

Chipping Away at the Unknown

How a Recording and the Music of C. P. E. Bach Helped Set My Life's Course

A long time ago, musicians released recordings on shiny plastic compact discs organized in bins for sale in stores made of brick and mortar. One of these stores was called Tower Records and it was in there, on Route 17 in Paramus, New Jersey, that I was introduced to the early music movement. I was about 15. I had been playing the cello for only a couple of years, but long enough to have received advice shared and heeded by many wonderful musicians: *vibrato* should be used continuously to ensure a beautiful sound. Undoubtedly, that particular Tower Records (as any record store) housed a multitude of recordings that demonstrated the permeation of this suggestion. So, while searching for a CD to buy, I was shocked when I heard on the store's speakers a new recording of J.S. Bach's E major partita for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1006, in which the last note of the *preludio* was not only played without vibrato, but was intentionally and unwaveringly (pun intended) played without vibrato, as though to make a point.

The player on that recording was not shy about making points. He was not a violinist but a cellist, the great early music pioneer Anner Bylsma (who knew quite well how to vibrate and, when he chose to, did so beautifully). The recording I had heard was of two works for unaccompanied violin and one for solo flute by J.S. Bach which Bylsma played on a smaller cello strung e-a-D-G, one octave below a violin. I still didn't know what point Bylsma was trying to make with that last note, following the movement's bravura final arpeggio in what remains one of my favorite performances. But it certainly moved me to immediately grab the CD (well done, Tower Records marketing wizards). I bought it, virtually memorized the liner notes, and if it had been possible to wear out a CD I certainly would have done so. That recording originated a course that my life as a musician continues to follow, one that included a year-long pit stop in Amsterdam to study with Anner Bylsma.

Although I was relatively new to "classical" music at that time, I knew a few works by J.S. Bach prior to playing the cello, and a wise teacher introduced his suites for unaccompanied cello as soon as I could manage to stumble through one of the movements. I was intrigued, of course, but I was disappointed that none of the four minuets included in the set was THE minuet I had heard many times. That was my level of understanding a few months into my studies. By the time I visited Tower Records in Paramus I had learned much more about J.S. Bach, but there remained an enormous amount I didn't know. It was a monolith of the unknown, which still remains, perhaps in a somewhat diminished form. But a small chip of ignorance was chiseled from it on my following visit to the record store.

Returning to the store as a newly-avowed Bylsma fan, I scoured the neatly-organized rows of CDs for anything by the cellist. I started at the beginning, but there was nothing by any "A" composers, and the store must have been out of Bylsma's recordings of the J.S. Bach unaccompanied cello suites, because the first CD I found with Bylsma in it was titled "CPE BACH" in large red letters. Beneath that was printed "Cello Concertos," then Anner's name. He was joined by the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, conducted by Gustav Leonhardt.

I had never heard of Emanuel Bach. I'm not even sure Tower Records supplied a plastic divider bearing his name following the massive section filled with recordings of his father's music. CDs of the music of one of the most significant and influential musicians and thinkers of the eighteenth century seemed like afterthoughts to the "Great Bach". Little did I know that when men of great taste and ability, such as Josef Haydn, Wolfgang Mozart, and Ludwig van Beethoven used this sobriquet they were referring to Emanuel, not the Thomaskantor.

The recording I found contains the three cello concertos by C.P.E. Bach. They were composed between 1750 and 1753, and there survive versions of each for flute and also for harpsichord. The latter was Emanuel's own instrument, and the former that of his employer, Frederick the Great. I knew that, even in 1750, the cello was not often utilized as a vehicle for virtuosity, J.S. Bach's suites and Antonio Vivaldi's concerti notwithstanding. I therefore assumed these were arranged for cello at the request of some performer or enthusiast; but this may not be so, according to Robert Nosow. In his superb notes to his edition of the three concertos published by The Packard Humanities Institute [CPEB:CW, III/6], Dr. Nosow argues that Emanuel likely arranged the flute and the harpsichord versions from originals composed for the cello. It appears that as his father did before him, Emanuel gifted cellists a significant body of work for their as-yet underrepresented instrument.

This gift is on full display on Bylsma's recording. Each concerto is profiled beautifully by the ensemble; and the music's virtuosity and character are represented by Bylsma with expected aplomb. There are traits that can be found across all three concertos, yet C.P.E. Bach imbues each with a unique personality in addition to some compositional and technical features all its own.

The first concerto on the disc is the last one to be composed, in A major (Wq 172). The gentle lyricism of the B-flat major concerto (Wq 171) and the dramatic conflict of the A minor (Wq 170) render these as undeniably attractive works that offer plenty of technical challenges and musical riddles to occupy soloists of the highest caliber. But it was the A major that had the biggest effect on me. There were no downloadable editions in 1993—there was barely an internet. The only edition sold by the Joseph Patelson Music House, that storied purveyor behind Carnegie Hall, was of an arrangement into F major made by the great cellist Gaspar Cassado. After getting to know the music through endless relistening, I was able to jot down the solo part on a sheet of manuscript paper. I so wanted to play this music.

The work is one-hundred-percent Emanuel, with ample display of the emotion and jarring juxtapositions so typical of his writing in this period (although, compared to the A minor concerto in terms of turn-on-a-dime changes of character, the A major's landscape is rather more smooth and accessible). But directly beneath the surface lies clear evidence of the man Emanuel called his only teacher. Take, for instance, the opening material of the first movement. Here we have a jaunty and energetic tune with built-in repetitions to drive the point home, as it were. But upon closer inspection one can see that the first four notes lie in one range, then two jump up an octave, then the next four drop down one-and-a-half octaves. A lesser composer may not have made this choice, instead keeping much of the material in the

same range. Emanuel composed music as *galant* as there is; but his father's implied polyphony, so fully expressed in the six unaccompanied cello suites, finds its way in nonetheless.

The interconnectivity of material also presents itself in a way that reminds me of Sebastian, though in a decidedly more transparent texture than can be found in many of his works. By this, I mean the use of small bits of music taken from previous statements and used in new ways, by new instruments, or for new purposes. Consider the three eighth notes played by the violins after that drop of one-and-a-half octaves at the end of the first measure; at the end of the second measure they are taken up by the bass line. In measures 11, 12, and 13 they are used as a developmental tool. Indeed, they are peppered across the entire movement. This sort of efficiency of treatment of otherwise simple and almost inconsequential material is something that Emanuel may have gleaned by studying his father's great fugues, where reuse of material literally defines the form. Familiarity is granted the listener and serves to bind the movement together, the composer all the while staying true to the then-current fashion for clearly defined and more-or-less transparent textures. It is also a technique that a later composer, a great fan of Emanuel's, was to master and bring to new heights. To me, the fact that Beethoven's themes are often simple but provide building blocks to monumental structures feels very Bachian.

There are, of course, many instances where C.P.E. Bach takes the cello and the music in directions never set or followed by his father. A favored tool of Emanuel's, already found in bar 9 of the opening, is the drop of dynamic level from very loud (often in conjunction with busy material) to very soft; in other words, a sudden change not only in decibel level but in character. Emanuel (who wrote that "a musician cannot hope to move his listener unless he is moved himself") makes what I can assure you are physical and emotional demands on the performers, upon which they are called to comply for a good performance. Like method actors, they must take on the new character with no preparation (this is also something I and others are familiar with from Beethoven's pen). I often wonder if such able and complete depictions of the incongruities of the human condition might have played a role in Frederick's relative disapproval of Emanuel, at least as a composer. Perhaps the King preferred more geniality from his composers.

At any rate, Emanuel remains true to himself in this, the most "genial" of the three concertos for cello. He also expresses the technical innovations in cello playing that had occurred since his father composed the suites for it. Here, these mostly express themselves in the composer's choice of the instrument's range. A scale in measure 42, in the midst of a rapid passage within the cello's first solo statement, takes the player more than halfway up the fingerboard on the instrument's highest string to a register that, as far as I know, Sebastian never explored on the cello. There are several more forays to high positions within the first movement, but the most effective use of the cello's higher tessitura comes in the singular second movement.

I remember the goose bumps upon first hearing this movement, coming as it does after a virtuosic and ebullient first movement. Two notes (a and c) are played generously by both violins, muted in their lowest, most guttural register, and joined in unison by muted violas. They are followed by one note played

suddenly soft. It is like hope against hope, immediately followed by resignation in defeat. It almost doesn't matter what follows the first bar; everything is said there. But what follows is striking. The same instruments move about, always in unison, playing music that struggles and contrasts. Only in the moment before the solo entrance do the two violins and viola parts find some independence from one another.

The solo entrance is marvelous. The cello soars above the ensemble, which tracks it with supportive material. Emanuel takes the player to higher registers than before and allows the ensemble a rare visit to their higher ranges only with a sudden, loud chord meant to interrupt. And this—the conversational aspect of this music, sometimes congenial, sometimes confrontational—is one of those traits that C. P. E. Bach provides in each of the concertos, implying how innate and valuable it was to him. In the first movement of the A minor concerto Bach portrays the cello as the *grand seigneur* to the rabbling ensemble, and in the B-flat major he presents two entities that mostly support each other. In this movement, the orchestra is a Greek chorus to the loneliness and searching sung by the cello. I am as moved by it today as I was when I first heard it.

That monolith of the unknown has somewhat decreased in size since I was 15, and I am able to analyze and understand more of what Emanuel was doing, and how he did it. I'd like to think I play the cello a bit more ably than I did then, and twenty-seven years after buying Anner's recording I have now had the honor of being joined by my friends from the Handel and Haydn Society in making our own recording of these concertos (we played these with one player on a part, as may have been done in some of the musical gatherings at which Emanuel first heard the concertos played). [[Click here for a link to purchase this CD at ArkivMusic.](#)] They even invited me to play the A major with them at Symphony Hall under Bernard Labadie's direction. This music featured at some pretty momentous milestones for me: a commercial recording, a Symphony Hall appearance. But I must say that hearing my youngest daughter casually hum the opening music to the A major concerto as she pursued one of her day's many creative endeavors gave me the greatest deal of both pride and appreciation: for Emanuel, creating a world in music that to those who know it contains boundless riches; and for my daughter, being musical but not pursuing music, and yet—knowing or not—entering that world with vigor. Who knows what Emanuel's music might mean to her twenty-seven years from now.

Guy Fishman

Israeli-born Guy Fishman is principal cellist of the Handel and Haydn Society, the nation's oldest continuously-performing arts organization. He is heard as a soloist, recitalist, chamber, and orchestral musician on period and standard cello. Guy has played with Dawn Upshaw, Gilbert Kalish, Eliot Fisk, Daniel Stepner, Lara St. John, Vadim Gluzman, Richard Egarr, Kim Kashkashian, Mark Peskanov and Natalie Merchant in recital, and appears at prestigious summer festivals such as Boulder Bach, Colorado Music Festival, and Connecticut Early Music. His teachers include David Soyer, Peter Wiley, Julia Lichten, and Laurence Lesser of the New England Conservatory, where he earned a Doctorate and also serves on the faculty. In addition, he is a Fulbright Fellow, mentoring with famed Dutch cellist Anner Bylisma in Amsterdam. His recordings appear on Olde Focus, Centaur, CORO, Telarc, Titanic, and Newport Classics labels. Guy plays a rare cello made in Rome in 1704 by David Tecchler.