

BCS TANGENTS

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Boston Clavichord Society
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Playing the Clavichord in Chamber Music: Some Preliminary Considerations

David Schulenberg

David Schulenberg is the author of *The Keyboard Music of J.S. Bach and Music of the Baroque*.

In a review of C. P. E. Bach's accompanied keyboard trios published in 1777, the anonymous writer mentions hearing Bach perform the pieces in his home on a "clavier" by Christian Ernst Friederici, accompanied by a muted violin and a cello "played with discretion." The keyboard instrument, which has the main part in these works, was a large unfretted clavichord; the optional parts for the two string players are wholly subsidiary, the cello mainly doubling the bass line and the violin filling out the harmony but adding nothing essential to the music, which can be played satisfactorily on keyboard alone.

Surprisingly, this is one of the very few historical documents that explicitly describe ensemble performances using the clavichord. In his *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments* (Berlin, 1753–62), C. P. E. Bach himself refers to the use of the clavichord to accompany the voice, and many German songs of the period allude to the same practice. But no practical details are mentioned, and sources of all types are virtually silent on ensemble use of the clavichord for earlier types of music.

Certainly the clavichord throughout its history was used primarily for solo practice. But in the past as in the present, players must often have used it in combination with other musicians—or to accompany their own singing. What considerations must one make before venturing to use it as an ensemble instrument? As a clavichord

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Promoting the Clavichord

Renée Geoffrion

Renée Geoffrion lives with her husband Louis-Philippe Rivet, a composer, in Pierre Buffière, near Limoges, France.

Sharing with others the pleasure of having and playing clavichords is definitely worth the trouble.

The artist's life, at least mine, is not at all as shown on TV. I spend hours driving my truck, wearing ear plugs to block out the noise. Sometimes I watch the truck being towed from a muddy château entrance. On other occasions, I freeze to death performing in a nice dress in a cold church. Not to mention carrying, tuning, repairing, and in general dealing with the quick aging of the instruments that share my adventures. I still don't give up! Perseverance, determination or madness? Let's not figure it out!

Anyone who plays the clavichord knows that one can understand the instrument fully only by playing it and listening to it live. No recording can replace a hands-on trial or listening to a live performance. This very fact is the source of a lot of trouble. It makes of clavichord promotion, a nice intellectual activity in itself, a very physical and complicated one too.

I divide my time between building clavichords and playing them. I have worked on clavichord as well as fortepiano promotion for 10 years. I've had some strong years as well as some weaker ones. Since 2003, my promotional activities have become more important and are now focused only on the clavichord. I have tried many different approaches and have tried to reach different publics. In what follows I summarize my experiences.

Here is what I can offer:

- a conference
- a recital (private or public)
- instrument rental and sales
- private lessons
- master-classes

- maintenance and tuning lessons
- "Clavichord Inn"

The "Clavichord Inn" is a small house in my village near my workshop. It is furnished with two clavichords and is available for people who would like to spend a few days playing clavichords in peace and enjoying nature. They can of course have clavichord lessons and also learn about tuning and maintenance.



A clavichord tutee. Photo by Renée Geoffrion

Music schools provide the best public for clavichord promotion because they include good professional musicians (the teachers) as well as young music lovers (students at different levels). Sometimes schools only ask for a conference, but the best tool is the "clavichord

project." A "clavichord project" consists of a conference, a recital, a 15-day clavichord rental and, at the end, a few hours of master-classes. Usually students of all ages are well prepared and give it their best.

Here are a few observations:

-The conference for music schools includes information on the origins of the clavichord, its role in music through the centuries, the components of a clavichord (including the functioning of the key levers), clavichord repertoire, and mathematical elements in the production of sound, as well as the presentation of music examples.

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Renée Geoffrion Recital

Peter Sykes

On Sunday, October 26, the Boston Clavichord Society presented Renée Geoffrion in recital in the Hastings Room at First Church in Cambridge. This was Ms. Geoffrion's second appearance for the BCS and, like her first performance, it was distinguished by creative programming, expressive and masterful playing, and a relaxed and genial presentation with spoken commentary between pieces.



Three clavichords were used for the performance, two of which were products of her workshop in France.

The program opened with a suite of Buxtehude played on a small travel clavichord of her own design inspired by similar instruments from the 1740s, but also borrowing some elements of modern technology, notably a built-in electro-acoustical amplifying system (not used during this concert). The instrument charmed with its sweet, silvery tone, and served well the gentle expressiveness of the music. Next was the C major sonata of Mozart, most often played as a first Mozart sonata by piano students, followed by two dances in Bulgarian rhythm by Béla Bartók (Mikrokosmos vol. VI) performed on the same instrument, making a persuasive case for both instrument and repertoire.

Next were four movements by Louis-Philippe Rivet, part of a longer work, *Nomoi of the Great Olympian Divinities*. All of them use an ancient Greek scale, the enharmonic genus of the hypolydian mode, which contains many pure intervals

as well as divisions smaller than semitones. The piece was written specifically for an electro-acoustic clavichord. A second instrument

was used for the performance of this piece. It differed in some details (short bottom octave, paired stringing throughout) from the first instrument. These movements were haunting in their mysterious and evocative use of musical space and silence.

After intermission, Geoffrion moved to a large unfretted Dolmetsch/Chickering clavichord for performances of works of Mozart and C.P.E. Bach. Back in more familiar clavichord territory, these performances were marked (as was the entire recital) by thoughtful musicianship and solid technique. Particularly affecting was the well-known "Farewell to my Silbermann Clavichord" of C.P.E. Bach, performed with an emotional intimacy and immediacy that perhaps only the clavichord can provide. Ω

The Travel Clavichord

Renée Geoffrion

The travel clavichord mentioned in the review above is described by Geoffrion in the following paragraph. She designed the instrument as part of her effort to make the clavichord more accessible. (See article beginning on p. 1.)

In 2007, I created a new special model travel clavichord as part of my effort to promote the instrument. This model incorporates some of the "good" characteristics of different historical clavichords as well as adaptations to the modern world, such as the inclusion of electro-acoustic pick-ups* and a keyboard not fully historical in design, but less sensitive to humidity changes. The instrument is streamlined in its conception and is a response to the need for a clavichord that is affordable and still musically interesting. It is quite resonant in tone, has a good dynamic range and offers possibilities of bebung. It is rather

easy to approach and has enough keys to play a great deal of J.S.Bach. The instrument is very small, easy to carry (about 20 pounds with its case), and can be a good companion to anyone who plays baroque repertoire. The ergonomics of the keyboard were carefully studied to make it as comfortable as possible for its small size.

Editor's note:

* See issue #17 of *Tangents* in which Geoffrion describes the electro-acoustic clavichord. The electro-acoustic clavichord resembles an "ordinary" clavichord, except that it includes a pick-up that permits electric amplification of the sound. The use of the pick-up is optional. When used, the amplification can be slight and will only provide a slight boost to the clavichord's sound. When the amplification is greater, the nature of the sound changes and the instrument becomes an electric instrument. Ω

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From “On Buying a Clavichord”

James Fenton

The following excerpts are reprinted with the kind permission of their distinguished author. Mr. Fenton’s article first appeared in *Granta* 100, Winter 2007. The entire article is highly recommended. As the excerpts indicate, the article is not a guide to purchasing a clavichord but a reflection upon doing so. Below is a short segment from the beginning of Fenton’s article followed by a longer segment from later in the article on the challenges of learning to play a keyboard instrument in middle age. Editor

The Clavichord

I am listening to one of the softest sounds in Western music. The clavichord itself was often said to be no match for any other instrument, or even for the voice. It seems it could hold its own, in sixteenth-century Spain, against the harp or the *vihuela*, the early guitar. But for the most part it was loved for its solo quietness and unmatched expressivity. The ‘dumb spinet’, it was sometimes called, unable to be heard at any considerable distance, ‘whence it comes to be particularly used among nuns, who learn to play, and are unwilling to disturb the dormitory’.¹



“It is going to be a small humiliation this learning of the keyboard...”

Three things I’ve been promising myself for twenty years that I would do before I die:

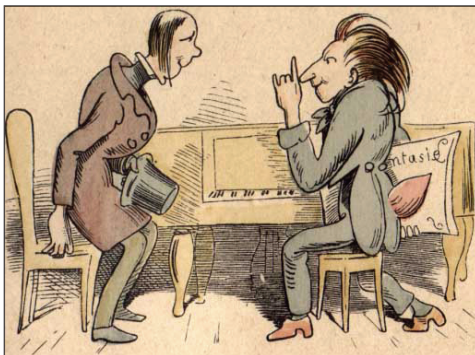
- climb the Matterhorn
- learn to play the harpsichord
- study Chinese

Susan Sontag, (‘Project for a Trip to China’)

The next line reads: ‘Perhaps it’s not too late to climb the Matterhorn.’ But the implicit pessimism about learning to play a keyboard instrument—even one so mildly *recherché* as the harpsichord—needs a

little explaining. Sontag was in her forties when she published these lines. It was by no means too late to take instruction in music. She had been thinking of doing so most of her adult life.

But a mixture of horrors holds us back. Some—a surprising number—associate music with early punishment. We see, not a beloved instructor but a teacher’s screaming face, and we feel the ruler across



“*Silentium*” Wilhelm Busch: *The Virtuoso* the knuckles. A larger number perhaps are inhibited by being heard at a disadvantage. The nun at her dumb spinet might be horrified not at the thought of waking the dormitory so much as being heard behaving like a child. Our loved ones inhibit us, if not by the anticipation of their impatience then with the thought of their necessary indulgence. How could we put them through all of this palaver of scales, arpeggios and endlessly reiterated tunes?

It is going to be a small humiliation, this learning of the keyboard—there’s no doubt about it; and who knows if we will be able doggedly to make our way through to a point, at least, when sitting down to practise or to play seems like something

better than an act of infantile regression? Or an attempt to atone for the shortcomings of our childhood?

We try out an electric keyboard with decently weighted action, imitating the resistance of a piano key. The demonstrator is a showman, a barnstormer in the arpeggio department, smirking through the octaves. Doubtless he puts on a white tux and performs in hotel foyers in the evening. He demonstrates the harpsichord stop and the two contrasting piano sounds, based upon aural samples of the finest Steinway models. We are impressed by the technology, but distressed on his behalf. What a disappointment to be deferring to us, in a department store, instead of thrilling us from the platform. What on earth could have gone wrong with his life?

Something, anyway, about this plan to compromise with an electronic keyboard, seems deeply wrong. The perfectly weighted keys, the sampled sound, the headphones to spare our neighbors: this was the world from which we wanted to escape. And really we are only putting off that moment when we are heard playing, if we confine ourselves to the electronic route, like my friend who plays with headphones because he cannot bear the prospect of the disapproval of his daughters. One day he will have to face those daughters down. Ω

¹ *The New Bach Reader* ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, revised ed. Christoph Wolff, W.W. Norton, 1998, p. 436, citing James Grassineau’s *Musical Dictionary* (1740).

The Clavichord at BEMF

There will be three clavichord performances at 2009 Boston Early Music Festival—perhaps more, if someone plays the clavichord in a fringe concert. All three performers, Maximilian Fleischman, Peter Sykes and David Breitman, have close connections with the BCS and have performed for us in the past.

Max will be the performer in the concert that we present on Friday, June 12. The concert will take place at First Church Boston (66 Marlborough Street). It begins at 2 pm and will be preceded by a buf-

fet luncheon. Max’s program will include works by Benda, Beethoven, Haydn, D. Scarlatti, C.P.E. Bach, and J.S. Bach. Later in the summer Max is going to Gdansk, Poland where he will on the faculty as a Collaborative Artist in the Morningside Music Bridge program. In addition to being a performer on clavichord and fortepiano, Max is a musicologist for the Manitoba Chamber Orchestra for which he writes program notes and gives pre-concert lectures.

Peter Sykes, chair of historical performance at Boston University, and David

Breitman, director of the historical performance program at Oberlin Conservatory, will perform in the clavichord segment of the Keyboard Mini-Festival that BEMF is sponsoring this year. The Mini-Festival will take place at First Lutheran Church of Boston (299 Berkeley Street) on Thursday, June 11. It is divided into three segments, devoted respectively to the fortepiano, the harpsichord and the clavichord. The clavichord segment will be from 2 until 4 pm. [Further details at www.bostonclavichord.org and www.bemf.org] Ω

Lebedinsky in Recital

Paul Rabin and Peter Sykes

The Boston Clavichord Society presented Henry Lebedinsky in recital on January 11, 2009 in the Hastings Room at First Church in Cambridge. Performing on a large unfretted clavichord after Hass by Goble, he presented a fascinating program of music by Slavic composers from the end of the clavichord era. Although mostly published for the piano, these pieces were likely also played on the clavichord; Lebedinsky made the interesting point that “obsolete” instruments survive in use in less cosmopolitan areas later than in cultural centers, and that the clavichord was found in eastern Europe into the nineteenth century. His playing made the music, which displayed a wide variety of textures and styles, sound perfectly at home on the Goble clavichord.

This concert provided a welcome introduction to five composers unknown to most audience members. Michał Kleofas Ogiński (1765-1833) was born near Warsaw into an aristocratic and wealthy Polish-Lithuanian family. A statesman, literary critic and composer, Ogiński played the violin, clavichord, and balalaika, and published two albums of keyboard music and an opera, “Bonaparte in Cairo.” Lebedinsky played two of his twenty-four polonaises, including his “Farewell to the Fatherland” (number 13, in A minor) written just before his move to Florence in despair

over the political situation in Poland after the Congress of Vienna. This piece, which Lebedinsky said was the Russian “Für Elise” in that every piano student plays



Memorial to Michał Ogiński, Santa Croce, Florence, Italy

it, was bleak, wistful and haunting. It was beautifully played, with supple rhythm. The other polonaise, “Les Adieux” (number 6, in C minor) was more pianistic, with large chords, rapid passagework, and echo effects in the main theme.

Jan Václav Voříšek (1791-1825) was a Czech composer, pianist and organist. He was the first composer to publish keyboard pieces titled “impromptu.” Lebedinsky played his Impromptus in E, op. 7, no. 5, and in D, op. 7, no. 2; the first was the best sort of parlor music - genial, polished, and gently witty - while the second was more folklike, energetic and insistent, with harsh, dissonant pounding chords. Next was one of three recently discovered piano sonatas by Dmitri Stepanovich Bortniansky (1751-1825), a Russian composer who studied in Italy. This sonata sounded much like early Mozart in its good humored, galant style.

The Adagio in A by Jan Křtitel Kuchař (1751-1829)—a Czech friend of Mozart’s—reminiscent of the slow movement from “Eine kleine Nachtmusik,” was sedate and charming. The Sonata in G by Josef Antonín Štěpán (1726-1797), pianist to the court of Vienna, was a kaleidoscope of styles, including the *empfindsamer* declamatory opening adagio, a galant, Italianate allegro, a minuet and trio displaying interesting rhythmic variety, a wild capriccio in rondo form with hurtling, broken chords and a galant closing allegro assai with an Alberti bass. All in all, this concert was groundbreaking in its introduction of new repertoire, and in showing just how far the clavichord can go in making music thought only for the piano sound both persuasively idiomatic and enjoyable. Ω

(Promoting, continued from p.1)

-After the conference, I give a few suggestions about how to approach the clavichord to the teachers and students who will use the rental clavichords.
-The recital includes a few pedagogical pieces, some typical clavichord repertoire, and at least one piece more often heard on the piano.
-I ask the students to prepare very simple pieces for the master-class so that we can work on musical matters with some chance of success and eventually achieve a nice playing of the whole piece.
-Harpsichordists, organists and beginning pianists, for different reasons, usually get along well with small fretted clavichords, while experienced pianists are somewhat allergic to them and will appreciate more the unfretted five-octave instrument because of its dynamic range and keyboard size.

- A bad clavichord will rarely convince someone to play the clavichord and does not help clavichord promotion in any way.

Somewhat less often I do a “concert-conference” for various societies that focus on music, art and sometimes on things that can be as “unrelated” as the management of forests. (In that particular case the conference was about music and wood.) I have presented the clavichord in public high schools many times. I think that the students will remember the clavichord and I shall certainly remember them. But to speak honestly, this was very difficult and it may have been good for the students, but I don’t think it will change a thing in the clavichord world... I once received a whole high school class in my workshop so that each student could try to build a monochord. (I am not about to do it again!)

Overall, many of my adventures are

more appropriately told to friends around a bottle of wine than described in a serious article. I have only mentioned those most closely related to clavichord promotion. It is in music schools that my work is most effective; it is not rare that a student or a teacher decides to go further with the clavichord after a clavichord project. I have seen it happen many times and it is the real reward.

Hearing a musical tone can still be a privilege in our noisy world. For a musician it is good to feel the beauty of every note instead of consuming lots of them. The characteristics of our sweet instrument keep it outside the mainstream. Therefore the choice to play and listen to it depends solely on very pure musical interests and motivations. I am devoted to the clavichord because I believe that it is exactly what is missing in music now. Ω

(*Chamber Music, continued from p.1*)
player, I have been contemplating this question as I plan a concert for the Boston Clavichord Society this April 19 in which I will be joined by Mary Oleskiewicz on baroque flute.

First considerations concern the instrument's basic sound and pitch: will it produce enough sound to balance another musician, even one performing "with discretion," and can it be tuned appropriately? Using a large Dolmetsch copy of a late eighteenth-century five-octave instrument, I might not be greatly concerned about balance, even when playing with a copy of a two-keyed flute by Quantz, which has an unusually powerful and rich sound. But as Quantz himself noted, the sound of the flute tends to project better than that of stringed keyboard instruments, especially in the higher part of its range, and therefore I will need to play out as much as possible while asking the flutist to exercise restraint. This is true even in sonatas for flute and continuo by Quantz, C. P. E. Bach, and King Frederick II of Prussia, all of whom counted on a strong, independent bass line to support the solo instrument.

A related consideration is temperament, for the baroque flute, like other woodwinds, was designed to play with purer intervals than are produced on keyboard instruments — especially those tuned in equal temperament, as the clavichord tends to be (particularly one that is fretted). Although tuning is less problematic with the evanescent tones of the clavichord, when accompanying a flute one must avoid doubling certain major thirds, especially if the keyboard is not in an appropriate non-equal temperament. (One temperament that I have found useful in performing with eighteenth-century woodwind instruments is described at <http://www.wagner.edu/faculty/dschulenberg/tunetemp.html>.)

Things become more subjective when one turns to issues of repertory and interpretation. We have successfully performed sonatas for obbligato keyboard and flute by J. S. and C. P. E. Bach in private homes and small halls for audiences of several dozen, and on the air.¹ It can be more satisfying to perform this sort of music with

clavichord than with harpsichord, since here the right hand of the keyboard replaces a dynamic instrument such as the violin. On the other hand, I suspect that it would be more difficult to achieve a suitable balance in obbligato-keyboard pieces with violin or viola da gamba. Singers accompanied by a clavichord must cultivate an "indoor" sort of voice, setting aside



Adolph von Menzel: "Frederick the Great at Sanssouci"

much of what they have learned about projecting across a large space. (The eighteenth-century German song literature was probably designed for the player to accompany himself or herself, singing *sotto voce* while doubling the melodic line on the keyboard.)

Continuo playing on the clavichord raises its own special issues. Naturally one is freer than on the harpsichord to play full chords, since one can adjust the dynamic level of every note. But this also means that, as on the piano, the player must voice each note of every chord. One has greater freedom to cross above the soloist, even a flute playing low in its range, but particularly when doing so it is important that the upper part of the realization form a good melodic duet with the solo instrument. As a result, I find myself playing less improvisatorily on the clavichord than I do on the harpsichord—although the particular music that we will be playing in our April concert demands what C. P. E. Bach called "refined" continuo playing, regardless of the keyboard instrument

used. This means, among other things, not doubling the numerous appoggiaturas in the solo part, in order to give the latter the rhythmic freedom necessary for playing this repertoire expressively.²

We have also performed much earlier music using the clavichord, including canzoni by Frescobaldi and arrangements of sixteenth-century polyphonic chansons.

In the latter the flute plays one part (often the tenor) while the keyboard plays embellished versions of the treble and bass. Whether such instrumentation was ever used historically I cannot say, but it can be tricky to find appropriate instruments—one-piece Renaissance flute and fretted clavichord—that play at the same pitch. Often I find myself transposing, as must also have been the case historically; fortunately, we can use Finale and other music notation software to simplify that task. Doing so is not entirely unhistorical, for sixteenth- and seventeenth-century keyboard players would have prepared their own short scores to play ensemble music. But I do sometimes find myself playing in keys unlikely to have been used by early players. Producing a good clavichord sound in tonalities that

require many accidentals can be difficult, especially on small fretted instruments with short keys.

In short, playing the clavichord in ensembles is a challenge, but one worth pursuing. As players experiment with various combinations, we will doubtless discover further solutions to the various problems that arise as well as additional possibilities for interpretation. Ω

¹ We can be heard online at <http://www.wagner.edu/faculty/dschulenberg/bcsclips.html> and also at <http://www.wgbh.org/webcasts/command>.

² See my article "Toward the Most Elegant Taste": Developments in Keyboard Accompaniment from J. S. to C. P. E. Bach," in *The Keyboard in Baroque Europe: Keyboard Studies of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, ed. Christopher Hogwood [Cambridge University Press, 2003], 157–68.





Photo by Joris Potvlieghe

Photo of Menno van Delft preparing for a recital on March 21, 2009 at the Musical Instrument Museum in Brussels. He played works by Haydn, C.P.E. Bach, W.F. Bach, and J.S. Bach. Van Delft writes “don’t get inspired by the high wrist and asymmetrical sitting position - much too informal...”

The clavichord was built by J.A. Hass in 1744. It was restrung and cleaned by Joris Potvlieghe. He discovered the date, which is quite early for such a big, five-octave unfretted instrument. Potvlieghe supplies the following data about this instrument: It has a relatively long scaling $c^2 = 286/288$ mm. The external measures (without mouldings) are: 1714 x 518 x 167 mm. The touch acceleration in the discant (for f^{\sharp}) is 95 %.

New Packard Institute Keyboard Volumes

Peter Sykes

The Packard Humanities Institute has recently released two more publications in their ongoing series of the complete works of C.P.E. Bach. These two are Volume 10 of Series I, which is devoted to his keyboard music. They contain works that have been arranged for keyboard; the first volume, 10.1, contains works written originally for keyboard and orchestra, and the second, 10.2, works originally written for orchestra alone. As in all the volumes issued by the Packard Institute, these contain excellent prefatory material. This material includes a general preface for all the volumes, another for the series of keyboard music, an introduction to the music contained in each particular volume, sample facsimile pages, a set of abbreviations used, critical notes, and commentary on editorial policies.

And what of the music itself? Certainly, given all the music that C.P.E. wrote for

the keyboard, “more works than for any other medium” as stated in the preface, there seems little reason to pay attention to transcriptions, even those made by the composer himself. And yet, the composer



himself paid attention; in Charles Burney’s famous anecdote recounting how he was entertained by C.P.E. Bach in a visit to him in Hamburg, it was the *Sei Concerti*, works contained in Vol. 10.1, that Bach played for Burney. Burney observed that Bach had endeavored to make them easy to play, “frequently I think at the expense of his usual originality,” and indeed these arrangements, far from displaying

Musica Antica a Magnano Summer Courses

Musica Antica a Magnano has announced their summer courses will take place August 20-28, 2009 in Magnano. There will be keyboard instruction for clavichord, fortepiano, and harpsichord. Courses in figured bass and chamber music are also being offered. Further information is available by writing info@MusicaAnticaMagnano.com or calling 39, 333 978 14 72 or 41, 21 728 59 76 (preceded by dialing 011, if calling from the United States).

Irwin-Brandon Clavichord Recital

Margaret Irwin-Brandon will present a clavichord recital on Sunday, May 3, 2009 at 1:30 pm in Springfield, Massachusetts as part of the Mattunes Music house concert series. Her program includes three Haydn sonatas, XVI: 29, 30 and 32, and J.S. Bach’s fourth keyboard partita. Further information is available at www.mattunesmusic.com

the usual overstuffed transcription style that is the bane of every accompanist, are genial, flowing, and excellently suited for the clavichord in their predominantly two-voiced texture.

They also offer a window into performance practices of the day, for which there was no shame in playing at home on the keyboard what one had heard earlier played by an orchestra in public. Indeed, these arrangements by Bach himself are not the only ones, there also being unauthorized contemporary reductions of his symphonies for keyboard. In fact the preface of Vol. 10.2 goes so far as to state: “With the exception perhaps of the Symphony in E Minor, Wq. 178, the keyboard arrangements of C.P.E. Bach’s symphonies eclipsed their orchestral progenitors in popularity.” These new volumes might well continue this trend; with the usual extremely high quality printing, paper, and binding for an extremely reasonable price, these volumes certainly deserve a place on every clavichordist’s music shelf.