

W. F. BACH (1710-1784)

Sinfonia in F major, 'Dissonant' [c. 1735] I Vivace

II Andante

III Allegro

IV Menuetto I and II

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In the pre-Classical dawn following the death of Johann Sebastian Bach in 1750, the direction of Western art music was left in the hands of the composer's three most gifted sons. In a sense, Bach had bequeathed them history, and the main strands of pre-Classical music are mirrored in their respective compositional styles. Johann Christian's music was Rococo - formal, sensitive, and charming, if occasionally vacuous; Carl Philipp Emmanuel's is often termed *Empfindsamkeit* - expressive, violent, brilliant and bizarre, though sometimes incoherent; finally, there was Wilhelm Friedemann, generally regarded as the most naturally gifted of the three, who continued the Baroque tradition in his own personal and eccentric fashion. This eccentricity of style is readily apparent in the composer's early Sinfonia in F, which cheerfully blends the stylistic archetypes of the Baroque with the newly forming Classical sensibility.

This work was most likely composed at Wilhelm's first place of employment, the Sophien Kirche in Dresden, where in 1731 Johann Sebastian had secured his son the post of organist, following an aborted attempt by Wilhelm at a career in the legal profession. The job evidently did not pay well, but it allowed young Wilhelm ample free time for other musical pursuits, including teaching, composing, and above all, improvising.

Wilhelm was a genius of organ and keyboard improvisation, said to have eclipsed even his father in this regard. As such, the greatest aspect of his compositions belongs in the realm of the improviser's art; a palpable sense of the unexpected. No other orchestral composer before Haydn so consistently toys with our sense of musical expectation and order. This is evident in the first movement of the Sinfonia, where Bach teases us with an opening in the style of a French overture. Our tonal footing is destroyed only a few bars in, when the melody unexpectedly fragments into a chord foreign to the main key (hence the 'dissonant' title) and changes to a much quicker tempo. The slow movement, an Andante, is full of tender lyricism, although even here Bach manages to undermine our sense of expectation, presenting unevenly proportioned rhythmic gestures to throw us off balance. The following Allegro is full of spirited musical gesture, and an almost Beethovenian use of dramatic dynamic shifts. Again, one expects the piece to end here, as the movement would form a fitting conclusion to a traditional Baroque work. But no, Bach has an extra movement up his sleeve in the form of two graceful minuet strains, in which (for the most part), the composer finally agrees to play fair.

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