

# January 2025

by Rebecca Winzenried

## Francesco Antonio Bonporti (1672-1749) Selections from Invention Opus X (1712)

When it comes to the musical form of an invention, the name Johann Sebastian Bach reigns supreme. Would it come as a surprise, then, to learn that Bach may have begun by working with ideas he discovered in another composer? Although he never traveled outside Germany himself, Bach had his ear to the ground about musical developments happening with other composers in other lands. Enter Francesco Antonio Bonporti, an Italian priest and contemporary of Bach who had begun experimenting with melody and rhythm in contrapuntal writing, introducing a more free-flowing style.

Born in Trento to a family of status, Bonporti entered the priesthood and while studying in Rome began composition lessons, perhaps also studying violin with Archangelo Corelli, who became an influence. After ordination, Bonporti returned to a position in Trento, continuing to compose as a sideline, and possibly as a way to attract attention within the church hierarchy. Among his works were numerous sonatas, concertos, and 12 operas, issued, in accordance with his social stature, as from the pen of "The Gentleman of Trento."

Bonporti's music did eventually gain him fame, although not exactly in the way he might have hoped. Bach picked up and worked through the ideas Bonporti presented by transcribing the latter's Invention Opus X, originally for violin, for harpsichord.

Until the early 20th century, the work was thought to be a Bach original composition, and it is through that connection that musicians began exploring Bonporti's works on their own merit.

In the long tradition of Bach transcriptions for various instruments, the Invention are performed here with Baroque flute and clavichord. A favorite of the Baroque period, the clavichord is seldom heard today, largely due to its quiet nature. The keyboard instrument operates when the small metal blades, or tangents, affixed to the keys strike the end of the strings. A clavichord does not project well, making it more suitable for practice or for the small-scale salon performances of its heyday than today's concert halls. (Amplification will be used here so audience members can experience the instrument's power of expression.) Musicians continue to appreciate how, by varying the pressure and touch on a key, they can alter pitch and add a touch of vibrato, similar to a string player, making the clavichord a particularly intimate performance partner.

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## **Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)/Emi Ferguson *Partita Recomposed (2020- )***

Bach and Baroque flute have been long-time companions for Camerata Pacifica Baroque Music Director Emi Ferguson. She was selected for Juilliard's inaugural historical performance program, played the first Baroque flute in the school's collection of instruments, and has been stretching the boundaries of performance on the period instrument ever since.

The Baroque flute is fashioned from wood, with six holes and only one key. It became fashionable in the French courts of the late 17th century, prized for its warm, sweet tone, and the nuanced sounds musicians could coax from it. Flutes were not a regular part of German music circles at the time, but Bach became a fan after he was reportedly introduced to the instrument by the French flute player Pierre-Gabriel Buffardin around 1717. He soon began working flute into his own compositions, beginning with the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5*, and following with several sonatas.

*Partita Recomposed* takes off from what is believed to be the only solo work Bach composed for the instrument, *Partita for Solo Flute in A minor (BWV 1013)*. It is fashioned in four movements named for dance forms: *Allemande*, *Courante*, *Sarabande*, and *Bourée Angloise*. Although, as Ferguson notes, Bach did not likely compose with actual dancing in mind. Instead, he was testing the extremes of this new instrument, taking it from the very lowest note possible to the absolute highest in the first movement.

The *Allemande* also tests a player's capabilities in its straight series of 16th notes that leaves no breathing room; the virtuoso Buffardin reportedly experimented with circular breathing to play it. "Bach was a bit of a show-off," says Ferguson. "This is a rock-star situation."

She honors his legacy, and what additional flights of imagination he might have taken today. Bach's original first movement *Allemande* is performed in *Partita Recomposed*, from which Ferguson veers into new territories of sound in the repeat. The *Courante* introduces rhythms of the popular Brazilian genre *choro*, which prominently features flute. In the *Sarabande*, Ferguson blends her own voice in harmony with the flute in a challenging, simultaneous "singing to myself" technique. And the final movement *Bourée Angloise* – well, that's intended as a bit of surprise; *Partita Recomposed* performances are never by the book. Following the lead of Bach, who continually challenged musicians and himself, Ferguson asks listeners to set aside notions of crisply articulated historical performance and consider how contemporary influences can shape a more personal interpretation.

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## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)/Dan Tepfer *Inventions/Reinventions (1720-23/2023- )*

As a jazz keyboard player and composer, Dan Tepfer is comfortable with the idea of pulling at musical threads, unwinding and recombining them in improvisatory strands. And he's found an unexpectedly kindred spirit in J.S. Bach. As Tepfer has written, "It's worth remembering that Bach was most known in his lifetime as an improviser. People travelled long distances, often by foot, to hear him extemporize at the organ or harpsichord."

Tepfer began experimenting with improvisations on Bach in his 2011 project *Goldberg Variations/Variations*, which included his own responses to the original. It led him to return to the basics of Bach's *Inventions*, which he, like untold others, first encountered as a student. The 15 *Inventions* (BWV 772-786), also known as the Two-Part *Inventions*, were written for Bach's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, and used by his students to learn about harmonics and counterpoint in the two hands on piano. However, the 15 pieces do not cover all 24 possible major and minor keys. Exactly why is not known, although Tepfer agrees with the theory that Bach wanted to focus on the more common, or "easier" keys without as many sharps and flats. "And it struck me that Bach had left open a window," he has written.

A window Tepfer flung wide open. *Inventions/Reinventions* begins with his performance of the 15 Bach *Inventions*, just as they were written, and in the original ascending key order. He then departs on his own improvisational journeys for the nine keys the master skipped over: D-flat major and minor, E-flat minor, G-flat major and minor, A-flat major and minor, and B-flat major and minor. "I close my eyes, listen inside for a fragment of melody, then take the melody on an adventure," he wrote in liner notes for a recording of the work. "They don't react directly to Bach's miniatures; instead, they react to the abstract and general structural concept that supports them."

Tepfer has previously performed *Inventions/Reinventions* on piano; this program offers a rare opportunity to hear it on Bach's favorite instrument—the clavichord. A switch of instruments plays into the work's improvisational nature; no two performances are ever exactly the same. Which adds an in-the-moment spark to Baroque masterworks. Bach, the improviser, would likely not be offended by such a chance to dialogue with a musician of the 21st century.