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# J. S. BACH

7 TOCCATAS BWV 910-916

PIETER-JAN BELDER *harpsichord*

**Johann Sebastian Bach 1685-1750**

**7 Toccatas BWV910-916**

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|------------------------------------|-------|
| 1. Toccata in F-sharp minor BWV910 | 10'30 |
| 2. Toccata in C minor BWV911       | 10'18 |
| 3. Toccata in D BWV912             | 11'05 |
| 4. Toccata in D minor BWV913       | 13'24 |
| 5. Toccata in E minor BWV914       | 7'18  |
| 6. Toccata in G minor BWV915       | 8'49  |
| 7. Toccata in G BWV916             | 8'11  |

Pieter-Jan Belder *harpsichord*  
Harpsichord by Titus Crijnen (2014, after Ruckers 1624)

The seven *manualliter* toccatas form the earliest group of pieces in the J.S. Bach canon that are defined by a collective title, yet since their tonalities follow no specific pattern, it is probable that their organisation was not of Bach's design. The toccatas exist in numerous sources, which suggests not only a broad distribution but also implies they were widely known during Bach's lifetime. However, the vast majority of these are individual copies, with only one source containing more than three. Of the individual copies, some toccatas feature more often while others remain relatively obscure. It is of interest that few appear to be in the hand of known Bach pupils, which suggests that he did not use them for teaching purposes.

The term *toccata* stems from the early Baroque and, in the hands of Girolamo Frescobaldi and Johann Jacob Froberger, usually signified an extended piece that consisted of several contrapuntal sections that were headed by an improvisatory introduction. However, neither structure nor instrumentation was defined, and the multi-sectional paradigm was adopted by a number of composers, notably Johann Heinrich Schmelzer and Heinrich Ignaz Franz Biber, whose capricious violin sonatas fell into a genre that was characterised by the author and scientist Athanasius Kircher (*Musurgia Universalis*, 1650) as the *stylus fantasticus*. He describes its main features as 1) instrumentation, 2) freedom of composition, and 3) the inclusion of fugal material. Nearly a century later, Johann Mattheson devoted eleven paragraphs to describing the fantastic style in *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739). He informs us that it is the least restricted genre that allows the singers' or players' skills to be revealed and adds that passages without a principal motif or melody that contain obscure ornaments, ingenious turns and embellishments are principal features. Mattheson goes on to tell us that a primary aim is with a view to 'pleasing, dazzling and astonishing' the listener. In the hands of keyboard composers, particularly those of the north-German school, examples often comprise a short introductory prelude passage that is used to introduce either any number of fugues or other compositions. This interpolation of *stylus fantasticus* found a voice among such composers as Johan

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Pachelbel and Dietrich Buxtehude and it is into this category that Bach's toccatas belong. While these are dismissed by Johann Nikolaus Forkel — one of Bach's early biographers — as 'youthful efforts' (*Jugendübungen*), the versions that have come down to us possibly date from as late as the end of Bach's Weimar period. Early versions of the D major and D minor toccatas (BWV912 and 913) are known and another version of the D major exists in a manuscript that is thought date from c1707. However, the fluency of the F-sharp and C minor toccatas and the final one in G major suggests a level of maturity that is not found in the others and while this might indicate a later date of composition, there remains a possibility that they represent revisions of less mature works.

Each toccata follows a discrete design. All but one opens with an improvisatory prelude and, true to the north-German tradition, each finish with a final fugue. Intermediary passages mainly take the form of fugues, bridged with declamatory passagework, that bear resemblance to declamatory recitatives in which melodic lines are punctuated by sudden rests, tremolos and surges of figuration. The *Toccatà in F-sharp minor* (BWV910) is of impressive proportions, despite the relative brevity of its two fugues. Both of these demonstrate a modicum of tonal planning, such as the move to the relative major at around the halfway point of the second fugue, yet this is a transitory move to the major that is short-lived, and the fugue soon returns to the minor. The tempo and subject of the opening fugue provide it with its energy and forward momentum. The subject is shorter and simpler than many other examples by Bach and its counterpoint is also uncomplicated, consisting for the most part of parallel thirds and sixths, yet this hides a level of sophistication that includes momentary shifts of the metre from common time to 3/4, the treatment of the subject in canon in the outer voices and modulations to remote keys which at one point touches D-sharp minor. The *arpeggiando* bridge is characterised by its opening on a D-sharp minor chord that makes use of cyclical harmonies as a modulatory device as it approaches the final cadence in the tonic. The closing fugue is intriguing. More

expressive than the first and predominantly in four voices, its rhythm is that of a refined French chaconne that calls to mind some of Bach's earlier works from the Weimar period such as the organ *Passacaglia* (BWV582) and the first chorus of the cantata *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* (BWV12), the ground bass of which is almost identical to the fugue subject.

Although the C-minor toccata (BWV911) seems ideally paired with the F-sharp minor, it is less mature. Its counterpoint is simpler, which includes long passages in just two parts and a relatively undeveloped and restricted harmonic and motivic plan. Although its musical rhetoric and intensive thematic development are reminiscent of the best examples of Bach's early keyboard style, the somewhat laborious rhetoric of the fugue, in which the subject is repeated immediately after a short rest, and several passages of repetitions that are reminiscent of the opening of the *Capriccio* (BWV992), quickly become monotonous. Parallels may be drawn between the fugue and Italianate concerto style in its solo-like episodes and dactyl figuration (an eighth note followed by two sixteenth notes). The latter is introduced in an improvisatory cadenza before the fugue starts up again with a new countersubject that is marked by the alternation of expositions with long sequential episodes. These make increasing use of the same dactylic rhythm that marks the previous cadenza. The fugue finishes with a cadence on the subdominant before the introduction of a virtuoso cadenza in sextuplets.

Perhaps the most successful of the toccatas is the D major (BWV912). It has at its centre a fugue in the relatively remote key of F-sharp minor that follows an opening flourish which, although reminiscent of the organ prelude in the same key (BWV532), is interrupted by tremolos that later return in bridge passages and provides the toccata with a sense of cohesion that is absent elsewhere. The rondo-like allegro displays a proclivity towards sharp keys and juxtaposes Italianate dactylic rhythms with arpeggiated passagework. This resembles the style of other Bach keyboard works, notably the *Sonata* (BWV967), and is marked by the first of several modulations to

F-sharp major. The first of two adagio bridges, in which recitativo-like figuration is interrupted several times by tremolos, gives way to the first fugue that is striking in not only its chromaticism but also the simultaneous statement of both subject and the first of two countersubjects that are presented in five of six possible permutations. These are punctuated with two short episodes that do much to provide the fugue with a sense of symmetry. The fugue dissolves into a new improvisatory transition that is punctuated with rhetorical outbursts of scalic figuration. Its marking of *con discrezione* brings to mind a similar use of the word in Froberger that suggests a rhythmically free approach. Of particular note is the manner in which it leads the music back to the tonic through a series of dark and indirectly related harmonies that find an equivalent in the *Chromatic Fantasia* (BWV903). The closing fugue is a *tour-de-force* Italianate *giga* that is marked by its harmonic rather than contrapuntal approach. The subject oscillates between two thirds — D and F-sharp; C-sharp and E — which imply a tonic-dominant relationship. The fugue again demonstrates Bach's preference in this work towards sharp keys, with sudden shifts between the tonic and its parallel minor, a statement of the subject in the bass in C-sharp minor and brief modulation to the most remote key of the entire work, G-sharp minor. It finishes with a sudden outbreak of thirty-second notes that, rather than ending with a final chord, lead into a cadence in full four-part harmony.

The *Tocatta in D minor* (BWV913) is similar in design to BWV910 and includes a similarly long passage of arpeggiated figuration in its second adagio. Stylistically, it is Italianate and is characterised by smooth sequences of Corellian suspensions. The introductory passage alludes to the organ prelude and fugue paradigm through its bass solo and this gives way to a motet-like passage, in four parts, that is marked by descending sequences and suspensions that are combined with paired falling motifs. The first fugue, marked *Thema*, suggests that the subject might have been taken from another piece and brings to mind the fugue BWV955. Similar motivic features form the basis of the second fugue, but neither are conventional. Each is rondo-like.

The first begins with a subject that is imitated in the tonic while the second employs a subject that appears to be loosely based on the *thema*, which is combined with a countersubject and immediately repeated in invert counterpoint.

Although the *Tocatta in E minor* (BWV914) is the least virtuoso, it is one of the more satisfying in terms of its architecture. The longest movement is the final fugue, which is preceded by a short opening prelude that gives way to a fugal allegro and a rhapsodic adagio. The formal opening four-note figuration is reminiscent of some of the *pedaliter* organ preludes and the ensuing *Un poco allegro* calls to mind the motet-like section of BWV913. It is a double fugue in four voices and despite a somewhat unexpected ending that comes after the final entry in the bass, it is one of the more expressive of the toccatas as a whole. One subject is marked by its chromaticism and both are abundant in suspensions that are developed in a series of brief episodes. The adagio is different from the others in that it is built over a simple linear bass line with a series of harmonies that are derived from extended, cadenza-like figuration which becomes more regular in a closing section that calls to mind the A minor *Praeludium* (BWV922). The Italianate closing fugue in three parts is intriguing since an almost identical portion is found in an anonymous manuscript in the library of the Naples Music Conservatory, which might indicate that Bach borrowed the fugue from another source. The subject is clearly north-German in style and is reminiscent of a number of composers close to the Buxtehude circle in its violinistic *bariolage* figuration. However, Bach's treatment of this figuration is more sophisticated in its inferred passing dissonances and episodes that are equally rich in the harmonies they imply.

Only two late manuscript sources remain of the *Tocatta in G minor* (BWV915); neither is particularly accurate, implying that the original score might have been lost. If this is the case, it would account for why Bach's obituary does not mention the toccata. The work has two main sections: an allegro and a gigue-like closing fugue that bears a resemblance to several works by Johann Adam Reinken. These

are flanked by an opening flourish (which recurs at the very end) that gives way to a sarabande-like adagio in which recitative-like cyclical figuration leads the tonality through D, C and G minors and F major. The Italianate allegro takes a concertoritornello approach that is apparent in a series of solo/tutti contrasts. These are achieved through varied textures and occasional dynamic contrasts, as well as the predominant use of two-part invertible counterpoint. The fugue is of the type found in the *Prelude and Fugue in A minor* (BWV896) in its reliance on strict counterpoint, and the sequentially-ascending subject and regular countersubject are treated in *riverso* in the first exposition.

The *Toccatà in G major* (BWV916) is different to its counterparts because of its three-movement form. While its plan bears a resemblance to the *Italian Concerto* (BWV971), the overall impression is that it is a work firmly in the German keyboard tradition. It begins with a scale that is worked into an allegro movement of the *ritornello* vein with alternating solo episodes and *tutti*s which are reminiscent of Italian contemporaries. Yet the beginning figuration on the tonic triad and short phrases belong to the German tradition. Like the corresponding section in other toccatas, the adagio adopts a freely imitative style with Italianesque melodic decoration at the opening that develops into a motet-style passage which begins with an unembellished figure of the preceding soprano phrase in the alto. The final three-part fugue is a *canarie* (gigue) of the type found in the *Sonata in C major* (BWV966), with an exposition that is constructed around the minor keys of E and A. The scalic figuration of this closing movement recalls the opening passage but this time the cascading figuration is capped with a long and unusual silence that is unknown elsewhere in German keyboard music.

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**Pieter-Jan Belder** (1966) studied recorder with Ricardo Kanji at the Royal Conservatorium of The Hague, and harpsichord with Bob van Asperen at the Amsterdam Sweelinck Conservatorium. He has pursued a flourishing career as harpsichordist, clavichord player, organist, forte-pianist and recorder player.

He has appeared at many international festivals, such as the *Festival Oude Muziek Utrecht*, the Berlin *Musikfest*, the *Festival van Vlaanderen*, the *Festival Potsdam Sans Souci*, *Bremen Musikfest* and the Leipzig *Bachfest*.

He regularly plays solo recitals, and is also very much in demand as a continuo player with such ensembles as the, *The Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century*, *Camarata Trajectina*, *Bach Collegium Japan*, *Gesualdo Consort Amsterdam*, and the *Netherlands Bach Society*, and has been working with conductors such as Frans Brüggen, Ton Koopman, Masaaki Suzuki, Jos van Veldhoven and Philippe Herreweghe, amongst others. Belder has also accompanied soloists such as Johannette Zomer, Nico van der Meel, Harry van der Kamp, Sigiswald Kuijken, Rémy Baudet, Rainer Zipperling and Wilbert Hazelzet. Belder conducts his own ensemble *Musica Amphion*.

In 1997 Pieter-Jan Belder was awarded the third prize at the Hamburg NDR Music Prize harpsichord competition. In 2000 he was winner of the Leipzig Bach harpsichord competition. In 2005 he made his debut as a conductor in the Amsterdam *Concertgebouw*, and was since then regularly conducting productions with soloists such as Michael Chance and Sarah Connolly (Dido & Aeneas) and the choir Collegium Vocale Gent.

He has made over 150 album recordings, most of them solo and chamber music productions. Since 1999 Belder has worked on his integral recording of the Scarlatti keyboard sonatas, which was released in 2007. Since then he has recorded Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* along with the complete harpsichord works by Rameau and Soler. Brilliant also released a recording of the *Kenner und Liebhaber* series by C.P.E. Bach, recorded on the fortepiano and the clavichord as well as harpsichord concertos recorded with his own group Musica Amphion.



Belder has also recorded several orchestral and chamber-music productions with *Musica Amphion*: Telemann's *Tafelmusik*, the complete works of Corelli, Bach's *Brandenburg* concertos, Bach's concertos for 2, 3 & 4 harpsichords, and the complete chamber music of Purcell. Also he initiated *Bach in Context*, a concert- and album series, performing Bach cantatas in their thematic context, and in which also the organ repertoire was incorporated. This series was in corporation with Gesualdo Consort Amsterdam and issued on the label Etcetera.

Pieter-Jan Belder is currently working on recording the harpsichord works by J.S. Bach, Dandrieu and the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book*. He has a succesfull duo with baroque violinist Rie Kimura with whom he recorded C.P.E. Bach's violin sonatas for the label Resonus.

Belder teaches baroque performance at the Musikhochschule in Lübeck, Germany.