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## Taking time with Bach

Angela Hewitt is one of the foremost living interpreters of Bach. Her world tour brings her to London's Wigmore Hall next week. She talks to Alan Rusbridger about the joy and difficulty of playing Bach



**Alan Rusbridger**

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'Pianists often annoy me' ... Angela Hewitt. Photograph: Karen Robinson

**Alan Rusbridger:** Some pianists would think, "It's enough for me to play this, without having to explain." Do you have an instinct as a teacher?

### **Angela Hewitt**

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London

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Starts September 22

Until September 28

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**Angela Hewitt:** I do, although I don't teach regularly. I refuse all private lessons, simply as a matter of time. I hardly have time to do my own work. But yes, I think I've always liked to put words to music, whether it's writing about the pieces as I do in my notes, or giving pre-concert talks, or explaining in the masterclass why I take such-and-such a decision for interpretation. I did have some excellent teachers who gave me that. I think that if you are an interpreter and also can explain what you are doing, it helps people an awful lot. You can get a lot from just listening to someone but to have them explain to you "Why?", that is another thing entirely.

**AR:** Has being forced to articulate what you are doing taken you to a different level in your playing?

**AH:** I think so. Having to really explain rhythmic alterations in Baroque music - why you double dot, where you double dot, and not just because you feel like it, but to have the reasons for it. To really have a think about keys in Bach and what keys express a certain feeling and if there are indeed keys that seem to express certain emotions for Bach, which I think there are. It made me think about things more consciously. That has helped my interpretation, for sure. I think the two work together - the vast knowledge I gain by the performing, and also the thinking about it and the wanting to articulate it.

**AR:** Where have you learnt from, if there are so few written sources?

**AH:** A combination. I admire the people who go into all the libraries and gather up all the original information. I haven't done that, I must say, although I try to keep abreast of all the recent biographies – the Christoph Wolf biography of Bach and all the new publications, certainly. Basically it comes from the experience with his music, combined with reading. For instance, I'm always saying that I was glad that when I did the recordings, that I did the partitas and the French suites first before I got into the fugues. I learnt so much about the dances in Bach. There are so many pieces in the Well-Tempered Clavier that are dances, but you have to recognise them and then you have to know what to do with them. So that was a help... I learnt from books, from experience, not so much from pianists, I must say. I listened to harpsichordists, to orchestras, to people like John Eliot Gardiner and the early music crowd.

**AR:** Why harpsichordists?

**AH:** Pianists often annoy me! A lot of them, I feel, don't play it in a true Baroque style. I still listen to them of course. I still listen to Edwin Fischer and admire the wonderful architecture he can build in a fugue. Schiff also. I think in many ways his playing is the closest to mine. I do think there's a way of playing Bach at the piano that is still stylistically correct and that's what I'm looking for.

**AR:** Do you practice a trill very regularly and then break it down into sixteen notes and then try and forget it and do it naturally?

**AH:** That's one way of doing it. And I think probably at first for a lot of kids that's the best way. Of course it's much harder to play it freer and keep the other hand steady. What I found in the end, is that you have to think of the other hand, not the trill. You have to think of shaping the more singing notes and let the trill go. But that's a very difficult thing to do. But sometimes, a measured trill, there is a place for that.

**AR:** What are the most controversial things about playing Bach?

**AH:** I think the issue of timing, of rubato. I've had so many comments about that. In Singapore, the head piano teacher at the Conservatory came to me and said, "You don't know what a great gift you've given us. The attitude here is that Bach has to be strict and unbending and rigid and you can't take any time, and yours was so wonderful and free and expressive and singing. It's just been a revelation."

If there's one thing I can get across to people is that Bach does not have to be rigid and strict and that taking time is allowed. Of course, it has to be done intelligently. Usually it's used to highlight the architecture or the harmonies and not just because you feel like taking a bit of time in that bar. You have to have a reason for it.

I also think that using the Fazioli piano has really made a difference too. You can get so many different colours in it, so many tiny variations of colour, of touch, that it's really added so much to my musical imagination.

It's funny, when I go back on this tour, to playing with, shall we say, a piano beginning with S, I have to play a lot more, you know, every note. Especially when I'm playing lightly and maybe quick, it has to be much more every note emphasised. I don't like that. It's not how I play anymore. I'm much more tired at the end too. But I think in combination with the Fazioli I've become more creative with my colour and sound and phrasing.

**AR:** Just talk a bit about what it's like living with Bach.

**AH:** Well, he's a pretty good friend. He's a demanding friend, I tell you! He gives me sore muscles in my neck! But every minute I spend in his company is worthwhile. I don't think that there's any other repertoire that I could have repeated so often as I'm doing on this world tour and absolutely never get tired of it. It's still a challenge. It's still growing. I'm still perfecting it. He is demanding. He demands great discipline and co-ordination and heart. I feel so much that it's worth it.

Certainly, all the time you put into learning Bach, it helps you so much with all the other

composers afterwards. Things like developing finger legato. So many times in masterclasses kids play Schubert, Beethoven, Chopin, and they have no finger legato at all. All the legato just on the pedal, it's not the same at all.

Just being able to play different voices, with different colours, that helps you with Beethoven too. The fluency you get in Bach, you apply to Mozart, Brahms as well. So I know that all the time I spend with Bach will make it easier with other things too.

He has been quite demanding. I couldn't have done, as I often say, the complete Bach and had four kids at the same time, no.

When I began the tour, I couldn't do all 48 from memory, but soon I took the score away from Book One, and in March, went for the whole thing. But it took me that length of time to really have it all safely in my memory.

I think it's a hundred times more work to play from memory than to play with a score.

**AR:** Why does it matter?

**AH:** A lot of people would say that it doesn't matter, that nobody would care, but it matters to me. Firstly, I feel that the audience's concentration is at a higher pitch when I'm doing it from memory, perhaps because they see the concentration on my face and it's translated to them. Plus there's no fooling with pages between prelude and fugue. And I didn't want anyone else sitting there. You demand so much concentration that you don't even want anyone sitting there, turning the pages.

**AR:** You've been playing this programme for six, seven, eight months. How much does the music continue to reveal itself to you while you're living with it?

**AH:** Up until a month ago it was changing. I'd find different things to do. I don't think now it's going to change dramatically. Just that it will become more part of me each time, which translates into being more authoritative.

**AR:** Is part of the pleasure of playing live feeling that you suddenly have a different kind of connection with the audience?

**AH:** You're usually hugely influenced by piano and hall and audience, but the two most important things are the piano and the acoustic in the hall. Also the audience. The greatest gift they can give me is silence. I have decided that coughing or not coughing is a matter totally of discipline and respect for the artist and for the music. In Tokyo, there were people with the face masks on who made no noise at all during the whole 48! But in other halls it's just constant and it can drive you crazy. Especially when you're playing fugues.

A combination of the audience, the piano and the silence in the hall. That's when you give your best and most colourful performances.

**AR:** Can Baroque music simultaneously be romantic?

**AH:** It's not romantic like Schumann, no, but if you use "romantic" to mean "very expressive", then, yes, I think so. Pieces like the B flat minor prelude, which is very tragic and romantic. Or the Variation 25 of the Goldberg. It's very intense. You can't get much more romantic than that. It's romantic for his time.

As a kid, I was often criticised for making things too romantic, but I think what they meant was too expressive.

**AR:** You mentioned Edwin Fischer. Are there other people of that generation that you get inspiration from?

**AH:** Kempff. You know that marvellous record of transcriptions? You want something romantic - that's romantic - Bach. The joy, the sorrow. He came from a family of organists and evidently could transpose any of the 48, which I certainly couldn't do!

Who else is there? Gould I listen to, but I could never imitate him. It was too much him,

and not enough Bach, for me.

Rosalyn Tureck of course, I grew up on – The Well-Tempered Clavier - although I did always find it a bit lugubrious, not lively enough for me.

**AR:** Of the 48, what are the ones that you have grown to love most?

**AH:** The C sharp minor, Book One, that wonderful fugue. It comes so early on too, you have to be ready for it, but it's marvellous. Oh my God, there are so many! The G minor, from Book Two, which is a real organ fugue, a fantastic prelude too. Book Two is much more demanding on you in a way.

Book One is more extrovert, more easily accessible. The preludes in Book Two are much bigger pieces. The fugues in Book Two tend to be more dense, more complicated to understand. Book Two is Bach writing for himself, I feel.

The second half of Book Two is the most difficult to make your way through, but it is the richest. You have to save yourself for it. It's the most demanding.

Book One we have in manuscript. Book Two we don't. All the copies we had of Book Two were copies his students made and sometimes there are annotations by Bach in the margin, but there are a lot more variants, little tiny variants in notes or ornamentations that he added at a later date. So there are more decisions to make about textual things.

**AR:** What's the secret of pedalling Bach?

**AH:** What's the secret? The secret is to figure it out with the fingers first – is to do all the articulation, all legato, whatever you want to do, do it all with the fingers first and then bring in the pedal if there's something you really can't join and want to have joined. That's the secret, I think, to use it only when required. How beautiful it can sound without pedal in the B flat minor. It's very difficult to do and takes great, great control.

In a drier hall, I would use a little bit more pedal, but never to blur a passage. For instance, at the end of Book One, the big B minor fugue, I might use it on every sixteenth note. I would pedal each note to give it a bit more resonance.

Soft pedal can be very useful. On the Steinway in Singapore it was best to avoid it. But on the Fazioli you can really use it to great effect, to get just a little bit more. Or you could use the fourth pedal too, if you like, if you're playing something very rapid. On the 308, and also on my [Fazioli model] 278, he puts on a fourth pedal. It lowers the keyboard and at the same time the hammer comes closer to the keys so you don't get so much attack. For Beethoven I use it, you know the end of Opus 10, No. 2? You put that fourth pedal down and it's a breeze.

**AR:** What is it about the Fazioli that you've come to love so much?

**AH:** It's the response. It's the clarity. It lives under my fingers. I think that's the main thing. I hold those long chords in the D major fugue – and I hold and hold and hold that chord because of the resonance and the harmonics. On other pianos you don't want to hold it that long because it sounds flat, but not on the Fazioli. I really do notice the difference in my muscles when I have to play Steinway rather than Fazioli. I'm much more tired physically with Steinway than I am with a Fazioli.

**AR:** What are the mistakes that pianists make when they play Bach, in your view?

**AH:** Lack of colour. They just play it all too much on the same level. When they play a six-page fugue and it's all on the same level it's awful! It's terrible.

**AR:** How much do you bring out individual voices?

**AH:** One of the true trademarks of a good Bach player is that you can do that. You should be able to play any passage in Bach in as many different ways as there are voices. To think horizontally. Everybody thinks vertically in Bach. I try to always think horizontally.

· Angela Hewitt's DVD, [Bach Performance on the Piano: An Illustrated Lecture](#), is out now from Hyperion

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