

And Why Bach?*

Rosalyn Tureck

And why Bach?" is the query put to me throughout the years and ever still today. My reply must be prefaced by:

Already in my mid-twenties I began to omit from my concerto repertoire the Rachmaninoff Second Concerto, then the Tchaikovsky and Chopin concertos. In my student days at the Juilliard I had spent two days on the Liszt A major Concerto and the Mephisto Waltz. By the third day I was so bored with them that I simply abandoned them. Their ideas and texture seemed so thin compared with the density and power of the late Beethoven Sonatas, Bach, Schoenberg and the Beethoven, Mozart and Brahms concertos. Since my public career began at the age of 20, I have been much involved in contemporary music, performing first performances of concertos by William Schuman, Wallingford Riegger – Concerto for Piano and Woodwinds, Vittorio Giannini, and solo works such as Aaron Copland's Sonata (1954) which I performed in the United States and gave one of the first, possibly the first, performance in England. I also introduced Wallingford Riegger to Europe by performing the Concerto for Piano and Woodwinds at the Venice Biennial Contemporary Music Festival.

My debut at Carnegie Hall took place at the age of 17 on an electronic instrument. I had met Theremin when I was 10 years old. My first teacher was Russian, a student and assistant teacher to Anton Rubenstein. Every Russian musician who passed through Chicago visited her and I met and played for them all – Ossip Gabrilowitsch and Leopold Auer being among the most memorable for whom I played at the age of 11 and 13 respectively. When I came to the Juilliard at age 16 I saw in my first week there a notice on the bulletin board that Theremin was in New York and offering a scholarship to study his instruments with him. I studied the instrument with him which has become known as the Theremin. It is the most pure combination of human and electronic based on vibrations in air made by varied complex movements of both hands in the air. At the end of the year I performed a solo part on another Theremin instrument – a keyed machine akin to a Moog Synthesizer.

Previous to my 14th birthday, I began studies with a second teacher who was not only a concert pianist with a long experience of concertizing in Europe but was also, unknown to me, a Bach scholar. With my first teacher who was severe, demanding and a perfectionist, I had studied chiefly the classical composers, much of J.S. Bach and little of Chopin or the romantic composers. My second teacher discovered my facility with Bach's music when in my first and second lessons with him within three days

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of each other I presented him with a memorized performance of a Prelude and Fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier each time as well as other assigned music. Although this was normal for me, my previous teacher had never mentioned that my natural ease in absorbing Bach so quickly was in any way unusual. Mr. Jan Chiapusso, my second teacher, having heard through the first lesson with my memorized performance, made no comment and assigned a second Prelude and Fugue which after I had again played for him by memory exclaimed: "Good God, Girl! If you can do this, you should specialize in Bach." This was how it all began. From that moment on I led, study-wise, a double life — not schizophrenic, but rather a duple channeled musical and scholarly activity. I worked on and continually added to my repertoire of 19th and 20th century piano literature, but equally I began by the age of 14, a study in depth of Bach and his period. I studied the harpsichord, clavichord, organ and the methods of the 19 century transcribers for piano. I played Bach transcriptions, but also worked on the antique instruments and examined sources pertaining to their technical styles and tonal resources. By the age of 15 and 16 I was giving all-Bach recitals. The range of my studies will be summed up most briefly by simply stating the materials I had ready to play for my entrance audition for the Juilliard at the age of 16. From the Well-tempered Clavier — sixteen Preludes and Fugues: Chaconne by Bach-Busoni; Beethoven — Sonata, op. 2 no. 2, Chopin, Ballade, G minor; and La Campanella of Paganini-Liszt. On receiving the fellowship I announced to my new teacher, Olga Samaroff, at my first lesson : "Well, I have sixteen Preludes and Fugues and I wish to complete all 48." And her response was "If you think you can do it, go ahead." Again my studies were double channeled and were to remain so for many years. I did go on with the "48" learning three each week along with music of other composers.

About two months after my first lesson, shortly before my 17th birthday, I started on a Wednesday afternoon a new Prelude and Fugue — the A minor of Book 1. The Fugue is a particularly complex one and, in the opinion of some theorists, rather awkwardly difficult. Its specific complexity triggered, I believe, an experience which was to change my life. In analyzing the music and perceiving the elements of the unusual Subject and its relationship with the contrapuntal and harmonic elements, I suddenly lost consciousness, whether for a few seconds or half an hour, I shall never know. When I came to, my whole being was possessed of an insight which involved Bach's concept of form and technique of structure. Simultaneously was the realization that I must develop a new way of thinking which would fit that concept and structure, and also the creation of a totally new technique on the piano in order to fulfill these with the utmost clarity and integrity on this instrument. So where I had regularly brought three Preludes and Fugues, Beethoven, etc., etc. to my Friday lessons, I abandoned all else and spent the next two days working out these entirely new ideas — so new to the habitual processes of my brain and keyboard technique that it took me two full days to learn four lines — the exposition only of the Fugue. When I explained on that Friday my experience, my new goals and had played those few lines, the response was: "Excellent if you can carry it through, but it seems to me impossible." However, having entered a world of new thought and

performance technique, I could never return to conventional Bach playing, ever of the best and most approved of that time. For my training had been, very fortunately, of the best and my labor concentrated. But there was no choice for me. There was only one way and that was forward, to labor and study every inch of the way, developing a technique which would preserve, clarify and express Bach's intentions structurally as well as every other aspect of his artistic conceptions. In my view this could be done on the piano only on the basis that a new technique could be devised to fulfill the music in performance with authenticity. I went ahead working out a technique step by step and broadening my studies of historical performance practices, of fugal form and of general historical musical developments in composition and instruments reaching back to medieval times. The double channeled way continued, each perhaps aiding the other, perhaps most of all by way of contrast of musical architecture in composition, in performance and in keyboard techniques.

The full story never has been verbalized. My performances are the sum total of my work, thought and spirit. They express them all, but until they are articulated verbally, the performances remain the tip of the iceberg. Now, after many years, I am beginning to edit the music, to write on concepts, performance practices and techniques involved in the realization of Bach's thought and spirit. If my work has proved to to have been of aesthetic enlightenment and spiritual benefit to others, perhaps, then, I shall not have labored in vain.



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