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Out of Time

by Sue Hitchcock

I was out of sync with the time machine and despite my efforts, it always ended up this way. I sighed, turned off the ticking mechanism of the metronome and returned to the practice of the Bach minuet I was learning for my exam. Some of my friends could whiz up and down the keyboard, usually with the one and only piece they knew, but playing the piano was for me like reading poetry – not like an actor, performing it, but thinking about the meaning, the correlation of the parts.

Bach has always been a part of my life. Children like that the notes seldom appear above or below the staff, which makes it so much easier to read, without pausing to identify them, but the phrases are not repetitive. Each has to be read and then, for me, related left hand with right, phrases continued or reflected like a puzzle or conversation.

By the time Rock and Roll appeared, I was far too engaged in Bach's music to bother with that and now I feel like an exile from popular culture. I was no musician and I decided to study Fine Art. My thesis for my final exam was on Gainsborough and to my delight I found that his friends were mainly musicians, amongst whom was J. S. Bach's son, Johann Christian Bach. If I could choose to live at another time, it would be then, one of the lovely Linley sisters perhaps or maybe Anne Ford, a musician in her own right.

But the music of Bach has many facets and I was further intrigued by Glenn Gould, a Canadian pianist, who gave up live performing which he felt compromised his interpretation and devoted himself to recording.

You can hear him singing along as he is mesmerised by the intricacies of Bach's music. He had no formula and two recordings of the same piece can be quite different. He was crazy, of course, spending a lot of time in workmen's cafes listening to the counterpoint of voices.

After ten years without a piano, I started playing again and a new side of Bach was revealed to me, when I began to try Toccatas and Fugues. The Toccatas particularly showed me that the strict rhythm of the metronome could be forgotten. This was not music for dancing, but talking, explaining, expressing what can only be said in music. It was a revelation to me, the end of rules, the beginning of a freedom to be oneself.

Still this wasn't the end. My explorations had been mainly solitary. The choirs I had belonged to thus far had not ventured into Bach's Masses. Then in 2002 I joined the East Sussex Bach Choir. I had been singing for twenty years, enjoying difficult modern music and even Renaissance madrigals, but at last here was the real thing. Had I only been a Christian, my soul surely would have been saved. May the music of Bach rest my body in the earth.