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DAVID Y. S. CHUNG  
[dchung@hkbu.edu.hk](mailto:dchung@hkbu.edu.hk)



## RECORDINGS

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CARL PHILIPP EMANUEL BACH (1714–1788)

*TANGERE*

Alexei Lubimov (Tangentenflügel)

ECM 2112, 2017; one disc, 67 minutes

On *Tangere* (Latin: to touch), Alexei Lubimov records the ‘Fantasias, Sonatas, Rondos and Solfeggi’ of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach on a copy of a tangent piano (Tangentenflügel) by Späth & Schmahl, Regensburg (1794). In the eighteenth century the tangent piano spread throughout Europe, being referred to in Italy as the ‘cembalo angelico’ and in France as the ‘clavecin harmonieux et céleste’. Franz Jacob Späth, a builder of pianos, clavichords and organs, was the most important of those producing tangent pianos in the second half of the eighteenth century: in 1751 he built one for the Elector of Bonn. As orders for his tangent pianos increased, he took his son-in-law, Christoph Friedrich Schmahl, into the business as a full partner. Their tangent pianos were the pride of some of the most eminent musicians of the day, including Mozart. Indeed, we read of Mozart in 1777 referring to the tangent piano as the ‘Späthisches Klavier’.

By the early nineteenth century, Späth tangent pianos existed in many European countries, and now boasted a range of six octaves – but as the fortepiano was gaining in popularity over the harpsichord, so the tangent piano was also on the losing side. The instrument thus had only a short period of popularity, and it sank into obscurity around the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. Some ten Späth and Schmahl tangents survive, dating from 1780 to 1801. They all have the same action and compass of five octaves, F<sup>1</sup> to f<sup>3</sup>, but are of differing lengths, from 184 to 222 cm.

The tangent piano is an instrument whose strings are struck by freely moving narrow wooden posts resembling harpsichord jacks. Unlike the clavichord, where the tangent remains in contact with the string to keep the note sounding, the Tangentenflügel’s tangent immediately leaves the string, allowing the string to vibrate freely. The instrument has an intermediate lever, increasing the velocity with which the jack-striking post is driven towards the strings. It offers much dynamic variation and has the advantage of combining the timbres and potential of other various keyboard instruments played in Bach’s time: the instrument’s treble range offers the brightness of a light-action piano, with its bass register occupying more of the sound world associated with the harpsichord. In addition, it is more powerful than most of the keyboard salon instruments of the time. Serving the new aesthetics of the period, the instrument offered a range of tone-altering devices, including an early damper system and a buff stop; players were now able to control the volume of sound by the strength with which they struck the keys. They could now engage the tangent piano’s choice of timbres in playing that was highly expressive. It is easy to understand why this instrument, with its substantial expressive and coloristic potential, would appeal to Lubimov, who writes in his liner notes that the tangent piano



itself had 'suggest[ed] the relevant music' to play: 'that of C. P. E. Bach, with its incomparable personal touches taken from extremes of sensitivity and extravagance'.

The disc offers a representative selection of this composer's most concise keyboard pieces, several of them taken from the *Clavierstücke verschiedener Art* (Keyboard Pieces of Various Kinds, 1765) and the *Musikalisches Vielerley* (Musical Miscellany, 1770). Though it is unclear whether Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach intended any of these works to be played on the tangent piano, it is an established fact that Johann Sebastian Bach's other musician sons wrote pieces expressly for the instrument. (As far as the instruments on which keyboard works were played are concerned, one can only examine the style and technical demands of each score in order to select the most suitable instrument for each specific work.) Four fantasias from the above collections are featured here, showcasing a mix of chordal and contrapuntal writing. There are humorous touches to Lubimov's reading of these works, and he often spreads chords in the name of ornamentation and beauty of texture, as in the Fantasia in B minor, Wq112/8. These are exquisite miniatures, with none exceeding one minute in length; each is a perfectly constructed and satisfying piece of through-composed writing. Indeed, the same can be said for the four Solfeggi presented here: some are gilded with ornaments and brimming with good cheer, others spontaneous and improvisational. Especially impressive is Lubimov's playing of the well-known, energetically arpeggiated Solfeggio in C minor, Wq117/2 (played by many of us as young piano students) – buoyant, exciting and then gone in the wink of an eye. Add to these the charming, bell-like (probably pedagogical) 'Clavierstück für die rechte oder linke Hand allein', Wq117/1 (Piano Piece for the Right or Left Hand Alone). Bach's Rondos sold well on the amateur music scene, but there is no guarantee that the musicians investing in the publications read into them the suspense and caprice with which Lubimov lavishes the Rondo in D minor, Wq61/4.

The two lengthier fantasias on the disc offer the listener two of Bach's most individual and unleashed utterances. Lubimov's playing of them endorses these qualities. Fresh, thrilling, unpredictable and inspiring in its sense of discovery, the C major Fantasia Wq59/6 (1784) abounds in changes of tonality and texture, with Bach's sentimental central melody no less surprising. The Free Fantasia in F sharp minor, Wq67 (1787), probably the longest of Bach's fantasias, comprises contrasting sections (not all of new material), as if Bach, a year before his death, wished to present a kaleidoscope of contemporary keyboard practice, a compendium of music from under the fingers of one of the greatest improvisers of all time. Lubimov's performance of this fantasia displays its contrasts in virtuosic figurations and imposing timbres, with a sense of spontaneity and unflinching experimentation, but he also gives exquisite expression to the work's introspective and dejected moments – all incorporated into a highly personal and emotional rendition of the piece.

Of the 150-odd solo keyboard sonatas from C. P. E. Bach's pen, two from the six books *für Kenner und Liebhaber* appear on the disc. Lubimov's adventurous reading of the Sonata in G major Wq55 (1779) brings home the spirit of the age of the *empfindsamer Stil*, the perfect vehicle for Bach's own impulsive, volatile temperament. In the Sonata in D minor Wq57 (1787), however, Lubimov offers a more restrained interpretation.

Alexei Lubimov (born in Moscow, 1944) is a pianist who also plays harpsichord and fortepiano, his preferences lying in baroque and twentieth-century music. A soloist, chamber musician and accompanist, he is a founder of the Moscow Baroque Quartet and a co-founder of the Moscow Chamber Academy, as well being instrumental in the 'Alternativa' Avant-garde Music Festival. In *Tangere*, Lubimov has enquired deeply into the music of C. P. E. Bach. His inspired playing presents the unconventional beauty and excitement of the Hamburg Bach's style, leaving no doubt as to the fact that the tangent piano, with its signature timbre, dynamic possibilities and strong contrasts, is tailor-made for this unique repertoire. Recorded in Antwerp for ECM New Series, the disc's recording sound is every bit as lively as its music.

PAMELA HICKMAN

[hickman.pamela@gmail.com](mailto:hickman.pamela@gmail.com)

