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This review has been reprinted with permission from *Ad parnassum*, A Journal of Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Instrumental Music, 10/19 (April 2012), pp. 165–8.

David Schulenberg’s sizable monograph devoted to the music of the eldest, purportedly the most promising, yet most ‘shadowy’ of Johann Sebastian Bach’s sons, Wilhelm Friedemann, stands out among the publications that marked the tercentenary of his birth celebrated in the year 2010. The volume follows, and in many ways complements, the new critical edition of Friedemann’s collected works (edited by Peter Wollny and published by Carus), which was commenced in 2009 and has to date seen the release of four of its eleven planned volumes. As Schulenberg explains in the preface, the motivation for the book came from the pronounced lacuna in musicological interest in Friedemann’s music and its sources, in face of the fact that his biography, or rather, the anecdotal accounts of his life as ‘the troubled son of a great father who fails to live up to his father’s or his own expectations’ (p. 12), have attracted many a work of fiction, as well as a few operas and films. Furthermore, although Friedemann’s comparatively small surviving compositional output, comprising approximately a hundred works, has in recent years witnessed a kindling of interest among performers of early music, it has remained on the fringes of the mainstream repertory by comparison with that of his more famous brothers.

Schulenberg therefore sets out to scrutinise and re-evaluate the

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*Works covered:*

The surviving compositional output of Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, broadly categorized into works for solo keyboard, music for instrumental ensemble and sacred compositions.
composer’s entire œuvre with the aim of pinpointing in it the unique aspects that make it worth studying and performing. He does so by delving into the fabric of the music itself and assessing it against the real and potential influences from members of the composer’s immediate family, as well as his teachers and contemporaries. A scholar and practising musician specialising in performances of early keyboard repertoire, who has fostered a long-lasting personal interest in the music of the Bach family, and whose previous scholarly contributions include studies on the instrumental works of Carl Philipp Emanuel and Johann Sebastian’s keyboard works, Schulenberg is the well-appointed for the task at hand. Musicologists will welcome the thoroughness of approach in his discussion of sources and historical context, which the author has carried on from his earlier publications, while the less academically inclined reader will benefit from the lucid yet unobtrusive explanations of terms such as galant or the significance of Johann Nicolaus Forkel, which musicologists, especially Bach scholars, would customarily take for granted. His systematic consideration of groups of works or individual pieces will appeal to everyone.

The first chapter sums up the current state of research and serves as an introduction to the many questions posed by the unknowns in Friedemann’s biography as well as the narrowness of his output, and concludes with an overview of his works according to genre, form and style. One of the interesting questions Schulenberg raises here concerns the pressures J. S. Bach’s sons might have felt in face of their father’s intense disappointment and dismay after he learnt that his ‘wayward’ and ‘undutiful’ third son, Johann Gottfried Bernhard had absconded from a respectable organist position for the second time having accumulated considerable debts (p. 7).

On the other hand, Schulenberg does not venture into a deeper discussion of the more frequently talked about topic of J. S. Bach’s second marriage to a woman who was only eight years older than his eldest son and its repercussions on family dynamics, but merely states that it seems impossible that the remarriage and the continuing arrival of younger siblings would not have created tensions and rivalries, and that they could have particularly affected the firstborn son (p. 4).

Before embarking on an in-depth critical interpretive analysis of the music itself, Schulenberg, in Chapter 2, explores in what way and to what extent the composer’s upbringing within the most remarkable and celebrated musical family in European history moulded his compositional style, by examining evidence found principally in the Clavier-Büchlein vor Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. He also contemplates the question of how two composers who grew up in the same household – the other being Carl Philipp Emanuel – developed in stylistic directions that would set them apart not only from from their father, but also from one another.

The ensuing chapters consider each group of works – keyboard works, those for instrumental ensemble and vocal compositions – in close detail (the numbering system used in this book is the well-known system of Martin Falck’s 1913 thematic catalogue of Wilhelm Friedemann’s works). In each of those chapters, Schulenberg starts out by defining the idiomatic features of Friedemann’s style together with its potential models and influences through comparisons with the music of Johann Sebastian, Carl Philipp Emanuel, as well as that of his peers and known (or presumed) teachers. Recent studies of contemporary compositional and performance practices provide a firm contextual anchor to Schulenberg’s enquiries. Taking into account the conventions and trends
pertaining not only to the period but also to the distinctive artistic climates of the cities in which the composer lived and worked (Dresden, Halle and Berlin) and their respective audiences, Schulenberg assesses each work with regard to its purpose, scoring, form, texture, harmony, motivic make-up and figuration.

The first of the two appendices, ‘Notes on Performance’, aims at raising the performer’s awareness of the issues arising specifically in relation to the performance of Friedemann’s music. The many valid points made by a seasoned performer concern instrumentation on the one hand (including the choice of instrument in keyboard works, tuning, the size of the orchestra, continuo realisation), and performance and interpretation (phrasing, articulation, fingering, tempo, ornaments, expression) on the other. The second appendix, an updated ‘List of Works’ in table form, lists Friedemann’s works according to Falck’s reference numbers, giving next to them the reference numbers used in the Bach-Repertorium (Vol. II, edited by P. Wollny, is devoted to Friedemann Bach), key, dating, edition (where a work has been published), author’s comments and page references to where the works are discussed in the main text.

By pooling contextual information with stylistic considerations, while at the same time being mindful of the variant readings found in extant sources, including drafts and revisions, Schulenberg is able to offer a fresh outlook on some of the spurious attributions, as well as the chronology of Friedemann’s works. For example, based on the presence of f''' and g''' in the first movement of the Sonata in B flat (F. 9), he suggests that the composition in its extant form was written relatively late, as it presumes the availability of an instrument with a full five-octave compass, which had not yet come into use at the time Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach published his treatise Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen (1753). Tendered in support of this argument is the fact that the second movement of the Sonata is a long cantabile – a type of movement Friedemann developed during his Halle period (1746-c.1764) or even later (p. 84). Schulenberg also challenges some oft-reiterated views regarding the weaknesses and incongruities in Friedemann’s music, especially those that concern his vocal music. He convincingly argues that his vocal writing, decried by nineteenth-century scholars as lacking in originality and being acutely close to the work of J. S. Bach, ‘was up-to-date in style, despite its conservative appearance’ (p. 206).

Although admitting that much of what has been said about Friedemann’s music lacking coherence remains valid, Schulenberg counters some of the later criticisms by Falck in whose opinion the formal design of the opening chorus of Friedemann’s earliest sacred vocal work Wer mich liebet (F. 72) was ‘wholly unclear’ and illogical (p. 210). He draws attention to the unison vocal sections that occur at three important sections in the form and lend some formal clarity to the movement, while the restatement of the opening material in the final section of the movement is a familiar device that the composer frequently resorted to in his concerto movements.

Particularly refreshing are the views Schulenberg puts forward as a performer, such as those concerning the recurrence of motivic material, which, as common-practice as they were in the eighteenth century, stand out rather conspicuously within a relatively small surviving body of works such as Friedemann’s and raise the question of whether the composer had difficulties in coming up with original melodic ideas. On the other hand, such repetitions, as Schulenberg suggests, could be the product of the composer’s reliance on improvisation rather than on written

Bach Bibliography http://www.music.qub.ac.uk/tomita/bachbib/review/Schulenberg.pdf
composition, since ‘an improviser is likely to return continually to favourite turns of phrase, if not whole themes and longer passages’ (p. 20). He further suggests that, while the occasional gaps in Friedemann’s pieces or their incompleteness may indicate that he ran out of ideas, it was equally possible that he left ‘the completion of such pieces to the vagaries of whatever might occur to him in midst of a performance’ (p. 59). It must be said, however, that, while Schulenberg is not hesitant in putting forward thought-provoking theories, he maintains a necessary degree of scholarly caution where the evidence is equivocal. One admires the pragmatism and objectivity with which he approaches his subject as he concedes, referring to Friedemann’s keyboard works, that ‘no physical gifts can make all these pieces gratifying to play’ (p. 66). Ultimately, due to the mysteries surrounding both Friedemann’s life and works, many of the answers to the questions raised in the book for the time being remain speculative.

That Schulenberg is a true child of our digital age is demonstrated by his largely innovative use of the virtual medium to supplement his book; synthesized audio files of all the musical examples quoted in the book (produced using a music notation software) have been made available through the author’s website, with a link given in the preface, and are, despite their artifice and crudity, of unquestionable usefulness to the reader (provided the link remains active). Together with the author’s elegance and clarity of expression they help the book ward off the danger of getting absorbed in a dense discourse and becoming like ‘dancing about architecture’, inherent in all books that make music their subject.

Readers who wish to follow up on the author’s comments and references may be slightly irked having to flip to the end of the book to read the notes, but one soon realises that the abundance of musical examples, the value of which is undisputed (we owe thanks to the accommodating publisher!), would not have permitted the more convenient footnote referencing style, thereby making endnotes a necessary compromise.

By and large, it will not be an overstatement to say that this monograph has indeed managed to fulfil its objectives, and its comprehensiveness, thoroughness, and coherency are qualities that make it another welcome contribution by this author to Bach scholarship. As he has amply demonstrated, Friedemann’s music, despite some perceptible incongruities that pose technical as well as interpretive challenges to the performer, which in turn can prove testing for the listener, exhibits a high degree of originality in adhering to the contrapuntal tradition inherited from his father and merging it with the stylistic elements of his own generation, and as such is hardly deserving of the fate of obscurity it was handed.

Date published: 01 April 2012