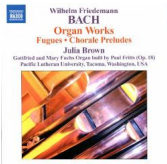
## W. F. Bach - Organ Works (Julia Brown)




*1. Fugue in G minor 2. Chorale Preludes, Jesu, meine Freude 3. Fugue in F Major 4. Chorale Preludes, Nun komm der Heiden Heiland 5. Fugue in C Minor 6. Fugue In C Minor 7. Chorale Preludes, Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt 8. Fugue in F Major 'Tripelfuge' 9. Chorale Preludes, Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit 10. Fugue in C Minor (2) 11. Chorale Preludes, Wir Christenleut han jetzund Freud 12. Fugue in B Flat Major 13. Chorale Preludes, Wir danken dir, Herr Jesu Christ 14. Fugue in D Major 15. Chorale Preludes, Christe, der du bist Tag und Licht 16. Fugue in B Flat Major (2) 17. Fugue in A Minor* Julia Brown - organ

By all accounts Wilhelm Friedemann Bach was the greatest organist of his time in Germany. The music critic Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart stated: "Undoubtedly the greatest organist of the world! He is a son of the world-famous Sebastian Bach and has reached - if not surpassed - his father's virtuosity." He then goes on to describe his features: "a fiery genius, a creative imagination, originality and inventiveness, a stormy quickness, and the magical power to enchant every heart with his play on the organ". Bach's oeuvre for the organ bears witness to that description, and it is a great shame that so little of his art has come down to us.

The CPO disc promises us "the complete organ works" by Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. This has to be taken with a grain of salt. To begin with, it is not easy to make a clear distinction between pieces for any keyboard and compositions specifically intended for the organ. Obviously pieces for two manuals and pedal can only be played at the organ. Those include the seven chorale preludes and the two Fugues in F and g minor respectively which Friedhelm Flamme included in his recording. Inexplicably he did not include the Fugue in F (F 36 / A 91) which Julia Brown has recorded. On the other hand Flamme plays several pieces which don't require a pedal; these include the Fantasias in d minor and c minor which open and respectively close, his programme. Also no pedal is required in the Eight Fugues (F 31 / A 81-88), but here Friedemann has specifically indicated that they can be played either at the "Clavier" (any keyboard without pedals) or the organ.

Although these two discs contain duplications, they also complement each other in that both offer pieces which don't appear on the other disc. The two Fantasias I have just mentioned are absent from Julia Brown's disc - she played them at the harpsichord on Naxos 8.570530 - whereas she included various fugues which are not in the two catalogues of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach's oeuvre. The reason is that they are not considered authentic. It is rather odd that this is not mentioned in the liner-notes. Authentic or not, it is nice to have them available, even though they have been recorded before - for instance by Leo van Doeselaar on Etcetera KTC 2503, 1984.

One can understand that they are considered doubtful, as some are very baroque in style and not very different from Johann Sebastian's fugues. The Fugue in B flat (track 16) is a good example. But that in itself doesn't tell against their authenticity. Listening to the chorale preludes one will notice their rooting in a past even before J.S. The cantus firmus is virtually unornamented, and Friedemann makes use of so-called Vorimitation in which the chorale melody is anticipated in the other voices. It was not only used by Sebastian but is also a feature of the chorale preludes by Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706). Other fugues begin in a rather old-fashioned manner but then turn towards the fashion of the time towards the end. This is typical of Wilhelm Friedemann who in his oeuvre moves to and fro between the various styles of his time.

The number of fugues he composed is remarkable and this is considered one of the reasons he fell from grace towards the end of his career. The form of the fugue had become largely obsolete, and when Friedemann attempted to get the Eight Fugues printed, publishers refused. These are very likely characteristic of his style of playing, and that could well have been the reason that in the last stage of his life he wasn't in much demand as an organist any more. It is assumed that he mostly improvised during his public concerts; that is probably the reason so little organ music by him has been preserved.

The duplications allow us to compare the interpretations of these two organists which are quite different. A look at the track-lists reveals that Julia Brown is consistently slower than Friedhelm Flamme. It is mostly not possible to decide which tempo is right. The Fugue in F (F 33 / A 90), for instance, works in both performances quite well. The slower reading by Julia Brown lends it a kind of gravity and seriousness which suits its character as it is reminiscent of the fugues in Sebastian's Well-tempered Clavier. Elsewhere the slow tempo works against the music, for instance in the Fugue in c minor (track 6) where the trills are unnatural. One could probably characterise Ms Brown's performances as analytical: every detail is exposed, thanks not only to the relatively slow tempi but also the registration which is mostly modest and allows for every single voice to be followed.

The differences between these two discs are also due to the organs. Julia Brown plays an instrument built by Paul Fritts and Company in 1999, which was clearly inspired by the German baroque organ. Friedhelm Flamme also plays a modern organ by Martin Hillebrand dating from 2008. Here new stops have been built in the style of the 18th century, particularly based on the disposition of the organ by Christian Vater which was built in this church in the 1730s. Some pipework from the organ Carl Giesecke had built in the same church in the 1860s has been incorporated into this organ. Because of that the sound is quite different, mellower and less penetrating than the sound of the organ Julia Brown plays. I don't want to choose between them. The Eight Fugues come off beautifully at the Hillebrand. So do the chorale preludes, but in these somewhat old-fashioned pieces the Fritts organ is probably closer to what Bach had at his disposal in his earlier years.

Both booklets leave something to be desired. I have already identified that the doubtful authenticity of several pieces in Julia Brown's recording is not mentioned. Otherwise the liner-notes are not very specific about the various pieces. The CPO booklet contains some general information about Wilhelm Friedemann as an organist, but little analysis of the music. The track-lists should have given the numbers in Peter Wollny's catalogue as well, in particular as Falck's catalogue is out of date. I have added them on the basis of the work-list in New Grove.

Both recordings have their merits and those who have an interest in Wilhelm Friedemann's music shouldn't miss either of them.  --- Johan van Veen, MusicWeb International

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