

## **Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767)**

### **Twelve FANTASIAS for solo violin (1735)**

A violinist writes...

I was wrong-footed by the Covid lockdown of 2020. With a great deal of spare time and no pressing performance engagements, I started looking for a project that might turn this unexpected situation to my advantage. At first the answer was horticulture, but when I tired of working in my garden, I began to ponder a more artistic challenge.

As with many violinists, a copy of the Telemann fantasias had resided on my shelves for years. This thin volume had been opened from time to time and the twelve short works played through – but then abandoned with a feeling of frustration that these immensely appealing and characterful pieces weren't nearly as easy as they ought to be.

As I pondered my big lockdown project, I reached for these fantasias again as part of my early-morning practice. While playing them, I was certain I could make mental space to contemplate the big endeavour – whatever that might be. Once again, I told myself that the fantasias would be light relief. None of the individual pieces even needed a page to be turned. However, as the days of the lockdown ticked over, I discovered once again that things were not so simple. Perhaps, my big project was actually staring right back at me? Possibly even with something of a knowing smirk.

As I looked more closely at the fantasias, I shared my deepening enthusiasm for these works with violinist colleagues. I discovered that my feelings of frustration, slight embarrassment even, were reciprocated. 'Much harder than they look...' was the general consensus. It seemed that a hesitancy to perform the Telemann fantasias was something of a guilty secret amongst my tribe of fellow fiddlers.

How so? Well, despite their many differences, Telemann and Bach were exact contemporaries and therefore one cannot really prevent oneself from comparing these Fantasias to JS Bach's monumental solo violin works. With Bach, the effort involved in performing these masterworks matches the essence of the music. Long and lonely hours of self-examination are what it takes to delve into their message – which is... one of long hours of lonely self-examination.

I had started playing the Bach sonatas and partitas as a twelve-year-old and had only reached the stage of playing all of them to any degree of technical proficiency and artistic understanding forty years later. But crucially, I'd always understood that that would be the deal. These pieces are the towering pinnacle of the violin repertoire. You can spend a lifetime playing them and never master them.

And here perhaps is why the Telemann fantasias have never been central to every violinist's repertoire. The achievement of playing them to a level of ease – one that allows anything like a full characterisation – requires an attitude of lightness from the performer. And that is difficult to bring off because the fantasias range over a huge variety of styles and idioms. It can be arduous to make things sound effortless. I was at times reminded of the great actor Edmund Kean's last words, which were reputed to have been "Dying is easy. It's comedy that's hard."

The spirit of the fantasias is essentially happy and sociable. They are dying to be released from the printed page and be played to an audience. We are a million miles away from Bach's massive, introverted, and spiritualised conversation with God. (The two men were friends, and we can be fairly sure that they corresponded in addition to their few documented meetings. But as to whether Telemann knew of Bach's opus for solo violin when writing his own, we can only speculate. If he did know Bach's sonatas and partitas, Telemann's fantasias must rank as one of the most deft replies to an apparently unanswerable statement.)

Here we are amongst friends – in the Salon, at Court, down the pub, in the fields even, and with the odd bit of elegant counterpoint in the study – but always with a knowing and fun-loving intelligence that skilfully covers its own tracks. One has the feeling that nothing is beyond being imagined for a solo violin here: an overture, a concerto, a recitative and aria and any number of dances - be they undertaken in muddy clogs or elegant court slippers. Telemann introduces us to a cast of much-loved friends - taking us by the hand and leading us as he does across half the world - from the Ottoman Empire to the shires of England.

Time and proportion are everything when holding an audience with such slender means; the comic and pathetic are magnified by being presented with such apparently effortless sleight of hand. (The usually brief final movements are particularly brilliant in their introduction of rustic elements and especially memorable in the way that they snap shut or fade away.)

The music also never says anything more than is necessary – the intelligence of the argument is so beautifully constructed and so flattering to the listener that the needed markers are touched and left, never underscored, except sometimes for comic effect.

There is remarkable proportioning too in the fact that each piece is printed on one piece of paper of exactly the same size and made to fit - whatever the number and character of the movements. Some of the movements are indeed ridiculously tiny and yet they always deliver exactly what is required of them. They look out on the world's humanity and embrace a seemingly limitless cast of characters with a wise and penetrating wit and with the utmost economy of means: a sheet of paper and a single violin.