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The Music of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach
Supplement 7.5. The Zerbst Sonatas, the Organ Sonatas, and Other Works circa 1758

Despite the inconveniences of being a refugee, Bach's time in Zerbst evidently provided opportunities for composition and reflection. It might have been at Zerbst that Bach conceived his publishing program for the following years; at Zerbst he composed six sonatas, all of which would appear in print, four in Bach's own sets of the next few years. Although none of these compositions is as striking as the great works of the 1740s, all have ambitious dimensions, marking a return to serious sonata writing after Bach's concentration on shorter pieces during the preceding years. Here, too, Bach's continuing use of truncated second movements (as in W. 62/21 and 51/3), and of opening a second or third movement with a modulating phrase (in W. 52/6 and 50/5), maintained the trend toward conceiving the entire sonata as an integrated cycle.

The two Zerbst sonatas that Bach did not publish himself would appear in anthologies. One of these, W. 70/1 in A, has been erroneously listed as belonging to the organ works that Bach apparently composed for Princess Amalia, who had an organ installed in the Berlin palace in 1755.¹ In fact, this A-major sonata seems to have been conceived together with the Reprise Sonatas, although Bach added varied repeats and a cadenza to the first movement only after its publication in an anthology of 1762–63.² One wonders whether this work was known to Chopin, growing up in Poland at a time when this sonata might still have been in circulation. He certainly understood the principle of varying the recurrences of a rondo theme, as occurs in the second movement (online example 7.20).

The A-major sonata cannot be an organ work, but the composition that immediately preceded it, written perhaps just before Bach left for Zerbst, was indeed the last of Bach's six organ compositions for the princess. These, although unpublished, therefore constituted another set of pieces that Bach assembled during the period, and like the Reprise Sonatas—published with a dedication to Amalia—they conclude with a special one-movement work. The latter, sometimes designated illogically as a prelude (W. 70/7), was the only one of the organ pieces with even a simple pedal part.³ Nothing in the other sonatas exactly requires the organ, but it is clear from the occasional pedal points and old-fashioned chains of suspensions that Bach invented a distinct idiom for these pieces that would have seemed appropriate for *galant* organ music.⁴ The frequent

¹ The history of these works (W. 70/2–7) is sorted out in CPEBCW 1/9:xiii–xv. Darrell Berg, “C. P. E. Bach's Organ Sonatas,” had previously established that they were probably composed for the princess.

² The original, simpler version, designated W. 70/1 by Wotquenne, is the first of the two versions edited in CPEBCW 1/5.2. The later version, listed separately as W. 65/32, remained, like the revision of the Reprise Sonatas, unpublished during Bach's lifetime.

³ The title “Prelude” as given in CPEBCW 1/9 is from the unauthorized print by Rellstab (*Preludio e sei sonate pel organo*, Berlin, 1790); Bach's autograph title reads “Orgelsonate mit dem Pedale” (Br 3918, in Berg, 4:274, also plate 1 in CPEBCW 1/9).

⁴ All six works survive in sources with autograph specification of organ as the medium (see CPEBCW 1/9:92–4), yet copies often indicate merely *Clavier* or *cembalo*. The Sonata W.

heavy chords in both hands are not what Sebastian, relying instead on the pedals and the *plenum* registration of a large church instrument, would have regarded as idiomatic organ writing. Yet they do make a fine effect on a good instrument.⁵ Some passages exploit the organ's sustaining power, while others engage the actual space in the Berlin palace where they might have been heard: strategically placed rests would have caught the after-ring of the full chords that precede them (online example 7.21). Similar writing occurs in the Fantasia and Fugue W. 119/7, although neither this nor any of Bach's stand-alone keyboard fugues has a reliable original designation as an organ piece.⁶

[Example 7.20. \(a\) Sonata in A, W. 70/1, later version, movement 2, mm. 57–60; \(b\) Chopin, Waltz in B Minor, op. 69, no. 2, mm. 32–48](#)

70/2, listed as unpublished in my “C. P. E. Bach in Zerbst” (table, p. 139), in fact came out in an authorized print during Bach's lifetime, as shown in CPEBCW 1/9:105.

⁵ As was demonstrated to me in a performance of the G-Minor Sonata W. 70/6 by Annette Richards (March 11, 2011), playing a reconstruction at Cornell University of the organ by Arp Schnitger that Bach and Amalia knew in the Berlin palace.

⁶ The fugues, including W. 119/7, appear as organ works in CPEBCW 1/9, although the editors acknowledge (p. xv) the presence of several notes outside the normal four-octave range of the instrument in eighteenth-century writing.

Four of the six organ sonatas date from 1755, but when Bach returned to the idiom for the last time, in 1758 just before fleeing to Zerbst, he opened the Sonata W. 70/2 with a movement remarkable for its through-composed form and imaginative tonal design. The first movement of W. 53/6, composed later as the most difficult of the “Easy” sonatas, is superficially similar. But the latter merely borrows the quasi-ritornello form of an orchestral sinfonia; in W. 70/2 Bach begins with a *piano* phrase over a pedal point that makes subsequent reappearances in G minor and F (there is no sonata-style return). The movement does incorporate the references to orchestral style, including passages in octaves, that Bach was now also including in his “symphonic” sonatas. Yet its more improvisatory trajectory might have been inspired by the distinctive possibilities of writing for organ.

[Example 7.21. \(a\) Sonata in B-flat, W. 70/2, movement 1, mm. 72–76; \(b\) Sonata in A Minor, W. 70/4, movement 1, mm. 15–24](#)

The image displays two musical excerpts from J.S. Bach's organ sonatas. Excerpt (a) is from the Sonata in B-flat major, BWV 70/2, movement 1, measures 72–76. It is in common time (C) and features a right-hand melody with sixteenth-note runs and a left-hand accompaniment with a prominent pedal point. Excerpt (b) is from the Sonata in A minor, BWV 70/4, movement 1, measures 15–24. It is in 3/4 time and shows a right-hand melody with eighth-note patterns and a left-hand accompaniment with a steady bass line. Both excerpts include dynamic markings such as *p* (piano) and *f* (forte).