



Houston-based organist, harpsichordist, director and scholar Matthew Dirst in conversation with Elizabeth Blumenstock:

Photo: Shannon Langman

Matthew Dirst gives a solo recital on both instruments "Follies & Fantasies" Monday June 20, and also joins the Festival Orchestra led by Blumenstock and fellow harpsichordist Ian Pritchard on the opening program June 19 "Many Happy Returns" in Bach's double harpsichord concerto in C Major. For more information and to buy tickets visit the Festival's website: bmf-cdm.org

EB: I am often asked what my favorite piece of music is. This is impossible to answer! I am also asked which composer is my favorite—impossible to answer as well! The impossibility is mostly the fault of that word, "favorite." So, instead I shall ask: which three Baroque composers consistently delight and move you, and why?

MD: Monteverdi, Bach and Handel, because their music is endlessly inventive and never fails to make an impression. All three are also, I think, quite indestructible. Even in a mediocre performance, there's always some new detail to savor, a turn of phrase that might borrow from convention but



Johann Sebastian Bach at 61, painted by Elias Gottlob Haussmann in 1748.

tweaked somehow to maximize expression and interest. When it's well played or sung, there's nothing more powerful from this era.

EB: As we have all been painfully aware, live performances came to an abrupt halt in the spring of 2020 and have been more or less down for the count until quite recently. But some other things became more possible during this time. For me, one of these things was working on taming a bit of the wilderness that is my “back yard” in rural, mountainous New Mexico. What was the most interesting of these “newly-possible” things for you?

“The lack of public events... gave me time to write a new book, one aimed at a general audience, on the subject of Bach’s Art of Fugue and Musical Offering.”

MD: The shuttering of performance venues meant that many of us suddenly acquired new expertise in digital programming. We learned how to plan programs for exclusively online delivery, and to think through how to do it safely for the musicians, especially during the pre-vaccine year. The lack of public events also gave me time to write a new book, one aimed at a general audience on the subject of Bach’s Art of Fugue and Musical Offering. This volume will be the first in a series of guides to the Bach repertoire, thanks to a collaboration between the American Bach Society and Oxford University

Press. For the first time in my career, I was grateful to be a stay-at-home musicologist!

—

EB: I have gradually been doing more and more teaching, along with concertizing, and, of course, teaching calls for quite different skills. As performers we wish to be memorable, but this is equally important to teachers! What is the most powerful thing a teacher ever did or said to you?

MD: During oral exams for one of my degrees a very wise though notoriously disorganized professor of mine said something I've never forgotten. We had been discussing one or another element of pedagogy, and he reminded me that we can learn even from those whose instruction we might not value highly: by figuring out what not to do when our turn came. He was, I think, reflecting on his own teaching.

—

EB: And last, where would you choose to go if you were given an all expenses paid, three week trip to anywhere in the world?

MD: Greece and the Middle East, but not in high summer. I've been to Turkey and was fascinated with the ancient historical sights and the culture in general: food, textiles, music, religion, the lot. I'd love to continue this exploration throughout the eastern Mediterranean, and a leisurely three weeks would be amazing. Where do I sign up for this lottery?

