

*Aus der Seele muß man spielen, und nicht wie ein abgerichteter Vogel*  
C.P.E. Bach, 1759

## Responding to Notation: Interpreting Dynamic Markings in the Instrumental Music of C.P.E. Bach

RACHEL BALDOCK

It is well known that Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was connected to a wide circle of philosophers, theologians, poets and music critics, both in Berlin, where he worked as court harpsichordist to Frederick the Great, and in Hamburg, where he took up the post as director of music of the city's churches from 1768. One of the central debates within these intellectual circles concerned the nature of artistic expression and its relationship to the self. Two recent articles by Richard Kramer and Tobias Plebuch in the collection of essays published as *C.P.E. Bach Studies* address these questions, taking specific contemporary personalities – Diderot and Gerstenberg – and using their input to read C.P.E. Bach's keyboard fantasias.<sup>1</sup> Their discussions cover the no less important, but rather less addressed, question of the relationship between the idealised expression of the composer's self and its enacted realisation by a performer. Kramer, reading Diderot, notes that he sought to distinguish between a genuine cry of the heart and 'the perfectly calibrated gesture of the actor, within whose calculations are choreographed the rhetoric of spontaneity'.<sup>2</sup> C.P.E. Bach, writing in his *Versuch* of 1753, offers an apparently simple solution, demanding unambiguously that the performer 'must of

<sup>1</sup> Richard Kramer, 'Diderot's *Paradoxe* and C.P.E. Bach's *Empfindungen*', and Tobias Plebuch, 'Dark Fantasies and the Dawn of the Self: Gerstenberg's Monologues for C.P.E. Bach's C minor Fantasia', in *C.P.E. Bach Studies*, ed. Annette Richards (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 6-24 and pp. 25-66.

<sup>2</sup> Kramer, 'Diderot's *Paradoxe*', *C.P.E. Bach Studies* (2006), p. 9.

necessity feel all of the affects that he hopes to arouse in his audience, for the revealing of his own humour will stimulate a like humour in the listener'.<sup>3</sup> C.P.E. Bach's performer should, by this measure, not be one who has learned the art of conveying expression, but one who conveys it by virtue of it being genuinely present.

These questions set the context for an examination of C.P.E. Bach's use of expressive markings, in particular his dynamic markings, and prompt an investigation into the meaning of the signs and their realisation in performance. The density with which C.P.E. Bach notates dynamics could be read as an indication that he is attempting to encode and control a mode of expressive performance, directing the performer in matters of delivery, an area of creativity previously outside the control of the composer. The inclusion of dynamics in many of the examples of ornamentation in his *Versuch* points to an increasing tendency to determine every aspect of his highly expressive and individual musical language. Yet the very idea of defining such 'rhetoric of expression' seems to run directly against his ideal of the performer whose expression springs from genuine emotion rather than from an art which can be learned. The whole notion of writing a treatise on the 'true art of keyboard performance' is in danger of being a paradox in itself; and C.P.E. Bach, acutely aware of the potential contradiction between that which must be defined and learned and that which must never be defined and cannot be learned, is careful to balance the most thorough and detailed instruction with warnings that to obey the rules in a simplistic manner is dangerous: 'Play from the soul not like a trained bird!'.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is not without significance that the summation of the treatise comes in the form of a free fantasia<sup>5</sup>, a genre which, more than any other, completely loses its expressive essence if performed in the manner of a 'trained bird'.

My collation and interpretation of dynamics data in the instrumental works of C.P.E. Bach attempts to shed some light on the composer's exploratory methods of notating modes of musical delivery, and asks how performers can negotiate their way through the web of instructions while forming their own genuine expressive voice. In the first instance, the aim is to rationalise the array of dynamics used by C.P.E. Bach in his published instrumental music, noting the different types of signs he uses, the frequency with which they are used, and the musical contexts in which they appear. Collecting data from different periods of his life enables changes in his usage over time and the extent to which these changes are linked to the different styles in which he wrote to be traced. In order to determine the meaning of the dynamic signs in their particular context, this study addresses the origins of C.P.E. Bach's

<sup>3</sup> C.P.E. Bach, *Versuch uber die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, ed.& trans. W.J. Mitchell (London: Cassell & Co., 1949), p. 152.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.* Chapter 3, §7, p. 150. Original German in dedication above, p. 77.

<sup>5</sup> The third movement of the sixth sonata of the accompanying *Probestücke* is the Fantasia in C minor, Wq 63/6.

dynamic notation, identifying two main sources: first, the dynamic sign indicating the kind of small-scale nuance possible on the touch-sensitive clavichord; and secondly, the dynamic sign indicating a sudden change of *affekt*, such contrasts of emotion being common currency in the artistic climate of the *Sturm und Drang* and the *empfindsamer Stil*. The two types of dynamic sign have different types of meaning and thus different boundaries of authority. The first has a literal meaning, instructing the performer, for example, to play a dissonance louder than a consonance. The second may be a more complex metaphorical sign, instructing the performer to change not only the amplitude but the emotion accompanying the amplitude. Indeed, in the latter case the primary directive to the performer is arguably to make an emotional change, and the final amplitude of the note has a causal relationship to that emotional change initiated by the dynamic sign, rather than to the dynamic sign itself. More often than not, a change in amplitude is not the only outlet for the emotional change taking place: it finds its outlet also in a freedom of timing and in the physical gestures of the performer. Following through this argument it is possible that the foreground presence of dynamic markings in C.P.E. Bach's instrumental music is not so much a descriptive tool determining amplitude as a responsive tool determining, indirectly, the pacing of the narrative, as crucial to C.P.E. Bach's highly expressive style as it is to the speaking of poetry.

The question of rendering C.P.E. Bach's dynamics in performance has been little remarked upon in scholarship, and yet it may give a new and useful perspective on some of the debates about the comprehensibility of his music which have dominated research in recent years. The detail with which he notates the dynamics offers a challenge to the performer wishing to take the instructions seriously and yet, rather than restricting his freedom, the result of striving to respond to each dynamic nuance tends to lead the performer to a more free and individual account of the music, precisely because it forces him to deliver each change according to his own emotional intuition.<sup>6</sup> It is this individuality of expression occurring at the point of delivery and held in the score only as moments of potentiality that may enable us to make sense of the fragmented surface characteristic of much of C.P.E. Bach's music.

<sup>6</sup> This concurs with a remark made by Bernard Harrison reviewing a recording of C.P.E. Bach's keyboard works: 'It is paradoxical that C.P.E. Bach's extraordinarily precise notation produces such diverse interpretations from modern performers.' (Bernard Harrison 'On the Periphery of Classical Musical Canons', *Early Music*, Vol. 22, No. 3. (August 1994), 531). Reviewers of Mikhail Pletnev's disc of C.P.E. Bach's Sonatas and Rondo (Deutsche Grammophon, January 2002) comment repeatedly on the strikingly individual approach, yet it is precisely the highly personal approach to the text, taking liberties with timing when implied but not dictated, which leads to a "dazzling display of improvisatory imagination from composer and performer", as one reviewer puts it, and makes this recording one of the most vivid and powerful renditions of C.P.E. Bach's music in recent years.