

Bach and the Italian Taste

The golden music magnificences of the early Eighteenth century would not have existed without the “reunited tastes”: with this expression (from French *Les Goûts Réunis*, according to the subtitle of the “*Nouveaux Concerts*” by François Couperin) it was meant a reunion of many styles from several European countries in a single work. This mixture - that we would call “cultural integration” nowadays - had been a revolutionary element in the musical scene of those years, lived by various composers in very different ways: these exchanges among countries transformed Europe in a studio of musical creativity that was kept live by reciprocal admiration and spirit of emulation. Already in precedent centuries, obviously, Italy was aim of attention by German musicians: cradle of mediterranean civilization, it lured - one among many - Heinrich Schültz, who went to Venice in 1628, and there he studied with Monteverdi. Admiration for the Italian style intensified in the first decades of Eighteenth century: while in France Couperin was blending Italian and French styles in his *Nouveaux Concerts* (1724) and his *Les Nations* (1726), that significantly ends with *La piemontaise*, in Deutschland Bach, Händel and Telemann were under the magnetic spell of Italy. Unlike Händel, Bach never traveled to the Bel Paese: having rarely left his native Thuringia, the Kantor satisfied his interest in Italian music through a meticulous studying and assimilating a lot of scores, in the solitude of his personal researches.

This process of interiorisation, far from any *Grand Tour* ahead of its time, was crucial for the evolution in Bach’s creativity: just think of the

influence exerted by pure Italian forms of expression in composing the Brandenburg Concertos or the concertos for violin. But Bach’s interest in Italy was not limited exclusively to the concertante: as the son Carl Philip Emmanuel reports in a letter to Forkel (January 13rd 1775), Bach listened to - and then studied - Frescobaldi’s works; this assertion is confirmed by the fact that Bach owned the *Fiori Musicali* collection. If Bach adopted the Frescobaldi’s toccata style and the forms of Italian counterpoint (first of all, the Ricercar), instead Antonio Vivaldi was his determinant referrer for the Concerto genre. Bach transcribed for keyboard twenty-one concertos: ten of these come from works by Vivaldi, five by prince Ernst of Saxony, one by Telemann, one probably by Torelli and two by still unknown authors. But, if Bach never traveled to Italy, how and when did he come into possession of these pieces? Nothing is certain, but ostensibly Bach’s transcriptions date back 1713-1714, when the composer was in Weimar: here, in addition to his functions of court organist, he also taught music lessons to the young prince Johann-Ernst of Saxony, who was endowed with an exquisite musical talent. Bach reached Weimar in 1708 and found there a milieu characterized by the most austere German puritanism, as the duke Wilhelm Ernst dictated: but, if theatre, opera and dance were almost banished, instead the duke turned out very progressive concerning instrumental music. Also, Bach was favored by the presence in the court of a cousin of his, Johann Gottfried Walther, who was an organist and whose talent and enthusiasm permitted a significative increase of court expenses for music (purchases of scores, instruments, addictions of new elements in the

orchestra...). Concerning the Italian Concertos, it was fortune to approach Bach: coming back after two years spent to study in Utrecht, the young prince Johann-Ernst brought several trunks of sheet musics from Netherlands. At the time, Amsterdam was the European capital in the field of music editions and it does not astonish us that among the scripts carried from Netherlands there was also *L'Estro armonico*, op. 3 by Vivaldi, that was published by Estienne Roger in 1711.

Do not think that, before his discovers in Weimar years, Bach did not know at all the Italian concert style: the most recent studies suppose far-back Bach come in contact with scores by Corelli, Albinoni and Torelli, which circulated in Germany in form of copies. An ulterior question instead concerns the purposes that Bach fixed transcribing these Concertos: was it material for the prince's education, or instead a widening of the same Bach's repertoire? Probably, these two aspects did coexist. How it is marked by Alberto Basso in his monumental biography, first of all Bach did not put together a purely educational material for the prince, but in some way he also wanted to pay homage to his young pupil's talent, initiating him to a music of the highest possible quality. Besides, the minuteness with which Bach worked to these transcriptions makes us presume that these works transcended the scholastic purpose, going to enlarge the Kantor's concertante repertoire.

The two works chosen by Andrea Bacchetti, the *Concerto in D major BWV 972 nach Vivaldi* (its model is the *Concerto op. 3 n.9*, from *L'Estro Armonico*) and the *Concerto n. 3 in D minor BWV 974* from a Concerto for oboe by Alessandro Marcello (this one has been attributed to the brother Benedetto for a long time), have been

sublime pieces from their original version: without any doubt, Bach was fascinated by the inspiration that comes from the lento movements of these almost celestial works. The script for keyboard maintains with efficacy the original division between the *Tutti* parts (realized by Bach with a wide use of chords, often difficult to execute) and the *Solos*, in which the texture becomes easier. Concerning the timbre, sometimes Bach is inspired by the sonorous universe of Domenico Scarlatti, who gave to him a model to transpose the Italian style on keyboard: that emerges, for example, in the virtuoso finale of the *Concerto BWV 972 after Vivaldi*, rich in ribattutas. Although he was still young, Bach did not have however a servile attitude towards the Italian composers: in effect, he operated numerous changes on the basic material, in order to relieve some repetitions and some schematic sequences in melodic composition and in progressions. What mainly affects, instead, in the art of Bach's transcription, is his economy of means and his refuse to use the Italian scores to spectacle keyboard: nothing of unnecessary has been added.

If his summary of Italian melodic clearness and German polyphonic solidity will happen more than twenty years later the discovery of Vivaldi, in other words with the *Concerto nach italienischem Gusto* in 1735, already between the end of Seventeenth century and the early Eighteenth - as it has been run over - surely Bach had come in contact with Italian music. Two scores of his youth – the *Capriccio in B-flat major BWV 992* (most likely we can trace it back to 1703-1704 or, according to some musicologists, even to a precedent period) and the *Aria variata in A minor in the Italian style*

BWV 989 (dated 1709) – confirm Bach's passion for Italy. In the first piece, written almost certainly for the departure his elder brother, Johann Jacob, with the army of Charles XII of Sweden, the reference to Italy is evident in titles (“Adagiosissimo”, “Aria di Postiglione”, “Fuga all'imitatione di Posta”) and in the generous melodism of the ariosos, alternated to episodes of an essentially more German imprint (the purely chromatic Passacaglia recalls the style of laments by Froberger and Pachelbel). The *Aria variata*, with its theme of a clearly Mediterranean languor, combines the style of the chorals for organ to a new sensibility, that forestalls the *Goldberg Variations* for some aspects: with these, the piece shares the reprise of the Aria at the end; but unlike the *Goldberg Variations*, in this case the Aria is reintroduced with some changes, or rather as tenth and last variation. As for the *Goldberg Variations*, the Variations of the Aria are based on the harmonic profile more than on the melodic one. But in both works, in addition to the formal aspects, it is the substance to get close to the Italian Taste: the Teutonic and protestant spirit makes way to a greater radiance, the severe counterpoint leaves space for the accompanied melody or for a lighter contrapuntal style in the manner of Corelli. As in the case of the transcribed Concertos, the Italian style becomes also a possibility for Bach to explore new solutions for timbre and to transcend keyboard same: these elements today bring us to totally justify a pianistic execution, especially when piano is able to give back at their best the episodes of Italian open cantabile style and the passionate dynamic contrasts. The direct confront between the two essential influences for Bach, Italian style and French style, is realized by the same composer: in the

second volume of his *Clavier-Übung*, composed in Leipzig and published in 1735 for the traditional Easter trade by the publisher Christoph Weigel from Nuremberg, the title mentions “a Concerto in the Italian taste and an Overture in the French manner for a double-manual harpsichord”.

This combination is not casual: in this second volume of “Exercises for keyboard”, the two styles are compared with, nearly to constitute two different summaries of Bach's spirit of coalescence. The *Ouvertüre nach französische Art* is a tardive partita, full of charme and animated by taste for dance and embellishment, and it was written first: inside this piece, Bach's juvenile admiration for the *pièces de clavecins* by Grigny, Dieupart and Couperin takes shape.

The *Concerto nach italienischem gusto*, instead, represents the extreme brief of his love for Italian music: a music which, in those years, often meant lust, exuberance, eccentricity, baroque taste - also in the negative acceptance of this term (in effect, Rameau was not accused by chance of “being too Italian” for the most imaginative and visionary music of his). In any case, Bach summarizes the recalls to Italian world, with its vivacity and sensuality, and the solidity of the typically German polyphonic architecture.

Kantor's creativity is overflowing: both in the first and in the third movements, the alternation of *Solos* and *Tutti* parts, typical of the Italian concertante style, is approached in a new, never rigid way, in which the different sections do have strict connections, making foresee which will be the development into the Sonata-form. If outer movements sometimes refer to Scarlatti's script, in the cantabile, full of whispered and mystic

melancholy Andante we can distinguish clearer the references to Vivaldi: melody stands so pure (it could be a violin, or an oboe) on a delicate accompaniment that evokes the string orchestra (double basses included). Concerning sonority, the great double-manual harpsichord, with an extension of five perfect octaves, worked almost as an orchestra: this fact justifies the title of "Concerto" (furthermore, Bach was not the first to write a Concerto for an instrument solo: just think of the 25 Concertos "*pour le clavecin*" by Christian Petzold). With an extraordinary contrast, the first manual gave voice to the *Tutti* parts, while to the second was committed the *Solos*. Today the wide dynamic set permitted by piano keeps that poetry of contrast and wonderful - that was not unknown even to Bach - alive.

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