



## LINER NOTES FOR THE COMPLETE KEYBOARD WORKS OF BACH

By Mahan Esfahani

It is my distinct pleasure and honour to introduce the Warner Classics re-issue box set of Zuzana Růžicková's complete Erato recordings of Johann Sebastian Bach. This now legendary set was originally recorded between 1965 and 1974 and released in 1975 on 21 LPs to significant commercial and critical acclaim in Europe and Asia. As a reflection of Ruzickova's tremendous achievement the complete set was awarded the highly coveted *Grand Prix de l'Academie Charles Cros* and Zuzana Ruzickova was later awarded the *Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des*

*Lettres* in recognition of the impact of her work on French cultural life. In this newly remastered collection, contemporary listeners have the privilege of hearing a significant exegete of Bach interpretation on the harpsichord from a school of playing diverging from the historicist manner which we have now come to accept as representing the 'correct' approach to Bach's music. Zuzana Ruzickova essentially represents the 'last Romantic' amongst Bach interpreters at the keyboard in that a great respect for and interest in the musical text unites with a keen curiosity in the art of music-making as an extension of the power of the individual artist-as-interpreter.

Though another complete 'Bach Project' had been issued in the 1950s and early 1960s by Deutsche Grammophon/Archiv with the immense work of the American harpsichordist Ralph Kirkpatrick (1911-1984), the Erato-Ruzickova set is unique in the annals of Bach Projects before and since in that it includes a number of peripheral keyboard works generally omitted in the programmes and recordings of even the most ardent of Bachians, e.g., the four-movement Sonata in D-Major (BWV 963) from Bach's late teenage years, and a number of minor preludes and fugues which never found their way into larger collections of Bach's maturity. This box set also features the inclusion of the six sonatas for violin and harpsichord (BWV 1014-1019) recorded in 1968 with her longtime duo partner Josef Suk, the three sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord (BWV 1027-1029) recorded in 1973 with the French virtuoso cellist Pierre Fournier, five concerto transcriptions by Bach of concertos by Vivaldi recorded in 1965 (BWV 972, 973, 975, 976, and 980), and the Triple Concerto in a-minor (BWV 1044) and Fifth 'Brandenburg' Concerto (BWV 1050) recorded in 1968 with Jean-Pierre Rampal on flute, Josef Suk on violin, and the Prague Soloists conducted by Eduard Fischer.

Of course, the central works of Bach occupy a special place in Zuzana Ruzickova's repertoire as they are the works that most often appeared on her concert programmes for half a century: the two books of the Well-Tempered Clavier or "48," the Goldberg Variations, the Six Partitas, the Six English Suites, the Six French Suites, the Seven Toccatas, the Overture-Partita in the French Style, the Italian Concerto, and of course the myriad capriccios and fantasias and fugue pairs which gained Ruzickova considerable renown as an interpreter of great fire and authority.

With Ruzickova's work we really have a vestige of the concert revival of the harpsichord prior to the larger historical performance movement of the post-War period. Against the backdrop of this revival, inevitably the names of Wanda Landowska (1879-1959) and Arnold Dolmetsch (1868-1940) deserve mention as the most famous pioneers (the first as a soloist, the secondly mostly as a builder), but in fact Ruzickova's own playing owes as much to the Mendelssohnian Bach Revival

and the general Central European interest in Renaissance and Baroque music evinced in the scholarly work of Chrysander, Brahms, Guido Adler, and their many disciples. The intellectual trends of the first Czechoslovak Republic (1918-1938) - in particular the Czech reawakening which to some extent inspired a revival of interest in Baroque and Classical music - also played a significant role in Ruzickova's general cultural education. Interestingly, her training was, with the exception of a year in Paris under the tutelage of the Landowska devotee Marguerite Roesgen-Champion (1894-1976), wholly completed with Czech teachers in Plzeň and Prague, most significantly with the Czech pianist František Rauch (1910-1996) and the harpsichordist and scholar Oldřich Kredba (1904-1981).

In those relatively early days of the harpsichord revival - only a generation after Landowska's pioneering efforts - the harpsichord's presence in the concert realm was almost invariably associated with the music of J.S. Bach, and accordingly most of the performers of the revival were known by their pianist colleagues as particularly skilled in Bach interpretation. That being said, Zuzana Ruzickova has had an public association with the keyboard works of Bach which is comparable only perhaps with the career of Glenn Gould. Little more than a decade after she left the Nazi concentration camps in Auschwitz and Bergen-Belsen, she was fêted particularly in Germany as an outstanding interpreter of Bach's works, being hailed as the star recitalist of such Bach festivals as those in Ansbach and Leipzig whilst pursuing an equally rewarding career as a concerto soloist with the foremost European orchestras under the batons of such conductors as Talich, Ančerl, Neumann, Kubelik, Karajan, Sacher, and others. This aspect of her career - namely the symbiosis of a strong grounding in the works of the Baroque with a commitment to the mainstream presence of the harpsichord in modern concert life - is what defines Ruzickova's legacy to art.

Lessons with Zuzana Ruzickova are generally focused on music as *pure sound* as opposed to music as semiotics or symbols on a page which in turn create their own language of visually-inspired concepts. As such, when Professor Ruzickova gives a suggestion for an articulation or phrasing, the neo-Platonic idea of the phrase takes priority over a view that earlier musics are inextricably tied down to a vocabulary of prescriptive approaches not concerned with the specifics of an interpretive problem. Thus, she will never say, "in the Baroque period, they always articulated this/that way," or "the tempo of this dance is always played in this/that way." Instead, she will ask a student the kind of questions which occupy the mind for a lifetime and which never have quick answers. What is the harmonic function of a particular ornament? How does a specific harmony act as a pivot for the next phrase? Sometimes, the conversation will go even deeper, as preludes and fugues from the Well-Tempered Clavier are discussed with reference to Ancient Greek drama or poetry by Rilke. Lessons inevitably end with a cigarette or two and a discussion of life and current events. I have no doubt that Zuzana Ruzickova's own experiences against the backdrop of the tremendous historical upheavals of the last century have inspired her intrepid journey both as an artist and as a person.

When speaking of one's own idols, it is all too easy to lapse into the sort of platitudes that preclude serious musical discussion. But how to take the plunge and define Ruzickova's manner of playing? It is not a style of playing that can be justified with pseudo-objective arguments and moralistic historicity. Her student the late conductor and keyboardist Christopher Hogwood was known to frequently observe in conversation that Ruzickova, both in her teaching and her interpretations, got to the very 'bottom' or 'essence' of a piece of music. This consuming interest in the immanent qualities of a score was inevitably a product of Ruzickova's interest in modern music, a relationship no doubt influenced not only by her marriage to the composer Viktor Kalabis but her close relationships with the mainstream classical artists of her day. Ruzickova's power as an interpreter of Bach lies in her conviction that *her interpretation is unique to her as an artist and individual*

rather than depending on a 'school' of playing whose existence is the primary proof of abstract validation. It is playing of great authority and colour which has stood the test of time, and much in the way that Ruzickova herself always teaches that the music of Bach is a gift, to hear her 'life with Bach' is an experience that one can only describe in terms of a gift.

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[ A word on instruments:

As can be heard in the range of different instruments used in these recordings, Zuzana Ruzickova's career spanned the transition from the heavier modern 'revival' harpsichord (produced by large firms seeking to modernise the harpsichord with some influence from piano technology) to historical instruments. In the case of latter, two of the instruments heard on some of these discs are not copies but quite literally historical originals - the 1754 and 1761 double-manual harpsichords by Henri Hemsch of Paris, restored and prepared for the recording sessions by Claude Mercier-Ythier. The exact identity of all of the revival instruments, on the hand, is somewhat clouded in obscurity due to the loss of exact records from the sessions, though we do know that these were absolutely these aforementioned 'revival' instruments, and specifically they were *Serien Instrumente*, the German term for mass-produced harpsichord which incidentally were mostly built by such German firms as Neupert and Sperrhake in West Germany and Ammer in the GDR. The sound made by this modern type of harpsichord, based loosely on an early 18th-century Thuringian harpsichord with some spurious connections to the estate of J.S. Bach, does not even remotely resemble the sound world intended by musicians of the of seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Inevitably, the builders' decisions to tamper with period scalings and to use modern steel wire caused certain acoustic particularities which we now identify with the sound of mid-twentieth century harpsichord playing. Nonetheless, Ruzickova's colourful manner of registration (the art of choosing and combining various sets of strings based on perceived architectonics in the music) is, by her own testimony, based on an extended study of the orchestration techniques of, say, Bach, which she then applies to the composer's music. As with all of her interpretations, the individual artistic product is nonetheless grounded in deep objective enquiry. ]