

“FAR FROM ALL WORRIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES: SIMPLY FOR THE MOMENT”

BENJAMIN ALARD PLAYS BACH – BUT ON WHICH INSTRUMENT? TAKE A GUESS...

Without a doubt, the work of Johann Sebastian Bach is in good hands with Benjamin Alard. Born in 1985, Alard has already won major prizes at international competitions in Bruges (2004) and Freiberg (2007). He serves as the organist at the church of Saint-Louis-en-l'Île in Paris and is unsurprisingly a member of the Neue Bachgesellschaft. Since 2018 he has been recording Bach's complete works for keyboard with the French record label harmonia mundi. Élise and Philippe Lesage interviewed him to learn more about his career and personal experiences with Bach's music.



The work of Johann Sebastian Bach has been a major part of your life for many years. Without going into great detail about your career path, can you explain in a few words the reasons for your interest in – or one could also say your love for – the music of Johann Sebastian Bach? What does Bach's music mean to you, perhaps in comparison to that of other composers?

≡ My “love at first sight” moment was with the chorale *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, BWV 659 (from the “Leipzig Manuscript”), which I heard on a record with Pierre Cochereau on the organ of Notre-Dame de Paris when I was only nine years old. The beauty of the music was mesmerising. Wanting to recreate what I had heard, I started looking for the sheet music. I was lucky to have had my first German course before starting secondary school. (English was also offered). Then the pastor of the congregation in Normandy introduced me to the organ. Irrespective of the religious content, I remember that this music was able to calm the restless child that I was. Moreover, it triggered a kind of trance, as if trying to lead me to music, above all, music influenced by dance.

You first studied organ at the conservatory in Dieppe ...

≡ One of my projects there involved a CD on the subject of dance. Nicolas Pien, who was my teacher at the time, suggested that I

prepare and record the Fugue in G major “à la Gigue”, BWV 577, on the historical organ of Saint-Rémy de Dieppe. This was an unexpected experience for me as a young boy! Later, I joined the organ class of Louis Thiry in Rouen; I had to play the first two-part invention. Although I had understood the piece, I was not well prepared. While I was playing it, the teacher asked me to repeat certain tricky passages and branches more slowly, but it was impossible for me... Then I began to practice under his guidance, with his valuable help and great compassion. In conclusion, I can say that Bach's music taught me to understand difficulties, which is still true today, because nothing is ever completely straight-forward.

To what extent have you been influenced by teachers, musical scholars or

perhaps the instruments that you have been able to play?

≡ By coincidence and good luck, I have met a number of teachers from completely different backgrounds. Be it the organ or the harpsichord, or two instruments that complement each other although they are very different: It helps to not be part of certain movements or schools, or to not identify too closely with them. Louis Thiry was a teacher who opened up extraordinary freedoms for his pupils and friends. He played Messiaen, Bach, Machaut and Schubert and appreciated the beauty of each style and era. Then Jean-Claude Zehnder and the Schola Cantorum in Basel encouraged me to make use of sources and research, an approach to which not all French people are open, at least not with Bach. With the harpsichord, it was the influence of Gustav Leonhardt and lessons with Élisabeth Joyé and Andrea Marcon.

For many years, you played in “La Petite Bande”, the ensemble of Sigiswald Kuijken...

≡ ...Yes, for more than fifteen years! That was a learning process that brought me into special contact with Bach and his cantatas, concerts, suites and passions. However, my last and ongoing teacher is the clavichord; it plays a role in my life almost every day. Even if every instrument is different and you have to adapt to it and find out how to best make it speak, there is nothing that

comes close to the clavichord, both for those who play it and for those who make an effort to listen to its music!

Working with the label harmonia mundi, you have taken on the project of recording the complete works for keyboard by Johann Sebastian Bach. Since the first CD in 2018, another eight have been released. We wanted to congratulate you on this impressive achievement but also to ask: On what basis do you decide whether to record a piece with the harpsichord instead of the organ or vice versa, or perhaps with the clavichord?

≡ To be honest, I try to deviate as far as possible from the beaten path. So many beautiful recordings have been made in the past that it would be pointless and uninteresting to recreate them by completing this project like a marathon. Sometimes, I decide to record this or that piece on a certain instrument, and then while I'm recording it, I realise – through further experimentation, e.g. with registrations, transpositions etc. – that the possibilities are endless. And then I do it differently. The decision to record a piece on a certain instrument can be influenced by different circumstances. My decisions are mostly guided by the context of the respective piece, by the discovery of the instruments and also by encounters that change my preconceived ideas. It's at the recording sessions where the decision is ultimately made. I have to say that harmonia mundi has given me complete freedom, which I greatly appreciate and which allows unanticipated and unexpected things to happen – of course with respect to the music of Bach.

While we're on the subject of your recording project: Why did you decide to include other composers – Bach's contemporaries – in the first volumes?

≡ It's important to show listeners, also Bach fans, where he comes from, who influenced him, in what cultural contexts he was active and what role his music played. Bach would have never become the person he was without the people who came before him or were active during his lifetime; the same applies to those who were influenced by his work.

Here's a more practical question: How many CDs are planned, and when will they be released?

≡ Provided there are no more unexpected developments, and there have been so many in the past, above all with very positive results – e.g. the isolation during the pandemic made me even more aware of how important the clavichord is! – we plan to produce a total of 17 CD volumes. The albums will be released, wherever possible, in chronological order based on Bach's life, and we hope to be finished by sometime between 2028 and 2030.

Has this new approach to Bach's music allowed you to discover any new, surprising, fascinating or previously unknown things?

≡ Yes, I absolutely believe it has. Some of the instruments that I have used for this project had previously never or rarely been heard in recordings or performances: for example, the claviorganum, harpsichord and pedal clavichord. At the same time, this project has forced me to develop a new approach that is faster and more efficient than my earlier recording work. It is very important to me to record the pieces in one take and to do as little cutting as possible, as this process often compromises the overall quality of the recording. The main reason for this is quite simple: We have very little time. When we started with the first sessions, we only had a week to record three CDs. Since then, a lot has

changed, but I still attach great importance to the aspect of "vibrancy", which has been lacking in many digital recordings, ever since they first emerged.

In Germany, people's views on Johann Sebastian Bach are heavily influenced by religious music. How does that compare to France, in your opinion? In other words, how do French people see Johann Sebastian Bach?

≡ They see him as a bon vivant, somewhat strict and immensely hard-working: This is also how he described himself, although these words are difficult to translate into our language. Since the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, things have been more peaceful in France! Even if his music does not have a sacred character, we can observe and hear that it is present in all of his music, including the music that is not intended for church services. The difference between sacred and secular did not exist back then. *The Christmas Oratorio*, for example, consists almost exclusively of movements that were originally secular cantatas.

What status do harpsichord recitals have in France? In Germany, they are something for specialists, and concerts are mainly restricted to smaller festivals. In addition, the appropriate places have to be available. Are the locations of your concerts important to you?

≡ The locations are very important and should not be chosen randomly. They have to fit to the music to the greatest possible extent and also allow for the silence from which the music can emerge. Places are tools, just like the instrument, the musician and the composer.

I personally like the feeling of being "greeted" by a place. That is not always the case, but you have to deliver on your commitments and try to win the attention of the audience members. Silence is very important in order to prepare for this.

Let's talk a bit more about how France and Germany compare: Are there differences in performance practice? Do you play the same programmes in Germany and France, or in other places, or do you adapt them to the expectations of the respective audience?

≡ Unfortunately, the different schools and styles that are associated with the various cultures and origins are gradually disappearing. It could also be that our modern methods of communication are contributing to the fact that our way of approaching music is becoming standardised. I try to fight to be myself as much as possible. I love it when my music-loving friends tell me that they have heard me on the radio and recognised my playing. That suggests a strong personality, which is essential for every life and every expression of an artist. I always try to adapt a programme to the instrument, the context, the wishes of the organisers and, of course, the audience.

And to wrap up: Do you have any dreams or goals with respect to future performances or performance locations?

≡ My dream, perhaps the only one, would simply be to share music at home. Not necessarily at my home, but at one or more places where I could feel at home – which is often the case, because I am very rarely in my own flat – and where friends and/or music lovers welcome me or could come whenever they like in order to listen to music for a moment, far from all worries, responsibilities, markets, consumption: simply for the moment. I will let you guess which keyboard instrument would be played in order to make this dream a reality...