

March 2023

by Emi Ferguson and Clay Zeller-Townson

The transverse flute underwent a major redevelopment in the 1680s thanks to musicians in the court of Louis XIV. While it became hugely popular in French aristocratic circles due to its sweet and pleasant tone and the ability to play both soft and loud dynamics, it took several decades for the instrument to develop widespread use across Europe. Bach was well into his thirties before he was introduced to the flute by the visiting French flute virtuoso Pierre-Gabriel Buffardin. This meeting is widely believed to have inspired Bach's first composition featuring the flute, his Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 (perhaps intended for Bach and Buffardin to play together), followed shortly thereafter by his Partita for unaccompanied flute. While most of Bach's secular instrumental chamber music was written between 1717 and 1723 during his time in Cöthen, he wrote six* sonatas for the flute over the course of his adult life in Leipzig in addition to featuring the instrument in other chamber music works and many sacred cantatas. *The exact number of sonatas Bach wrote for the flute is hotly contested with many scholars disagreeing on the authenticity of BWV 1020, 1031, and 1033. While we may never know how many sonatas he wrote for the instrument, what we can agree upon is that hearing the instrument for the first time around 1720 inspired Bach to write secular chamber music for the flute for the rest of his life.

Bach's three flute and continuo sonatas, BWV 1033, 1034, and 1035, distill his most wonderful musical qualities down to just a two-line texture: treble (flute) and bass. While the flute part is obbligato (the composer writes out all the notes they want performed), the bass part is a continuo line, an open-ended accompaniment part used in seventeenth and eighteenth century music consisting of a bass line melody along with numbers that indicate chords, similar to the chord changes that jazz musicians use, allowing performers to contribute unique improvised performances. Many composers, including Bach, understood that a composition was not complete until the performers had added their own interpretation to the piece. The use of continuo in a composition is an open-ended invitation from composers that allows ensembles the freedom to orchestrate, to shrink and grow from one person (most often keyboard or cello or guitar) to large groups of a variety of bass instruments like Ruckus. The epic forces of Ruckus—baroque bassoon, cello, viola da gamba, theorbos, baroque guitars, baroque

bass, harpsichord, and organ—give a wonderful array of possibilities that allow us to explode Bach's bass line into a rainbow of colors.

The three sonatas, and their accompanying preludes (arranged by Emi and Ruckus) each inhabit their own artistic world and represent three distinct stages and aspects of J.S. Bach's life.

THE CRAFTSMAN: Bach's E Minor Sonata, BWV 1034, written in 1724, is musical architecture at its most grand. Possibly written during his early Leipzig years (during which he also composed over sixty cantatas), this sonata has the weight of his larger musical sermons, and its technical sophistication shows the hand of a seasoned craftsman. The first movement, *Adagio ma non troppo*, features a constant push and pull between the treble and bass, reminiscent of Sisyphus and the rock, that unfolds into a tour de force *Allegro* of the second movement that features running 16th notes that do not let up until the ecstasy of the third movement arrives. This *Andante* is one of Bach's most sublime, simple, and beautiful movements, and the perfect respite from the intensity of the other three movements of the sonata - a welcome break before the roar of the fourth movement, *Allegro*, that features all of Ruckus at their most intense.

THE ECCENTRIC: At the other end of the timeline, written in 1741, is the E Major Sonata, BWV 1035. It is sensual, simple in form, and perfumed with luxurious harmony. There's a galant breeziness throughout, yet the harmonic twists and melodic interplay between flute and bass reveal Bach's love for thorny, contrapuntal music. A delicate *Adagio ma non troppo*, the yin to the yang of the BWV 1034 movement of the same name, is followed by a bawdy *Allegro*. The third movement, *Siciliano*, features Bach's original melodic interplay between flute and cello/bassoon with a newly added bass line, unique to *Fly the Coop*, providing a rhythmic groove alongside dueling baroque guitars and fantastical harpsichord - a true Baroque rhythm section that takes the listener to an exotic land of unusual sights and sounds. This raucous nighttime music is followed by the morning light haze of the fourth movement, *Allegro assai*, that brings the sonata to a gentle conclusion.

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THE TEACHER: Falling somewhere in between the poles of the E Minor and E Major sonatas is the slightly more anachronistic C Major Sonata, BWV 1033. Open-hearted, inviting, full of grace and generosity, this sonata features an unusually simple continuo line that may have been composed by a young C.P.E. Bach as part of his studies (possibly 1731) in response to an existing solo flute work by his father (possibly 1721). This collaborative compositional process invited us to join the Bach family fun. Using C.P.E.'s baseline as a springboard, we interwove other music by Bach, rewrote bass lines, and added newly composed material. The opening Andante is full of warm, almost romantic chord progressions that unfold into a Presto featuring a single pedal bass note with the flute dancing merrily above. The second movement of the C Major sonata bears uncanny similarities to the sixth variation from Bach's Goldberg Variations, and so, we felt that a mash-up of the two would show (in addition to our keyboard prelude arrangements) how Bach used material and instruments interchangeably and repeatedly throughout his career. We start our mash-up with the A section of the flute sonata, transitioning to the Goldberg sixth variation at the beginning of the B section, then returning to the flute sonata for the final B to round things out and get us back home to C Major. A newly composed bass line, based on the octave-jumping left hand of the Goldberg sixth variation, accompanies the flute throughout, with CPE Bach's original bass line now found several octaves higher in the baroque guitar – a playful homage. The third movement, Adagio, is a true aria in A Minor, with the flute soaring above an intense and powerful bass line that mines the depths of the instruments on hand. Ending things are two spirited and joyful Menuetts. The first a more traditional dance, with the second borrowing its accent from French dances.

These sonatas are often introduced to flute players at a young age and while they are beloved standards in the repertoire, they continue to challenge and inspire with their capacity for individual interpretation. The way that we share them today is by no means the only way to play these pieces, and is our unique take on them, but we think our interpretation shows and augments all the characters and colors that these sonatas are naturally imbued with, turning them into true ensemble pieces.

The album, Fly the Coop: Bach Sonatas and Preludes, was recorded in idyllic southern Vermont where we convened to live, work, rehearse, and record together in July of 2018. All of us involved with the album have been close friends and collaborators for many years, and so the evolution and creation of Fly the Coop, was one that felt very natural and organic both personally and musically. Rehearsing for long days in a beautiful old barn with views of the Green Mountains was wonderful inspiration for us as we experimented with ways we could bring these pieces to life. All of the instruments and techniques used in today's performance are learned from historical treatises and practices, yet we are distinctly aware of the fact that we are influenced by the centuries between our time and Bach's. It was natural for some of these influences to sneak into our interpretations of these sonatas, in the same way that Bach himself was influenced by the music of his own time. It is our own attempt to take it out of the museum, and breathe life into them from a historically informed, yet personal and contemporary perspective.

Peppered throughout the program are our arrangements of iconic and obscure keyboard works by Bach. Movements from the Well-Tempered Klavier, addenda from his French Suites, and early drafts of pieces found in the Anna Magdalena and Wilhelm Friedrich notebooks are all featured. Bach's love of family and friends is evident in his writing, and our arrangements of these keyboard works are our love letter and homage to the sense of community imbued in his writing and work.