

W.F.E. Bach's Six-Handed Flower

By JOSEPH SMITH

One might almost suspect Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst Bach's *Das Dreyblatt* of being another of Peter Schickele's *PDQ Bach* spoofs. *Dreyblatt* translates as "trefoil," which means both a flower with three leaves (like clover) and, by extension, any group of three related or connected units. (Don't you hate it when you look up an unfamiliar foreign word, only to find you don't know its English meaning either?) It provides a male pianist with a fine pretext for embracing two female colleagues, but I suppose one could also consider a modern transcription: a woman between two men. Are you surprised that a Bach could produce so frivolous a piece? Don't forget that several generations earlier, the family included Hans Bach: a court jester as well as a fiddler.

The only of Johann Sebastian's grandchildren to become a professional musician, Wilhelm Friedrich Ernst Bach (1759-1845) was apprenticed to his successful uncle Johann Christian (the London Bach, whose graceful compositions were emulated by young Mozart). Wilhelm continued to compose principally in this *galant* style his entire creative life. He landed a fine appointment as conductor and teacher in the Berlin court of King Friedrich Wilhelm, an accomplished cellist. (There was a strong musical tradition at the court, stemming from Friedrich "The Great," whose court musicians included C.P.E. Bach.) Wilhelm Bach lived long enough to witness

Mendelssohn usher in the nineteenth-century revival of interest in Sebastian.

In two-piano music, the players can play in the same range at the same time, whereas in four-hand music, they must get out of each other's way. I believe that this limitation actually constitutes a benefit, engendering clearer textures, less indulgence in plethoric sound. This benefit applies to six-hand music as well: while there are indeed lots of hands at work, they are occupying different places on the keyboard. The fun of *Das Dreyblatt* is that although it is exceptionally busy, we can hear all that is going on.

Hearing it is like looking at the inside of a watch—an old-fashioned non-digital, analog watch, that is! The six-hand literature contains other appealing pieces as well. The young Rachmaninoff composed a *Romance* and a *Waltz* for three young sisters. The *Romance* begins with a passage he was to borrow for the slow movement of his second concerto about a decade later. One must admit that the middle pianist is given less to do than the outer two. The intricate jingling *Waltz*, however, manages to keep all three players quite gainfully employed. (I once heard the *Waltz* played with great relish by eleven-year-old triplets!) Percy Grainger composed extensively for all kinds of piano ensemble, and his six-hand "Zanzibar Boat Song," inspired by a verse from Kipling, is poetic and not very difficult. ■

DAS DREYBLATT

for six hands
(abridged)

WILHELM FRIEDRICH ERNST BACH
(1759-1845)

Andante con moto

Andante con moto

8^{va} sempre

Andante con moto

8^{vb} sempre

(N.B. The gentleman playing the middle part sits slightly behind the two ladies on either side. They have to hold their arms above his, and the restricted space makes it necessary for the 3 persons to sit somewhat closely together.)

17

f

f

3

21

p

r.h. loco

p

Musical score for measures 26-30. The score is written for piano and includes dynamic markings *pp*, *f*, and *p*. It features a section labeled *8va sempre* in the upper right-hand part. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and articulation marks.

Musical score for measures 31-35. The score includes dynamic markings *p* and *l.h. loco*. It features a section labeled *tr* in the upper right-hand part. The notation includes various rhythmic patterns and articulation marks.

Avanzando

36

Musical score for measures 36-39. The score is written for piano and grand staff. It features a complex texture with rapid sixteenth-note passages in the right hand and more rhythmic accompaniment in the left hand. Dynamic markings include *cresc.* and *ff*. The tempo is marked *Avanzando*. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Fine

Musical score for measures 40-43. The score continues with piano and grand staff notation. It features a prominent trill (*tr*) in the right hand of the piano part. The texture is more chordal and rhythmic. The tempo remains *Avanzando*. The key signature has one flat. The section concludes with *Fine* markings at the end of each system.

Fine

Fine