

J.S. BACH

TRANQUILLITY

JONATHAN PHILLIPS - PIANO




| divine art

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

1.	Prelude in F minor, BWV 857	1:39
2.	Ich ruf du zir, BWV 639	3:37
3.	Organ Concerto in D minor, BWV 596 - Largo	3:09
4.	Nun Komm der Heiden Heiland, BWV 659a	4:37
5.	Goldberg Variations, BWV 988 - Aria	4:16
6.	Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor, BWV 849 - Prelude	2:56
7.	Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor, BWV 849 - Fugue	4:32
8.	Prelude in B major, BWV 868	1:16
9.	Prelude in F sharp minor, BWV 883	3:02
10.	Prelude in B minor, BWV 855a	2:58
11.	Organ Prelude in E minor, BWV 533	3:47
12.	Organ Sonata No. 4 in E minor, BWV 528 - Adagio	6:12
13.	Italian Concerto, BWV 971 – Andante	4:53
14.	English Suite No. 2 in A minor, BWV 807 – Sarabande	3:44
15.	French Suite No. 1 in D minor, BWV 812 – Sarabande	2:51
16.	Concerto in D min for Oboe after Marcello, BWV 974	4:11
17.	Toccatà in C major, BWV 564 - Adagio	3:40
18.	Prelude and Fugue, BWV 853 - Prelude in E flat minor	3:17
19.	Prelude and Fugue, BWV 853 - Fugue in D sharp minor	6:16
20.	Prelude in B flat minor, BWV 867	2:37
21.	Actus Tragicus, BWV 106 – Sonatina	2:41

Total playing time 76:12

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This CD contains music for anyone hoping to gain an overriding sense of stillness, calm, contemplation and reverence. Bach's music has radiance, luminosity, divinity, serenity, and timeless beauty. There is tenderness and sometimes melancholy, but it is always suffused with optimism, and as Bach indicates at the end of many if not all his scores, his music is always written in the service of God.

Bach's music is the bedrock I have returned to over my lifetime, because it centres me and always brings me to back a genuine state of homeostasis and balance. Until recently, this part of my repertoire had remained an utterly private affair, because frankly, programming Bach for piano recitals can turn many people off. Or so I thought.

I was encouraged to share this repertoire by a friend, after playing most of it at an intimate recital in April 2019. Deeply humbled by the response, I decided it was worthwhile recording and offering my interpretation of it to the wider music loving world.

As many of the audience in that recital had never heard much of this music and responded to it so naturally, this music seems to illuminate to me the two criteria which the great German philosopher Immanuel Kant put forward for a genuine aesthetic response in listeners. I felt maybe Kant was on to something. His conditions are:

1. The condition of felt response
2. The absence of rules

In other words, it makes us respond immediately and directly to the music. It touches us. We feel something, and we don't really know why, it just does! Perhaps the hairs on the back of the neck stand on end or we find ourselves with a tear rolling down a cheek. Crucially for me, the music has the capacity to move us, irrespective of any previous musical experience, expectation, expertise or education. There doesn't seem to be any logical explanation, rhyme reason or formula, it just gets through to us and we have no real idea how, or why. In an age of technology, science, artificial intelligence and algorithms, where we seek to explain everything, we still have no real clue about how or why music and art can and does touch us. I find that very reassuring. Our shared human aesthetic response to music quite literally transcends our understanding of it.

This disc contains a selection of original Bach compositions and transcriptions, including one transcription by Bach himself on a very famous melody by Marcello. There are three transcriptions by Busoni, one by August Stradl, and two by Alexander Siloti who was Rachmaninoff's teacher. These later composers' fascination and reverence for Bach's music, I think, tells us something about its enduring appeal. There are also two organ pieces, and even the opening movement of one of Bach's Cantatas. In my view, they all work extremely well on the modern piano. I am convinced JS Bach would have approved of the modern Steinway concert grand piano on which this CD was recorded.

In addition, and importantly for me, the aim and spirit in which we recorded this CD was to achieve a real sense of a live performance. A live performance that once again could trigger the kind of connection and response that was there in the recital. In the recording sessions at St John the Evangelist Church in Oxford, two complete performances were recorded, and that was pretty much that. My belief is that the authenticity and communication of live performance are both utterly compromised by endless editing. As a pianist, my role is ultimately to re-create and breathe new life into these compositions as if they were being created spontaneously for the listener.

The overriding characteristic of all these pieces is the supremely vocal singing style. Bach wrote some of the greatest sacred choral music ever written, and his keyboard style certainly in the repertoire chosen for this CD is very melodic. This poses one of the great challenges to the pianist, as anyone who has tackled Bach knows, for the piano is essentially a percussion instrument. Creating a smooth (legato) line therefore, that breathes, projects, and shapes a phrase as naturally as the human voice is one thing, but combining that with multiple lines of vocal counterpoint makes it a huge challenge. In addition, as these multiple individual lines of horizontally flowing melody combine, they create a vertical framework of beautiful harmonic progressions. It's all a bit mind boggling really. Suffice it to say that this is one of the reasons why we study Bach as musicians. There is a transparency to the texture which leaves the player totally exposed, and there is no hiding place in Bach (or Mozart come to think of it). As a player, Bach reveals you and exposes your vulnerabilities.

It is a lifelong journey to better understand and discover him, as well as aspire to get a little closer to the perfection we seek but can never achieve. So yes, his music is demanding, but if you can work with him, you are working on the very essence of what makes music, and the discipline of your endeavours can eventually reveal the timeless beauty of his art. And art as we know, is the term we bestow only upon those rare things which have the capacity to connect us, and to move us, and that continue to do just that, despite fashion, changing tastes, and the inevitable march of time itself.

This CD is offered in gratitude to all the people in my life who have helped forge me as person, as a musician, husband, father, son and brother. Without them, and the personal or musical experiences they have contributed, and shaped, this recording would not exist. There are too many to mention here, but I hope you all know who you are.

As a postscript, and in no way seeking to disarm criticism, I'd like to finish by paraphrasing from the preface and postscript to the anthology "Seneca's morals by way of Abstract" by Sir Roger L'Strange in 1673 which sums up his rationale on the publication of his own transcription of Seneca, and almost 350 years later it neatly sums up my own views on publishing this Bach CD. "Some other man in my place would perchance make you twenty apologies, for his want of skill...but these are formal and pedantic fooleries: As if any man who first takes himself for a Coxcomb in his own heart would afterwards make himself one in print too.... This (CD) such as it is you are extremely welcome to: and I am sorry it is no better both for your sakes and for my own, for if it were written (played) to the standard of the original it would be it would be a most valuable present...

I made this work principally for myself, so it agrees exceedingly well with my constitution. If any man has a mind to take part with me, he is very welcome to do so. But, let him carry this consideration with him, that he is a very unmannerly guest that presses upon another bodies table, and then quarrels with his dinner".

JONATHAN PHILLIPS

Jonathan is a Graduate of the Royal Northern College of Music where he studied with Sulamita Aronovsky, and as postgraduate with Alexander Kelly in London. His recital and Concerto debuts at the Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell room London were followed by winning the National Youth Orchestra of Wales Soloist award in 1986. As a result of this he was invited to give 5 performances of the Rhapsody on a theme of Paganini one of which was televised and broadcast live on BBC2.



Jonathan's Concerto experience is considerable, with over 100 performances including concertos by Rachmaninoff, Tchaikovsky, Chopin and Schumann. Jonathan worked with Tamas Vasary who recommended him to take part in the 1990 Tchaikovsky competition in Moscow. Since then, Jonathan has broadcast for the BBC, Russian and Italian and Swedish TV and radio, and given recitals all over the UK, Europe and former Soviet Union. Jonathan was interviewed by John Humphries and played live on Radio Four's Today programme following a full-page feature article in the Guardian Arts Section about the preparation and performance of the Rachmaninoff 3rd Piano Concerto he gave in London in 2003.

Jonathan lives in the Cotswolds, is married to a professional singer and has two grown up sons. These are perhaps his proudest achievements. An introvert who has never really sought the limelight, nonetheless he has enjoyed some considerable musical successes. He has degrees in Music and in Philosophy, a decent collection of good Bordeaux wine, a fascination with ancient Greek and Roman history, a temperamental twenty-year-old sports car and many wonderful friends. This self-effacing man's pianistic skill has been described as:

"A Musician of real quality and Finesse" The Times

"An assured technique and great power... vigorous expressive and reflective playing. The Rachmaninoff Etudes were masterful" The Daily Telegraph

"Jonathan Phillips has, outstanding technique, sensitive musical qualities, and strong performing projection" Tamas Vasary



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This recording is dedicated to the memory
of my parents Howell and Norma Phillips.

Produced by - David Wright, Jonathan Phillips and Natanya Hadda.

Recording engineer and editor - David Wright.

Recorded in 2019 and 2021 at St John the Evangelist Oxford.

Artwork - James Cardell-Oliver, Divine Art

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