotion and brilliance to the challenging Busoni arrangement of Bach's Chaconne from the second violin partita that his interpretation is the one I appreciate most.

Similarly David Helfgott, a performer who after a breakdown as a young man returned later in life to the concert platform. He then endured withering criticism for his recorded performance of Rachmaninov's third piano concerto, the notoriously difficult *Rach 3* which had years before triggered the breakdown. Critics advised people to listen to better versions by greater pianists. Yes, this work demands technical expertise that only a limited number of keyboard wizards can deliver. However David Helfgott, who can certainly play it, brings extra experience and a particular poignancy to a work which in other more virtuosic hands

can have a tendency to come across as not much more than dazzle which triggers applause and cheers that raise the roof. Helfgott handles the technical problems with aplomb and then elicits more from the music. Because the score is closely related to his life, healing and resurrection he is able to reveal so much more, and opens our ears to the special qualities of this frequently derided composer.

In the musical world there are three levels of pianism. The highest is occupied by critically celebrated and popular recording artists, virtuosi and experts in particular repertoire. The second level grudgingly allows respect for those less brilliant but good enough to be concert pianists.

The third level is occupied by what are often disparagingly called amateurs, people like me who could not even dream of being on the other two levels. The word has become tainted by the presumption of inadequacy and failure. The word amateur is however an accurate description, because we play for love of the piano and the music written for us in particular. Composers over the last few centuries have earned a steady income from writing pieces published for amateurs like me to play, encouraging us to communicate with a substantial repertoire that is often challenging but always accessible.

Lack of the kind of innate talent that is an essential quality for any performer, added to the dearth of time for practice in our otherwise busy lives creates problems for amateurs.

However much we practise there will always be the sense of inadequacy. Once when a friend came to stay and while he took a bath I played some Chopin waltzes. As he came down the stairs I made a stupid comment about it not being the radio. 'I know,' he said, looking at me severely. 'From the mistakes!'

Other embarrassing personal experiences are instructive to relate because they help explain the purpose of my writing. The first shaming episode happened during a school concert at

which boys used to perform a short well-rehearsed piece. With my usual need to be different I decided to play a whole Mozart sonata which lay far from comfortably under my fingers. It must have sounded awful and the music teacher came up when I had finished and politely told me next time to play just one movement, and to make sure I had practised it thoroughly. Of course he was right. Who would want to hear any music performed with mistakes? I shouldn't have done it, but already then I wanted to play a whole piece through, and not just part of it. It is frustrating and irritating listening to Radio programs made up of excerpts, a movement ripped from a sonata, cycle or symphony, shorn of its context and therefore meaning. Slow movements in particular need to be heard in the framework of the movements preceding and following. Beethoven embedded his most emotional and nakedly vulnerable utterances in this way, giving them a sturdily protective structure.

Emphasis on note accuracy, keeping strict time, shaping a piece and carrying on without hesitation and repetition has not only been a never-achievable goal for a pianist like me but remains a depressing discouragement for amateurs, many of whom simply give up and then regret this decision for the rest of their lives. We are told to keep within the boundaries of our ability, which means limiting our playing to pieces we can work to note perfection. My curiosity, desire and need to play the whole repertoire break such a rule. For instance I insist on playing the Chopin studies which represent a peak of pianistic virtuosity. By giving the fingers strenuous workouts with a variety of figures, arpeggios, thirds, sixths, scales etc. they provide technical preparation for playing most other pieces, while being beautiful and musically substantial pieces. They work best when played as two complete sets. No one should be in listening distance: the studies remain beyond my ability. My violin teacher considered them the greatest music ever written, and they stood prominently on his grand piano surrounded by sheets of Fritz Kreisler and Beethoven violin sonatas. He lived in a cramped Bolton backstreet terraced house which I visited on foggy evenings, trudging past

mills along rain drenched roads. He once ended a lesson by playing the Beethoven concerto, a performance that for me surpassed all other renditions with its intimacy and total lack of showmanship. Shyness and stage-fright had discouraged him from following a solo career. I imagined him practicing the Chopin and wondered what the neighbours made of it. Every time I play the studies he is in my thoughts.

Most piano teachers disagree with my approach and insist that I should limit my repertoire to simple pieces I have worked to perfection. My own piano teacher, Doris Staton, with years of experience as a concert pianist behind her and whose advice I have followed faithfully throughout my life, made me prepare some of them for concert performance. These included Chopin's *Raindrop Prelude* and Schubert's fourth impromptu from the first set, pieces so familiar to generations of learners that the endless practice used to drive players and listeners to distraction. My father declared that he wished never to hear the unfortunate Chopin ever again. However Doris Staton quickly understood my attitude to playing the piano, and kindly removed me from the stress of taking exams, although we worked through all the set pieces. She also introduced me to lesser known works, so instead of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*, she chose its companion opus number, also a beautiful *quasi una Fantasia*, to prepare for performance. As a reward for that concert she ceremoniously presented me with the two volume complete set of Schubert Sonatas, from which I still play, and we worked on all of them. When practising I remember her words and am constantly helped by her methods, which I will describe in the following pages. At the same time I take inspiration from Sviatoslav Richter who declared that we should never be afraid to play music that is beyond our abilities. This gives me courage to explore the whole of piano literature however difficult. These pages are written for those on level three.

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A long time ago, but still within my living memory, upright pianos were a feature of all middle class and even many lower middle class houses. At a time of rigid social stratification, aristocratic and upper classes flaunted grand pianos because their homes were large enough to accommodate these musical beasts. When invited into such places of wealth and privilege, these elegant instruments filled me with awe, their black ebony casing polished to a mirror reflecting the ivory keys made from the tusks of slaughtered elephants. Upright pianos in cheaper brown wood casings, though still with ivory keys, hence the term ‘tickling the ivories’, stood against living-room walls in smaller residences. Most working class homes had no space for these instruments, although I did occasionally come across them, so much did people of all classes love to make music. Pianos were a fixture of the local pub. At home people generally bashed out hymn tunes or popular numbers, hitting the keys hard to create enough of a din to encourage wavering singers and keep them in tune, but at the same time rendering the instruments in constant need of repair. Children were encouraged to learn how to play the instrument until television and other social media entertainments persuaded many to give up what tended to demand too much time and effort. As I pointed out earlier they frequently wished later in life that they had persevered. No pain, no gain, is a fitting description of practising the piano. Tackling the foundations of piano technique such as the virtuosic Chopin etudes mentioned above, tricky Scarlatti sonatas that test hand dexterity and finger-twisting Bach fugues can turn into wrestling bouts, often frustrating and demoralising because the problems seem insurmountable, and frequently are. At such times it is good to remember Gillian Weir’s counsel that we should make friends with the music. When a tricky bar resolutely refuses to fall under my fingers, if not banging my fists on the keyboard in despair at my incompetence, a crime on the innocent instrument, I tend to shout out: ‘I love you!’ Then add, sorrowfully: ‘But you don’t love me back!’

In those far off days accuracy and keeping a steady rhythm formed the basis of tuition. Music teachers were frequently seen and experienced as martinets shouting strict time and pouncing on wrong notes by hitting the pupils' hands with a wooden ruler, which explained the forceful way players tended to strike the keys. Group violin lessons scraping through hymns and folk tunes in third form at school were characterised by fortissimo piano accompaniment to keep us half-hearted learners in tune. Mr Hughes, spruce and smart with a pencil moustache, glaring black eyes and a military crew cut, sat at the upright like the sergeant major he may well have been in the war, and battered octaves with parade-yard precision. One dreary Monday morning as we boys in our grey shorts and sweaty blazers were about to launch into *Ye Banks and Braes* I felt sorry for us all and weakly interjected in Children's Hour accents: 'Are we all sitting comfortably?' The rest of the form burst out laughing. I expected punishment, but instead Mr Hughes sighed and to my relief in a soft tone of regret I never forget, said, 'Thank God someone has a sense of humour!' Incidentally his tall slim son David with ivory smooth skin happened to be the best looking boy in the class and everyone had a crush on him.

Hammering at the keyboard did not prevent players loving the music. Harry Ashton, a local chicken farmer, played his adored Mozart in this way, sturdy fingers hitting the keys at never less than painfully loud. Chopin would suffer the same treatment, but in the well-thumbed hard-backed copy of the *Nocturnes* Harry gave me as a gift each opus number had a pencilled headline in praise of a famous pianist the farmer had listened to performing that particular one in concert. Harry played in this idiosyncratic way but his inner ear heard the delicacy and refinement of how they should be performed. Meaning and beautiful tone were left for professionals.

Pianists at my school varied from lower form enthusiasts including me who played from any sheet music we could lay our hands on and would then plough through fistfuls of mistakes, to

older talented performers who existed on a different plane. One of these sixth formers accompanied by the school orchestra overwhelmed everyone with a soulful and spirited performance from memory of Beethoven's third piano concerto. Such musical talent is like cream that rises to the surface of milk. These artists are born with confidence and natural aptitude which indicates that the player and the instrument are as one. Such players are acrobats and poets, athletes and artists all rolled into one.

This star pianist came to the house soon after the concert to ask my vicar father for advice about training to be a clergyman, so perhaps he chose not to be a performer. I remember trembling with nerves seeing him talking in our sitting room, a god paying a visit. He saw me come in and smiled. This otherworldly being turned out to be a good natured kindly person putting me at my ease.

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Is art a profession or a spiritual activity?

With exceptional performers it can be both, and these stars are respected and cherished. For them it is the joy of communication that can appeal to listeners and players alike. When the young Rudolf Serkin's debut recital ended in a long enthusiastic ovation, the surprised player asked his manager standing in the wings what he should do, what encore would be appropriate. 'Play the *Goldbergs*,' said the manager. Serkin failed to get the joke, the Goldberg Variations being one of the longest pieces in the piano repertoire, returned to the stage and without hesitation played for the next hour and a half. By the end the audience had long since vacated their seats leaving just one person listening. This happened to be Artur Schnabel, another exceptional pianist. Despite fame Serkin always remained humble and focused on playing the music. After an understated and moving performance of Mozart's final piano concerto, conducted by Seiji Ozawa in what must have been one of the pianist's

last concerts, the now elderly Serkin gave the impression of playing the piece he knew intimately for the first time, moulding each phrase with care and affection, allowing the composition to unfurl and reveal itself without intervention. Afterwards Seiji Ozawa told the pianist that it had been a privilege to accompany him and the ever-modest Serkin looked surprised and touched.

As a young man I had the nerve to play in public, and now shudder at the memory. One day planning to perform Chopin's monumental *Fantaisie opus 49* and fearing coming unstuck, I took advice from a singer friend. Noting my uncertainty she sensibly dissuaded me from embarking on what most likely would have been a messy and embarrassing occasion. Shortly after making that decision I witnessed Malcolm Binns tossing off Chopin's third sonata, playing the final movement with a brio that only comes from total confidence and technical mastery. From that moment I never played in public again.

I admire those who with innate talent and after persistent hours of dogged practice can sit in front of an attentive demanding audience to share a piece of music with technical accomplishment as well as offer an interpretation. When these pianists play from memory there is the added thrill of watching a high-wire act. How can these gifted artists remember every note and nuance? The truth is that more often than not these professional artists can remember the notes but not always the nuances. In his final years Sviatoslav Richter, one of the most celebrated pianists of the last century even taking into account his frequently controversial interpretations, decided to play from sheet music. He made the point that acrobatics were all well and good, but even the best virtuosi needed to be reminded of the dynamics and instructions painstakingly indicated by most composers. Recently one of Sviatoslav Richter's successors Igor Levitt mocked the notion that it even mattered whether a pianist should play from memory or from the score.

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The basic guidance to players like me is to keep at it, and follow those rules which help most. The point of playing has always been for me not to perform but to communicate with the composer and share his journey, which in the case of a sonata or a connected cycle of pieces, means tackling the work as a whole. As with painting and all creative activity, practice and playing is a perpetual endeavour. Performers can and do achieve perfection, which is the point of being a professional. Absolute technical command is the foundation for this kind of accomplishment. For players like me, perfection is always beyond reach, but we can still access the music in our own way, and this theme is the substance of my book. Music is about more than the absolute precision described so poignantly by Hans Andersen in *The Nightingale*: a mechanical bird may delight and entertain, being reliable and technically flawless, but it is the voice of the real nightingale which heals and staves off death.

Because players with busy lives spent away from the piano can rarely if ever achieve professional perfection our search has to be about something else. A good teacher helps. Doris Staton used to be a concert pianist until arthritis disfigured her fingers and forced her into retirement. Here are some of the rules that laid the foundation for technique that has helped me.

She declared that the more passionate and technically demanding the music the cooler the player should be. This is similar to singers dealing with passages which move audiences to tears. Focussing on the technical aspect of producing the result is easier said than done. However much I tell myself to remain calm while attacking virtuoso passages, the emotions get in the way. It is even more difficult for singers who have to embed their voices in an accompaniment that cannot fail to move them as well as audiences. Kathleen Ferrier used to be in tears during the final bars of Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, but not while she sang.

Pianists have to concentrate on getting all the notes right, which helps cool the temperament. Incidentally, Doris Staton had framed a photo of Kathleen Ferrier, signed 'with gratitude' by the singer, and placed it on the Blüthner grand piano. Looking at it during each lesson reminded me of my piano teacher's illustrious career. In those days the singer idolised by musicians and audiences the world over for her sumptuous contralto, artistry and unique ability to connect emotionally with listeners had died of cancer only a few years before I started lessons with Doris Staton. To have accompanied this celebrated singer must have been a special experience indeed. 'A nice person,' Doris Staton said of her with typical British reluctance to overstate.

Doris Staton loathed 'emoting' on stage. The notion of 'playing with the heart' irritated her. 'Either you have a heart or you don't,' she declared contemptuously. For her the heart is to be found in the music, all that is needed is to play what the composer wrote and pay scrupulous attention to dynamics. If I ever had assumed this disciplinarian way of performing might render her music making passionless, I learned differently when on one occasion I arrived early for my lesson and while waiting in the chintz furnished parlour next to the music room could hear my teacher and a performer preparing for a concert playing through Grieg's piano concerto. The soloist, like all the pupils, performed on the Blüthner grand with its seductive warm tones while Doris Staton accompanied on a nearby upright piano. A volcano erupted in the house, the walls shook and finally both players emerged from the music room with flushed faces as though they had just been engaged in passionate sex. I knew that they had both been sitting stock still at their keyboards and focusing on the notes. Doris Staton derided theatrical antics in the concert hall, unnecessary dramatic gestures, grimacing and contortions over the keyboard. She would have been appalled by Lang Lang's mannerisms. I am in two minds about this. While Horowitz, Rubinstein, Kissin and many other celebrated pianists are models of physical reticence, granite at the keyboard while negotiating bravura passages that

might tempt exaggerated gestures, and staying cool when conjuring sounds that move audiences to tears, other pianists are helped by emotional display. As for the music itself Rachmaninov and Chopin demanded that their compositions be played like Mozart. Not surprising when we remember that while their idol's music called for accuracy and refinement, contemporary audiences considered Mozart to be a romantic. The intensity and passion of that composer's music echoed for his contemporary listeners the darkest passages of Dante's *Inferno*.

The organist and inspirational teacher Gillian Weir looks beyond the technical aspects of playing an instrument. Liszt called these drudgery and left his pupils to deal with the practice and solving of technical problems elsewhere. Weir encourages players to 'make friends' with the music rather than treating it as something to be mastered and beaten into submission. For me playing the piano is like engaging in conversations with a good friend. I feel some composers encouraging me over my shoulder, but never Chopin who stays inside his notes and has no interest or time to whisper nice words in my ear. Instead his spirit in the score constantly beckons and urges me to play better. This makes me think of a famous pianist from the distant past who confessed that he visited Chopin's grave regularly to apologise for all the wrong notes. On the other hand Bach, the other main pillar of my repertoire, looks straight at me and nods reassuringly, telling me that the music is meant to challenge and stretch players like me. Smiling in appreciation that I am nourished and inspired by the journey through each piece, he observes that he wrote mostly for his sons and others to learn the art of keyboard playing and composition, food for the mind heart and spirit. Beethoven on the other hand laughs harshly and tells me: 'Fool! What are you thinking? I struggle constantly with my own music. Pay attention to them in every detail but bear in mind that these notes are a means to express something beyond the page.' Mozart winks at me, especially at those moments when I come unstuck, passages he had total control over.

Schubert and Haydn sit next to me playing along. Liszt stands behind me, his long hair brushing against my ear and saying like Beethoven: 'What do you expect? This was meant to astound audiences with my phenomenal technique; of course you can never play it, but thank you for trying. It's nice you appreciate things that in my time people derided me for.' When I sometimes manage to finish one of his Hungarian Rhapsodies with a flourish he shouts  
Bravo!

Concentration is a key aspect of playing because the mind has a tendency to wander. As with all the best conversations, listening is crucial. Making music works best when the body and mind are relaxed but not lazy. Tension affects the mind and fingers. It is helpful to strike a fine balance because being too relaxed makes them lazy. The conversation should flow easily but is most enjoyable and fruitful when the focus remains on the music. If tension stiffens the body, I inhale deeply and hold the breath for a few seconds, then exhale, relax the shoulders, and start again. Gillian Weir also gives a technical tip for playing Bach and Baroque music in particular. The hands and fingers are not expected to move in the same legato way demanded by music written later when the modern piano took over from the harpsichord. The whole hand needs to jump about the keyboard. This helps with playing Scarlatti and Bach. The technical challenge is therefore to land accurately. Once I get the hang of this particular acrobatic move I have a better chance of solving the challenge of awkward passages, such as the Echo movement that ends Bach's B minor Partita from the *Well Tempered Clavier-Übung* the one usually partnered with the *Italian Concerto*, and the concerto itself, where the only way to overcome the difficulties is to train the whole hand to move up and down the keyboard in the way Gillian Weir advises. In the *Goldberg Variations* Bach exploited the harpsichord's double keyboard, which actually makes some of the variations easier to play than on the piano, where the cross hand passages are far more challenging to bring off as the fingers of both hands inevitably tangle into a cat's cradle. I try training the hands to jump to

where they need to be without stiffening the shoulders. This helps also with such works as Beethoven's first Opus 31 sonata which contains a number of awkwardly placed leaps in the left hand. These strides are a regular feature of Chopin, as in early jazz. They provide a solid foundation for what is happening in the upper register and I advise primary focus on the left hand.

Teachers differ in their approach to technical problems. Some believe that difficult bars should be isolated and practiced endlessly, at slow speeds until they are thoroughly mastered.

I follow the principles Doris Staton taught me. First play a piece through, then go back and practise the difficult bars and when they are correct play the piece through again. I take example from Shura Cherkassky, a superlative Ukrainian pianist from the past. When practising and making a mistake he would go back to the beginning again. This is about preserving the meaning and shape of the piece, as important as hitting the right notes.

I add a lesson learned from experience. Practice the first bars if not the whole first page until the patterns and phrases are totally under the fingers. This means playing the difficult ones dozens of times. I have discovered that once the beginning has been understood and plays easily the rest of the piece falls into place. There are exceptions of course, because the most interesting compositions play around with figures and patterns, wrong-footing the player, especially in development sections. Having those first bars and the first page thoroughly learned does help even with the trickiest compositions.

The written demand to play 'accurately' amuses me, because clearly composers intend their music to be played without mistakes. There is an instruction over the second of Chopin's *Variations on Là Ci Darem la Mano* which specifically asks 'veloce, ma accuratamente', and I always burst out laughing. But of course Chopin knew exactly what he wanted. Virtuoso passages can often be played with pedal firmly down in a swirling mist of brilliant sleight of

hand, disguising mistakes, missed notes etc. This variation needs to glitter like a diamond necklace, every note in place. Having said that I trip up every time, and the fourth variation with its virtuosic jumps played at top speed remains beyond my technical ability.

Bach and Chopin are the bedrock of my playing for their complexity and dexterity which keeps my fingers oiled, but also because there is such variety of invention, substance and beauty that never fails to surprise and delight, however often I play them. Another feature they have in common is the challenge of chromatic modulation. Bach explores twelve tone two centuries before Schoenberg, as for instance in the harmonic shifts that occupy the middle section of the expansive B Minor fugue which closes *Book One* of the 48. Not content with composing a fugue in a remote key, such as the E flat minor in *Book Two*, another sublime creation, Bach takes us on a journey through a sequence of chromatic key changes turning the piece into a forest of accidentals, which in my case are aptly named. For amateurs like me they present a never ending challenge, and after years of playing and practise I stumble, sometimes yell and shed tears but never give up. Bach is at his most invigorating when he veers away from the expected path, breaks rules and embarks on harmonic adventures. Max Reger came under fire for his own compositional iconoclasm, and muttered ruefully as he played Bach how that venerated composer would upset the same critics. Bach is also challenging and equally affecting when composing pieces a beginner should be able to play. It is not just that a single wrong note can mar the whole piece. Simplicity can be deceptive: those catchy minuets in the French Suites look easy, but demand concentration.

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Like every amateur pianist wanting to play the whole repertoire I aspire to technical proficiency in the most challenging passages. Therefore I am in awe of the dexterity and control professionals display. Amateurs appreciate the skill of celebrated performers and are

star struck. Meeting Stephen Hough once at a party I became tongue-tied. He is as good-natured as he is supremely gifted, and would have happily continued a conversation despite me uttering idiocies. Fortunately for him his mobile saved us both from an embarrassing encounter. He attended to the call while I stood stammering.

There are two groups of virtuosi. The first encourages and inspires us to explore all kinds of piano music, however difficult. The other has the opposite effect. The second group includes magisterial performers who intimidate. After hearing say Pollini or Argerich dispatch the Chopin *Etudes* at hair-raising speeds and with iron-clad accuracy for instance, I want to close the piano and never play again. Their brilliance tends to spoil the music for me, declaring as it were: 'Listen to grown-up playing. The rest of you forget it.' With this group of formidable talent the perpetual act of creation becomes solid and fixed. I am spellbound by the performances but gain little else from them. They do not inspire. Virtuosi in the first group, including Cortot, Horowitz and Rubinstein from the past, Kissin, Levitt and Hough from the present, equally gifted and breathtakingly brilliant technically, have the ability to invite the listener and the would-be player to take part in the creative process. After listening to Kissin performing the tenth transcendental study by Liszt as an encore at his first Carnegie Hall recital, I just had to learn to play it. No matter that I knew I could not even come within light years of his performance, and would spend the rest of my life being defeated by the demands, I needed to experience Liszt from the inside. The Liszt studies had always been territory beyond my reach, and remain so, but having dared to explore I began to appreciate the frequently underrated composer's imagination, inventiveness and daring. He celebrates the piano as an instrument capable of every effect from orchestral, percussive to the lyrical. He described his more experimental harmonic ideas as 'hurling a lance into the future'. What's more, by getting my fingers and mind round the complexities of the score the music reveals its compositional adventures which are otherwise hidden beneath the virtuosity of star

performances. Liszt's glittering compositions often come over as not much more than bombast tiresomely delivered as fast and as noisily as possible, in the manner of Tom and Jerry scores which once famously did make use of Liszt's second Hungarian Rhapsody. That is the fault of the performer. This type of brilliance prioritises effect over substance. Playing the music without concern for effect helps me uncover what makes the music interesting. Of course the notes have to be there. With Chopin in particular the effect is the substance, as for instance the final pages of the 4<sup>th</sup> Ballade which demand extra degrees of vertiginous virtuosity and are the point of the whole piece, the volcanic eruption to which it builds. This is also the case with Liszt, and the thoughtful virtuoso Evgeny Kissin opened that door for me. Far from being intimidating his performances encourage me to play the pieces for myself, even when I wail aloud at my inadequacy. Once when grumbling about my inability to play like Kissin, a friend stared at me in shock at my stupidity, and said: 'If you played like him you'd be up there on the platform too!' Precisely. Performers who have mastered technique waste no time talking about it. It is as essential a tool of their trade as a spade is to a gardener. They are unafraid of challenges and relish every opportunity to show their skill. Jean Paul Thibaudet declares that he enjoys giving concerts and dazzling with his virtuosity. These performers focus on refining interpretations that mature over their careers. Players like me simply say about our efforts: try and play better, with fewer wrong notes. A harpsichord maker once told me wittily that the purpose of repeats in Baroque music is so that second time round we get it right.

Playing as well as we can is only part of the experience. If it were just about accuracy I would have given up long ago. Players aim for what lies beyond the notes, which is about everything that matters to us. The harpsichordist Susanna Ruzickova said about Bach: he 'tells us not to despair: there is a sense in life and the world.' Having been a survivor of a concentration camp these words coming from her are particularly poignant.

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It is useful to remember that up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century most composers wrote for the amateur market. They earned a living by publishing instrumental and chamber music for domestic use. Bach reserved the most difficult compositions, such as large scale organ works, for him to perform and show off his technical and musical prowess. He wrote the taxing *Goldberg Variations* for a talented court harpsichordist but much of his instrumental music he dedicated to pupils and amateurs for their pleasure and instruction. In that tradition Beethoven also composed challenging works like his concertos to display his unique brilliance as a performer but he wrote also for the amateur market. Despite the difficulties of several sonatas including the *Hammerklavier* I try and play them all. As I also do the whole sequence of Bach's 48, which vary from the deceptively straight forward to the challenging, but restrict myself to groups of two or four at a time, making sure to follow the major key preludes and fugues with their minor pairs. Bach is known to have performed each book at one sitting, so he must have conceived them as a whole, but that requires the stamina and musicianship of an Andras Schiff or Angela Hewitt. I do however play the set of Chopin preludes in one go because this collection of miniatures indicates a clear trajectory and development from the seductive opening in C Major to the demonic final D Minor. The virtuosic demands of the latter along with several other preludes in the set continue to evade me, however hard I work on them ('incessant practice' is the editor's comment). My approach will be written about in detail later.

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## PROGRAMMING THE REPERTOIRE FOR PRACTICE AND PLAY

Certain daily activities are sacrosanct to me, and are my way of keeping despondency concerning world affairs at bay. Even when the day is busy with other matters, so long as I'm

at home I insist on painting a watercolour each afternoon, and play the piano for at least an hour or two in the early evening, and briefly before going to bed. These moments are as important as eating: sustenance for soul and body. Before opening a score I limber my fingers with several scales, ending with A Major from bottom to top of the piano and back.

Each day's play begins with a Scarlatti sonata. I came late to these miniature masterpieces and initially struggled with their special demands, wide leaps, intricate scale work and rapid cross hands. The difficulties in Bach rise from the music and his ideas taking him into unexplored territory, whereas the tricky passages in Scarlatti are meant to improve technique, a thorough work-out for the fingers. Now familiar with what his contemporaries called 'polished diamonds' I realize that the technical challenges are their musical purpose, which is why making no mistakes is essential, even if it means frequent practice and playing them several times over. Scarlatti helps focus the mind and accuracy for whoever I decide to play next. The two hundred sonatas in the Dover edition display striking variety. They are never tiresome to play however stressful the practice. There is barely any repetition of ideas which appear to come to Scarlatti like seeds bursting from a pod. Each one flowers into something different and as full of individual character as the others.

After limbering up with Scarlatti and sharpening my focus on playing as accurately as possible I embark on the complete published keyboard works by Bach, taking several weeks to complete the cycle, and follow them with Handel's suites and chaconnes which are gems of keyboard literature. They do not aim for the monumental range of Bach, but brim with Handel's invention and are a consolation to play. His keyboard legacy is a fraction of Bach's who takes me on more adventurous journeys, but do not underestimate Handel. The last suite in F minor pre-dates Brahms by well over a century. Every time I play the adagio first movement with its unexpected and poignant modulations I have to remind myself that this is baroque and not romantic music. The *Chaconne in G major* with over sixty variations takes

the pianist in every direction. Some are straight forward, but several are challenging. They provide a good preparation for playing baroque music, which seems to have been Handel's intention. The variations seems to be added without the kind of overall structure that make his even more adventurous set in C minor so interesting, and they end abruptly with a strange spare final variation where the exposed harmonies look forward over two centuries.

The *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* starts me off on the Bach journey. It not only oils the fingers, but has a splendour that opens the door to what is to follow. I will go more into detail about this piece and experiences I had occasionally performing it. For now I focus on covering the repertoire. The companion pieces are equally substantial, including a brilliant *Fantasia* which tests hand agility. I practise and play these pieces separately, not as a group. They share an outgoing concertante quality, orchestral in tone with deliberately virtuosic passages that probably assumed there would be an appreciative audience. The set of seven toccatas which I play next are more intimate, intricately composed for domestic performance and with a sense of drama to attract players and listeners alike. People don't associate Bach with being witty, but the toccatas are full of high spirits as well as moments of achingly sweet melancholy. This sense of humour may not be laugh-out-loud like Haydn, but do allow a glimpse of Bach's playful side. He is at his most technically challenging in these movements though, with pages that demand technical brilliance. I play each toccata separately, not as a sequence. One at a time is quite enough for my amateur fingers. They are quite different one from the other, and all equally inventive.

Incidental pieces including a sprightly early E major capriccio with some awkward passages, and a rare jewel, the little heard fugue on a theme by Albinoni I play as and when I'm in the mood. The fugue is a substantial chromatic composition, similar in pace and density to the B minor fugue that ends Book One of the 48. The unexpected modulations and the way the lines cross between the hands make them equally tricky to play despite the slow speed. The

fugue on a theme by Albinoni is a beautiful piece rarely heard and played. Bach totally confident in his abilities, showed keen interest in the work of his contemporaries from whom he learnt, using ideas which he then took further in his inimitable style.

Better known pieces are the *Italian Concerto* and large-scale partita *French Overture in B Minor*. The concerto is foisted on learners and can cripple them. I guess many have given up the piano because of failure to get this piece under the fingers. It looks straight forward on the page, similar to Mozart's A major sonata with the Turkish march which is also deceptively simple, both not lying comfortably under the fingers. The Bach Concerto is best played whole, including the lyrical slow andante and exhilarating presto finale.

The *French Overture* prepares me for the sets of suites and partitas. The English Suites are like concertos for solo instrument, virtuosic and expansive with orchestral sonorities. The set of partitas is more intimate. While recording them the forte-pianist Andreas Staier observed to me that Bach gave a different title to each movement, setting a wide variety of dance and musical forms. Intended for the amateur market the partitas stretch players' technique and are uniformly difficult to play, although the last three are grander and ever more technically and musically challenging. The gigue of the final partita is a tour de force, both a complex fugue and a deconstruction and apotheosis of the dance. I round off this stage of the journey with the French Suites which being shorter seem to be less demanding than the English set, but Bach at his easiest is still challenging. It helps to have got my fingers round the English Suites and the partitas before playing them because it helps to be relaxed and confident.

Now come the 48 preludes and fugues in two separate sequences of 24, which despite being practice pieces represent a peak of instrumental composition. They have been labelled the Old Testament of keyboard literature to Beethoven piano sonatas' New Testament, a tag which gives them an unapproachable even forbidding aspect. This is not my experience of

either composer. They are life enhancing. Even when making technical demands, the 48 travel through an ever changing constantly surprising panorama. Bach encompasses a variety of moods from the light fantastical to the solemn and transcendental, from tortuous suffering to moments of calm resignation. When playing them I am constantly astounded that any human being could have created this monument to the art of playing a single instrument with such a wealth of ideas and at such sustained quality.

Whereas the 48 celebrate variety and contrast, *The Art of the Fugue* takes a few themes and weaves them into different fugal patterns, starting as intricate as anything he'd already composed then becoming ever more complex. For all the challenges, musical and technical, playing this final group of instrumental fugues fills me with serenity, even as I'm negotiating my way through the forest of knotty counterpoint. Bach takes me on a far reaching journey with just a few different but interrelated themes. After the first eleven fugues my fingers simply can't reach all the notes of the following contrapuncti, and am wondering whether they were perhaps written for several instruments or were not meant to be played at all, just read on the page. Other pianists however do manage, somehow. I do play the final unfinished fugue which in the opening bars plunges into unfamiliar harmonic territory and then proceeds with ever more extreme modulations. Till recently I've felt that maybe Bach didn't finish this fugue because he couldn't, the complexity actually defeating him. However it appears that he did in fact complete it: no surprise because Bach could do anything and everything. The original is lost, and the incomplete copy that remains ends tantalisingly mid-bar. It is frustrating trying to imagine how he would have brought it to conclusion, particularly using the theme based on the letters of his name which he sneaks into the composition towards what we know as the final bars that end in mid-flow. Still, even finishing on those notes left hanging in the air does not disturb the serenity I experience playing the set. There is a personal memory described in *the white house: From Fear to a Handshake* (published by O

Books). After a particularly painful meeting between survivors and perpetrators during plans to build a memorial for several thousand murdered Muslims in the Prijedor region of North Western Bosnia, I needed to recover my spirits and begged to be allowed to play a piano at the local music college. The principal guided me and my copy of the *Art of the Fugue* to one of the practice studios and left me alone. Even after playing the first eleven and calming down as a consequence it would be too much to say along with Susanna Ruzickova's comment on playing Bach that I felt all 'was well with the world'.

I continue the Bach journey with his *Goldberg Variations*. Despite the intimidating sequence of academic canons and virtuosic interludes, this phenomenal composition manages to express a wide variety of emotions. It is said that the aristocrat who commissioned them suffered from insomnia and wanted a piece of music to while away the long night hours. It is unlikely these musically fascinating variations packed with wit, beauty and ideas would send him to sleep. My reckoning is that Bach composed the piece with the player specifically in mind: the technical challenges would certainly keep him awake. The name of the variations after all refers not to the count who commissioned them but to the gifted harpsichordist Goldberg who performed them. Each time I complete the set, usually taking me between one and a half and two hours, I feel as though I have been on a strenuous but exhilarating walk over hills and along dales. The repetition of the elegant theme at the end is for me a special moment: it's rare that I'm not feeling deeply moved. Some musicians claim with hyperbole that music can change you. Well, in the case of the *Goldberg Variations* I am a changed person every time I finish playing them.

To complete the Bach cycle takes weeks, and I wind down with the *Two and Three Part Inventions* that are for me a distillation of Bach's art: a deceptive simplicity which disguises considerable subtlety. For me they glow with modest beauty after everything I've been playing before.

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It is possible to trace a certain chronology in Bach, a compositional approach that for instance changes from Book 1 to Book 2 of the 48, and a difference in style between the early pieces like the E major capriccio also a beautiful set of variations in the Italian manner (much favoured by Rosalyn Tureck) and the *Goldberg Variations*. Among the countless fatuous observations I used to make as a pretentious young man, who thought he knew more than he did, I once declared to Andreas Staier that I judged Book 1 to be more difficult than Book 2. In typical friendly fashion he nodded, but his eyes expressed incredulity. If anything Book 2 is far more difficult than Book 1, but for amateur players like me, Book 1 presents many technical difficulties of a virtuosic nature, whereas the difficulties in Book 2, though frequently more challenging, are of a different nature. For instance the large scale A minor fugue in Book 1 lies uncomfortably under the fingers whereas the similar but even more complex B flat minor fugue in Book 2 is laid out in such a way that the hands, after practice, can negotiate the tricky counterpoint without resort to awkward stretches. However difficult Bach's later works are, there are fewer finger-twisting passages, not because the music is easier but because, as far as I'm concerned, Bach arranges the notes more comfortably for the hands. I still need practice to interweave the fingers, crossing into each other's territory, and to motivate the whole hand to jump up and down the keyboard when necessary. As in his phenomenal sequence of cantatas, a number of the earlier ones are strikingly mature expressing a drama and poignancy that match anything in the later works. So I play the keyboard works in the way described above regardless of chronology.

On the other hand I approach the Beethoven sonatas in the order they were written. The development of Beethoven's style and thinking, the startling innovations and changes that pushed musical boundaries way beyond traditional limits remain perennially surprising and challenging. For this reason I play his sonatas one after the other from beginning to end,

interrupting the sequence with his sets of variations, wherever the opus numbers indicate. I play the marvellous ones based on a theme that Beethoven used twice before, most famously in the Eroica symphony's last movement, after the Opus 31 set of sonatas. As for the dazzling C minor variations without an opus number, the style is so close to the 4<sup>th</sup> piano concerto that I play them midway through the sonata cycle, before the *Waldstein Sonata*, alongside the five concertos. I have more technical difficulties with the 1<sup>st</sup> concerto than the ones following, in particular its last movement. Some of the shorter sonatas are less often performed but are if anything Beethoven at his most adventurous and technically challenging. I will write in more detail about my approach to them, because for sure I shouldn't be playing most, but they are one of the main purposes of all my practice. The last three are like reaching the summit of a high mountain with panoramic views on every side. After a pause I traverse the *Diabelli Variations* which are a distillation of Beethoven's piano style, with added bravura and wit. As a young man Beethoven used to move audiences with his improvisations but irritated by the women weeping would shock them out of their sentimental languor, banging his fists with sudden force on the piano keys with a harsh laugh. The *Diabelli Variations* are as Igor Levitt describes 'a slap in the face' with their challenge to assumptions about music, especially its power to stir the emotions and pique the intellect. Beethoven forever gives a different perspective while never denying his ability to move and excite. The subtle change of rhythm from a waltz to a minuet at the end is not only a final inspired challenge to expectation but delivers a magical effect. When Bach brings back the original theme at the end of the *Goldberg Variations* we are moved but in a different way. Instead of varying the basic rhythm which he has been doing throughout the set, turning the aria into a gigue for instance, the older composer adored by Beethoven follows the final virtuosic flourishes with a peasant song in canon form, a quod libet, an 'as you please', before crowning the variations with a

repeat of the aria theme which without a single altered note has been mysteriously transformed by all that has happened in between.

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Composers have their particular style, a personal fingerprint expressed in a musical idiom, each needing to be learnt like a language unique to the person. The way of playing Scarlatti is not the same as for Bach. Even though they inspired each other, Chopin, who did most of the influencing, Schumann, Brahms and Liszt have each a particular individuality that determines a technique specific to their personality such that I personally prefer not to play them on the same day: it is like having my attention divided at a party. I'm better at one to one. These major romantic composers for the piano demand separate approaches. This is perhaps not surprising because one of the chief characteristics of the romantic art movement is a celebration of the unique individuality of each person.

So, how to start practicing the technically challenging pieces?

I need to remember first that each composition of whatever age and style has a kernel, an idea, a figure, a progression that is the core of the whole work. This manifests itself usually in the first bars. My way of entering a piece is to practice those first bars until they lie comfortably under the fingers. I have discovered then that the rest of the piece can indeed fall into place. It is my laziness and lack of focus that cause mistakes. There are of course tricky traffic snarl ups later in the pieces, particularly in Bach fugues, but even they become easier to practise and negotiate once the first bars are successfully negotiated, 'negotiation' being the operative word because playing music is a constant dialogue between me and the composer.

Modulation can confuse in the more complex pieces and many compositions tend to stray far from the home key so it helps to establish the key of the piece and keep it at the back of my mind throughout. Bach and Chopin have this in common and can wrong foot me. Bach frequently strays in the first two bars, so casting doubt on the home key, whether it is even major or minor. He creates his own syntax, so everything he writes makes sense within those rules, because however adventurous the composition becomes, Bach keeps to them. Hans Sachs tells his protégé Walter in *The Mastersingers of Nuremberg* this truth about composing a song: ‘make your own rules, then follow them’, which applies to any creative process. Mozart and Schubert can catch the player out with unexpected modulations. Mozart generally does this towards the end of a piece just when you think he is wrapping up in the home key and this surprise generally triggers an emotional climax which guides the player to the heart of the composition. Schubert does the same with poignant effect whereas Mozart is more often than not also being mischievous, keeping both player and audiences alert. The final bars of his variations on *Ein Weib ist das herrlichste Ding/A Wife is the most wonderful thing* provide a good example of that. It is useful to practice the whole last page and be prepared, because these are the moments that confound expectations and dismiss any notions that Mozart is being clockwork predictable. Any mistake spoils the climax. Beethoven admired this effect and uses it in his early works, particularly the first two piano concertos which are clearly modelled on Mozart.

So, the basic approach to playing involves focusing practice on the opening page and then on crucial bars where, as frequently in a Bach fugue or Liszt or Chopin study, there is a knot of complex modulation, counterpoint and passages of exhibitionist brilliance. Then there are pieces which elude me constantly, however much I practice them. My top finger resolutely refuses to land on the correct upper notes of the fearsome leaps in Liszt’s *Campanella Study*. Chopin’s 24<sup>th</sup> Prelude in D Minor is for the big boys and girls, again because of the leaps in

the left hand, as well as the fast scale passages running trickily across the rhythm. I hoot with laughter at the scene in the Hollywood film of Oscar Wilde's *Portrait of Dorian Grey* in which the eponymous arch manipulator regularly tosses off the phenomenally difficult piece note perfectly. Mind you, eternal youth might well have given him enough time and energy to give it the endless practice required. There is a similar scene in Jean Negulesco's *Humoresque* about musicians training to be concert performers when Oscar Levant dashes off at an impossibly fast tempo Chopin's fifth study, the one known misleadingly as the 'black key study', from the opus 10 set. A young woman is suitably impressed and immediately after the emphatic final chord he cockily walks off with his conquest. The scene is of course meant as a joke. The main substance of the film is truthful about the sacrifices and labour demanded to achieve professional success, the hours of incessant practice, the need for patronage, and the cost to personal life and relationships.

There are other useful guidelines garnered from years of practice. They work for me, but may not suit others. One as I've already said but cannot be repeated enough is to focus on the bass line, not just in Baroque music which is built on that steady rhythmic and harmonic foundation, but also in the Romantic repertoire where the bass, even if only accompanying, has leaps and tricky patterns which require practice. Once I get to know the piece the treble tends to look after itself, even complicated passage work, as I concentrate on getting the left hand right. Chopin's waltzes depend not only on accuracy in the accompaniment but also call for a marked Viennese lilt, emphasising the slightly quickened pace between the first and second beats. Chopin gives extra emphasis by occasionally vamping the rhythm for several bars before the musical ideas start. This subtle rubato is a matter of individual taste, but for me these pieces depend on it, in the same way as his mazurkas gain in character by emphasis on the kicking third beat. Chopin apparently insisted on this, even when his contemporary Meyerbeer complained that it had the effect of altering the basic rhythm into four beats in the

bar. If done the way the composer intends, this emphasis implies a flexibility that does not alter the basic three in a bar. 'Rubato' means robbing time. If done without exaggeration the effect might seem that way, but isn't, because the time stolen in the first beat is made up in the next two beats. Garrick Olsen, Byron Janis and Artur Rubinstein provide scintillating examples of this use of rubato. They understand the sinuous character of Chopin's waltzes, and their infectious rhythm. But this way of playing presents difficulties to amateurs. I advise paying attention to the bass and establishing the characteristic Viennese lilt, which is both lascivious and witty: seduction with a smile. The waltz is about sex so there has to be a hint of urgency and excitement. The waltz originally shocked bourgeois society because it encouraged close physical contact between the dancers, connecting bodies at hip level. Willi Boskovsky and the Vienna Philharmonic are a template for how to perform the waltz because they play as though the music is breathed. Incidentally I find the courantes in Bach suites easier to understand if each bar is played split into two sets of a three beat waltz. I am probably wrong, but the seeds of the future waltz are planted in this quick and heady French dance. Out of the Chopin set of waltzes I particularly love the more technically tricky ones, such as Number 5 in F minor where the waltz beat is further complicated by Chopin adding a cross rhythm. The effect is exhilarating, not dissimilar to the courantes I just mentioned. When played well it is impossible for audiences to resist jumping up and dancing. Chopin explored throughout his life three particular dance forms focusing on their different characters. His polonaises are ceremonial with a nationalist fervour but frequently tend to wistful melancholy. Most come in pairs: the Opus 44 expresses both aspects at their extreme, so for me it is important to play the two in the order Chopin published them. The famous opus 22 military polonaise which roars encouragement in battle in expectation of victory is immediately followed by a dark-hued companion which expresses the other side of battle, its tragedy and desolation, without surrendering anger or defiance. The following two polonaises

are stand alone pieces which encompass both aspects. The first one even interrupts the triumphalism with a wistful mazurka, like a dream of another life. The other military polonaise is exhilarating to play but only on those rare occasions my confidence and technique are up to the challenge. Fortunately we players are not in competition so we do not have to play it as fast as performers who need to show off their brilliance. They should take heed of his tempo marking which is not fast. The grandeur of the polonaise is more important than speed. As for the expansive substantial *Polonaise Fantaisie*, for me one of Chopin's most marvellous creations, the dance itself takes a back seat to a thoughtful and emotional reflection on what it means. Chopin's mazurkas are generally considered to be his most personal compositions, and they follow his life from beginning to end. Their chief difficulty is the subtlety of expression: so much happens in just a few bars. He also experiments with harmony and rhythm preparing the way for musical developments half a century later. Chopin inspired and influenced Debussy. The polonaises sound outgoing whereas the mazurkas are more inward. The latter are certainly dances, but for small gatherings not brilliant state occasions. The waltzes express a different character, vigorous and dreamy in turn, but always with a lightness of spirit. They are airborne.

The bass line is fundamental in more ways than the obvious one in all these dances, however varied and different their character. I focus on hitting the right notes. The shape of the whole composition then falls into place, organically, and reveals its full splendour, however technically demanding to an amateur.

Chopin's pupils remembered instructions as to how the music should be played... for instance he observed to an enthusiastic performer that the octaves in the third scherzo should not be performed too fast, however tempting for those virtuosi who want to astound audiences in the manner of Liszt. Played slightly slower gives the piece more power. Bach on the other hand left few guidelines. The few that he wrote on his scores give a sense of how he wanted to

prevent a wrong-headed approach, so for instance the 24<sup>th</sup> Fugue of the 48 is specifically marked Largo, to stop players taking it too fast and he is specific about the phrasing. This is helpful for playing similar pieces which do not come with such instructions from the composer. He wanted his counterpoint to flow in such a way that all the detail of his composition can be clearly heard. The wonderful fugue on a theme by Albinoni is similar to the 24<sup>th</sup> in B Minor, and should therefore be taken at the same measured pace. Largo is not as slow as a Lento or Adagio. Bach performances provide such an extreme variety of approach that it is hard to decide how his music should go. Susana Ruzickova performs like a teacher, her 48 sounding particularly severe on a harpsichord with a thunderous bass and an upper register that has less resonance. However on a lighter different sounding instrument she gives a sublime performance of the *Goldberg Variations*, one of the best I have ever heard and worth the price of the whole anniversary boxed set. She performs with a clarity that reveals every detail of the music. One can take issue with some extreme tempi in her Bach playing, tending too slow in the 22<sup>nd</sup> Prelude in the first book of the 48 which should surely flow at a comfortable pace, not be a dirge. But as a whole her Bach is satisfying as well as instructive. Barenboim tends to romanticise but he is nonetheless beyond reproach because his personality, musicality, experience and intelligence can't fail to give meaning to every note he plays. Andras Schiff performs with an almost intimidating level of perfection and his reputation is assured. Although admiring and respecting his mastery of the music I find his performances sometimes enervating in the manner of picking ever so preciously at notes and regulating all the lines of counterpoint so they sound smoothly equal. This tends to remove character from the music. I'm aware of being in a tiny minority. There is no doubting the care and skill in which Schiff so painstakingly moulds the music not a single note unconsidered, and always played as though written for piano. Bach used the specific sonority of the instrument at his disposal, one in which the bass is stronger and therefore louder than the

upper clefs, to create dynamics which add variety to the sound. I will say more about this when considering specific pieces where Bach uses the different registers to dramatic effect. Most pianists make no attempt to imitate the sound of a harpsichord, and Bach sounds wonderful on the piano, so there is no need to make the instrument sound like any other. Rosalyn Tureck, a specialist in performing Bach on the piano, surprised sceptical critics with her declaration on how his music should be played taking into consideration that we have no record of his performance style and can only surmise. For Tureck decisions about tempo and style were intuitive, which for me is an encouragement, as I will explain later when writing about pieces where matters of speed and interpretation can be controversial. Angela Hewitt is as formidably perfect as Andras Schiff, and allows individual flourishes especially when it comes to embellishments which in Bach's time were meant to reflect the personality of the player. Glen Gould for all his eccentricity is always challenging, inspiring and deep delving. Of all the Bach specialist pianists I have heard he manages to be both true to the specific sound of the piano, percussive as well as lyrical, and also to the sound Bach might have heard from his own instruments. Gould's take on the F Minor *Three Part Invention* is a striking example of the clarity of his thought and touch: each note, phrase and line expressed to match the immaculate craftsmanship of the composer.

In general the way I approach Bach on the piano is to avoid the pedal at all times and imagine the lines of counterpoint as a peal of bells.

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About the romantic repertoire my piano teacher Doris Staton gave another piece of advice: the more passionate and virtuosic a piece of music, the cooler and calmer the player should be. This reminds me of Richard Strauss's comment on Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, famous for its sustained emotional intensity. Referring to the monumental feat of this opera's

composition that forged a new musical language Strauss declared that Wagner must have had a 'head of marble'. Professional singers and performers need to keep a distance from the tumult of emotion in music which requires a steady focus on the notes, dynamics, the vocal chords and the movement of the fingers to fulfil the composer's demands. The lack of familiarity with the experience of performing makes it hard for me to restrain emotion when on rare occasions friends ask to hear me play the piano. Performance does add a whole new dimension to the experience of just playing notes.

Doris Staton lived unmarried in a tidy semi-detached house with chintz curtains and furniture coverings. She gave the impression of being staid and old-fashioned, disapproving of excess and impropriety, but on the occasion I overheard her practice the Grieg concerto with a soloist I sensed passions burning below the genteel surface. Much in demand as an accompanist, she knew a number of famous singers, including Kathleen Ferrier who signed photos with friendly greetings and gratitude. They were framed and displayed on the Blüthner grand piano in her studio. As a teacher she epitomised the school of discipline and technique but with an appreciation of music's beauty and purpose: a serious matter. For every concert, however humble the venue, she would dress in a gown, jewels and fur coat as for a royal occasion. Observing my nervousness about exams, as well as discovering I could not play from memory however hard I practised, she studied the grade pieces with me without forcing those particular tortures, surmising correctly that I played for love and had no ambitions to be a concert pianist. When she presented me with two volumes of the complete Schubert Sonatas I will never forget the solemn look on her face and the way she gently and thoughtfully stroked the title page with her arthritic fingers, as it were challenging me not to disappoint her assessment of me. During my subsequent years of travel, living and working in different places, only once returning to Bolton by which time she had died, I missed the opportunity of thanking her for a training that enabled me to carry on playing in a way that

made all the difference to my life. Her own performing style followed that of her idol Myra Hess: pearly tone and with the phrases thoughtfully crafted to reveal the structure and meaning of the music. I still repeat her technical advice silently to myself whatever and whenever I am playing.

Her gift touched me in particular because she considered Schubert's sonatas 'difficult to make interesting', a judgement which puzzled me because I have always loved what Schumann once described as Schubert's 'heavenly length'. In those days many people shared her opinion. An elderly Polish man who shared lodgings with me during my first years in London in 1969 expressed contempt for Schubert, declaring that no one could possibly sit through a whole recital of his music, unlike that of Chopin. After traversing Beethoven chronologically I do the same with Schubert whose later sonatas are for me another peak of piano literature. Playing the last sonata is always special. Artur Rubinstein chose the slow movement as his favourite desert island disc declaring that he always considered being asked to perform it an honour. This came as a surprise because I had never associated Rubinstein with Schubert, knowing him as a Chopin specialist. For that reason when playing this sonata I always think of the elderly Polish man, who while we lived at the same address suddenly committed suicide for reasons that remain a mystery.

After the Chopin studies I tackle the impromptus including the *Fantaisie Impromptu* with its famous *I'm forever chasing rainbows* melody. Although written and published separately I play them as a group. The scherzos and ballades follow, but I never play them in sets, because again they were composed at different times. Instead I play them in pairs, the first Scherzo with the first Ballade, etc. and continue with the Barcarolle and opus 49 Fantaisie, also together. Both the two late sonatas contain passages that are way beyond my technical ability, but I tackle them nonetheless because they contain the meatiest music he composed, each sonata quite different in character and mood and both substantial musically. The

waltzes, mazurkas and polonaises need to be played in the opus number groups they were published. The nocturnes I play at any time and not necessarily in order, but I generally round off the journey through Chopin with the concertos and concert pieces which are pure pleasure, even if their technical difficulties will be forever beyond me. *The Allegro de Concert* has a Lisztian quality, seemingly written for a large audience. This style strikes me as unusual for Chopin who generally prefers a more intimate venue even for his most bravura compositions. I love the Irish tinged melody that threads its way through the glittering passage work and wonder if Chopin wanted to pay tribute to John Field whose nocturnes and concertos influenced his style. The virtuoso parts are tricky to play. Rarely performed it is a wonderful work but calls for bravura alongside lyrical moments which need plenty of time to breathe. Parts of it remind me of Liszt. Claudio Arrau, a great Lisztian, does the work justice in his recording, because this artist always gives Chopin space for the ideas and emotions to expand while providing a sturdy structural framework as well as technical polish.

Liszt presents a markedly different kind of technical virtuosity, which is why I never play him together with Chopin. It is a matter of expert opinion but Sviatoslav Richter, a superb interpreter of both composers, discussing the studies declares without hesitation that those by Chopin are the more difficult to play. In my case it is easier to cheat in Liszt, leaving out notes and playing octave passages with just one note, something Richter has absolutely no need to do, Chopin however demands the accuracy of a Mozart. Not a single note can be missed out or fudged. Liszt looks blacker on the page, and of course accuracy is essential, but for an amateur like me one can get away with fudging the impossible octave runs and jumps in *Mazeppa* for instance and still gain pleasure from playing the piece. Not in any circumstances would I agree to perform either of the sets. I do not allow anyone within earshot of my practice; and pity anyone who has to put up with it, even if in a room at the other end of the house, poor Donald.

As with Chopin I start my Liszt journey with studies, first the transcendental twelve which I shouldn't even be looking at, then the not much less challenging Paganini six, and rounding off with the concert studies. I can't do without these sumptuous tone poems, rewarding compositions not just technical exercises. They prepare my cheating hands (which avoid the fiendish bravura octave passages) for the B Minor Sonata and many incidental pieces but mainly for my favourite Liszt: all three books of the *Années de Pèlerinage* which I fell in love with as a boy, determined to play them at some point in my life whatever the technical difficulties. The Hungarian rhapsodies appeal to my Eastern European roots, but only now after years of practise can I begin to enjoy playing them. The virtuosic fireworks are an essential part of pieces which have the kind of soulful slow introductions with which I have a special affinity, all heavy sighs and breast-beating, but these don't work without the elated climaxes being dispatched confidently with a flourish.

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Playing Haydn and Mozart is for me a matter of being on top of not only the technical but also the musical challenges: and that only comes with years of playing them. A major reward of keeping at it for decades in my case is that at long last they are friendlier to my fingers. It is the same with Mendelssohn who imbues traditional musical forms, baroque and classical, with yearning early 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism: a personal and emotional response to the material. His compositions tend to be under-estimated, criticised for not being forward looking in the manner of his contemporaries Schumann and Liszt, both of whom he inspired. Schumann declared that he wished he could write with Mendelssohn's deceptive facility. Liszt comes directly out of Mendelssohn and takes him into full blown mid 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism, as does Wagner for all his anti-Semitic dismissal. This attack on Mendelssohn unfortunately still sticks but when listened to with an 'innocent' ear his music always surprises with its polished quality and often startling originality. He famously worked hard at

his compositions. They may sound effortless but being self-critical he kept revising them. Some of his compositions like the opus 35 six preludes and fugues are particularly fine, but only the first one gets played occasionally. They are a tribute not only to his revered Bach but also to Beethoven who expanded the fugue into new musical territory, the latter composer at his most adventurous, challenging for the listener as well as player. Mendelssohn and Brahms hesitate to explore the form beyond boundaries broken by Beethoven. Mendelssohn's adulation and respect for Bach and Handel is suffused with feeling and liberation. In my opinion he is at his considerable best in the *Variations Serieuses*, which demand considerable practice. Their succinctness and high level of inspiration puts them for me on the level of the best variations written by anybody, even the Diabelli and Goldbergs. This is heresy of course because their brevity cannot match the depth and variety of Bach and Beethoven, but they shine like jewels. Mendelssohn makes not only considerable technical demands on amateurs like me: he needs exceptional sensitivity of touch.

Britten reckoned Brahms to be a bad composer and famously played him to be reminded of that fact. Brahms is difficult to play, not just technically. I need to get inside the skin and emotion of each piece, and let the music dictate how it should be played. The difficulty is a matter of balance, on the one hand not overdoing the emotion, on the other not understating it. Brahms for all his prickly nature is about feeling, therefore sentiment is important. But it must not be contrived. If I follow the dynamics with an open heart and sensitivity the music and the personality of Brahms come to meet me. As to technique and mistakes, Ethel Smythe cheers me up in her memoirs with stories of Brahms' foibles, and fellow musicians complaining about him playing 'fistfuls of wrong notes'.

Schumann is an essential part of my repertoire. The Eusebius and Florestan aspects of his bipolar nature appeal to me. Much depends on the quality of the piano. A good instrument like mine helps bring Schumann alive. There is so much tonal and compositional subtlety as well

as emotional and intellectual variety in his works that only on my present piano, my most prized possession, I begin to explore and what is more, enjoy playing Schumann. Other pianos made me struggle. The technical problems remain, but tonally my present piano is more sympathetic. Most performances of Schumann leave me cold, but playing him is a different matter. There is an intimacy to his writing that works best in direct communication between me and the composer. It is like being allowed to eavesdrop on a private conversation. A third party performer turns me into an audience and takes away this intimacy. Even his concerto is like chamber music. Liszt in contrast demands an audience. Clara Schumann reported laughing and needing to leave the room when the two composers fell into a heated argument as to whether Schumann's concerto could even be called one. I relate to the vulnerability of Schumann, his antipathy to gestures, his honesty and craziness and so many moments of inspiration that take the breath away. He is also perpetually contemporary. Even those who were inspired by him to write their own sequence of miniatures, however wonderful (as for instance the charming Seasons by Tchaikovsky) they cannot match Schumann's startling invention. When I play him and someone overhears, they invariably come and ask: 'who wrote that?' The pianist Gordon Back, who became a professor in the Royal College of Music, used to visit and generously go through Schubert duets with me. On one occasion he played Schumann's second piano sonata and when he had finished turned to me deeply moved and said, 'Schumann is marvellous isn't he!'

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#### A WORD ABOUT MY PIANO

Much depends on the instrument and my relationship to it. A complex mechanism made of bits of wood, twisted gut and metal, but as Shakespeare commented about the viol, 'it can haul the soul out of the body'. This of course depends on the player, the human interpreter,

and reminds me of another Shakespeare quote, in which Hamlet converses about man with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern both of whom he mistrusts. His famous speech in that scene is therefore tinged with bitter irony: 'What a piece of work is man' 'in action, how like an angel' 'in apprehension how like a god', 'the paragon of animals'...

In an act of selfless generosity my father's second wife gifted me her first husband's treasured possession, an upright Bechstein piano, which she could have sold for a lot of money. I met it first on my first visit to Leeds where she had been left widowed to raise three children. My father ended up in a second marriage and I ended up with a fine Bechstein. Made almost a hundred and fifty years ago in Berlin when the piano manufacturers were at the height of their reputation and had the appreciation of composers like Brahms, this is now my most treasured possession too.

I had been practising for years on an adequate piano but the moment my fingers touched this Bechstein suddenly the music gained new dimensions: it seemed to play itself. The piano houses a harp-like construction within a modest polished wooden casing. A mechanism of dampers and felts magically produces a variety of tone colours that is far from modest. When the pedals slip and come unstuck they are easy to push back into place. The instrument needs tuning about once or twice a year, and benefits from bowls of water being topped up and placed on the floor beside the pedal levers. The vapour keeps the action from drying out. There seems to be nothing complicated about its functioning, and yet it never fails to sustain me and to paraphrase Shakespeare, 'haul the soul out of my body'.

My father and his second wife eventually migrated to Australia where my father had been offered a university lectureship. I expected the piano to go with them, but to my surprise his wife decided to leave it with me. This rare gift beyond anything I could dream of touched me so deeply that every time before sitting down to play I send her a prayer of thanks.

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## PLAYING FROM THE SCORE

Unable to play from memory my eyes need as much contact with the score as possible, taking them off only when my fingers need to know what keys they have to reach. I enjoy the beauty and shape of the notes on the page. Bach's hand-written scores with their curves and flowing river of notes are among the most pleasing to look at, and have long been considered works of art in their own right. Each composer has their individual visual impact on the page.

Mozart is neat and orderly with unexpected moments of drama. I imagine him writing most of his compositions straight down with minimum need of correction or alteration. He is known to have done this but on the other hand he himself reported putting much effort and work into his compositions. Beethoven lets you see that process. It is possible to imagine the chaos on the score before he reached the version which satisfied him. Schubert seems relaxed but as the pages turn and notes veer off-piste, passages can suddenly test the player. Chopin looks as complicated as he sounds. Liszt's scores are frightening, especially with the amount of notes on both staves and many pages are so black that there is hardly any white left. The passion and drama is visible, but also those moments of calm when he reduces everything to an almost bleak simplicity and calm.

Haydn scores look as satisfying as they are to listen to but are deceptive for the player. As Alfred Brendel correctly points out, Haydn is too hard for both children and grown-ups, adapting Artur Schnabel's observation that Mozart is too easy for children (I disagree) and too difficult for grown-ups (definitely agreed). Haydn demands a mature understanding of his emotion and wit. He wrote for proficient players. Despite the technical challenges Mozart is approachable even for a beginner. In that sense both Brendel and Schnabel are right.

Playing on the piano I can enjoy three senses: touch, sight and hearing.

# THE MUSIC

## BACH

Even though intended as instruction, Bach's instrumental work is also sensual. How could it not be? Dance underpins everything he writes including many fugues (for instance the gigue of the C Sharp Minor in Book Two of the 48): the languid allemandes, sinuous courantes, tender and noble sarabandes, graceful minuets and bouncing giges. This is what makes Bach, who enjoyed to dance, a pleasure to play, and an inspiration to every musical style that followed including jazz and pop. There is sensuality even in those frustratingly tricky passages where Bach crosses the hands in contrary motion so the fingers inevitably become enmeshed like a messed up cat's cradle. Bach's counterpoint is about respect and attention: the melodic lines negotiated by the fingers have to relate to each other with equality.

## BACH'S CHROMATIC FANTASIA AND FUGUE

I used to play this like a romantic transcription, full pedal, loud and grand, and associate it with my disastrous year teaching. At this private school the children of wealthy parents who lived abroad in places like Malta, Turkey, Persia as Iran used to be known, and Hong Kong were not expected to do well academically or to pass exams. With Ben my best friend from university, we taught the boys according to our own interests, reading Homer, the Njal's Saga, and other classics, encouraging them to illustrate essays and write their own plays. Some boys resisted and enjoyed humiliating me with practical jokes and pranks, occasionally embarrassing me in front of the whole school. Others took well to this unorthodox curriculum. We paid lip service to the exam syllabus by studying Auden and Shakespeare,

spending months over the first scene of *Romeo and Juliet*, discussing the themes of conflict, violence and adolescent behaviour which the boys understood only too well. Some of them reported to the headmaster that they enjoyed the lessons so he unwisely signed them up for the exams, which of course they failed wretchedly. Fortunately Ben and I resigned at the end of the year, and heard about the exam results from some of the boys who liked to keep contact and reported gleefully about the disaster, my reputation shot to smithereens. In contrast to me, Ben proved himself to be a fine teacher, which is what he eventually became full time to acclaim, but of course at a much better school.

The headmaster allowed me access to his piano and to accompany the morning assembly. On one occasion I played the Bach *Chromatic Fantasia*, right pedal down and going hammer and tongs. One of the boys who did not like me, taking his seat in front of the piano remarked witheringly: 'Calm down!'

Ever since then I have taken the pedal off Bach. The piece is powerful enough without extra upholstery. I like the fugue to follow the final bars of the fantasia immediately, there is such calm dignity in the main theme, starting quite slowly, and then without losing its steady pulse, the gradual entry of semi-quavers makes the counterpoint sound as though it's picking up speed, a sleight of hand that Bach often employs to dramatic effect. This is why I don't rush the theme, knowing how fast the music will get, and nothing should sound hurried.

When it comes to choosing tempo Bach gives an indication in the music itself, and this can be found in the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* right at the end with the octave run. Following Rosalyn Tureck's theory about intuition in playing Bach, the speed depends on the player, and what he is capable of doing without spoiling the shape of the music. If the piece has been played too fast then this octave run will either sound clumsy and be in danger of crashing, or I will have been forced to slow down, which spoils a climax that is meant to be triumphant

and exhilarating, not pompous. The whole piece builds to these final bars, which deliberately echoes the brilliance of the fantasia section.

It is useful to hear how the music sounds on the instrument for which Bach wrote it. Listening to Trevor Pinnock's sober performance taught me about the structure and balance.

As a corollary to my experience at this private school, which incidentally closed down years later, I have some pleasant memories. A few of the boys enjoyed my unorthodox teaching, and one of them turned out to be a gifted artist and writer, with such idiosyncratic spelling that I didn't have the heart to correct him, his words were more expressive than the correct way. An older boy from Hong Kong, at 22 my age and thin as a rake, gave me a parting present that I treasure to this day: a stone for grinding ink set in a beautifully decorated box together with ink blocks and a set of Chinese brushes. Knowing me to be a painter the thoughtfulness of this gift touched me especially. He also taught me how to use them, which I did for years after, illustrating my mother's poems and Andersen fairytales.

At the piano I generally dedicate what I am playing to a person, a place or a memory. The Bach *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* always reminds me of the positive and creative times at this school. We introduced the boys to classic cinema. They appreciated Kurosawa, Clouzot and Tarkovsky which encouraged them to write and paint. They also demanded to be taught things they wanted to know about war and peace rather than boring bits of syllabus. I don't think so much about my failings as a teacher. I remember the friendship of some of the boys. I gave Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to one with learning difficulties. The book absorbed him and ignited his interest in literature. Another boy wrote pithy entertaining plays based on stories in Homer such as Bellerophon and Pegasus for his classmates to perform. He updated them so they spoke directly to their experience. The plays were about family relationships recognizable to all of them.

My disciplinary skills were nil and the hostile boys ran rings round me. From the others I learnt more than what I taught them. Most importantly I learnt I couldn't teach, at least not in the way the educational system demanded.

Making the rounds in the evening I noted how communally the boys all behaved, entertaining themselves, cooking meals in their shared rooms and inviting us to join in. There were problems of course and occasionally vicious fights would break out. The boys came from different countries and I observed how each group displayed different characters. The British tended to be more buttoned up, plotting under their breath. Most of them had parents living as ex-pats in places like Malta or Spain. Their sons never seemed pleased to see them when they visited, and the parents looked bored and disinterested, just relieved that the boys were not at home. These boys struck me as lacking family love, forced to look after their own interests since no one else seemed to care. Lessons were a distraction from life's pains and disappointments, and we tried our best to occupy their minds and spirits. The other boys received no parental visits and did not mind. The boys from Persia were premature adults: self-sufficient and quick-witted but also flirtatious with the teachers. In the previous year they had seduced a teacher into trouble, which didn't surprise me because these handsome boys were ruthless. The one from Turkey was a heavily built son of a hotel chain owner, therefore exceedingly wealthy, belligerent and intimidating. At one moment in the middle of school lunch a knife fight broke out between him and one of the difficult English boys. I froze, not knowing how to handle the situation but fortunately other boys separated them. In contrast the Chinese were good-natured, polite and seemed to have no complaints about anything.

An effeminate English boy attached himself to me and would listen appreciatively to me practising on the headmaster's piano. However he once put me in my place and brought me down to earth with a thud. It happened on one of those occasions when the deputy headmaster used to invite boys to his cosy flat in the evening to watch TV, kindly trying to

provide them with a home atmosphere. A program happened to be transmitting a concert by Liberace. Surrounded by candelabras, wearing a glittery costume and smiling unctuously the showman performed an elaborate paraphrase of a Chopin waltz in his inimitable nonchalantly brilliant manner. The boy turned to me with a dismissive wave of the hand and said: 'Now that's what I call piano playing!'

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About teaching and responsibility I often wonder what happened to the boys. A few kept in touch for a few years and even visited me, but as happens in life, the contact broke and they disappeared. Some exceptional teachers do follow the progress of pupils who show promise, as did for instance my favourite English teacher, Jim Garbett, who some years before his death congratulated me on my work and books. Responsible for getting me into Kings College, Cambridge, which he correctly surmised might tolerate my eccentricity he took a thoughtful interest rare to find among teachers today or at any time. He also suggested a career in journalism, because of my observant eye and interest in real life, people and situations. Given that all my writing is a kind of reportage, his judgement proved correct and at least I had the opportunity of thanking him for everything, and also Theodore Major who taught me how to be an artist and whose final exhortation: 'Keep on painting' is a perpetual encouragement. However one of my regrets is a failure to keep in touch with my piano teacher Doris Staton. Leaving Bolton Lancashire at the age of 18 and shaking its dust off my feet, intent on never returning I did so only once to show friends my childhood home, but never met her again to thank her for helping me make the piano my essential life companion. Her advice and method hovers over me whenever I sit down to play. This book is dedicated to her among others who have encouraged me. Like Theodore Major she would no doubt have told me to keep on playing the piano and never stop.

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## BACH FANTASIAS FUGUES AND TOCCATAS

These substantial pieces prepare me for other Bach keyboard works. There are questions about speed and how certain passages should go. For instance in the A minor *Fantasia con Fuga* the fantasia part is written out as just a sequence of arpeggios. Bach probably expected the player to improvise, as he would have done. In my case the arpeggios are sufficient played as written because of the variety of modulation, and grandeur of the sound. Only when playing them on a harpsichord did I discover that arpeggios like these are loud and turbulent not dainty and subdued. They provide an introduction of grand gestures to a perpetuum mobile three part fugue that flows unimpeded like a stream along a mountain valley.

The fugues and their introductions strike me as being contrasts in mood and ideas. Andras Schiff and Angela Hewitt teach me about how to voice counterpoint clearly, but both less emphatic than Glen Gould who idolized Bach's fugal textures and more penetratingly than any other pianist explores the musical tensions inherent in the form. At home I can accentuate the contrasts without fear of being criticised by the experts.

Bach's use of minor keys triggers emotion. Minor and major are in perpetual tension.

Conflict is too strong a word, although occasionally there is a struggle for resolution which Bach steers through a knotty climax underlining a sense of overcoming difficulty and achieving a triumphant conclusion or at least a state of hope. This A minor pairing of fantasia and fugue is a case in point. It begins in the minor and then ends upbeat in the major,. Both the A minor Fantasia and Fugue and Prelude and Fugue for organ share similar tensions leading to resolution. This shift in Bach's compositions is often only achieved in the final bar, the last chord, the argument persisting inexorably throughout the whole piece until that moment when the sun, as expected and longed for, comes from behind a cloud.

In the *Fantaisie in C minor* Bach sustains the minor mood right to the final chord giving the effect of muscular defiance. The piece also has a story for me. It is one of those awkward exam pieces, like the *Italian Concerto*, given to learners and which separate the promising from the hopeless players. There are so many technically challenging bars, with awkward arpeggios running in opposite directions and passing through typically chromatic Bach modulations, as well as cross-hand jumps, where even after years of playing it I still come unstuck. I've discovered that almost all Bach's C minor pieces have similarly tricky passages. These pieces need extra study and practise. I had to take my hat off to one of the waiters, local girls and boys, at a hotel in Scotland run by friends of mine, Eric and Ian. Eric persuaded her to play the *Fantaisie* for the guests after she had cleared away the supper dishes. The girl dispatched it with aplomb and without a mistake: definitely a pianist with promise. No way would I have been able to bring that off, because a piece like this attacks the nerves and my fingers being expected to perform for a critical audience would have been in all the wrong places. Andreas Staier gives an exemplary performance. The drama and virtuosity suit his confident style. The chromatic modulation in the final bars always thrills me, and it is an exciting piece to play, rather like walking a tightrope.

In contrast the following A minor *Fantasia and Fugue* is lyrical and consoling. It also charts a progress from minor to major, but in a meditative rather than dramatic manner. Though the fugue has its knotty challenges, especially with uncomfortable stretches in the left hand, the technical challenges can be solved and this is always a pleasure to play, with the counterpoint of both fantasia and fugue interweaving seductive harmonies with expansive melodic lines. I try to emphasise the long notes so they carry like sustained voices. Particularly in Bach's fugues they provide a beautiful descant or counter melody to the main theme. Bach uses these held notes to similar beautiful effect in the *Art of the Fugue*, and throughout his compositions for the keyboard. In the Fantasia section they are crucial, and this indicates the speed of the

piece. Too slow and the sound fades too quickly because I avoid the sustaining pedal. These notes have to be played in such a way that they carry, like a vibrant bell. I play it *andante*, enough for the piece to flow at a steady pace, so the resolution has a sense of joyful arrival. In my opinion, no doubt controversial and inexperienced, the fugue should not be played quickly. It has a stately progress and slow burn build-up, interrupted by the chromatic new subject in the middle. Albert Schweitzer tended to play Bach at a leisurely measured pace in most of his recordings, and I love those interpretations which are brought off so well because despite the slow tempo which later organists speeded up, he keeps rigorously in time. The rock solid steadiness of his playing sounds just right and moreover conveys a sense of grandeur and inevitability. So in the case of this A minor fugue I think of him and try not to vary the speed. The slowness helps keep the four voice counterpoint clear and guides the ear through all the complex modulations right through the knotty chromatics of the final page to its immensely satisfying final chord in the major.

The following A minor *Fantasia and Fugue* has the uplift and brilliance of the Brandenburg Concertos. In fact the cadenza passages in the *Fantasia* echo the ending of the 5<sup>th</sup> concerto's first movement. The rhythm of the *gigue* pervades both parts. My experience playing these dance-like pieces has taught me that the *gigue* need not be played too fast. Speed seems to be of the essence among performers these days, as though they were in perpetual competition. It is exhilarating to hear Peter Hurford dispatch Bach on the organ at hair-raising tempi and with absolute precision. Not being purist or pious about music I don't mind: if musicians can then, why not? But players like me can't. So long as the pieces don't sound sluggish, they could actually be danced to without tripping over. Speed is a matter of individual taste and ability. However, even on this matter in the A minor *Fantasia and Fugue* Bach gives a clear indication without specifying, so corroborating Rosalyn Tureck's theory about intuiting how the piece should be played. The rapidity of the theme and triplet figures is determined

towards the end of the fantasie by the cadenza. There need be no change in pace, the triplets leading into the demi-semi-quavers of the cadenza take care of that, and therefore by implication the following fugal theme need not go too quickly but with a steady buoyant rhythm.

## TOCCATAS

Tempos are indicated more clearly in these mini-sonatas, with their fast finger limbering passages, slower sections, and quicker fugal movements. Bach sets traps and surprises which are clearly meant to challenge. They allow players to show off and be virtuosi. There is also wit and high spirits, not often associated with Bach although they can often be found in his cantatas. There are expressive and emotionally intense passages also reminiscent of the cantatas and in the last toccata even a foretaste of the Mass in B Minor. Concentration is essential because the compositions suddenly veer into unexpected keys and accidentals that wrong-finger.

*The Beat that my Heart Skipped* is a meaty French film that made a star of the charismatic Romain Duris. It is about a piano loving son of a gangster who sets out to learn the toccata in E minor. Every time I play it the film comes to mind. The story has an ambiguous conclusion. He flunks the exam, and his father's gangster past comes to haunt him, leading to a revenge killing. The two sides of his life clash and he gives up the piano, to devote himself to managing the career of his teacher who becomes a concert pianist. The suspect implication is that there is only success or failure. My piano teacher realized early on not to put me through the stress of an exam, and in so doing saved me from disappointment and giving up.

Players will find their own solutions to playing these pieces, but I would like to make some observations about four of them in particular because they reward study. All pose questions about speed. The toccata in D minor BWV 915 ends with a long fugue, rather similar to the

famous G major organ fugue by Bach, familiar in an orchestrated version by Gustav Holst. It is clearly meant to be jolly, and therefore should go at a quick pace. This presents technical problems in a particularly finger-twisting composition, and it's easy to come unstuck. A recorded performance by Karl Richter takes a steady pace, plays without mistake and sounds relentless throughout its length. Karl Richter respects the challenge of this fugue, but then misses the wit and high spirits. For me it only makes sense if played with relaxed dexterity, bouncing as on air. It is in the rhythm of a gigue, and that gives an indication as to how to play. This is similar to the toccata in D major which is most frequently heard because of the variety of characterful short movements ending in another witty fugal gigue. That toccata is as usual full of traps for the unwary. D major tends to be a difficult key for pianists because the music lies awkwardly under the fingers. Mozart's sonatas in D major, especially the early one, are among his most difficult to play.

The toccatas in C minor and F sharp minor, BWV 911 and 910, are to my mind towering compositions. The first in C minor has a brilliant introduction leading to a ravishing adagio which moving through a series of chromatic harmonies prepares the way for a fugue that starts with a straightforward but rhythmic catchy theme. It develops in three voice parts to what appears like a climax and ending. Before finding resolution there is a repeat of the opening flourish which then leads unexpectedly into a repeat of the fugue but now extended with the addition of a counter subject. This development indicates the tempo: too fast and it will sound garbled, too slow and it will sound clunky. This fugue is an example of Bach's fecundity. There is no reason for such length and wealth of contrapuntal ideas except sheer delight in composition and exploring a theme that invites constant invention. Like nature which provides each healthy plant with a head of seeds enough to re-grow the planet when a fraction would do, so Bach does more than he needs just for the hell of it, knowing how splendid the results will be. This is not composition as a chore but pleasure in the creative

process. We pianists can only revel in it. Artur Schnabel gives a wonderful performance of this toccata, at just the right speed so the fugue opens like a flower and his touch as always is sensitive but firm, the tone rounded and pearl-like. There is no trace of fussy preciousness. His kind of playing, especially the touch, comparable to the lean but expressive sound of the Busch Quartet, is inimitable. I try, but can only aspire to that quality and direct manner of performance which succeeds in revealing the composition's essence.

The F sharp minor toccata is for me the most moving and interesting of the set, although all of them are beautiful. The remote key alerts us to Bach exploring further and deeper than usual, and already he is far in advance of his contemporaries. After the typically tricky introductory flourishes with accidentals waiting to trip me up, there is a grave slow section that cannot be hurried. At first it seems too slow, with harmonies foreshadowing the late romantics, but the decorative figures that appear a few bars into this section indicate the correct tempo. I relish the beauty of the modulations which do not quite prepare for the shock of a spirited presto and staccato movement, full of traps and witty variations that are meant to catch the player off-guard. The next movement is another contrast, a striking feature of all the toccatas, but none as extreme as this one in F sharp minor. A series of sinuous arpeggio modulations follow that search for resolution and give the impression of wandering lost in a dark forest. It could be played slowly but I take these two pages at a brisk andante because they lead into a fugue, the theme reminiscent of the *Crucifixus* in the *Mass in B Minor*, with its slow descending phrase. Trevor Pinnock and most other performers I have heard pay no attention to this similarity and play the fugue fast, letting the previous two pages take the weight of a slow movement, so my interpretation of the final part of the toccata is probably suspect. However, for me the density of harmonic shifts and the steady tread of the fugal theme seem to demand solemnity and express sorrow and resignation. Yes, there are bars where scales going up and down the instrument might imply a brilliant cadenza, but when

played slowly they add tension and significance, as it were continuing the search through the darkness, hoping to find light and then resigned to failure. This for me is underlined by a final bar, an example of an unexpected Bach gesture that I come across at the end of a number of his compositions, and one I insist on respecting. The toccata does end in the major key, but the resolution is abrupt and followed by a silence, implying uncertainty and a question. It only works when the pedal is not used. The music says bluntly: 'that's it!'

The toccata in D major sounds a peal of bells in the opening movement and ends with a lively skipping fugue that needs to go as fast as possible, with a characteristic Bach abrupt ending: the theme's cadence resolves into a canon where the voices give up one after the other and disappear into the bass clef and silence.

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Klavierübung is German for piano practice. The volumes of these exercises that Bach composed contain a great deal of the most beautiful and substantial music ever written for the instrument. The century after his death people took him at his word and composers, including Beethoven, studied and respected these 'exercises' while Mozart admitted that much could be learned from the old master. However most of their contemporaries accepted the view shared by Bach's sons about their father's music being old-fashioned and out of date. The sons were initiating a new Classical style, breaking away from the Baroque tendency to ornate complexity. When Mendelssohn revealed the drama and emotional intensity of Bach's choral works to audiences who had forgotten about him for almost a century, Bach's reputation soared and has remained high ever since. Mendelssohn revered him, and wherever he travelled and had access to an organ he would play Bach. Chopin felt the same and carried the 48 Preludes and Fugues with him wherever he went, playing from them every day and giving them to his pupils for instruction. .

The 48, the Italian Concerto and French Overture Partita all came under the heading of exercises for keyboard. Even when writing to test his son's technique Bach couldn't help making the composition musically interesting emotionally involving. On the one hand I feel sorry for the young sons starting out because these exercises are challenging, and I can imagine them cursing under their breath at the knotty passages. On the other hand they were lucky to have such substance to get their minds and fingers round.

The Italian Concerto has been the bane of young piano learners ever since Bach wrote it. The written score looks straight forward, which makes the challenges frustrating. I look at the notes and think yes I can play them, no problem. Then the jumps and tricky fingering come all at speed and at the same time it should all flow smoothly. I hit a wrong note, fudge a phrase and as in Mozart, every mistake sticks out and ruins the whole piece.

The slow movement is an aria over a plucked-sound bass accompaniment. The sonority of the harpsichord gives those bass notes strength and pungency over which the treble spins a decorated melodic line. Pianists tend to respectfully remove character from the bass accompaniment. Schiff picks at the notes in a precious manner which irritates me. Give them their power: the soaring melody in the right hand requires a strong foundation particularly those low As, Ds and Cs. They should ring out like deep church bells. The shifts between major to minor on the last page are ravishing but have a tendency to catch me out.

The last movement is intentionally virtuosic and therefore challenging to play. Although meant to be performed fast it works best kept in strict tempo, like a motor, more allegro than presto so my fingers can negotiate the cat's cradle of counterpoint. This goes well on the piano, and there isn't a performer who fails to lift the spirits. Sviatoslav Richter as usual injects the brilliance with character in an exhilarating live performance.

The *French Overture Partita* is an extended piece, especially if all the repeats are respected, but there is so much interest and variety it is never tiring to play. Bach organizes the movements to create variety of mood, so he places two light gavottes and two passepieds between the long opening movement and the stately sarabande. There is no allemande, but the courante, usually fast, has the elegant swish of the German dance. The catchy *Echo* which ends the partita is another of those deceptively simple pieces which present challenges. The trick is to play in the baroque and not classical or romantic style. This means as I said earlier on the advice of Gillian Weir moving the whole hand to wherever the notes demand, the only way to hit those fast ascending and descending sequences of chords with confidence and accuracy. I might be advising that, but after decades of playing and practising I still land on wrong notes.

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The books of English and French Suites and Partitas each have a different quality, although it isn't clear to me why the English Suites are so named. What is the specifically English character? The French style dominates all of them. Bach admired Couperin whose celebrated and ravishing collections of *Ordres* inspired him. The one English dance included is to be found in the French Suites. The rest come from all over Europe, including polonaises. The English Suites sound like concertos for solo instrument, with expansive first movements, and are virtuosic. I start this Bach sequence with them because they give my fingers a work out in readiness for the more intimate Partitas and French Suites.

All these sets of pieces were meant as instruction and for domestic performance. In Straub's classic film *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, which sets out to depict Bach's everyday life in Leipzig, his wife is seen playing one of the suites on a clavichord, Bach's favourite instrument along with the organ by all accounts, while a baby is playing in another

corner of the room, sunlight pouring through the window to illuminate the score. The film is spare: nothing glamorous about Bach's life. It is striking to see the choir, orchestra and soloists crushed in the organ gallery to perform the *St Mathew Passion*. The music bursts out of this confined space like a seraph spreading mighty wings. The intimacy of Anna Magdalena playing through the suite in a small room on a particularly delicate instrument with domestic life carrying on round her makes an unforgettable impression and suggests the kind of sound Bach specifically had in mind. The clavichord's action is less percussive than the harpsichord, not so emphatically sonorous. The way the strings are stroked rather than plucked allows for a variety of subtle tone colours. This is indicative of Bach's intentions, and why he loved this instrument in particular. He composes for the particular sound quality of an instrument. He does the same but in complete contrast for the mighty organ on which Bach, the master organist of his age, exploits the sonority and the instrument's ability to sustain notes to imposing effect.

Talk about favourite instruments is irrelevant in the case of Bach. He wrote for every instrument as though it were his favourite... violin, cello, flute, oboe etc... He even had a special love for instruments most composers pay less attention to, like the viola d'amore, which accompanies some of his most moving cantata arias. He had a keen ear for variety of tone and colour, and John Eliot Gardiner points out Bach's underrated sense of humour, especially in the cantatas where the occasionally bizarre blend of instrumental sounds comments on the words.

Bach's special affection for the clavichord is significant: intimacy being the key factor and this is a guide to players at home. The *Goldberg Variations* and the *48* are performed now in the Albert Hall to packed audiences, but Bach would never have imagined this. A large room in a court residence might have been the biggest space available for his domestic instrumental and chamber music. Bach did not expect his sets of suites and partitas to be played anywhere

other than in a domestic setting. Even the famous evening concerts at which his concertos were performed took place in the local coffeehouse which I've visited and would have provided only a cramped space for the players. Glen Gould's decision to restrict his performances to the recording studio meant he could focus on the intimacy which is at the heart of these pieces. They are communication between the composer and the player. Not even an audience is expected to be present. Listeners are as it were eavesdropping on this conversation, the precise effect Glen Gould achieves on his recordings, although being a class performer he also mediates between the music and whoever wants to hear it. Despite my reservations about Andras Schiff's approach to Bach there is no doubt that even when playing in the largest venues his intention is also to create this effect so the thousands are allowed to eavesdrop and listen in rather than be the object of his performance.

## THE ENGLISH SUITES

It is striking how different the sets of suites and partitas are in lay out and composition, as though written for different classes of players. The English Suites being more technically challenging were probably intended for more advanced students. They also sound like pieces for performance, which contradicts what I've just been saying about the intimacy of these instrumental works. As a player I enjoy the extrovert nature of these suites, the grand gestures of the preludes: I am as it were performing for myself. The last movements in gigue time are meant to be brilliant and to be played as fast as possible. Not having to please an audience I can keep the tempo within reason, otherwise my fingers end in a jumble. These particular suites are a useful introduction to Bach's compositional technique. He starts with a theme and particular figures and patterns which he then alters and varies in subtle ways throughout the rest of the movement: for instance changing the shape of the phrases. To prepare for these deviations that can easily trip me up, I need to learn the opening bars thoroughly, as I pointed earlier, so the pattern of the notes is firmly in my fingers. I play them over and over, even

when returning to the piece for the umpteenth time and find myself making unnecessary mistakes. ‘Concentrate!’ I shout under my breath. Once they are note perfect it is a matter of keeping a steady focus and to be ready for the tricks and pitfalls Bach sets up later. This method is necessary in the longer preludes which open the suite numbers 2-6.

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The first English Suite begins with a flourish which indicates the tempo of the three-part invention that follows in a steady flowing pace. Two lyrical courantes constitute the main substance of the suite, because the second is followed by two variations/doubles. Usually courantes are exuberant, fast and brilliant, but in the first English Suite they are in the elegant style of Bach’s revered Couperin. Bach then took the dance form in a variety of directions. I share Bach’s enthusiasm for Couperin whose *Ordres* are satisfying to play. The stately sarabande that follows Bach’s courantes in the first English suite contains a couple of rapid scales for the left hand that require practice. They help establish the right tempo for the whole dance, not too fast and keeping a steady pace so that these flourishes don’t sound rushed. The bourées and gigue have to be played fast to make their effect: tricky and virtuosic as are a number of movements in the following suites.

I associate this first English suite with my father, and there is a story. My mother came from a cultured Viennese family background, so music and a piano were an important part of home life. My father had a different business oriented Berlin family background. His father once owned several large cinemas in the city, but lost everything because a business partner he shouldn’t have trusted cheated him. For a few years he had enjoyed the prosperous life of a self-made man with an expensive home on Wannsee, still an exclusive Berlin suburb, and incidentally close to the place where the Third Reich planned the Final Solution. There are photos of my father and aunt as children in smart clothes sitting on expensive tricycles, my

grandmother in an extravagant fur coat and the four of them also taking a holiday on Lake Lugano in Italy. After the collapse of my grandfather's business as a consequence of being cheated by his associates, a propensity to trust the wrong people that I sadly inherited, they had to move into cramped lodgings in the poorest part of the inner city. At the same time the Nazis took over the country so all chance of restarting a business vanished. They subsisted on potatoes and herring, the cheapest food available which my grandmother learnt how to prepare in a variety of ways which my aunt remembered with admiration. A photo taken then shows a happy family despite the circumstances; so much pride in the parents' faces for the children, of whom the father expected most from his son. Because of the new draconian anti-Jewish laws a cruel choice had to be made. Only the son found refuge in England, and my father left this close-knit family, aware of the inevitable fate that waited his sister and parents. The brutal removal of that family love created a wound exacerbated by survivor's guilt. My father never recovered from this trauma.

My grandfather loved classical music which set him apart from his parents and their extended families, mostly shopkeepers who had no interest or appreciation for it. As a young cash-strapped man he managed to feed his passion for opera by joining a 'claque', people allowed free entry as long as they cheered favoured singers. Remembering the great names who sang at the Berlin Staatsoper he must have heard several legendary stars, and I regret never having had the opportunity to hear his memories of them. Concerning my grandfather's love of opera, which I also inherited, there is an amusing story about his father, who had left Poland as a young man, selling shoe laces from a box strapped round his neck, built up a small business in Berlin and prospered. Later in his life and as a birthday treat the family bought him a ticket to the opera. He came home early and the family in surprise asked whether he had been disappointed or bored. 'Not at all,' he declared. 'It was wonderful. Thank you! I took my seat and enjoyed looking at all the people entering, talking and moving around, the

women in fine clothes wearing expensive jewellery. Then the lights went out and everyone clapped. I assumed the performance had come to an end so I came home.'

During the brief period of success and wealth my music-loving grandfather took special pride in representing and sponsoring an up and coming violinist, Barnabás von Géczy, who then made a successful career leading tea dance orchestras at elegant hotels, most famously the Esplanade, and became popular during the Third Reich, especially with Hitler. My grandfather then suffered the pain of being ditched by von Géczy who did not want to be associated with a Jew, and who after the war enjoyed renewed fame and popularity. He made no response to requests for help from my aunt who had survived the 'death march' from Auschwitz to Ravensbruck. She hoped in vain to prick his conscience for not helping the sponsor who had discovered and supported him and nurtured his career.

My father inherited this love of listening to music. He never learnt an instrument, unlike my mother who played the piano when she found time between household chores. She was a supremely gifted writer, a poet, and toiled hard and with determination to make my father's published books polished and readable. Even now when I write her spirit hovers behind my shoulder urging me to hone and simplify. She played Bach fugues from the 48 and accompanied herself in Schubert songs, singing them with a hoarse voice. She would have liked to be another Elizabeth Schumann, but my mother's way with *The Crow* and *The Signpost* gave the pared down beauty of these songs a particularly painful quality that suits them, and for me no other more refined performance has ever come close. That figures, because apparently the then mortally sick Schubert sang them to his friends, shocking them with the painful rawness of his vocal production. This raises questions about the authenticity of professional performances, and there are as many wonderful ones as there are great singers to sing them. The truth behind these songs has an unbearable quality which a cultivated voice inevitably glosses over. On the other hand any performance like that of my mother would be

intolerable for listeners. Again this addresses my theme of playing being completely different to performing, however valid.

As I improved on the piano she gave up. My father enjoyed listening to me, insisting that he even appreciated my painful practice, although just once he took exception, as anyone would have done, to the Chopin *Raindrop Prelude* after my hundredth practice: those endlessly repeated notes became tolling bells. Years after his death I still play for my father and regret deeply that he cannot hear me now I play his favourite pieces so much better, especially Beethoven and Bach. When I turned eight and we still lived in Manchester my parents found a piano teacher for me. A young thin man with liquid brown eyes and a trimmed beard, Mr Greateorex, began to tutor me at home before we moved to Bolton and Doris Staton took over. He engaged in long conversations about music with my parents and on one occasion delighted my father by performing the whole of Bach's first English Suite for him. Whenever I play it I think of my father and also his music loving father, a man I never had a chance to know because he and my grandmother ended up gassed in Auschwitz.

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The exhilarating concerto-like prelude to the second English Suite offers an example of my method of practice. The best way for me to achieve accuracy in the opening Prelude, especially given the fast speed, is perpetual repetition of the first page until the rhythm and placement of the notes become second nature. The subtle variations Bach then sprinkles over the development can be dealt with more easily. The movement works best when it proceeds without any fluctuation of tempo, building up a head of steam to the final bar.

The allemandes in these suites are elegant and refined. I can hear the wide sumptuously embroidered gowns of the court ladies swishing as they dance slowly and gracefully. The courantes, with the exception of the first suite, are fast. My method of grasping the rhythm is

to imagine the bar split in two, and each three beats as indicated in the bass played like a quick waltz. I then understand the rhythm of these virtuosic movements. My Peters edition repeats the sarabandes of suites number two and three, with quite elaborate ornamentation second time round. Perhaps Bach intended the sarabandes to be played like this, but some pianists on record perform both, following each repeat bar with the variation. The sarabande is charming and elegant in its unadorned state. The embellishments not only add more notes but vary the mood and character. Perhaps Bach is giving a lesson in how to ornament his music, and he may have expected gifted players to provide their own embellishments.

The bourées of the second suite are fast, which tests amateur hands, and there is tricky finger-work demanded in the major key second of the two. They are much in the spirit of the opening prelude. Each of these suites is an entity, not just a series of disconnected dances. So when the virtuosic giges come, they crown the whole suite with an exhilarating flourish. However brilliant and demanding these works are they are within amateur possibilities, unlike Chopin who in his most challenging pieces demands professional virtuosity. Bach's difficult pieces reward practice, and my method hopefully helps. The gigue from the sixth suite is however an exception to what I've just said. This piece will always be too difficult for me because of the complicated fingering shared between the hands while keeping the pounding rhythm and negotiating the modulations. It is also an extraordinary sounding movement, brutal and forward looking: it could come from the score of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Bach stretches the boundaries in ways that are still surprising and mould breaking.

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The prelude of the third English Suite is another concerto with alternating orchestral tuttis and solo passages. The musette that partners the sprightly gavotte presents a problem with how to sound the bagpipe drone effect. In the final English Suite Bach solves the problem in

a different way, but here the note has somehow to be struck in such a way as to hold the sound for several bars. An organ would do it without a problem. I take the movement as fast as I can, first playing the drone note as loud as possible so the vibration lasts to the repeat bar line. On a good piano, like mine, the effect is actually magical: the sound dies away, so it becomes an echo, an effect difficult to achieve on a clavichord.

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Gillian Weir performed the fourth English Suite on the piano years ago in one of her debut recitals for the BBC and it stuck in my memory for the purity and simplicity of her interpretation, nothing exaggerated, but every line clear as crystal. This is how I try and play it. The prelude has a few wide stretches of over an octave for the left hand, technical challenges that regularly pepper Bach's scores and indicate he must have had unusually large hands.

The dances show off Bach's inventiveness, not one like another, but for me it is the preludes to all the suites that are the main meat, each more expansive than the previous ones. Playing them is like becoming an orchestra, each set of instruments taking their turn adding colour to the counterpoint between the melodic lines. Bach creates a variety of sonorities. I can hear which instruments are playing; strings, cellos, woodwind... even the occasional trumpet and horn. Again it is a matter of practicing the first bars until the shapes and figures are not just understood but lie comfortably under the fingers. The rest of the movement plays around with the figures, modulating and altering the key, turning them upside down and varying them in Bach's inimitable way: an endless flow of ideas with imaginative interpolations. There seems no end to Bach's invention and inspiration. The endings can sound perfunctory, as though Bach were saying, 'that's enough now'; however there is a structure to these preludes which means when the final chord is played there is a sense of achievement for the player.

The prelude to the fifth English suite provides a good example of Gillian Weir's advice on playing Baroque keyboard music, training the hands to jump up and down the keyboard without landing on wrong notes. The fingers of the right hand should be able to cover the whole phrase comfortably wherever Bach places it. The counterpoint and the driving rhythm of this prelude when played without hesitation and mistake are so exhilarating that it is worth the effort to get right. The dances in this suite are also exceptionally graceful: another elegant swishing allemande, running courante, lyrical sarabande and a pair of whirling passepieds which present a few tricky challenges because they need to go as fast as possible. The fugal gigue is a tour de force with a series of chromatic phrases being driven by a pounding rhythm. This is quite some stamping dance, only outdone by the gigue of the sixth suite, the one that challenges me every time with its Stravinsky rhythms and complicated finger work: another tour de force. I can see Bach's feet tapping vigorously as he composed both of them.

The sixth suite opens with a particularly long prelude. The length of the main section determines the speed which to my ear sounds better played as fast as possible. It is another whirling dance like the last movement of Beethoven's seventh symphony, or Schubert's ninth. Usually I play Bach's allegros with enough breath to give the modulations and shifting patterns clarity. When my fingers are well oiled and practiced I find however that this allegro works best taken at a cracking pace like a speeding train. The opening lento is calm before a storm. This culminates in a bar marked adagio, the lento slowed to stasis. What then follows illustrates Bach's sense of drama, an under-appreciated element of his style despite frequent evidence in his cantatas and passions. When played on a harpsichord Bach's allegros with many notes whip up a storm, which gives me the clue as to how it should sound on the piano. I learned this from listening to Masaaki Suzuki's thunderous performance of a Bach fantasia. However, on a clavichord these pieces, played not too fast, sound filigree, light rain on a roof.

Bach takes care over contrast within and between movements. So the unusually slow following allemande, another *lento*, indicates that this is meant to be a relaxing moment after the maenad prelude. In the partitas Bach creates variety in a similar manner, inserting pieces with different moods that aren't dances, like arias and scherzos. The courante in the sixth English suite is another fast movement between the slow allemande and a sarabande which echoes the simplicity and grandeur of a sublime Handel aria. Bach ever curious and open to musical influence admired and found inspiration in many composers living at the same time. We have evidence that he wanted to meet Handel, his exact contemporary, an encounter that sadly never happened. In the sarabande's double Bach decorates the heart-easing melody with sinuous counterpoint that interweaves the major and minor key of D to mesmerising effect, the whole piece relishing this modal ambiguity before reaching resolution.

The high-stepping macho gavotte benefits from Gillian Weir's advice about moving the whole hand up and down the keyboard. In the gavotte's musette Bach achieves the drone effect less problematically than the third suite.

The technically demanding gigue with those awkward trills played by the same hand over and under a tricky sequence of accompanying chords that demand wide stretches appears briefly and mysteriously in the television adaptation of John Le Carré's *The Little Drummer Girl*.

The son of one of the Israeli Mossad agents is playing it, rather well, while they plan punitive operations against Palestinian terrorists. When the agent's ruthless leader comments and asks why this piece in particular, the mother says cryptically: 'Sometimes only Bach will do.' In the context of spying and assassination the music adds another dimension to the already disturbing narrative which, as in reality, cannot find a resolution to the perpetual and ever-deepening Israeli Palestinian conflict. Are these agents implying that the Israelis are justified in their violence because of cultural superiority, the assumption that because Palestinians don't appreciate Bach they are an inferior race? Daniel Barenboim and his West East Divan

Orchestra which includes Palestinian players have scotched that fallacy decisively. I experienced this snobbery of cultural superiority first hand during my time in Israel in the 1960s. Let alone the Palestinians still living in Israel who were and still are treated as third-class citizens, these attitudes even divided the Jewish communities. 'Yekes', the nickname for Ashkenasi Jews who came from Europe where they had until the holocaust for generations excelled in medicine, the law, business and the arts, considered themselves therefore best qualified to be the leaders, more entitled than those coming from supposedly less cultured more backward regions such as North Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East. This snobbish attitude also turned out to be incorrect and unjust. I attended Hebrew classes alongside Jews from Romania, Russia, South Africa, Persia and Iraq as well as the UK and found that the most sophisticated and intelligent class mates were the Persians and Iraqis, raised in educated middle class families, the Europeans coming from poorer, oppressed and therefore less well-educated working class backgrounds. I played the piano at community concerts and included Bach. This may not have been the Persian Jews' traditional culture, but they respected and liked me. Moreover their self-confidence, maturity and intelligence far exceeded mine. They taught me Hebrew better than the teachers and were an example of solidarity, the three of them collaborating without friction. They also educated me in matters of the emotions, sex and social skills.

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We know from one of Bach's sons that his father had no hesitation in astounding, shocking and even frightening his listeners. I love the story about him testing a new organ, pulling out all the stops and playing full throttle so the alarmed organ builder blanched and almost fainted. There is this myth, initiated amongst others by his sons who were in the vanguard of post-Baroque and a new elegant and more classical music uncluttered by complex counterpoint, about Bach being a fusty academic and old-fashioned, implying dullness.

Nothing can be further from the truth. The variety and colour, drama and emotion in Bach stretched and broke boundaries established by current traditions. The javelin of his musical ideas and composition reached beyond the Classical and Romantic periods to the revolutionary changes of the twentieth century including jazz which found inspiration in Bach, and continues to fly today and beyond. Criticisms of this father of Western music came also from composers of the post Schoenberg school but this time accusing Bach of being too emotional, even sentimental.

The better I play the music the more I love it. Insoluble technical problems can breed dread, irritation and boredom. It has taken me till only recently for me to be totally in love with all these pieces. Not that the problems are ever sorted.

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## THE PARTITAS

The partitas stir personal regrets for me.

I used to be a friend of Andreas Staier the famous forte-pianist from when he came to perform at the Lufthansa Baroque Music Festival at the Piccadilly Festival I directed during the mid 1980s. While recording the partitas he pointed out to me that these German suites are a compendium of all Bach's styles. The composer had them published as his opus 1, so they were intended for domestic enjoyment, not just exercises, and represented as much as possible the variety of his skills and extent of his imaginative freedom. My feeling when playing them is that he took extra care honing and distilling his compositional technique so the movements in all their variety shine like polished jewels. Now I think of Andreas and a friendship that because of work commitments and different lives sadly evaporated. I lost touch with him and his partner with who I liked. They attended my *Winterreise* exhibition in

Cologne, were enthusiastic and bought a painting which I still have. A depression followed the exhibition. I embarked on a series of travels around Europe described in *The Road to Chartres* and *An Apartment in Kiev*. Needing to make money and create a favourable space for my work led me to open a Coffeehouse Gallery which then demanded all my time and energy. Andreas invited me to a recital at the Wigmore Hall and expected me to bring the painting. I could not attend. That brought the friendship to an end. Schubert's *Winterreise* has the same significance for him and his life as for me and mine. He came to perform it at the Piccadilly Festival. Initially he had chosen another painting of a joyful full frontal nude man leaping out of the picture. It is the one based on the song *Mut/Courage*. I pointed out *The Broken Bridge* which I consider the best of the series. He immediately agreed and decided on that one, which has still not been delivered. I look at it every day. *The Broken Bridge* is based on Schubert's *Stormy Morning*, described in *Image*, The painting belongs to him. I keep it on unauthorised loan.

The particular perfection of the partitas makes them as difficult to bring off as any Mozart sonata. The same can be said of the English and French suites, but they give satisfaction even with slippages. The partitas will always remain beyond reach however well they are performed. Andreas Staier described the recording sessions as being particularly long and arduous because he constantly tried to achieve that elusive perfection. As an example from past artists Dinu Lipatti comes close in his famous historic recording of the first partita, made shortly before his early death. Everything sounds right, nothing forced, and it remains a benchmark on how to play Bach on the piano.

The first partita has a celebrated gigue, scintillating with rapid cross hand work. Lipatti performs it not too fast but with such rhythm that the dance sounds effortless. Some years ago a young pianist chose to play this movement after an In Tune interview on BBC3 and came a cropper, making a hash of it. Having talked enthusiastically with the interviewer she sat down

at the piano too quickly and had no time to prepare herself. I respected her cool professionalism afterwards behaving as though nothing untoward had happened while inside she must have been in turmoil. A similar embarrassment happened to a celebrated Strauss soprano at the Proms some years ago: her voice collapsed during the third of the composer's *Four Last Songs*. Nerves, lights, the occasion or simply a technical slip in managing her breath control meant that she had not prepared sufficiently for one of the composer's famous long soaring phrases. Preparation and readiness are crucial, the fingers like the voice and breathing knowing precisely where they are going bars ahead. For me the secret as always with Bach is never to rush and play quicker than I can.

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A complete non-sequitur with apologies: the mishap that happened to this singer at the Proms reminds me of a legendary Strauss interpreter. Elizabeth Schumann became famous for the rare beauty and quality of her high notes. I smile at the way she responded to another young soprano Irmgard Seefried's question as to how she produced those ethereal high notes of a beauty no one else could match. The answer came in two words: 'vom Arsch!' 'From the arse!' That hardly needs explaining to anyone who knows about singing. Solid vocal technique has its foundation deep inside the body. Following the presentation of the silver rose in *Der Rosenkavalier* the character comments in ecstasy on the fragrance 'as of real roses', unfazed at being told it comes from drops of Persian oil. I imagine the soprano at that sublime moment in the opera squeezing her butt cheeks and pushing a long stream of breath from there up through her body to project those soaring high notes over the audience. There are fortunately two recordings one studio-made, the other live from the Vienna State Opera: both among the most magical moments in recorded singing.

The notion of sublime art coming from a place of mess and dirt is taken up by Carl Jung who celebrates the 'dung heap' as a source of fertility on which all life depends. Nor are the lungs entirely irrelevant to the act of playing an instrument. Adolf Busch lead violin of one of the greatest string quartet ensembles used to throw up before going on stage. Stage fright is common even among the most celebrated artists. Performers who suffer from nerves take long deep breaths before starting. Whenever I endure an unsatisfactory practice in which my fingers refuse to go where they should I generally stop and do the same before resuming.

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The grave and hymn-like second half of the minuet lasts less than a minute and is just sixteen bars long, but is a jewel at the heart of the first partita. The modulation at the beginning of the second part never fails to move me. The virtuosic air-borne gigue that follows wrong foots even professionals as I pointed out earlier. A light touch helps the hands move quicker, but the manoeuvres remain perilous.

The partitas become ever more challenging, especially the last three which make strenuous demands on technique and musicality. But already in the second one the capriccio final movement is difficult with its intricate finger work and a series of jumps in the left hand which are wider than an octave. Bach must have had large hands because there are bars, such as in the prelude of the fourth English suite, where he demands a wide stretch. It is however a relief to know that on the harpsichord and clavichord it is impossible to play any movements too quickly. The relative ease of piano action tempts high speeds. The capriccio is an example of how too much rush can spoil the music because Bach's composition, as often in such movements, involves dense counterpoint. Play it too fast and the music becomes an incoherent jumble. Played at a relaxed allegro the capriccio reveals its spirit and humour as well as compositional complexity. Bach may well have published these partitas to make a

name in the amateur market, but he evidently wanted to give his customers enough substance to keep them challenged and interested. As Andreas Staier pointed out to me, Bach intended to show everyone the wide, virtually limitless variety of what he could do.

The third partita in A minor is full of quirks and surprises which I assume Bach meant as entertainment and laugh out loud jokes, not something anyone associates readily with this composer but is an important part of his musical character. The fantasia prelude plays with major and minor, slipping chromatically into other keys to give the apparently simply two part invention suggestive complexity. Bach does this in his set of fifteen two part inventions which makes them, to my mind, even trickier to play than those in three parts. It is this compositional daring that elevates the solo cello suites and solo violin sonatas and partitas: by hinting at counterpoints and other voices that aren't written we hear them invisibly accompanying the single line. This is a conjuring skill that no other composer achieves to quite the same degree.

Flouncy dresses flick and swirl through the allemande. The courante leaps and hops. The burlesque indicates Bach is having fun with its witty figures culminating in a cheeky downward octave scale. The discord in the fifth bar before the end of the scherzo, which for a long time I thought to be constantly misreading, is of course an intended joke, as the title scherzo implies. Bach is poking fun not only at the hapless player like me but at himself and his habit of stretching the rules of harmony beyond limits. The gigue fugue in three parts rounds off this cheerful partita and finally turns minor into major with an uplifting sense of resolution.

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After the relatively short and pithy movements of the first three partitas the fourth and sixth are expansive and adventurous. They are on either side of a pithier fifth partita in which the

substance is distilled. For me it is a particularly beautiful work. I can never say categorically about Bach that I prefer one work to another, because my responses change, and pieces that I found slightly less exiting to play can then reveal special charm and interest. But my heart always lifts when the page opens on the fifth partita.

The fugal part of the fourth partita's stately overture in the French style flowing like a steady stream reminds me that the name Bach in German translates as 'brook', hardly adequate in describing his body of compositions which are a mighty river in full flow. As so often in Bach's long movements this fugue passes through unexpected and scintillating developments, just when it seems he is bringing everything to a close. In the following movements Bach seems to be de-constructing and examining the rhythms and style of the different dances. The gigue of the final partita takes this exploration to extremes: the familiar rhythm is overlaid by ever-increasingly complex counterpoint.

The fourth and sixth partitas share harmonic and compositional complexity. The fourth's leisurely long and heart-easing allemande conjures up courtly dresses swishing and swirling in candlelight; jewels glint and smoke from candelabras billows and wreathes. I start the first bars at a restrained tempo and steady pace so the embellishments that follow don't sound rushed. In contrast the courante hops and skips through a series of elaborate figures which demand crystalline accuracy. Between the dense counterpoint of the first three movements and the sarabande Bach provides rest to the ear and fingers by interpolating a breezy aria, but I focus attention on the bass line with its tricky stretches. The opening phrase of the sarabande culminates on a held high note which gives an air of mystery, a question mark which demands and receives an answer. The movement sounds best not taken too slowly. Sarabandes are graceful dances, not dirges, although this one has its solemn moments. A modest but cheerful minuet is then followed by a gigue, a lively three part fugue which demands extra dexterity because some of the phrases lie awkwardly under the fingers. The

sixth partita takes Bach's experimenting with the same dance forms and pushes boundaries even further.

The fifth partita in G major is a diamond like the Koh i Noor in the British royal crown that sparkles from every facet. Quite different in character from the others, Bach appears to be having fun. It starts with what he calls a Preambulum, a kind of toccata or fantasia where he plays around with figures and ideas, but all the time in absolute control of the material leading to an ending with an emphatic downward scale to a low G octave. On the harpsichord this sounds defiant and thunderous, rather like the final bar of Chopin's 24<sup>th</sup> prelude and of Schubert's last impromptu in his second set: a note of finality tinged with a mixture of triumph and angry resolution. Sonority gives this movement extra character, the notes scurrying to the high register light and airy, those reaching down to the bottom of the instrument heavier and louder.

The moodiness and humour carries into the graceful allemande and a deceptively simple buoyant courante which is for me where the diamond glints brightest. A lilting sarabande is followed by an offbeat minuet in the brilliant style of the first partita's famous gigue. A jolly passepied leads into a gigue that appears at first to be equally light-hearted and then turns into an intricate fugue with tricky cross-hand passages that require practice. It provides a substantial finale to a partita that for all its brevity and sparkle is as seductive and emotionally charged as a late Mozart sonata.

The opening bars of the sixth and final partita give notice that this is a large-scale composition, full of serious matter, technically and musically challenging. The lengthy toccata moves chromatically from minor to major. The key E minor not only inspired Bach in other large scale compositions such as the Wedge Fugue for organ, but here in this sequence of partitas is placed immediately after the one in the related key of G major. Whereas G

major, as in the 48, shows Bach in cheerful mood, E minor stirs complex emotions and ideas. There is a temptation, as in the F minor from the set of Toccatas discussed above, to play fast. The chromatic rising passages might call for virtuosity, but to me they are better played with a deliberately cautious tread, as it were relishing each harmonic shift so when they cluster on the last page the effect is cathartic, moving decisively to the major. The fugue that dominates the central section is so convoluted that any rush muddies the counterpoint. Modulation is the engine of this expressive movement.

The allemande dances through a similar harmonic process but with a lighter tread, demanding finger dexterity. This is like a breather before the courante which is a whirlwind tour de force, with virtuosic syncopated figures over a steady bass ostinato which needs to be taken at a rigorously steady beat. What an extraordinary composition, needing to be played fast, full of swagger! This courante delights and surprises me every time I play it. The final upward diminished seventh arpeggio before the emphatic final chord is such a cheeky gesture, like a cheery wave and belly laugh.

Just as in the fourth partita Bach follows the first three densely textured movements with a limpid good-natured Air. It serves as a palette cleanser before the sarabande which with magnificent rhetorical gestures returns to the gravity of the opening toccata but with enhanced ornamentation in the style of Couperin, all meticulously notated to give extra intensity. There is a melancholy grandeur about this dance.

Again Bach with his unerring sense of balance and variety inserts another airy composition in the style of a gavotte, all sprightly hops and skips before plunging into the final gigue of exceptional contrapuntal complexity. My feeling is that the gigue needs to go quickly, but my fingers are challenged at any speed. It is such a beautiful composition, teeming with interest, but it continues to perplex me. Is this deconstruction also an apotheosis of a gigue? The final

bar is far from being a decisive home-coming, despite a return to E major. The whole of this expansive deep delving work ends on a question, a mysterious arpeggio. Bach is quite specific how he wants his final notes or chords to sound: either not held or sustained with a pause sign. In this case the held sign appears over the bar ending and not the note itself. In other words he wants the player or eavesdropper to pay respect with silence. The effect is overwhelming, especially for the player like me for whom the whole piece is technically and musically demanding: a reward for hard work. At this point I see in my mind's eye Bach's indulgent appreciative smile.

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There is a painful personal story around this movement in particular. In my early thirties the relationship with my mother deteriorated to a degree that it broke completely. Our meetings became steadily more difficult until finally I had to put an end to them. During her final visit to me I happened to be practising this partita's gigue and overheard her mutter that she didn't understand why I played it. Either she disapproved of the music or my need of it and my inadequate performance. Perhaps the dance with its complicated rhythm and working out of ideas disturbed her, as, for all its beauty, it also does me. Whatever the reasons, at that moment I knew communication would be difficult between us, not just the attitudes to music but our world-views totally at odds and the umbilical cord broke completely. Over the following few years my mother's health deteriorated and when at last I paid a visit to her in North Wales she had entered the final days of cancer suffering in agony being cared for by her partner. Too late for any reconciliation, the physically and emotionally grim situation led to a harrowing conclusion. At the well-attended memorial event arranged by the partner I accompanied him in several Schubert songs and played her favourite Bach prelude and fugue in E flat minor from Book One of the 48. Just a few people had attended the funeral itself, which had taken place some weeks earlier. While I waited with Ben outside the crematorium

for the burial service to begin the funeral directors came up to offer their condolences and I suddenly caught sight of the coffin on the floor behind them. ‘There she is!’ I exclaimed and the two men spun round with a look of shock on their faces, thinking my mother might have resurrected and climbed out of the coffin. The memory of that moment always makes me laugh. The truth is that I had said goodbye long before her death, so for me she no longer lay in that box. My mother’s spirit had flown far away to other places, perhaps her beloved Alps, wherever she wanted to be.

Whenever I play this last partita I think of her, our difficult relationship and yet at the same time remember and appreciate all that I learned from her, the powerful influence she had on my creative life. Apart from giving birth to me there is no doubt that without her I would not be who I am for good and bad as a writer and artist.

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#### BACK TO THE FIFTH PARTITA, A LOVE LETTER

From beginning to end this partita in G Major, the key of some of Bach’s sunniest works, is such a jewel of a piece that every time I play it, it is like making love. The wit, the charm, the buoyancy and transparency of composition never fail to delight and dazzle, even if the technical demands are challenging, especially in the gigue which is fugal perfection that manages drama, humour as well as seductively airy counterpoint. This quick dance is composed with the relaxed ease of a master, but is densely plotted and argued, so by the end there is a satisfying sense of resolution as well as elation.

#### THE FRENCH SUITES

A musicologist once described these as relaxing to play, a rest from more demanding repertoire. This may be the case for professional performers. We others shouldn’t be fooled

by their brevity and apparent simplicity. Ostensibly written as exercises for his young sons, these pieces are Bach at his most distilled: they demand technical precision and concentration. This is why I explore them only after traversing the more virtuosic English Suites and the musically and technically challenging partitas. The melodic and rhythmic charm of the French Suites make them rewarding and consoling to play. Even so, after practising the set's fifth suite for over sixty years, the exhilarating gigue catches me out every time. Among many Bach lovers Joyce Grenfell chose the lively gem of a high-stepping gavotte as well as the gigue from this particular suite as her Desert Island discs. A television adaptation of Jane Austen's *Persuasion* used the first suite's sarabande in an almost statically slow performance to accompany a dinner scene. Agreeable listening however this is not easy music to play. Their apparent simplicity and brevity are deceptive.

#### THE 48

The variety and richness of Bach's unmatched exploration of prelude and fugue are indeed intimidating for composers and players alike. There is hardly a composer since who did not rise to the challenge and as a result produced some of their best work. Chopin carried the two volumes with him wherever he went and as a teacher encouraged pupils to learn them. Since Chopin and Bach are the mainstays of my playing the piano, this connection figures. The substance and beauty make them satisfying to play.

Bach may well have intended these pieces for practice and not meant anything more than a study in every available key and counterpoint challenge, technical problems for the keyboard pupil to resolve. For me and many the two sets contain the whole world and more.

The first and probably the most famous prelude and fugue introduces the player to the instrument and what it can express, launching us on a journey that will lead to ever more challenging musical adventures. The template is set in that for all the deliberate musical

contrasts the prelude and fugue share a relationship beyond key signature, connections that are both intellectual and emotional, an appeal to heart and mind. A pianist recently recorded all the preludes separately because he couldn't reconcile himself to the fugues which seemed academic and less fun than the more imaginative and charming introductions, unrestrained by strict form. For me the preludes prepare are complemented by the fugues so the coupling is organic: the one answering the other in mood and substance. The relationship isn't just between each prelude and fugue, but also between the major and minor pairs. Even now the intimate connections can so confuse me that I still make the mistake of forgetting whether I'm playing in major or minor. In each piece Bach explores the relationship between major and minor as well as different keys to such an extent that pushes boundaries: the compositions sometimes sound atonal.

Since Bach is known to have performed each book at a sitting he may also have intended all 24 of each book to be heard as a whole. This sequence of 48 preludes and fugues is part of what he called The Well-Tempered Klavier. The whole body of music contained there explores the sound world of a keyboard instrument which would have then been a harpsichord, clavichord or organ. The 48 follow a sequence of scales that suited the particular tuning of the keyboard available to him, and it is known that he worked with the instrument makers, advising them, making suggestions and refining the tuning, hence the word 'well tempered'. I like the double meaning though, implying that the music is conducive to a good mood.

As a player it is the relationship between major and minor that provides for me the most significant challenges and musical interest. Chopin may have based his own *Preludes*, without fugues, on the Bach sequence, but the tension between major and minor is contained within each piece and he arranges them in order of rising numbers of sharps and diminishing numbers of flats. Musicologists suggest that Chopin's preludes are a kind of salon music

which can be played separately, but for me there is a single powerful journey from C major to D minor in which all the pieces have a distinct place in the structure. Bach's journey from C major to B minor when performed by artists of the calibre of Andras Schiff, Daniel Barenboim and Angela Hewitt who specialize in performing each book at a sitting, creates an effect that is overwhelming, like the gradual incremental building of a cathedral. Despite the fact that several Chopin preludes are beyond my technical ability I always play them in sequence as a single work. I've never done the same with Bach's 48, either of the books, playing always two, major followed by its minor because they belong together, and no more than four at a time. The whole lot at one go would be too much for me to manage: hats off to pianists who manage it. What an occasion that must have been when Bach played them at one sitting. Oh to have been a fly on the wall, even just to get an idea of tempo, let alone of how he approached each piece!

#### SOME OBSERVATIONS

The sustained notes in Bach give me the greatest pleasure. An organ might help them carry, certainly more than the harpsichord or clavichord, but I appreciate the way the piano can create a similar sound which then fades as the other notes carry on before it then melts into the next line of melody.

As said before: playing old instruments taught me about variety of tone. The lower part of a harpsichord is sonorous and the upper part light and even quite thin. On the piano I let the bass sound fuller than the treble. For me this adds an emotional and spiritual dimension to the music that played with equal weight can come across dry and academic. The fugues take advantage of this variety of tone so when Bach moves to the upper registers the music sounds almost disembodied, fragile but also celestial. When he moves to the lower depths the passion behind the music becomes overpowering. The way Bach clusters notes down there indicates

for me that he intends the music to be forceful, even menacing. There is drama and emotion in every piece, and above all, for me, a yearning, a ‘Sehnsucht’, for harmonious resolution. Embarking on this particular journey is always a special moment for me, but ‘pace’ (Italian for ‘shut up’) pianists who hate fugues: preludes and fugues together are inseparable.

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## BOOK ONE OF THE 48

### C MAJOR AND MINOR

The famous first prelude despite its bare simplicity contains in microcosm the most important elements of both sets: sonority, modulation and a journey that is both technical and emotional. James Rhodes writes movingly about this piece in his performance diary *Fire All Round*. Gounod follows the structure of the prelude in a famous arrangement as accompaniment to his celebrated Ave Maria and imposes a melody that is not implied by Bach’s original which is barely unrecognizable under the romantic layers laid over it by Gounod. There is no need for any melody; not even a secret one like that written out but not intended to be played in Schumann’s *Humoresque*. Bach establishes fundamental ideas for the player, such as emphasising the bass which should carry powerfully throughout all its 35 bars, and above which float the arpeggios taking the player through a series of beautiful and sometimes startling modulations. Paul Klee used to talk about drawing as taking a line for a walk. Bach is doing the same with these two simple ideas.

In contrast to the prelude’s simplicity the fugue is a dense piece of four part counterpoint which after a series of complex manoeuvres of modulation and thematic development, including several bars that test finger dexterity, resolves into a return to the tranquillity of the prelude by evaporating upward into a high chord in the home key. The number of voices in

the fugues of the 48 does not necessarily imply extra richness of texture. I find that the ones in three parts are among the most densely composed so they give the impression of being in many more voices. Bach is a master of suggestion, so even two part counterpoint sounds as though several more voices are involved. In the first C major fugue the four parts preclude suggestion of more voices. For all its density there is an airy lightness to the argument, a deceptive simplicity of progression that holds promise of easy resolution. Compare this with the second book fugue in C major where the three parts give the impression of an orchestra with trumpets.

The C minor prelude is as restless as the C major prelude is tranquil. Played on a harpsichord it clatters along, jabbing and noisy till eventually it picks up speed and comes to a decisive conclusion. As so often in the 48, the C minor fugue is a surprising contrast, skipping along all smiles and sunshine, a minor key not necessarily cause for gloom. The previous C major fugue is solemn in comparison. The charm as always with Bach demands good technique and lots of practice required to bring it off so that it sounds effortless. For me the story behind this particular prelude and fugue concerns a member of St James's congregation whom I hardly knew but for some reason entrusted me with his spinet, to give it a home for a few years while he moved to America. Once settled there he came to retrieve it. Teaching me how to play and look after this precious old instrument he played the C minor fugue from Book One of the 48 and immediately I heard how Bach may have intended his keyboard compositions to sound: each note clear as a bell, and every line of counterpoint evenly balanced, with reverberant bass and pinging high notes.

#### C SHARP MAJOR AND MINOR

What a tricky major key signature this is, and by making it virtuosic Bach doesn't make it easy for the amateur player. The fugue sounds best also played fast and contains a tricky

chromatic development similar to one in the presto section of the Toccata in F Sharp Minor. I can't tell if Bach is having fun at our expense or simply allowing his imagination to cross every boundary (probably the latter, or both) but it is hard enough to cope with remote keys without chromatic episodes complicating things further. This means that I'm constantly forgetting I'm in the minor when playing the second pair, even now after over half a century playing them. The moods are contrasting, as they are throughout the 48. In this case the major pair is light and airy. The minor pair has tragic grandeur plunges into the depths. After a melancholy prelude in the style of his adored Couperin Bach composes a lengthy four part fugue which is one of the glories of the First Book. Mendelssohn seems to have been inspired by this fugue in several of his own, and although they are marvellous pieces in their own right, developing into full-blown romantic climaxes, Bach's lucid counterpoint, gravity and originality shine with a unique lustre that can't be matched. There is a discordant modulation in the final bars that constantly startles and moves me, similar to the way Mozart introduces a surprising harmonic shift near the conclusion of several of his own compositions. In Bach's case the effect of this discord is to delay the ending, so the satisfaction of resolution is enhanced.

Comparing the matching pairs in first and second books of the 48, in Book Two the C Sharp minor prelude has a similar melancholy to the one in Book One, but the fugue is a scintillating gigue in contrast to the gravity of its predecessor in Book One.

#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN D MAJOR AND D MINOR

These two are among the most familiar to amateur pianists. Despite or because of their technical challenges teachers consider them good practice for learners. Both fugues are well within most amateur's capabilities, but the preludes are not only tricky for the fingers, they also demand a subtle touch. Anything heavy and hammering turns them into a trial for both

players and listeners. Played with a light sensitive touch they are a delight; Bach at his most magical. The D Minor prelude strikes me as a lyrical riposte to the more effervescent D Major, which needs to be played quite fast, although not presto whereas the D Minor is spoiled by rushing and has a melancholy elegance in which Bach has, as always, a particularly seductive way with the triplet figures. These are for me at their most potent throughout the first part of his organ Prelude and Fugue in A minor. The shifting harmonic implications make these pieces tricky to play because they can wrong foot me. Most performers do a good job on these preludes, but Schnabel plays the D major to perfection. This pianist manages to get the tempo right, not too fast but not dragging either, and there is a pearly tone which adds substance to the filigree figurations. The sound has to do with the quality of his touch and musicianship which reflect a sensitive and thoughtful personality with wide cultural interests. His performances were about more than piano and technique. Famously his teaching of pupils like Clifford Curzon, another inspired Mozart and Schubert player, included visits to galleries and the theatre. Most performers focus solely on the music, a hermetically sealed world of technique and interpretation in which each note and phrase is polished to perfection. With Schnabel there is an awareness of life beyond the notes, which is why his Beethoven Sonatas in particular have such character. Imperfections there might be, and he never repudiated or glossed over them, saying after one particular recording session of a Brahms concerto that another take might have fewer errors but would not be played better. The power of his Beethoven comes from that rugged quality of stretching and breaking boundaries, triggering emotion and challenging the intellect. Schnabel's hands respond to the different character of each composer. His Mozart has equilibrium and grace but with a purposefulness that allows magical interludes no other pianist quite manages to the same degree, as for instance the last movement of the sonata in A minor. In Schubert he brings out the Beethoven, an unavoidable influence on the younger composer. There are few

recordings of Schnabel's romantic repertoire beyond Brahms. People rated his performance of the last movement of Chopin's Funeral March sonata as the best they had ever heard, and I can only imagine the character he must have injected into what appears to be an exercise in finger dexterity. His Bach has a wholeness and sense of calm assurance that reminds us that the composer dedicated everything he wrote to God.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN E FLAT MAJOR AND MINOR

The large-scale toccata-like prelude of the E Flat Major includes a substantial double fugue: Bach as ever generous with ideas. In surprising contrast the fugue which follows is a graceful charmer. The way the voices interweave sensuously reminds me of the Domine Deus duet from the Gloria of his B Minor Mass in which the tenor, soprano, flute and violin pass the melody from one to the other. The E Flat Minor pair which follows is for me one of the highpoints of the whole 48. The prelude in the form of a stately sarabande to my ears should not go too slowly, although most performers cannot resist the temptation to turn it into a solemn dirge. From the opening chord we are transported to a different world and mood from the Major pair. As so often Bach takes us on an emotional and sometimes harrowing journey to release us on a final chord in the major. Peter Dickinson the composer pointed out to me that the key of E flat underpins George Gershwin's *The Man I Love*. Mozart's Piano Concerto in that key also expresses a similar warmth and grandeur. Having set us down safely Bach then embarks on what is for me one of his most haunting themes which he then works in three parts and takes us on a leisurely journey, calmly and tenderly over four pages of intricate counterpoint to a satisfying resolution which remain in the minor key, but moving quietly upwards, rising on angel wings. Ingmar Bergman seems to have felt the same about this fugue because he includes it in one of his early films, played by his pianist wife, heard from outside the house in the garden. Being my mother's favourite of all the fugues in the 48 I of course I had to play it at her memorial. The key signature and Bach's mischievous habit

of introducing chromatic variations on the theme make this a tricky fugue to play faultlessly. I remember crossing my fingers in the air before embarking on it. Mistakes disturb the elegiac mood of tranquil acceptance.

Of the many moments I look forward to while playing this sublime piece, one happens half-way through bar 44 when the bass after a bar's silence inverts the theme deep down the instrument. The harpsichord taught me how sonorous those low notes are, so I naughtily hesitate ever so slightly before the entry and then give it especial emphasis. For me this makes the fugue swing and it becomes a graceful sinuous dance like that performed by the three Graces in Botticelli's Primavera. The grave and stately sarabande prepared me for a fugue of a serenity that has the sense of continuing without need of a conclusion. This comes as ascension into silence. Bergman's film understands the healing quality of this composition. For me the piece will always remind me of my mother in her prime. While playing it for the memorial event I imagined her spirit soaring far away to some place where she could shed all the traumas of her life. Seriously ill most of her life she managed to take just one plane journey visiting her father before he died. I felt nervous for her but for no reason. After the flight she said she wanted to be a bird in a future life. That is how I imagine her spirit now: rising up the highest mountains and then like Bach's fugue evaporating into the boundless cosmos.

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#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN E MAJOR AND E MINOR

I appreciate the relative simplicity of the following preludes and fugues, as refined and distilled as the French Suites. There is evidence that Bach worked on them. The music looks and sounds as though it had all been composed in the head and flowed easily like a mighty river from his pen. Now we know that Bach made changes, edited and re-composed them

before they became part of the 48. Their simplicity is deceptive, as always when Bach seems to be writing for beginners. The E minor fugue may only be in two parts but demands nimble fingers. As with Mozart these pieces are approachable for children but become ever more enjoyable to play as the years go by and my technique improves. They sound best played neither too fast nor too slow and with a light touch.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN F MAJOR AND MINOR

The same distilled simplicity pervades these pieces except for the fugue in F minor which for me has the kind of technical challenges and musical interest found in Book Two of the 48. The fugal theme has two distinct parts, the beginning stately with a chromatic modulation while the second half is fast and rhythmic. Bach plays with these two moods throughout its spacious length and builds through a series of harmonic shifts and complicated figurations in which the fingers of both hands keep taking over the theme. As so often with Bach when he takes on complex journeys the climax is reached in the satisfying major: we are home.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN F SHARP MAJOR AND MINOR

The prelude is a jewel, as sublime in its simplicity as the prelude in C major. Peter Dickinson the composer told me that the ones in remote keys are among the best in the 48. He particularly loved this one, pointing out especially and singing to me the idiosyncratic trill in the first bar. Usually Bach makes these keys even more difficult by introducing complicated chromatic diversions, but in this prelude and fugue he keeps everything straight forward and all the more rewarding to play and listen to. The fugue has some tricky passages, but if I keep to sensible fingering the problems sort themselves. The equally beautiful and modest prelude and fugue in the minor key are also relatively easy to play. The fugue takes one of Bach's mathematical figures, a similar device to a wedge shape that inspired some of his most imposing compositions. In this case he plays around with note lengths which double in speed

within the same phrase. As always Bach turns something purely technical into a musical journey that steadily gains in power right through to the final chord, the four voices interweaving from hand to hand. The long notes add another dimension in the way they are held while the melody counterpoints in different directions. These long notes are used to sublime effect in the Art of the Fugue, his final exploration of an art form he made his own.

There is a personal story around the prelude in F Sharp Major from Book One of the 48. A pianist friend of my parents introduced them to music they didn't know. I started lessons around that time and wanted to play with his solid technique. This piece delighted him and he played it for us. Aged between 8 and 10 I used to stay overnight and weekends with him and his wife. One night after I'd been put to bed I could hear him and his wife talking cheerfully with guests. Then suddenly he crept into my room and kissed me passionately on the lips. Since my parents never showed me any physical affection this came as a welcome surprise. At the time I had no idea he shouldn't have done this. He never touched me again, but to this day I still feel the intensity of that kiss. During my stays he taught me how to accompany him on the cello which he also played well. He had a light touch in contrast to a taciturn friend, another keen pianist, who occasionally visited and hit the piano keys angrily like a hammer without any attempt to play softly even when the music demanded it. There is a postlude to this memory. Several years after those childhood overnight visits I happened to meet him on the street, greeted him but noticed immediately that he had lost all interest in me. He muttered hello, turned his head away and carried on walking. This rejection upset me, but I understood straight away that for some men their emotional and sexual fascination with boys lasts only while they are pre-pubescent.

Whenever I play this prelude I think of him with pleasure, the kiss, the music making, and wonder what happened to him. Around the same time another pianist friend of my parents took an affectionate interest in me. I fell in love with Roger so passionately that when he left

England to work with poor people in Africa I begged him and my parents to let me go with him. 'I can look after you!' I said in desperation. My parents laughed, looking at their eight year old son with surprise. He smiled at me wistfully and I never saw him again. The one day we spent together remains vividly in my memory. He allowed me to show him places that were special to me, such as a pond where water- boatmen skittered across the surface. He crouched down next to me and took genuine interest in everything I did and said. Back at home, alone together, I put my arms round him and kissed him with passion. He behaved with restraint but did not resist, at one point sighing and caressing me tenderly, murmuring with sorrow: 'What a lovely boy you are!' This meant everything to a needy emotionally starved boy. I adored his face with warm brown eyes and trimmed beard. His Liszt performances wowed audiences so that he became the ideal I constantly aimed to reach. He could hear a piece of music just once then sit down at the keyboard and play it from ear. I never found out what happened to him after he left for Africa. Did he ever return? My parents never spoke of him again. Whenever I play Liszt, especially the Annes de Pelerinage with their yearning for foreign places, I think of him. First love, even at that early age, can never be forgotten.

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#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN G MAJOR AND G MINOR

I learnt the G minor prelude and fugue for Grade 8, working on the pieces without me going through the stress of sitting the exam. Playing it I understand only now how it should go and shudder to think what a mess I would have made of it. The brilliance of the G major prelude still presents a challenge. The driving beat of the fugue tempts speed, but my feeling is it shouldn't go too fast because during the interplay of the three voices one leads into the other in a variety of directions and through a series of surprising modulations. The G minor pair

spins a more melancholy lyrical mood but to my mind the fugue should not go too slowly because there is a swing in the rhythm. At the speed I feel it should go there are some tricky passages to negotiate but the effect is satisfying, dancing to a conclusion in the major key.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN A FLAT MAJOR AND MINOR

The startlingly 20<sup>th</sup> century harmonies in both these pairs lift them out of the baroque tradition. Lyrical and beautiful to play and listen to, these pieces contain moments with ambiguous harmonic shifts that sound way before their time, already in the third bar of the A flat major fugue, then in the third bar before the end. Numbers were an obsession for Bach, though perhaps not as extreme as for Bruckner who needed treatment for it, so these playful ideas are carefully considered and not quirks. I need to practice some bars a lot to get the modulations right. As though this remote key in the minor weren't difficult enough to navigate Bach, as so often, mischievously introduces chromatic passages. That fugue is one of the most sublime in the whole book, the tread reminding me of passages in the St Mathew Passion and the Mass in B Minor. This is music to enter the gates of heaven.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN A MAJOR AND MINOR

What fun these are! The high spirits of the A major prelude prepares the way for a fugue that is full of jaunty good humour. Beethoven apparently laid extra emphasis on the first note, which strikes me as being true to the character of the piece even though Bach doesn't mark it. The fugue has the seemingly contradictory time signature of *allegretto vivace*. With that strange single note played at the beginning followed by a rest, this clearly is Bach winking with a big smile on his face. It should go with a skip and a jump, but not so fast that the semi-quavers when they suddenly appear don't sound helter-skelter, especially as several bars are tricky to play at any speed. This is exhilarating music to play and listen to.

The mood calms down in the A minor prelude which explores ideas from the previous fugue. Then the A minor fugue sets a lengthy subject on a long journey of several pages. This for me is an example in the First Book of the 48 being trickier to play than the Second Book. I do not find the notes and phrases lying comfortably under the fingers. There is a similar lengthy fugue, the 22<sup>nd</sup> in Book Two, which is an even more complicated composition but yet manages to be more secure to navigate. A minor like C major is quite tricky to play, as I also experience with the famous Mozart sonata and late Rondo in the same key. It doesn't help that Bach ends the Book One fugue in A minor with a climax requiring either an extra hand or to be played on the organ with a long held pedal note. It appears that the two books were in fact written for a variety of instruments. There is certainly an 'organ' feel to this fugue. The last two pages are particularly difficult, but build to a tremendous interrupted climax. Bach often uses this device, in which after an unresolved chord there is a pause and the fugue then carries on with a grand coda to a final resolution, here in the major key.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN B FLAT MAJOR AND MINOR

The pair in the major key is bravura, a brilliant prelude leading to a lively bouncing fugue. Hearing them played on a harpsichord I realize the prelude needs to sound boisterous rather than delicate, the many notes would clatter noisily up and down the keyboard, although with typical wit Bach ends the virtuosic piece with a phrase rising from the sonorous depths to the tinkling top. The pair in the minor key are a complete contrast, and two of the most moving pieces in the whole 48. To my surprise even famous performers I admire hugely (like Susanna Ruzickova) take the sublime prelude so slowly that it becomes a dirge, when to my ears it should go with a lilt. The following five part fugue then resonates with special gravity. My mother loved this piece and used to play it before she gave up the piano. The wide stretches imply again that this might have been intended for the organ, but even without using the sustaining pedal it sounds well on the modern piano. The long held notes ring out and

fade, blending with each other to create the effect of a Palestrina motet floating through the wide spaces of the Vatican basilica. Bach absorbed so much influence from the past and present. At the same time he already absorbs in an uncannily prescient way influences from the future where his own music inspired and challenged future composers.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN B MAJOR AND MINOR

This prescience suffuses the whole of the fugue in the minor key, a towering pillar of the 48, and one where Bach took special care to mark phrasing and tempo.

The lyrical ease of the pair in the major key is in striking contrast to the complexity and monumental grandeur of the pair in the minor. However as always Bach is at his most skilful when being apparently uncomplicated and that is evident in both the prelude and fugue in B major.

I used to annoy fellow pianists when I performed the B minor prelude with cheeky chutzpah in ad hoc concerts among friends at college. ‘That’s not how it should go!’ they’d shout. In other words all piano players take personal possession of this particular composition. It is tempting to take the prelude slowly, and the music is so beautiful that even at a leisurely trudge the sublime suspensions still charm. I like to take it now at a walking pace that knows where it’s going, in other words cheerfully with the wind at my back and the sun full on my face, a ravishing landscape stretching out on all sides. There is no escaping that the following fugue is deeply serious but with varying moods, from the mournful to the ecstatic as in the gorgeous counterpoint with melodies crossing between the hands. It then adventures bravely into rigorously controlled atonal modulations in the middle section, prefiguring Schoenberg by well over two hundred years. Passages like these must have been what Reger referred to when he would shake his head in admiration and mutter how they would upset music academics, the ones who accused him of being too modern. This fugue takes us on a long

emotional and intellectual journey so the final bars provide for me the most longed for and satisfying resolution, in B major of course. The fact that Bach took care over the tempo and phrasing tells me how much he valued this particular composition.

## BOOK TWO OF THE 48

Book One opens with one of the simplest preludes Bach ever composed: the essence of minimalism in which a repeated rhythmic figure is guided through a sequence of modulations. Bach appears to be laying down a different gauntlet at the start of Book Two with a prelude in the same key of C Major but as complex and dense in counterpoint as the Book One prelude is spare and pellucid.

Although Book Two is compositionally and technically more challenging than Book One, I personally find the earlier set trickier to negotiate. However complicated the later set Bach creates less awkward and more comfortable positions for the hands and fingers. The music is equally beautiful in both books, and Bach wrote nothing more sublime than the first C Major prelude but as a composer he delves deeper and expands wider in Book Two. He breaks rules, recreates them and stretches my intellect, challenges my technique and inspires my imagination.

### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN C MAJOR AND C MINOR

Whereas the deceptively simple prelude that starts Book One seduces me into the start of a journey that becomes ever more challenging and varied in mood and style, the prelude in the same key launches Book Two on further exciting musical adventures with a flourish of richly

textured counterpoint. There are bars which appear to require more fingers on each hand, but are possible with focused practice, paying attention to the long notes which cannot be released without losing the melody. This is a stately procession with everyone dressed in sumptuous colourful robes. Then, in keeping with Bach's gift for contrast, a spirited three part fugue which must be played at speed in the style of a Brandenburg Concerto, trumpets dancing peals of notes, blows a bracing wind through the dense complexity to exhilarating effect. What a start!

Playing Book One each time I think this music is so good and frequently sublime. It can't get better. When I embark on Book Two I feel the same and I wonder how that is even possible to take things further and am astounded at Bach's fecund invention. As a student and young man my chutzpah outdid my ability. I once played the C minor pair in the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford for a birthday celebration. A suggestion from the audience that I should consider taking more piano lessons shamed me, but I continued to perform for several more years. The prelude is relatively straight forward, harking back to the relative simplicity of Book One and the piece moves along with lyrical springy step. The fugue seems to take the same direct path and then becomes ever more complicated, exploring the minor mode, beating a path through the jungle, with tricky finger work and untypically for Bach does not end in the major.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN C SHARP MAJOR AND MINOR

I'm in love with these two pairs. Peter Dickinson pointed out that the ones in remote keys are among the most beautiful and interesting. The keys make them difficult for amateurs, added to which Bach makes no concessions to the complexity of composition. The pair in the major is relatively but deceptively simple. Bach creates a seductive rocking motion in the prelude in which the modulations negotiated by a repetitive pattern remind me of the C major prelude in Book One, but I always stumble during the final quick section, as I do in the sprightly

bouncing fugue which is fun once I'm on top of it. Bach highlights the wit with some virtuosic scales that are satisfying to play.

The minor pair is elaborate. I like to play the prelude at an andante to allow the embellishments and harmonic shifts to make their point without rush. It has a melancholy feel, and the fugue is like the sun emerging from behind a cloud. It is a gigue but so demanding to play that I cannot take it as fast as I'm sure it should go. The heart-stopping modulations bring depth to an infectiously rhythmic dance. There are tricky cross hand passages and I dream of one day playing them without hesitating, my main weakness.

#### PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN E FLAT MAJOR AND MINOR

The major pair is a pleasure to play because it is not so demanding technically, despite a few tricky bars which are helped by sensible fingering. The minor pair should sound equally relaxed but the key signature presents problems for us amateurs. These start already in the flowing prelude, but become thickets in the fugue where Bach embarks on a series of chromatic modulations as though E flat minor weren't already tricky enough to negotiate. This key however seems to bring out the best in Bach, because both the Eb major and minor pairs in Book One are equally beautiful.

The rhythm of the elegiac fugue in the minor pair shares the same exalted mood of achieving the final stages of life's journey with Bach's last compositions for the organ, based on the chorale describing the soul's entry into heaven, *When I approach God's throne*. The fugue which never fails to move me is worth every effort to practice and get right. Though complicated by chromatic excursions the minor key modulations reach resolution like the sun coming from behind a cloud. Bach springs a welcome surprise on the final chord in the major.

Mozart and Beethoven among many composers also discovered a particular aura of comfort, splendour and emotion in the chord of E flat major. Gershwin uses it to satisfying effect in *The Man I Love*. Gershwin's piano transcription is a celebration of Eb major.

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At this stage of talking about Bach's 48, a bedrock of piano literature, I need to stop exclaiming how beautiful they are. Let's take that as read. This book is about how an enthusiastic amateur can approach them, by sharing my experience. One aspect of my relationship to them glows especially brightly: the more I know them and the older I get the more I love and appreciate them. In fact at my ripe old age I feel a kind of ecstasy playing them. The formidably talented Andras Schiff has a way of putting it which makes me uncomfortable. He says that they make him feel 'clean'. That is too pious for me. I know what he means, though I would describe the sensation differently. They are intellectually absorbing, the counterpoint complex and challenging, but at the same time having a sense of achievement and resolution. However densely complicated it becomes, for instance the large-scale fugues in the Book One's B minor and Book Two's B flat minor, despite the mental and physical dexterity required, the effect is of a transcendent beauty that satisfies the brain and the heart. Cleanliness has nothing to do with it.

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#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN E MAJOR AND MINOR

This key in both major and minor seems to inspire Bach to sunny composition. The E minor English Suite number 5 is joyful from beginning to end. In the Book Two E major pair a similar relaxed lyricism pervades the prelude followed by a fugue of simple gravity which

could be and has been sung by a choir. The accidentals add spicy sharpness to the sense of quiet exaltation.

Minimalism challenged Bach to his technically most difficult compositions. The solo cello suites and violin sonatas stretch performers to their limits. I find his two part inventions trickier to negotiate than those in three parts. The E minor prelude is just such a two part invention which demands concentration to play accurately, all the more because it feels deceptively simple. The sprightly fugue continues the sense of dancing exaltation with some tricky cross finger writing and two tremendous climaxes which give the conclusion a satisfying resolution.

#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN F MAJOR AND F MINOR

Maybe the prelude in F major would sound best on the organ, with all those long held notes giving a rich depth and grandeur, but I love the way the sound dies away on the piano giving each voice a clear definition through the dense layering of counterpoint. Rather like the prelude in C major at the start of Book Two the sumptuous sonorities demand full tone. The following fugue is then a total contrast, light as a feather, dancing breezily in a manner that challenges finger flexibility. I love the way Bach springs surprises, however much I think I know the piece. .

Speeds are a moot point in the F minor pair. The prelude is traditionally played slowly, and perhaps that is how it should go, but my instinct is to play it quicker, not too fast but to give the piece momentum or it can sound plodding and stodgy. For me there is a lilt, springy bounce and delicacy. F minor brings out a melancholy strain in some composers, Beethoven and Mozart for instance, and for all its grace there is gravity in the prelude. The fugue is

marked very fast in my edition of the 48 but I prefer to take a leisurely allegro. Not only do the technical challenges slow me down, but the composition is full of detail. If taken too fast it can sound rushed and incoherent. That is what I think, but what do I know? It's in pieces like these that I miss hearing how Bach played them. A skilled performer can keep the clarity even at velocity.

There is a memory of regret attached to this piece. A potter and his wife built a kiln next to my mother's house and lodged with her. They produced beautiful stoneware including jars solid heavy jars and large round jugs like the one being used for pouring milk in the famous painting by Vermeer. For reasons I don't know, a violent falling out with my mother's partner meant they left and I lost contact with them. Before that unpleasantness they once visited me in London and I remember playing this fugue while he sat listening and gazed soulfully into the middle distance. 'That is so beautiful,' he said. Whenever I play this F minor fugue I think of him and wonder where he and his wife went. There is no doubt they would have achieved success with their exceptional pottery.

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#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN F SHARP MAJOR AND MINOR

For me nothing could be remoter than these key signatures, but the notes fall comfortably under the fingers after decent practice. The pair in the minor key is famously beautiful and overshadows the preceding prelude and fugue in the major. I enjoy playing both. There is a relaxed discursive quality about the prelude that flows pleasantly like a crystal clear stream, and then the fugue in contrast skips in gavotte rhythm. But I cannot play it as fast as it should go. The key and the accidentals create too many problems for me.

Then the adagio prelude in F sharp minor opens with a solemn grandeur and weaves a mesmerising melody over long phrases with only one breath two thirds of the way through before rising and sinking peacefully to rest.

In my first year at university when students are eagerly getting to know each other before parting in different directions and many cutting friendship, a young composer and disciple of Stockhausen used to listen to me playing this prelude and telling me that his tutor considered it the greatest movement in the whole 48. He pointed out the compositional subtleties which made me even more in awe of Bach. The fugue is for me as beautiful with the same sense of elevated long breaths, but this time uninterrupted apart from the entry of a second subject which enriches the texture. This pair makes me agree wholeheartedly with Susannah Rusickova saying that playing Bach makes one feel all is well with the world.

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#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN G MAJOR AND G MINOR

The G major pair is pure pleasure, the music seeming more difficult than it is, because of the speed and density of sound. I once played it on the beautiful baroque organ in the monastery of Vallombrosa which I visited with my partner Donald. A handsome monk gave us a friendly and even seductive smile then handed us the keys to the loft. What a treat! The instrument was in surprisingly good nick, clearly well restored and looked after. Milton visited here too centuries earlier, long before Bach wrote this music. Moments like this remain with one for a lifetime. The fugue is especially delicate. The speed is determined by the final bars where the demi-semi quavers shouldn't sound rushed. They bring the lilting counterpoint to a satisfying conclusion.

The G minor pair is in complete contrast, the prelude grave and elegiac. I need to watch out for the accidentals, so as not to spoil the mood of tragedy. It reminds me of Mozart's powerful setting of the Qui Tollis in his C Minor Mass. Mozart studied Bach and maybe he knew this prelude. The prelude is followed by a defiant fugue with a pounding beat. The repeated notes give the impression of anger and I like to play it not too fast and quite loudly from beginning to end. There is a driving impetus from beginning to end, quite different from any other fugue in the 48. The effect is exhilarating, because the composer Bach has a complete grip on the music's structure and purpose, bringing it to a resounding climax, but the anger expressed in the persistent hammering on the same note is impossible to suppress.

At university, again, my playing introduced a friend to Bach's 48, and this fugue in particular impressed him. On hearing it his face went crimson with emotion. The music had a visceral effect on him. This pair in G minor has a searing intensity.

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#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN A FLAT MAJOR AND MINOR

As I play through the 48 I have the sense of reaching the highest peak only to discover the following ones are as high if not higher. Such is the case with these substantial and breathtakingly sumptuous pairs. The long leisurely prelude of the major pair has a monumental grandeur like a walking journey through a landscape with wide panoramas. It leads into a sublime fugue with a melodious theme which to me sounds like a peal of bells. There are tricky modulations to negotiate all the way which need careful fingering and culminate in a forest of accidentals and chromatic harmonies, immensely satisfying to play.

The minor pair is even grander and more searching. The prelude seems to me to break beyond the baroque into the classical style being developed by Bach's sons. However Bach

can't help introducing dense counterpoint and playing with different keys. I love the descending split octaves in the second part of the prelude, which remind me of the famous bass line in the Air from the Orchestral Suite in D. The fugue is one of the most sublime in the 48 and a gift to amateurs because for all its length and tricky modulations it is not so hard to play. The melodic flow of the three voices inhabits the same elevated atmosphere of Beethoven's last quartets. Maybe Beethoven who studied and admired the 48 found inspiration in this particular fugue because he introduces one with a similar theme in the final movement of his penultimate sonata.

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#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN A MAJOR AND MINOR

Glen Gould performs the A major prelude very fast to negate any notion of the piece being an andante pastorale as suggested in Donald Tovey's edition of the 48, the one I have grown up with. I like to play it as an allegro but not too fast. It does have the rhythm of a gigue, but there is such a lyrical feel to the dance that rushing it seems like vandalism. But if you are as brilliant as Glen Gould Bach can never be ruined however controversial his interpretations might be. He always makes one rethink Bach. With inimitable sleight of compositional hand, Bach segues into the fugue by subtly altering the rhythm while keeping close to the prelude's theme and mood. Both pairs give the impression of being a relaxing interlude between the preceding and following large-scale compositions, but as always with Bach even at his simplest he gives substance and challenge. The A minor prelude is an example of that, as Tovey in my edition describes a 'rich outpouring of lyric melody'. He also goes on to point out the dense chromatic harmonies that Bach generally introduces into his writing for two parts, and which give the impression of almost orchestral grandeur. Syncopations and off-rhythms add to the complexity, giving the piece a sense of tragedy familiar in the Agnus Dei

of the B minor Mass, so this prelude is not easy to play. The contrasting fugue is full of drama with scurrying demi-semi-quaver passages leading to trills in the bass rising in a long phrase that needs to be played in a single breath reaching a high climax before descending again. This fugue has tremendous force as well as brilliance and once the technical challenges are overcome, immensely satisfying to play.

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#### PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN B FLAT MAJOR AND MINOR

These are for me the crowning glory of the 48. Their beauty and substance transcend the technical complexities, which are present throughout. Their length adds to the difficulty, especially the fugue in the minor pair. The B flat major pair is the one I look forward to playing most, and when I turn the page to it my heart lifts. The prelude is however a minefield of challenges with leaps above an octave and tricky cross hand passages added to an already difficult gigue rhythm which indicates that the piece should go with a swing. I have heard slow performances which make the piece sound turgid. Bach contrasts the lively gigue with an elegant minuet for the fugue, which never fails to move me when I play it. It reminds me of a similar sleight of hand that Beethoven achieves at the end of the Diabelli Variations when the original waltz theme, having been converted boldly into a march already in the first variation, as it were dissolves into another elegant minuet. Both Bach and Beethoven spring a surprise that I find deeply moving, although I can't explain why. Both composers elevate the stately dance with its graceful gestures into a movement that is both a dance and intimately emotional. The music becomes sublime. What makes Bach's fugue in B flat major special for me are the long notes that need to sound through the flowing counterpoint. Their melody moves through the sinuous theme passing from one voice to another. I notice that Bach explores this melodic device throughout all the Art of the Fugue.

The effect for me is like the entry of the chorale in the opening chorus of the St Mathew Passion. The simple line of melody cuts through the dense counterpoint like the voice of humanity trying to be heard in a crowd. In the classic Karl Richter recording from the 1950s, his first of two, the effect is searing because he brings the loud boy sopranos forward so the hymn isn't bedded into the counterpoint but rides it. The religious fervour in this interpretation, despite the lack of instrumental authenticity pioneered by John Eliot Gardiner and others, is not only unmatched but strikes me as being close to Bach's intentions. Much is probably 'incorrect' and maybe those boy singers wouldn't have dominated the texture in those days. With great excitement Liszt once came across an old man who had been chorister at the Thomanerkirche and informed the composer how ragged the performances were because the boys could barely cope with the musical difficulties, and were regularly beaten! In Straub's film *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, the impressive sight of choir and orchestra squeezed into the organ loft at the Thomanerkirche is as it must have been. The choirboys would certainly have let fly with that chorale in the first chorus. The effect is the same with the long melodic lines in the B flat major fugue and throughout the Art of the Fugue which are for me the emotional key to these compositions.

I also sense the mood of the St Mathew Passion throughout the prelude in B flat minor. It provides a solemn and densely textured preparation for a fugue on the scale of the one in B minor which ends Book One. It is a mystery how Bach manages to make a complicated technical exercise also beautiful to play and hear. It is clear just looking at the score that Bach is stretching the limits of the fugal form, and it looks formidable, but the sound world he creates through the complexity is breathtakingly varied and extraordinary, timeless belonging to no particular musical period, constantly contemporary. There is a similar complex fugue, the four-part A minor in Book One, but even though the five-part B flat minor is even more challenging as a composition, I find the earlier one technically more difficult with the

note layout awkward for the fingers to negotiate. Bach seems to have been conscious of that and solves those problems in the Book Two B flat minor fugue. Once the fingering is worked out the notes lie more comfortably under the hand and the piece is grateful to play. This is a benefit because the theme of the B flat minor fugue has drama and substance, and the way Bach weaves the counterpoint of the five voices while traversing a wide landscape of variations on it and leading the lines through a series of chromatic modulations takes my breath away and never fails to move me. Thankfully Bach removes excessive technical obstacles so the player can appreciate the composer's skill and inspiration in a piece that is quite difficult enough. I find the pauses in the theme particularly striking. It converses with itself, asking a question and then answering it with a steadily upward motion as though searching for happy resolution. The other voices join in and the way they all come together at the end is triumphant.

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#### THE PRELUDES AND FUGUES IN B MAJOR AND B MINOR

The pair in B flat minor could well have crowned the 48, but the composer has more new ideas up his sleeve which pour out in the B major pair which brings the 48 to an uplifting conclusion. The prelude in the minor key has the freshness of someone trying a different style, maybe inspired by his sons who were forging a new musical language, blowing a rebellious gust of the 'new' through Baroque complexity. It has the fleetness of the prelude to the fifth partita, my favourite of that collection. But then, in marked contrast, the fugue returns to Bach of the Mass in B Minor, rising from the depths with confident strides to a splendid ascent into the heavens like the *Dona Nobis Pacem*. The fingers have to negotiate some delicate cross hand phrasing and once again there are long held notes underpinning the swell and riding the crest of counterpoint. For me this fugue is a fitting crown to the 48.

The B minor pair is like a charming epilogue, unlike the large scale pair which majestically concludes Book One. The prelude rolls along like a river in full flood and reminds me of Wordsworth's mountain echoes and gusting winds, the earth wrapped in all four elements. The fugue is a dance in the rhythm of a minuet swaying through particularly attractive passages with leaping octaves and poignant suspensions. Bach gives us a playful and graceful conclusion to the 48 which despite being primarily a set of technical and composition exercises for the piano will always be for me a trove of infinite treasure.

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## THE ART OF THE FUGUE

Variety is the key to the 48. In *The Art of the Fugue* Bach explores the fugal possibilities of a handful of themes, in all manner of configurations. They appear to be academic exercises but playing them is for me calming and nourishing. Like the 48 they are endlessly rewarding spiritually and emotionally.

I leave experts to analyse them. Throughout my travels with the Soul of Europe on peace-building projects in places where war has destroyed regions, split communities, murdered and tortured people I always carry a copy of the *Art of the Fugue*. There is never opportunity to play them, except once. This happened during the process of bringing Bosnian Serbs and Muslims together to create a memorial at the Omarska iron ore mine, site of a killing camp, for the over two thousand murdered during the Bosnia War in the Prijedor region. The process is written about in *the white house, from Fear to a Handshake*, available to read on the Tender Bridge site.

Rage, denial, shifting blame, indignation, extreme trauma and justifiable general suspicion of outsiders with limited knowledge thinking they can enter an unfamiliar situation and help

people naturally make this process of peace building a challenge. However the process can also be heartening, because fundamentally people on both sides of conflict do want to overcome trauma, heal and get on with each other, regardless of history and atrocities. We would not have been there if the people hadn't invited us.

At one point in the project a Muslim survivor of the killing camp screened a film about his experiences. Other survivors watched this grim documentary alongside Bosnian Serbs who were of course shocked and outraged. Still in denial they declared everything to be a lie, and why hadn't a film been made about atrocities committed by Muslims against Serbs? There seemed to be no chance of communication let alone peace building. The denial depressed me and the film distressed me so much that I begged our project managers if they could find a piano for me to play. The principal of the Prijedor music academy led me to a grand piano standing in a room empty of any other furniture and with no pictures hanging on the white walls, a space devoted to inner spirit. Without distraction I played through the *Art of the Fugue*, one fugue after the other. The stillness all round with the rest of the building seemingly empty of people I could focus on the music which reflected the process of mediation we were trying to achieve. The different themes communicated with each other in seamlessly constructed interweaving lines, the voices alternating in importance, listening to each other and for all the difficulties somehow achieving resolution. The journey there and discussion on the way might be gentle without too many obstacles, occasionally defiant, often knotty, sometimes cheerful and even exuberant and celebratory with grand gestures. The 48 uses many dance forms, but the *Art of the Fugue* is about mathematics, intellect and not without emotion. I especially love playing the lyrical fourth and eighth fugues and the joyously rapid ninth with the long held note melodies moving between both hands, high and low. The tenth is a particularly satisfying fugue which Bach rewrites slightly and it reappears later in the set with a slight variation. The eleventh is on a grand scale and takes all the

themes, turning them inside out and upside down and despite the complexity, sublimely at ease with itself from beginning to the final bar. Bach certainly completed the unfinished fugue which ends the book, and what we have is tantalising because I imagine him carrying on for several more pages, simply because he could, and for the way he has transformed the main themes into new material, such as the introduction of his own initials half way through. This development promises a composition that could continue indefinitely. as it is the final bar stops in mid-air, and I wish I knew what Bach wrote next. People have made attempts at completing it, but I like to leave it abruptly. This ending gives me the feeling that Bach could have gone on forever.

The contrapuncti that make up most of the second half of the collection are too difficult for me to play, although other pianists have managed. The impossible stretches indicate they may have been composed to be read and studied on the page. They can and have been transcribed for groups of other instrumentalists, usually string quartet or chamber orchestra, and as so often with Bach transcriptions, sound wonderful, new pieces in their own right. Bach would have approved. He frequently transcribed his own work, and with subtle variations on the original forged new compositions. Bach transcribed for two pianos the double violin concerto, with a slow movement that is such a sublime duet for the two players, that I can't imagine it being played on any other instruments. Bach's effective transcription sounds like a new minted piece because, with his acute ear, he is aware of tonal difference.

I have tried playing all of them, but generally keep to the fugues one to eleven. In that room in Prijedor, away from pain and conflict, the composer's concentrated focus on musical form and his spiritual sense of an infinite universe putting all our comparatively insignificant world's sorrows into perspective, helped me feel a restorative calm. The tears did flow filling a bottomless pool of grief at humanity's limitless cruelty, like the unforgettable eerie lake behind a locked door in Bartok's *Bluebeard's Castle*.

Did this hour of playing *The Art of the Fugue* in the room empty except for a piano remind me of my own family history? Is this why I play? Do I hope to find consolation and some kind of answer to the traumas of history? All that can be said is that I am grateful to composers, especially Bach, but others too. Their music is not just balm for the soul. It can be disturbing, discordant even, and infinitely challenging to play and listen to, but I need to play the music just to get through life. My father declared music to be humanity's greatest creation. Musicians survived persecution and the holocaust by playing their instruments. Alice Herz-Sommer survived the Terezin concentration camp in that way, and lived to the ripe old age of 111 years, famously positive in her attitude to life. She remembers playing the piano in her German home while waiting for the Gestapo to take her away; the neighbours knocked on her door. She feared the worst or that she might be disturbing them with her practice. In fact they wanted to thank her for the beautiful music. As with my own grandparents in Berlin, neighbours were prepared to comfort and help, but felt powerless against a state hell bent on persecution and genocide. Alice Herz-Sommer had been playing Schubert, the most consoling of all composers. In those traumatic circumstances music can be transcendent.

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In the next part of my writing on playing the piano I will share my experience of playing Beethoven and Chopin, among others.