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Burkard Schliessmann

Major works by Bach from one of Germany's leading pianists

BURKARD SCHLIESSMANN
Johann Sebastian BACH
Italian Concerto Partita No. 2
Fantasias and Fugues

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Talking Bach with Pianist Burkard Schliessmann

By Jerry Dubins

Burkard Schliessmann is a fascinating man. A true polymath, he has a deep understanding of music, the arts, science, religion, and history and a keen grasp on the complex body of interdisciplinary studies that connect them in ways both obvious and obscure. Chatting with him—or more properly, I should say, listening to him expound on Bach, which seems to be his favorite topic—is an engaging and engrossing experience.

But the interests of this extraordinarily gifted and diversified German-born artist are wide-ranging. As a professional scuba diver, he serves as an Ambassador for the “Protecting of Our Ocean Planet” program of the !! [HYPERLINK](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_AWARE)
"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_AWARE" \o "Project AWARE" ¶ Project AWARE Foundation[†], projectaware.org; and as a student of nature he has become quite an accomplished photographer.

Graduating with a Master’s degree from Frankfurt’s University of Music and Performing Arts, Schliessmann studied in his youth under one of the last students of the legendary Helmut Walcha, and later participated in master classes conducted by Shura Cherkassky and Bruno Leonardo Gelber. By age 21, Schliessmann had committed to memory and played the complete organ works of Bach; and to this day, Bach remains Schliessmann’s greatest passion, though he waxes almost as passionate on Chopin and Schumann.

Burkard has been interviewed three times before in Fanfare, the first time by Peter Rabinowitz in 27:4 in a conversation that centered largely on the pianist’s Chopin and Schumann albums for Bayer Records. In a second interview, this time, with James Reel in 31:3, Burkard spoke at length about his approach to Bach’s Goldberg Variations on his then new SACD, also for Bayer. And in yet a third interview in 33:5, titled “Cannons Camouflaged by Flowers,” again with Rabinowitz as in the first interview, Schliessmann spoke of his “Chopin-Schumann Anniversary Edition 2010.”

For this fourth interview, once again, the topic is mainly Bach, for Burkard has just released a brand new SACD album, this time on the Divine Art label, containing a program of Bach’s keyboard works.

Jerry: Burkard, let me begin here: You mention early study with a student of the great Helmut Walcha. For as long as I can remember, I’ve had Walcha’s recordings of almost all of Bach’s harpsichord works in my collection on EMI Japanese import discs, and on the Arkiv label I have Walcha’s *The Art of Fugue*. I mention this because we have a Hall of Fame section in the magazine to which we submit past recordings, reviewed or not, that we believe have special merit and deserve special recognition. Walcha’s *The Art of Fugue* was one of my Hall of Fame picks, one of only two or three I’ve submitted in my 12 years with *Fanfare*. Tell me why you think Walcha’s Bach is special and how it has influenced your own interpretations.

Burkard: Already by the age of 21, I played the complete organ works of Bach—and this by memory. As a child and youngster, I had been taught by one of the last master-students of the legendary Helmut Walcha, and I completely had been affected by this style of insight into Bach and the musics’s internal structures. This method of regarding the independent coherence of all the voices gave me a special comprehension of Bach and his philosophy.

Lastly, one can say that I have been growing up with Bach, even to this day. If you understand the free organ works (preludes, toccatas, fugues), the chorales, and especially the trio sonatas, you have an insight into Bach that others don’t have. Especially the soloistic and independent leadings of the three voices of the trio sonatas is artistically the major aim of an organist; and already in the *Orgelbüchlein*, Part 5 of the Peters Edition, shows Bach in all his structural and emotional effects.

Albert Schweitzer described the *Orgelbüchlein* as something where the tonal speech of Bach is unbeatable. The comprehension of the organ-Bach is an understanding of the counterpoint and the polyphonic structures, and the coherence of Bach himself. Indeed, Walcha’s

interpretation of *The Art of Fugue* is a touchstone in the history of the interpretation of this work, unique in his overwhelming clarity and insights into the polyphonic structures, but also as a result of an aspect, which I personally call—also in view to my own and personal approach to Bach—the aspect of human reality.

Very classical in strength of speed and architectural proportions, he pointed out the polyphonic structures in an enlightened but moreover especially *humanistic* way, in a much smoother and more elegant way than Glenn Gould on the piano. But I believe this result is also connected to a conviction of Walcha himself, who believed in the truth of several parameters: truth of sound, truth of interpretation, and truth of instrument: The Grand Organ of the St. Laurenskerk in Alkmaar and the acoustic possibilities of this hall were just right to merge all of these artistic ideals into one big culmination and synthesis. Indeed, Walcha's interpretation of *The Art of Fugue* also would be my choice for my the Hall of Fame.

Jerry: In very different ways and for different reasons, Glenn Gould's Bach has perhaps been even more influential than Walcha's. Gould actually represents a dividing line between the old and the new in the approach to playing Bach. I don't think there's a keyboard player today, whether on harpsichord or piano, whose interpretive approach to Bach's music has not been profoundly influenced by Gould. It's as if there's B.G. (Before Gould)—Wanda Landowska, Rosalyn Tureck, Eunice Norton, and Claudio Arrau—and A.G. (After Gould)—all those that followed. It's like that comment Brahms made about how difficult it was to write a symphony with "the tramp of the giant" [Beethoven] behind him. In what ways and to what extent, if at all, do you feel your own interpretive approach has been influenced by Gould?

Burkard: Well, I confess that I'm deeply impressed by the clarity of Gould. Pogorelich, who I believe, once said in his early years, that "before himself there only have been three outstanding pianists: Horowitz for his hyper-virtuosity, Michelangeli for his singular sound, and touch, and Gould for his clarity ..." But in my complete approach I'm not influenced by Glenn Gould, though that doesn't mean I second-guess him. But one also has to realize that Gould had been at a very special and also sensitive point in time where he was forced to play Bach in this "radicalized manner."

To approach Bach, one has to realize that 100 years after Bach's death, Bach and his music had been totally forgotten. Even while he was still alive, Bach himself believed in the polyphonic power and the resulting symmetric architectures of well-proportioned music. But this had been an artificial truth—even for him. Other composers, including his sons, already composed in another style, where they found other ideals and brought new solutions to them.

The spirit of the time already had changed while Bach was still alive. Approximately eighty years later, it was Mendelssohn, who died 1847, but a few years before, had discovered Bach anew with the performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829 in Berlin. Now a new renaissance began, and the world learned to know the greatness of Bach.

To become acquainted with Bach, many transcriptions were done. But the endeavors in rediscovering Bach had been—stylistically—in a wrong direction. Among these were the orchestral transcriptions of Leopold Stokowski, and the organ interpretations of the multitalented Albert Schweitzer, who, one has to confess, had a decisive effect on the rediscovery of Bach. All performances had gone in the wrong direction: much too romantic, with a false knowledge of historic style, the wrong sound, the wrong rubato, and so on.

The necessity of artists like Rosalyn Tureck and Glenn Gould—again more than 100 years later—has been understandable: Gould illustrated in the 1950s the real clarity and internal explosions of the power-filled polyphony in the best way. This extreme style, called by many of his critics, “refrigerator interpretations,” had been necessary to demonstrate the right strength to bring out the architecture in the right manner, which, to a great extent, had been lost before. I’m convinced that Gould’s approach was the right answer at this point in time. It’s possible that Gould would have played in another way, if he’d have felt free to do so, but he seems to have felt dutybound to go this uncompromising way because it was his interpretive and artistic responsibility.

I call this history and way of interpretation the “culture of interpretation.” The ranges of Bach interpretation had become wide, and there were the defenders of the historical style and those of the much more modern romantic style. Also the performances of Bach’s orchestral works and cantatas had become extreme—on one side, for example, Karl Richter, who used a big and rich-toned orchestra; on the other side, Helmut Rilling, whose Bach was much more historically oriented.

I, myself, represent the style of a Bach who was a human being with all his heights and depths, who knew life very well. My Bach is the experience of my playing the whole literature; and filling the different voices with their own life, vitality, and vividness; it’s the independent speaking-until-singing of the different voices; and lastly it’s a balance between pianistic virtuosity and something chamber-music-like.

I had been fascinated by Gould’s explosive emotionality, which really is part of my own conception, even if today I have the possibility of another interpretation, as explained; but there are two versions that I also admire very much: those of Murray Perahia and Angela Hewitt. In the case of Hewitt, I wonder about the people she describes in interviews who come up to her and confess that they much prefer her first version of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* because they feel much more comfortable, safer, and free of risk with the “non-rubato” version, and they say they’re afraid to follow the “new way.” Personally, I think it’s worth a discussion whether it’s good or not to make a mixture and cross-over between Gould and Backhaus (what Hewitt is doing with her second version with the *Well-Tempered Piano* from 2008), but that’s between her and me. I also confess to be on the side of “risk.”

But in answering and clarifying your question: no one interpretation has influenced me; moreover, my interpretation is influenced by my knowing not only the whole literature, but also by my knowing the organ-Bach and his unlimited colors. It’s this richness, I hope, that I give to my listeners. It’s an all-embracing conception of life. We still have to mention giants like Wanda Landowska and Marie Claire Alain, who were a great influence on Bach interpretation, but not to me personally.

Jerry: For your new album you’ve chosen some of Bach’s most popular and often-recorded keyboard “hits”—the *Italian Concerto* and the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*, for two. Now, I’m not going to ask you to argue the case for playing Bach on the piano as opposed to the harpsichord. That discussion was covered in your interview with James Reel. Besides, I don’t think there *is* much of an argument about it anymore. “It’s a done deal,” as they say. My take on the matter is that there was never much validity to the debate to begin with. First, Bach lived and worked at a time when it was accepted practice for one instrument to substitute for another when the originally scored-for instrument wasn’t available, and Bach himself transcribed his concertos for various instruments.

But second, and more importantly, I think, is that unlike his French contemporaries, François Couperin and Jean-Philippe Rameau, whose works for keyboard are of a descriptive, *pièce caractéristiques* nature, Bach's keyboard, instrumental, and orchestral music is nonrepresentational and essentially abstract. In fact, when you get into works like the *Goldberg Variations*, *The Art of Fugue*, Book III of the *Clavier-Übung* (aka *German Organ Mass*), *A Musical Offering*, and even a work like the Chaconne from the Unaccompanied Violin Partita in D Minor, some would say the abstraction is based on number and mathematical intellection. This is why I believe Bach's works transfer so well from one instrument to another—think of the violin chaconne on guitar or *The Art of Fugue* played by a string quartet. We don't even know for sure what instrumentation was intended for *The Art of Fugue*. But my point is that because much of Bach's music—especially that for keyboard—is nonfigurative in nature, it's not dependent on a specific instrument for the purpose of expression or to make its point. What are your thoughts on this?

Burkard: Oh, a fascinating and challenging question. First, we're of the same mind that Bach's works have such a flexibility that they all have their own character and effect, even if they are performed on different instruments, independent of whether they are scored for a particular instrument or not. Here one can see the real genius of Bach. His music is independent of an epoch and modern for all times. For example, ff course, no doubt, his organ works sound best (and also much more to their original intent), if they are played on an adequate organ for Bach or baroque music in general. But also, they develop their truth if you perform them on a modern or even romantic instrument, like a Sauer and Ladegast organ in Germany, or in the U.S. on the great Aeolian or Skinner organs.

Of course, it's another language and character that speak here, but nevertheless in fascinating manner, especially if the interpretation is flexible enough not to force the instrument *to* Bach, but more to leave the instrument to speak in its own way. On the other hand, for example, you want to perform a major work by Max Reger, which is composed specifically for the possibilities of an organ by Sauer and Ladegast, you never will have the flexibility performing it on a typical baroque organ, though Reger himself is regarded as an epigone of Bach.

Let's take your thoughts about the version of *The Art of Fugue* played by a string quartet. Again, I express the same opinion, because in this version—my favorite is the performance by the Emerson String Quartet on DG—the chamber music character of the music comes to the fore. In the four-voice reduction of a string quartet, you are aware of the polyphonic clarity and purity as in no other version.

As to the transcriptions and arrangements for others instruments by Bach himself, yes, from one and the same work we have different versions; it was the spirit of time to do it, a phenomenon which was also consistent with the *parody method* which was used by nearly all composers. But the reality—only few know this about the background of *The Art of Fugue* and the *Musikalisches Opfer*—is the *reason* these works are not scored for specific instruments. It has to do with the fact that Bach was a member of the *Mizler'sche Societaet* (Lorenz Christoph Mizler, 1711–1778, was a pupil of Bach and founded this circle), an elite group of individuals representing different areas of society, such as culture, industry, politics, and so on. For composers in the group, it was their task to demonstrate themselves regularly with new compositions, which had to be composed in a “theoretical” score, meaning not notated for any particular instruments. This is the background of the *The Art of Fugue*. Whether or not Bach

wanted or preferred a specific instrumentation, to satisfy the *Mizler'sche Societaet*'s guidelines, he had to produce an open score that remained “speculative.”

Bach's works are a bridge linking together far more remote areas of music, and allowing every later generation to understand the musical past. They were written at the end of a major period in the history of music, and while they are rooted in the past in terms of their form and spirit, their bold divinatory treatment of their musical material means that they also point the way forward and adumbrate a future age. Ever since Bach's works were rediscovered by the Romantics in the early 19th century, their composer has been admired and hailed as the quintessential musician and as the incarnation of a supra-personal, timeless spirit in music.

It's hard to put into words this special quality about his music, not least because it is *sui generis*, and because the distance from the self, or “I,” which it was almost impossible for the Romantics to grasp, was still a given for Bach as a result of the tradition in which he was working. He never spoke about himself or about his own sufferings and pleasures. His calling was sustained by a profound artistic and intuitive understanding of the nature of archetypal procedures in music and of the life and impact of the melodic line, which he had inherited from the age of Renaissance polyphony as one of the tools of his trade. With his unsurpassed ability to create the most vivid themes, Bach contrasted the older style with the newer Classical art, with its additional dimension of humanity. The mouthpiece of a higher power, he was the medium of religious revelation in his sacred works, the servant of social conventions in his secular suites, and the executor of musical developments and decisions in those “free” compositions that were not tied to a particular purpose, most notably the preludes and fugues of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. In short, Bach's incomparable greatness rests as much on his genius as on his position and function within the history of music.

Bach's works are remarkable for the synergy arising from many different currents, a quality inspired by remote forms from the past, starting with vocal polyphony. The power associated with the independent melodic line, the primal power and impulse of all music-making continues unbroken in his music, filling his fugues with their uninterrupted thematic momentum. The architectural spirit of Gothic art is manifest in Bach's forms, achieving a sense of fulfilment that seems like reminiscence. Such forms are like bold and fantastical buildings in the imaginary space of their sound world, thereby acquiring a genuine weightlessness and timelessness. The legacy of an age that was religious in its inspiration lies primarily in the unique contribution of the transcendental, which is achieved through mystic contemplation and ecstatic uplift.

Jerry: Okay, I think we've probably spent enough time pondering philosophical issues. Let's get direct our attention now to your latest SACD recording of five well-known Bach keyboard works—the Partita No. 2 in C Minor; the *Italian Concerto*; the Fantasia and Fugue in A Minor, BWV 904; the Fantasia [Adagio] and Fugue in C Minor, BWV 906; and the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*. Once again, your self-authored album note gives in-depth, detailed information about each of these works—so refreshing in an age where we're lucky to get more than a track listing with many releases today—but I'd like to do a little probing and exploring of each of these pieces with you here and now.

The Partita No. 2, of course, is one of six such works Bach published as Part I of the *Clavier-Übung*. You mention that of the six partitas, No. 2 is the only one without a concluding gigue. But in its place, we have a zany, off-the-hinges Capriccio, which, it turns out, is my favorite movement in all of Bach's partitas. A college professor I once had for a counterpoint class remarked that all the great composers had their ears screwed on backwards, and when I

listen to this Capriccio, I know what he meant. There are some of the weirdest harmonies progressions, and dissonances in this movement, and in the second half of the binary form, Bach seems to vary the craziness by turning it upside down. Can you explain a bit more about what he's up to here? To my ear, the whole thing is just so slapstick funny.

Burkard: Yes, this Capriccio is also one of my favorites, and here Bach plays with the form of music and structure. What makes it so slapstick funny are the unique combinations and variety of motifs, themes, and their reversals, especially the tenths jumps, and as you mention, the weirdest harmonies, which give the music a special mood. A better capriccio couldn't be composed than this one by Bach.

Jerry: Next up on your SACD is the *Italian Concerto*, which comprises the first half of the *Clavier-Übung*, Part II. I suppose if I wanted to make fun of Schumann again, I could say that Bach's *Italian Concerto* paints a perfect musical portrait of the Scottish highlands. But seriously, what makes it Italian? And also, why do you suppose after publishing the *Clavier-Übung*, Part I, with six quite substantial, multi-movement partitas, Bach published a second volume with only two, much shorter works, the Italian Concerto and the French Overture in B Minor, BWV 831?

Burkard: That the *Italian Concerto* is Italian is mainly a matter of the form. The form of the solo concerto was established in Italy by Giuseppe Torelli, its purpose being to pit a single instrument, or solo, against a larger body of players, the tutti or ripieno. As a medium, it was then taken up and developed by Vivaldi and others. Bach had become familiar with typical examples of the genre at a relatively early date, inspiring him to engage with it and prepare transcriptions for organ and harpsichord during his years in Weimar from 1708 to 1717. The fruits of this interest fall into two groups, the first comprising six arrangements, BWV 592–97, the second set sixteen, BWV 972–87.

In his *Italian Concerto*, Bach took this idea a stage further by using the instrument's two manuals to create a series of contrasts, clearly alluding in the process to elements developed by Vivaldi such as the ritornello theme that progressively enters on different degrees of the scale and is treated contrapuntally with the solo sections that are found between them and that are accompanied by relatively few voices. The composition as a whole may be said to flirt with the idea of being a keyboard reduction of a genuine orchestral work.

In a review that he published in 1739, Johann Adolf Scheibe, one of the first music critics in Germany, found it impossible not to admire the *Italian Concerto*: "Preeminent among published musical works is a clavier concerto of which the author is the famous Bach in Leipzig and which is in the key of F Major. Since this piece is arranged in the best possible fashion for this kind of work, I believe that it will doubtless be familiar to all great composers and experienced clavier players, as well as to amateurs of the clavier and music in general. Who is there who will not admit at once that this clavier concerto is to be regarded as a perfect model of a well-designed solo concerto? But at the present time we shall be able to name as yet very few or practically no concertos of such excellent qualities and such well-designed execution. It would take as great a master of music as Mr. Bach, who has almost alone taken possession of the clavier [...], to provide us with such a piece in this form of composition." [Editor's Note: Trans. from *The Bach Reader*.]

It's interesting that it was a sinfonia from Georg Muffat's *Florilegium primum* of 1695 that provided Bach with his inspiration; the affinities between the thematic ideas in both works are palpable.

The introductory bars of the Italian Concerto could hardly be more affirmative and are immediately repeated in the dominant. In the solo passages it is generally the performer's right hand that takes the role of the soloist, while the left hand provides the accompaniment and occasionally contributes additional melodic material. The jewel of the piece is its slow movement, which is headed "Andante" (in other words, not too slow). A rhapsodic melody of great beauty soars freely over a highly organized and at times sequential bass. With its darker, minor-key colouring, the coda evokes a mood of oppression and somber resignation, which also lends a note of tragedy to the cantabile middle movement. This movement is arguably the one that most closely resembles one of Bach's Italian models, except that Bach writes out in full his florid embellishments rather than leaving them to the performer's imagination. Scheibe criticized Bach for doing so: "Every ornament, every little grace, and everything that one thinks of as belonging to the method of playing, he expresses completely in notes; and this not only takes away from his pieces the beauty of harmony, but completely covers the melody throughout."

As to why Bach published a second volume of the *Clavier-Übung* with only two, much shorter works, the *Italian Concerto* and the *French Overture* in B Minor, BWV 831, the answer can be no more than speculation. But the fact is that the title *Clavier-Übung* mustn't be confused with or even mistaken for "etudes" or a compositional treatise. It's much more the fact that titles like these had been commonly applied to "use music" of the time and epoch.

Jerry: BWV 904, the Fantasia and Fugue in A Minor, falls into a catchall category of works for solo keyboard that encompass BWV numbers 846 through 962, and include preludes, fugues, fantasias, and toccatas. The A-Minor Fantasia and Fugue, and the next number of your disc, the Fantasia [Adagio] and its unfinished Fugue in C Minor, BWV 906 falls into the same category. Can you explain a bit more about the interpolated Adagio, which I understand from your notes is Bach's own arrangement of the Adagio movement from his G-Major Unaccompanied Violin Sonata. You say that Busoni provided a completion to the unfinished fugue and inserted the Adagio movement between the Fantasia and the Fugue to create a three-movement structure. So you adopted Busoni's edition for your recording? Do I have that right?

Burkard: Yes, an absolute masterpiece from Bach's years of maturity is the Fantasia in C Minor, BWV 906, which was written towards the end of the 1730s. Here Bach explores the world of Neapolitan keyboard music created by Alessandro and Domenico Scarlatti, one of the principal effects of which was the crossing of the performer's hands. Succinct in terms of its motivic and thematic writing and filled with a sense of intense motoric urgency, the Fantasia reflects its composer's engagement with Classical sonata form. The first subject-group is followed by a much calmer episode that serves as a second subject, while the development section gives way to a foreshortened recapitulation. It's regrettable that the ensuing fugue remained unfinished; at least it has come down to us in only an incomplete form. Wholly unique, it is cast, rather, in the form of a fantasia and sets out to explore a world of such unprecedented novelty that we might be forgiven for thinking that this was an experimental study rather than a piece intended for publication. Note in particular the bold chromatic progressions and examples of contrary motion, to say nothing of the work's audacious harmonic writing. Whereas the first part of the fugue is unquestionably by Bach, the authorship of the second, more diffuse, section

is uncertain. Ferruccio Busoni completed the fugue, extending its original forty-seven bars to ninety-six with a display of contrapuntal mastery. In order to achieve the inner cohesion of a three-movement sonata-like work, he also interpolated between the Fantasia and Fugue the *Adagio* in G major, BWV 968, which Bach himself had arranged from his Third Sonata for Unaccompanied Violin, BWV 1005. The source of this arrangement is an autograph manuscript by Johann Christoph Altnickol headed “SONATA per il CEMBALO Solo del Sigre J. S. Bach,” although, stylistically speaking, the arrangement tends, rather, to point in the direction of the generation of Bach’s sons, notably Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. But it is possible that the arranger was Altnickol himself. Whatever the answer, the arrangement is a fine example of the way in which a violin piece could be adapted for a keyboard of the time. The low register of the writing may be due to the fact that the following movements of the violin sonata were also intended to be transcribed without violating their melodic line, but it may also be an argument in favor of the use of a particular instrument such as a lute-harpsichord.

I only followed the idea of Busoni to interpolate the *Adagio* as a “completion” of this unfinished work, and to give an impression (or even illusion?) of a complete “three-movement” work in the manner of Scarlatti. But the transcription of the *Adagio* itself is either Bach’s original, perhaps Wilhelm Friedemann, or even Bach’s son-in-law, Altnickol.

Jerry: Every time I hear the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*, I imagine Bach saying to his students, “Und here, kinder, ist vat you can do mit der fully diminished seventh chord.” It may be true that there’s nothing else like it in Bach’s output—it’s unique among his works—but given Bach’s comprehensive knowledge of the music that came before him, and his summing up of the entire Baroque era, don’t you think he was aware of the precedents for this sort of thing in the early 17th-century florid and often fanciful keyboard and lute capriccios and toccatas by Frescobaldi?

Burkard: Indeed, as one of the high points of Bach’s output for the keyboard, and also as a special case within that group of works, the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* in D Minor, BWV 903, has always enjoyed particular acclaim. The piece is believed to date from Bach’s years in Cöthen from 1717 to 1723, and inspired Forkel to comment: “I have taken infinite pains to discover another piece of this kind by Bach, but in vain. This fantasia is unique, and never had its like.” And Forkel was to be proved right, for BWV 903 is rightly regarded by performers and listeners alike as one of the high points of Bach’s whole output as a keyboard composer. The fact that the Fantasia’s popularity is not limited to our own age or even to the Bach revival of the 19th century, but dates back to the composer’s own day, is clear from the high opinion of it expressed by his contemporaries. Wilhelm Friedemann even predicted that it would “remain beautiful for all ages,” a prediction that holds true today.

The work’s key of D Minor recalls the no less popular Toccata and Fugue for organ, BWV 565, and the same is true of its free form, which reflects Bach’s artistry as an improviser. The autograph score of the *Chromatic Fantasia* is no longer extant, making it difficult, if not impossible, to date the work with any accuracy; but from 1730 onwards Bach set his pupils the task of writing it out, which at least provides us with a *terminus ante quem*.

The uniqueness of the Fantasia rests on its exuberant chromaticisms, which convey a feeling of infinity through the extensive use of enharmonic change, to say nothing of all the suspensions and passing notes, in that way inducing a state of weightlessness in the listener. No less important is the immediacy of the music’s expressive language, thanks in no small part to

the privileged position accorded to a recitative-like passage located at the very center of the work. The chromatic modulations speak a language all their own and recall the religiously inspired rhetoric of grief and mourning that invites an attitude of calm resignation that was to be found at a later date in the music of Liszt. But the anguished chromaticisms also create a sense of erotic tension that invites comparisons with Wagner's Tristanesque harmonies, where the excesses and liberties found in Wagner's chromatic procedures achieve a unique degree of expressiveness and a personal intimacy in terms of a musical language that points in the direction of the mysterious and the metaphysical.

The ending of the Fantasia is unique. A five-bar coda over a pedal point on D, it features a series of chords of a diminished seventh descending over the span of an octave, the scales of each figure being varied with filigree delicacy and accompanied by playful ornamental figures in the upper voice. It is from this sense of sinking into a feeling of gloomy resignation and rampant imagination that the subject of the ensuing fugue emerges, a line that rises stepwise from A to C.

Just as the final section of the Fantasia harnesses together such remote keys as BI Minor and CT Minor, so in the central section of the Fugue, Bach goes beyond fixed key relationships, which has real consequences for the listener. It becomes difficult to follow the directions in which the modulations and harmonies are going. Bach introduces his subject, which is, however, not fully chromatic, in B Minor in bars 76–83, then in E Minor in bars 90–97, combining both entries with a modulation to a particularly remote tonality.

"Well-tempered" tuning was not the only reason why music systems developed as they did at this period. Chromatic and enharmonic procedures involving a playful approach to tonality, thus allowing composers to demonstrate both their boldness and their abilities, were by no means unusual in the vocal and keyboard music of the time. The famous exchange of cantatas between Gasparini and Alessandro Scarlatti in 1712 is merely one example among many. The flamboyance of Bach's bold harmonic writing, in conjunction with the highly virtuosic aspects of the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* have encouraged performers to emphasize these elements in concerts and in arrangements.

In the 19th century the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* was a classic example of the Romantics' approach to Bach. One of the founders of the Bach revival, Felix Mendelssohn performed the Fantasia at two concerts in the Leipzig Gewandhaus in February 1840 and January 1841, firing his audience with tremendous enthusiasm. He himself attributed the impact of his performance to his free interpretation of the arpeggios in the Fantasia and to his ability to exploit the effects of one of the grand pianos of the time, using differentiated dynamics, picking out the top notes, overusing the sustaining pedal and doubling the bass notes. This interpretation became the model for the second movement (Adagio) of Mendelssohn's Second Cello Sonata, op. 58, of 1841–1843, in which the top notes of the arpeggio in the piano spell out a chorale melody while the cello plays an extended recitative recalling the recitative from Bach's *Chromatic Fantasia*, and even quoting the final bars of this last-named work.

This Romantic interpretation proved influential. As a young virtuoso, Johannes Brahms used to launch his concerts with the *Chromatic Fantasia*, while Liszt, too, performed the work at his recitals. Max Reger even prepared an organ arrangement. Bach's highly expressive work, which is surely one of his most personal, has retained its fascination across the centuries. It has also been frequently reprinted with interpretative additions and performing markings. In his own edition of the work, the Romantic Bach interpreter Ferruccio Busoni drew a distinction between the final passage as the coda and the recitative.

The *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* is a visionary work that looks far beyond its age in terms of its formal design, its structure, its character, and its inherent musical language. Even today it continues to point the way forward. And YES, Bach indeed was aware of the precedents for this sort of thing in the early 17th-century florid and often fanciful keyboard and lute capriccios and toccatas by Frescobaldi, but also of the precedents of the French clavecinists, e.g. Rameau, Couperin, and de Grigny who all created a very, very virtuoso style. And YES, Bach had studied and knew these compositions very, very well, and integrated these compositional elements and refinements of ornamentation into his works, such as the *French Suites*, the *French Ouverture*, and the *Goldberg Variations*, and *The Art of Fugue*, as, for example in Contrapunctus 6, “in Stile francese”).

Jerry: Switching gears to the subjects of performance and recording, let me ask if you used the same Steinway piano for this new Bach program as you did for your *Goldberg Variations*. You mentioned earlier that you thought highly of Angela Hewitt’s Bach, so I must tell you that I have consistently cited her Bach, along with András Schiff’s and Craig Sheppard’s, as being my top choices. There’s a playfulness in Hewitt’s Bach that I really like, and she has chosen to perform on a Fazioli piano. So what guides your choice of instrument?

Burkard: Yes, I know Hewitt plays on a Fazioli. In fact, I was one of the first to play on a Fazioli F-308, when the company was starting out. This was in 1988, and for one of my earliest recordings (a Brahms CD released by Bayer), I used this Fazioli F-308. In 1990, I became “Official Artist of Steinway & Sons” and got their best instruments and best services (by the way, my friend Georges Ammann, tours with me for all my recording sessions, but also assists with my recitals); and from this time I concentrated only on Steinway. The instrument on this Bach CD is one of my own Steinways, an instrument from Steinway Hamburg, which I hoped to find for many years, and then found in 2010. My pianos in general are alive to me and a mirror of me. So, it was vital to get it right. The Steinway Grand D-274 I play on my new Bach SACD is not the same instrument I used for my *Goldbergs*. For the new program I needed a much more rich-toned instrument and, so I think, it’s adequate. Piano and artist have to blend into one. That’s my artistic credo.

So, what are my personal demands of an instrument? It has to fulfill all artistic requirements to the highest degree: full sound; ability to sustain tones, which is a prerequisite to realize the polyphonic structures, especially to point out the longer notes and organ-points; and then, great flexibility in the tonal palette, which is enormously important for underlining the independence of the voices, and which can bring out countless registrations, like on an organ. The mechanical lightness is so wonderful, which enabled me to realize the extreme virtuosity in the faster movements of the variations. The complete range of tone and voicing of the instrument is so plastic that the clarity of the polyphony is guaranteed at all times.

But, to bring out all these qualities, all aspects have to come together. My piano technician, Georges Ammann from Steinway-Hamburg, is one of the best technicians in the world, and as chief-technician from Steinway Hamburg, he collaborates with all major pianists. It’s his professional knowledge and experience that have enabled this instrument to achieve its full potential. He really did a great job! Otherwise, it’s my recording producers, Friedemann Engelbrecht and Tobias Lehmann, and my recording engineer, Julian Schwenkner (Teldex-Studio in Berlin, teldexstudio.de, which is renowned throughout Europe), who worked on the really unique reproduction of my piano sound.

As we all know, the singularity in the art of Bach is the fusion of both the horizontal and vertical lines. It's a real wonder to see that the creation and forming of the horizontal line, the polyphonic structure, also results in this perfect, beautiful vertical line, the harmonic line. As we also know, Bach already used the full harmonic range and radius as no composer before him. My artistic aim of course is to point out the horizontal line in a dynamically elastic way, but in the same breath, to form the harmonic line in a bright field of color (I would call it "harmonic articulation"), to achieve a particular atmosphere of emotions and moods, drama, velocity, vividness, and so on. As we can imagine, these are high demands for an instrument. The instrument has these prerequisites, because the clarity on one side delineates the polyphonic structure, but these lines also blend into a "compact sound," by which it's possible to realize and verify the harmonic articulation I've described. One can be lucky to find an instrument with both qualities.

Jerry: This next question is one I ask of every instrumentalist I interview, so you're not going to get away without having to answer it. We spoke earlier about playing Bach on the piano vs. the harpsichord, but there's a further distinction to be made between "modern" piano, "period" piano, and fortepiano. Bach would have had the opportunity to play on the latter, when he visited Frederick II in Potsdam in 1747. Is there a case to be made for performing Bach on fortepiano? I ask this for two reasons: one, some very fine recordings of Brahms's solo piano music have come my way recently, featuring performances on various pianos of the composer's time; and two, I'm just curious to know in general your attitude towards performing on period instruments, whether authentic or copies thereof.

Burkard: It's a profound deliberation and decision to perform Bach on the piano—or on harpsichord. One has to free oneself from the idea that the compositions of Bach are strictly bound to the instruments of the Baroque epoch. One has to remember that Bach himself used other keyboards than the harpsichord, such as the spinet and the clavichord, all instruments that have their own character and different handling and so have a decisive effect on interpretation. That means Bach himself didn't restrict performers to *one* instrument, *one* sound, and *one* manner to play his pieces.

And then we have Bach's compositions for organ, another other style in music, structure, and sound altogether. Bach was a very versatile and complex, nearly multilayered composer, and I'm convinced, if Bach also had known the piano concert grand of today, he would have been fascinated by the richness of artistic possibilities.

On the other hand, if one knows the historic background of Bach interpretation, one has to confess that many readings of the text of the compositions in whole must be dependent on the style of harpsichord, spinet, and clavichord playing, especially articulation and phrasing. These readings cannot directly be produced on a concert grand piano. One has to verify and reproduce these readings in another manner by pointing out the original meaning in a relative manner, but one that is convincing in relation to the new instrument.

To answer your question directly, even being a concert pianist, I don't find in general that it's necessary in some final sense to perform Bach on a concert grand piano. To play Bach in historic academic style absolutely has to be defended, and these interpretations surely have their absolute justification. But if you already make the jump to play Bach on the piano, you have to do this with all the consequences. Then you have to play Bach not in the style you would on

harpsichord, no, you have to play the concert grand with all its possibilities; otherwise it wouldn't be convincing, because the piano totally would be undermined in its tonal variety.

In the case you mention of Brahms's music performed on pianos of his time, yes, it gives an excellent insight into how the music of this period actually sounded and, objectively, what instruments Brahms knew and heard. But in conclusion, for all the interest in period instruments and historic performance, I'm personally committed to modern pianos. It's a question of personality, mentality, and character.

Jerry: Talk to me about your new recording. I recall you mentioning in an earlier conversation we had that there were two different engineers who produced the SACD—one for the standard two-channel layer, the other for the multi-channel surround sound layer. Isn't that unusual? Can you explain how and why that came about?

Burkard: I wanted to deliver something in *state-of-art*. So, the tasks have been divvied up, and each of my technicians did a great job! It was mainly Julian Schwenkner who mixed the Surround version. Each of these three layers is individually engineered and has its own character and sound.

Jerry: There's no denying that SACD benefits big, heavily-scored Romantic-period works—your recording, by the way, sounds fantastic in either format—but I wonder, really, what advantage multi-channel technology brings to a solo piano recital or even to a string quartet, where you don't have the side-to-side and front-to-rear dimensional spread you do with a large orchestra laid out before you.

Burkard: It's a personal preference for me that I like rich-toned sounds and halls. So, frankly, I wanted to give my listeners, who are able to play the disc in SACD Surround 5.0, the feeling and impression of being in a concert hall rotunda with the sense that the piano is placed in the middle with the auditorium and audience surrounding it. That way, the listener becomes part of the music, the artist, the interpretation, the acoustic of the hall, and the complete experience. I call it "tension of a life-performance."

Jerry: Okay, so what's next on your agenda? More Bach, more Schumann, more Chopin? Or are you ready to branch out into different repertoire?

Burkard: I've already produced two SACDs with major works by Chopin. I will continue that project in April, 2015, in Berlin, so that Divine Art can release this edition in a three-SACD-package. The program promises to be something special.

And of course I'm ready to branch out into different repertoire—Scarlatti, Mozart, and Schumann. But Bach and Chopin will continue to be central and keep me busy the rest of my life. ...