

Why play Bach on an antique flute?

by Fletcher James

J.S. Bach, 6 Flute Sonatas

John Solum, Baroque Flute; Igor Kipnis, Harpsichord; Barbara Bogatin, Baroque 'Cello Arabesque, 1988
Compact disk—CDZ6589; Cassette—ABQC6589.

The Bach sonatas for flute form the centerpiece of the chamber repertoire for flute. Every serious flautist, whether professional or amateur, will work on these pieces, again and again, throughout his career. I would urge that you listen to these recordings, and perhaps compare them to other recordings of the same pieces, for three reasons.

First, because Bach's poetry can only be properly brought out on instruments which are themselves based on the principles of classical aesthetics. Second, although this performance varies greatly in quality, there is a lawfulness to that variation. Third, because the better sections of the recording—about half—will give you the rare opportunity to hear Bach performed very well.

Most persons are under the impression that the only reason to use period instruments in performing baroque or classical music, is some anti-technological "search for authenticity," in which the musicians seek to avoid the "great improvements" of modern instruments for the simple life of the past. Nothing could be further from the truth, as this recording could prove all by itself.

In fact, the revolution in instrumental design which occurred over the past 100 years, is an integral part of a movement to *destroy* classical aesthetic values, whose other features included the systematic raising of concert pitch from its scientific value of C = 256 (A = 432) to the modern values of A = 440 to 446.

Modern instruments sound louder

It is true that modern instruments, as more efficient acoustical resonators, yield louder sound levels. It is also true that they provide strict equal temperament of scales, and smooth out the differences in quality between one note and the next. However, this is not an advantage; rather, these

changes have acted to create "value free" instruments appropriate to existential twelve-tone music, or orgiastic 100-man performances of the works of Hitler's favorite composer, Richard Wagner. This is most evident in the replacement of the classical fortepiano of Beethoven's time, with the modern, metal-framed pianoforte, and the replacement of the baroque and classical flauto traverso with the Boehm flute.

As an amateur flautist, this reviewer has recently made the switch, from a modern silver flute, to a 19th-century wooden flute. I have had a first-hand opportunity to hear and see the great differences in these instruments. On the older instrument, every note has its own individual character. The traverso is built around the key of D Major; all of the notes of that scale have a relatively open and bright tone. The in-between notes (including C-natural and F-natural) have a much darker sound. The difference is something like the effect of various vowels in singing.

The result is that every key signature, with its own sequence of tones, has an absolutely unique quality. Bach was very much aware of this, and his sonatas for flute were composed with this in mind. Whereas on the modern flute, one could take a piece written in the key of B minor, and transpose it up one half step, to C minor with little net effect (both equally boring), a similar change on the traverso would be the equivalent of totally rewriting the piece.

Instrument tells how to phrase

When I recently interviewed John Solum, the flautist on the Arabesque recording, I asked him how he went about



Drawing by the French artist Watteau. A man playing an early traverso flute in the 18th century, the period when Bach composed his suites for the instrument.

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

determining the phrasing for a piece. He said, "The first thing, is that the instrument tells you how to phrase. For example, when there is a modulation [transposition of thematic material to a new key], there is not just a shift of register, but also a shift in quality."

Another unique property of the older flute is its vastly superior capability for articulation: the ability of the flautist to individually shape the volume and duration of every note within a phrase. The late scientist Arthur Benade was actually able to show, with laboratory measurements, that the *lower* acoustical efficiency of the older flute meant that notes could be started and stopped at least twice as fast as on the modern flute. In an unpublished paper, Benade strongly criticized Theobald Boehm's 1847 redesign of the flute, from a conical to a cylindrical geometry, blaming Boehm's "intellectual Romanticism" for degrading the poetic capabilities of the instrument.

Among other things, this means that the older flute is capable of mimicking the phrasing of string instruments, the harpsichord, or the human voice. This totally changes the way in which the flute works within an ensemble. If you compare the Solum/Kipnis/Bogatin recording to performances on modern instruments, you will hear this very clearly, even if you do not have any musical training. On the original instruments, the ensemble functions as a whole, while on the modern instruments you simply hear "flute with accompaniment."

Solum's recording

This recording contains six sonatas. Three (B minor, A Major, E-flat Major) were written by Bach for "flute and harpsichord obbligato," which means that Bach composed the entire harpsichord part. The other three (E minor, C Major, E Major) are for "flute and basso continuo." This means that Bach supplied the flute part, a bass line, and "figures" (numbers) which indicate the main notes to appear in harpsichord part. It is left to the harpsichordist to work out and improvise the harpsichord part, a process called "realization."

The effect of this form of writing is that it forces the ensemble to encounter and solve the problems of cross-voicing, thus participating directly in the composer's creative process. This result can be heard vividly in this recording, where the continuo sonatas overflow with life, beauty, and humor (far more so than the obbligato sonatas, although the latter include the B minor sonata, one of Bach's great works of chamber music.)

Igor Kipnis's realizations are far superior to any others I have come across in recordings or print. I would encourage him to publish appropriately edited versions. Kipnis's playing is lively and well phrased, as opposed to the usual mechanical approach of most harpsichordists.

John Solum's playing, at its best, is technically brilliant and poetically superb. This is pretty much the case throughout the three sonatas with continuo.

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