

Dance moves

Introducing his new recording for Avie, pianist Charles Owen helps *Jeremy Nicholas* to unravel some of the musical intrigues and intricacies of Bach's Six Partitas

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED BACH EVER since I was at the Menuhin School, hearing the violin and cello suites played by my friends.' Charles Owen, joint-curator of the London Piano Festival, is discussing his new recording for Avie of the Six Partitas. 'Our head of music was an amazing man called Peter Norris, a Canadian who was obsessed with Glenn Gould – so he played Gould's recordings a lot. If anyone tries to copy Gould too closely, in my opinion it always sounds awful. That said, I draw a lot of inspiration from Gould – his high degree of clarity, for example, and with virtually no pedal.'

Owen chose a Steinway for the recording which he made at his alma mater. 'What appeals to me most about the Partitas are the upbeat, joyous, almost jazzy movements – the capriccio of the C minor, for instance. But as I've studied the music more, it's the Sarabandes and some of the slower Allemandes that haunt one. In the E minor, which of course is the greatest of the set – the summit of the mountain, if you like – I feel we're very close to the *St Matthew Passion*. It's in the same key, and though the Partita may not be in 12/8, that interval of the falling second in the central fugue after the opening toccata is so extraordinary that I feel it's a very close cousin. To me it's like one of the choruses out of the *Passion*. And the final Gigue is extraordinary – the opening subject has almost all 12 notes of the chromatic scale.'

The Six Partitas BWV 825-30, though the first of Bach's works to be published,

were in fact the last of his keyboard suites to be composed, and are also the most demanding. They appeared in separate editions between 1726 and 1730 before being published as a collected edition as 'Opus 1' in 1731 under the title *Clavier-Übung* ('Keyboard Practice').

Charles Owen is at pains to mention the guidance he has had for the Partitas from

'a wonderful Hungarian teacher, Valéria Szervánszky, who works very closely with [György] Kurtág. She has inspired me in recent years. The Partitas are essentially dance suites,' he enthuses. 'The French *courante* or (Italian) *corrente*, the German *allemande*, the Spanish *sarabande* – the most serious of the dances – and Scottish jig (or *gigue*): it's the EU in all its glory! The humble jig was transformed by Bach into the unbelievable double fugues of the D major and G major Partitas. That's what gives the set its special character. Obviously Bach does the same in the Cello Suites, Orchestral Suites, English Suites and the French Suites, as does Handel and many others. However, Bach in the Partitas, in my opinion, is the summit.'

On his recording, Owen plays all the repeats: 'It's a question of proportion and balance,' he insists. As for ornaments, his starting point is Bach's book of instructions on the subject (*Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach*) written for the



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composer's eldest son, though he is not fanatical about them: 'Some people say they absolutely have to begin on the beat in Baroque music. I agree entirely with that, but sometimes it is simply not possible.'

The key sequence of the Partitas is particularly intriguing. On the surface (1) B-flat major, (2) C minor, (3) A minor, (4) D major, (5) G major and (6) E minor seems arbitrary, but in fact, the key notes alternately rise and fall symmetrically. A planned seventh partita in F major

was never written, but the key sequence continues in the *Clavier-Übung II* with the Italian Concerto (in F major) and the French Overture (in B major). In other words, the pattern begins with the first letter of Bach's name (B-flat is 'B' in German nomenclature) and ends with the last (B-natural in German is 'H').

The title page of the Partitas announces that they were 'composed for music-lovers, to delight their spirits'. That may be, but Bach was not in the business of making any concessions for the amateur. Owen thinks that in terms of delicacy, the most difficult is No 1, but 'technically, the most challenging probably is the Gigue of the fifth Partita. And did you know the second subject of the fugue of that Gigue fits perfectly with the opening subject – clever, no? Actually there's not a single movement anywhere that is technically easy because you have got to control three or four voices in every movement. You have to think orchestrally on the piano, remembering the sound of the harpsichord but not

imitating it directly. Though the Partitas are dance suites, by the time you get to the Sixth they go way further than that and are much more profound. They are not dances just for a bit of fun. Here, Bach is addressing the eternal.' 



Charles Owen's new recording of Bach's Six Keyboard Partitas will be released on 11 November by Avie Records (AV2366 – 2 CDs). www.avie-records.com

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