

The third volume of the “Bach&Italy” series issued by Da Vinci Classics focuses on the Italian transcriptions of Bach’s organ Chorales and Chorale Preludes. Properly speaking, a Chorale is a religious song (lyrics and tune) which typically constitutes the musical heritage of the Lutheran Church. However, the origins of these tunes are very varied: some were created from scratch by Luther himself or his close collaborators, others were early Protestant adaptations from pre-Reformation Gregorian chant (thus Catholic liturgical music), pre-Reformation devotional songs (such as Christmas carols) or secular tunes; later, many Lutheran Chorales were either inspired or derived from the Calvinist Genevan Psalter. These tunes received musical elaborations throughout the history of the Lutheran Church, including simple four-part harmonizations, organ Preludes, up to entire Cantatas (such as Bach’s Chorale Cantatas). In particular, the practice of proposing the Chorale tune to the congregation through an instrumental Prelude was one in which Bach excelled both as an improviser and as a composer, and his monumental output includes a large number of organ works based on Chorales.

Following a practice firmly established by Franz Liszt and Carl Tausig, several pianists and pianist/composers attempted to imitate the organ on their instrument: though both instruments make use of keyboards (and pedalboards), the organ possesses a timbral variety which the piano cannot hope to achieve, while the piano is endowed with subtler nuances which may be modified more flexibly by the pianist’s touch. It was the Italian Ferruccio Busoni, however, who theorized in a systematic fashion “how” an organ piece should be transferred on the piano’s keyboard: his theory was beautifully illustrated by his memorable organ transcriptions, including the justly famous *Toccata and Fugue*. His *Ten Chorale Preludes* exemplify the timbral and technical possibilities of a piano which attempts to rival the organ: along with Luigi Perrachio’s *Sei Preludi Corali* they are published in “Bach&Italy2”, the second volume of the “Bach&Italy” series. Volume 3 includes other hidden gems. Even before Busoni’s Chorales, in 1882, Italian dramatist, librettist and composer Arrigo Boito had realized a transcription for voice and piano of two Organ Partitas; the resulting song (with lyrics by Boito himself) had been published first in a memorial album for the deceased wife of an Italian Risorgimento hero, and later in a collection commemorating operatic composer Vincenzo Bellini. Boito’s lyrics are rather lugubrious, but the combination of voice and piano attenuates their deep sadness; the score of this song is published by Da Vinci Publishing in the JSBach.it series.

In 1911, Felice Boghen (who was Ferruccio Busoni’s close friend and faithful disciple) issued a *Corale per pianoforte sopra un tema di Bach*. Indeed, the piece’s main theme is not by Bach; English-speaking listeners will probably recognize it as “The Old Hundredth”, which in fact is a Genevan tune composed by one of Calvin’s cooperators, Loys Bourgeois (1551). In spite of Boghen’s misattribution, however, Bach’s silhouette is clearly observable in this unjustly forgotten piano piece: the result sounds slightly as Busoni’s piano transcription of a Chorale Fantasy by Bach could have sounded, and it is generally very effective and pleasant.

The two series of five Chorale Preludes each composed by Camillo Togni are one of the masterpieces of the art of transcription. Togni, an Italian serialist, had his Damascus moment when he heard a teenager Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli performing some of Arnold Schönberg’s piano works. From that moment on, Togni spent his musical life in the constant study of both Bach’s music and that of the Second Vienna School; many of his works are explicitly inspired by Bach, and the B-A-C-H motto appears in his very last composition, a touching lullaby.

The two *Partite* were written in 1948-9 and in 1976 respectively, thus bearing witness to a continuing interest. Togni transcribes Bach’s Chorale Preludes very freely, entering into a fruitful dialogue with Bach’s original. Busoni’s recommendation to imitate organ registration on the piano is interpreted in a very personal and unique fashion by Togni, who draws from his experience as a serial composer the idea of a *Klangfarbenmelodie*, a melody of tone-colours. Thus, Bach’s

melodies (i.e. both the Chorale tunes and the voices in counterpoint with them) are frequently performed in different keyboard tessituras; Togni daringly juxtaposes consecutive notes of a tune on various octaves, thus creating aural illusions of a perceived continuity tinged by multi-colored timbres and shades. The fact that Togni's *Partitas* are conceived as musical wholes is shown by his choice to seamlessly connect the fourth and fifth Preludes in both series.

Among the ten Chorales transcribed by Togni, some are particularly fascinating, including the second movement of the *Prima Partita* op. 29. This piece, which was also one of Togni's favorites (he realized a second version for orchestra in 1980), is transformed by his transcription into an enchanted aural world. It is also particularly interesting to contrast Togni's version of *Alle Menschen müssen sterben* (which, in spite of its title, is a very serene Chorale Prelude in Bach's version) with that realized by Renato Trebbi and also recorded in this album (world premiere). Trebbi was a multifaceted artist and cultural manager, who founded numerous educational establishments and musical centers; his series of three Chorales reveals Busoni's influence much more directly than happens to Togni's *Partitas*, and seems to embody some of the main tenets of the Christian faith: Christ's Incarnation (*Puer natus in Bethlehem*), his Passion and Resurrection (*Heut triumphiret Gottes Sohn*) and the afterlife of those who believe in him (*Alle Menschen müssen sterben*, which closes the series on a powerful and exultant note).

Another figure who played a key-role in the Italian musical scene for years was Roman Vlad, an appreciated composer, theorist, organizer and musicologist. In turn, he was an expert of Bach's music, about which he wrote extensively (including, significantly, a masterful article on Busoni's transcription of the Chorale Preludes), and with which he constantly engaged creatively. In 1984, at the eve of the Year of Music (1985) celebrating Bach's tercentenary, Vlad wrote a series of five Chorales after Bach. In fact, one should more properly speak of five versions of the same Chorale, since the tune is always the same (though it was commonly sung to two different sets of lyrics at Bach's time, hence the two different titles found in Vlad's series). The first two Chorales are basically Chorale harmonizations: both Bach's originals and Vlad's interpretations are extremely sober and tranquil. The third movement is a Chorale Prelude, where the tune is richly ornamented following Bach's very expressive rendition. The last two Chorales are based on the same model; however, while the fourth is an almost literal transcription of Bach's original, the fifth not only transposes it by a tone, but integrates it with the famous theme of Bach's *Art of the Fugue*, suggesting the possibility of using this movement as an ending for Bach's unfinished masterpiece. By way of contrast with Vlad's literal respect for Bach's original pieces, Giancarlo Facchinetti (who had studied under Togni's guidance) decided to embrace the challenge offered by Bach's works in full. He took one of Bach's most famous chorale harmonizations (i.e. the Chorale which acts almost as a *Leitmotiv* within the St. Matthew Passion) and used it as a theme for a set of very different variations, whose polystylistic idiom includes tonal, atonal and deceptively serial elements. The initial and rather unexpected irony found in the first variation gradually makes room for an increasingly focused spiritual dimension.

The remaining two works in this CD connect the world of Bach's Chorales with his Cantatas. Sergio Fiorentino, one of Italy's greatest twentieth-century pianists, wrote two beautiful transcriptions of the famous Chorale *Jesus bleibet meine Freude* (which he indicated by the alternative title of *Jesus, meine Zuversicht*); the version recorded here is the latest (1996). Fiorentino employs fascinating piano sonorities in order to render the exquisite and touching elegance of Bach's original (which had been famously transcribed, among others, by Myra Hess). As far as we know, Bach never wrote a version for solo organ of this magnificent Chorale elaboration found in two movements of Cantata BWV 147 (*Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*), and therefore the model on which Fiorentino based his transcription is an orchestral and vocal piece. The same applies to the earliest piece recorded here, i.e. an 1885 transcription which one Giacomo (or possibly Giovanni) Battista

Manzotti (in all likelihood an Italian emigrant to the U.S., as he is listed among the “Piano Composers of America” in an 1887 issue of *The Etude*) wrote after an Aria from Cantata BWV 21 (*Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*). The original printed score bears a curious and intriguing subtitle: “This is a strict transposition from the Orchestral score without any changes. Bach in his perfection”. While today’s readers may be tempted to smile at this claim, in its naivety it reveals an important truth: each in his own particular way, all the Italian musicians whose works are recorded here had a deep and reverent love for “Bach’s perfection” and aimed, with their transcriptions and arrangements, to reveal yet another facet of his superb music and of his deep and touching spirituality. In my opinion, they all succeeded.

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