

Program Notes from Feb 14, 1999

Seth Lachterman

**Peter Sykes, organ
with the Berkshire Bach Singers**

Bach was a ceaseless innovator; his chosen favorite instrument, the organ, became a platform for the most intimate, poetic, and daring of his musical thoughts. Luckily, his audience for such *Orgelkunst* was quite different than unappreciative bourgeoisie that attended church services. Organists were usually composers and music theorists who unabashedly wrote for their kind. In a certain sense, the pipe organ was mystic conveyance that performers used to exalt their God in a grandeur of sound unmatched by any other instrument. The ability of this instrument to delineate counterpoint with such varieties of color, all under the control of a single performer's fingers and feet, inspired even the most pedestrian of composers. Bach worked with the existing genres and extended the harmonic and textural vocabulary far beyond that of his predecessors. His masterpieces remain as the true culmination of German organ music,

Trio Sonata in Eb S. 525

A "Trio Sonata" is normally thought of as a chamber piece written for two solo instruments with basso continuo. The bass line, being an independent contrapuntal voice is the third member of the trio. In a chamber setting one would actually expect four instrumentalists to participate: the two soloists, a cello or bassoon taking the bass line, and a harpsichordist filling in the needed harmonies. Bach wrote six "trio" sonatas, around 1727 conceived for pedal harpsichord or organ solo: the two hands, with pedal part, simply mimicked instruments with continuo.

Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, wrote of these works:

[These] are written in such a galant style that they still sound very good and never grow old, but, on the contrary, will outlive all revolutions of fashion in music.

His comments are as true an estimate today as they were two hundred years ago. The Trio Sonatas are certainly among Bach's most approachable contrapuntal works; the textures are light and clear, and the melodic subjects are immediately appealing. The first, in Eb, is particularly buoyant with brisk outer movements, and a beautiful *siciliano* centerpiece.

G-minor Fugue ("The Little") S.578

Written before 1707, this justly popular fugue is an early specimen of the Spielfuge - "the instrumental fugue" - in which the melodic lines and contours are more idiomatic to string writing rather than vocal or organ composition. Spielfuge designates a family of compositions ranging from this simple jocund piece to the dazzling Fugue in G-minor S.542 which appears later on the program.

Wer nur dem lieben Gott lasst walten 5.690, 5.691

In dulci jubilo S.608 S.729

A "chorale prelude" originally signified any organ elaboration of a Lutheran hymn performed prior to the congregational participation in that hymn. The prelude employed variation, improvisation, or a variety of fugal forms in the course of the chorale's elaboration. Bach's penchant for bold harmonic and melodic invention got him into trouble with both congregations and employers: many were lost trying to pick out the hymn tune, and became disoriented with Bach's wayward improvisations. In Arnstadt, in 1706, his employers wrote to: *Reprove [Bach] for having hitherto made many curious variations in the chorale and mingled many strange tones in it, and for the fact that the congregation has been confused by it.*

The two settings of *Wer nur dem lieben Gott* date from this early period, and demonstrate the young Bach flexing his harmonic muscles in defiance of the wishes and expectations of church and town officials. Yet, in spite of their daring, the compositions reveal Bach's careful study of his seventeenth-century predecessors.

The culmination of Bach's early chorale experimentation is the "Little Organ Book," written towards the end of the Weimar period in 1717. Some of these chorales, perhaps, were written during Bach's stay in prison in November 1717 following a contentious dispute with his then employer Duke Ernst. *In dulci jubilo*, S.608 is a sparkling Christmas piece and a beautifully crafted double-canon. The outer voices (pedal and soprano) intone the chorale tune in canon, while the inner voices, in rolling triplets, providing the second canon, create a sweet chaos of simultaneous triple and duple meters. The second setting for S.729, dating some eight years earlier, was reused in later years as a pedagogic example of intermingling improvisatory passages with simple chordal chorale harmonizations.

Fantasy and Fugue in G-Minor, ('The Great'), S.542

In 1720 Bach went to Hamburg and visited Adam Reincken, the father of north German organ composition, who was then ninety-eight years old. It is possible that the "Great" fugue was a dedication to the venerable master since the fugal theme closely resembles one from Reincken's *Hortus Musicus*. The Fantasy is, perhaps, the most rhapsodic and dramatically chromatic work of Bach's keyboard works. It resembles, on a much grander scale, the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue for harpsichord. "Fantasies," in the sense of the *Stylus Phantasticus*, or "Fantastic Style," is akin to the Toccata in which virtuoso scale passages, arpeggios, broken chords, and chromatic harmonies alternate with strict polyphonic sections. The use of dissonance appoggiaturas, clashing suspensions, and growling progressions, make this piece as "fantastic" a work as can be found in keyboard literature, even by twentieth-century standards. The fugue, no less a performance challenge, is the very spirit of exuberance and dance; unfettered by shock effects, its playful majesty provides a perfect balance to the preceding movement.

Selections from Clavierübung III (*"The German Organ Mass"* S.552, S.669-689)

Prelude in E-flat S.552

Three settings of *Allein Gott in der Hoh' sei Her* S.675, S.676, S.677

Two settings of *Wir glauben all' an einem Gott* S.681, S.680

Fugue in E-flat S.552 ("The Saint Anne")

In 1739, Bach published a monumental collection of organ works arranged to reflect portions of the Lutheran Mass and catechism. The term "Clavierübung" rather prosaically means "keyboard practice." Bach was to publish four such "practices" which included the Italian Concerto, the partitas, and the Goldberg Variations. The third set was composed for organ and dedicated as follows: *Third part of the Clavier-Ubung, consisting of sundry preludes on the catechism and other hymns for the organ Nyritten for the enjoyment of amateurs and in particular for connoisseurs of such work.*

Bach organizes this great collection in a symbolic liturgical superstructure mirroring Luther's version of the Mass including chorale settings of the Kyrie, Gloria, the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Communion. We find here, as well, Bach's preoccupation - typical in the later Leipzig compositions - with imbuing works with numerological symbolism.

The "Mass" opens with the great *E-flat Major Prelude*. This is not based on a spiritual text as such, but its internal structure being in a key of three flats with three melodic subjects suggests the Trinity. The stately and regal style of the first subject, written in the style of a French overture, connotes the majesty of "God, the Father." The humble second subject is, perhaps, "God, the Son," and the fleeting third subject symbolizes the Holy Spirit.

The chorales which follow are generally set in pairs: one for keyboard and pedal, and another, "manualiter," for keyboard alone. This was Bach's way of interpreting Luther's "large" catechism and "small" catechism. An exception is the Gloria, set to the hymn, *Allein Gott in der Hoh' sei Her'*, which appears three times: the first without pedal, the second for keyboards and pedal, and the third, again, without pedal. The symbolism of "three" is apparent again, and the middle setting is a Trio embedded in a trio of like pieces.

The Credo, *Wir glauben all' in einen Gott*, in the "large" setting, uses the chorale's first four notes in an off-beat syncopated motive which permeates the thickly contrapuntal texture. The pedal part, though, is a repeated motive which rises by eight notes and falls by sixteenth notes. In the nineteenth-century, commentators likened this bass part to a "giant" striding upwards then tumbling down - hence calling this chorale the "Giant's fugue." The manualiter setting, capitalizing once again on the hymn's opening phrase, is in the "French style," with sharply dotted rhythms and thickly coated ornaments.

The *Fugue in Eb Major*, which closes the Clavierbung, is paired as a closing bookend to the opening Eb prelude. It is no surprise that this fugue has three subjects, and is, perhaps, the most majestic organ fugue of Bach's Leipzig period. Set for "full organ," the opening subject bears a similarity to the Anglican hymn, "St. Anne Tune" The exalted opening subject, moving in a slow, stately, meter gives way to a faster second subject, which in turn yields to a livelier third subject. The grand climax is achieved at the very end when the opening subject reappears with the two later subjects in a ground-swellling pedal part.