

Bach, the Organist

Thanks to a poll conducted by *The New York Times* (January 23, 2011), we are now certain that Johann Sebastian Bach is the greatest composer of all time; not that there was any doubt, although there was room at the top for Mozart and Beethoven. The irony is, of course, that in Bach's lifetime he was never regarded as such by the burghers of Leipzig who heard his masterpieces at church every week, year after year. For more than a quarter century Bach worked, composed, and performed in a city where he was regarded as little more than an able town musician, choir leader and tenacious defender of the contrapuntal art that was steadily growing out of fashion. Telemann was a far more revered figure, as was Handel. Even in Bach's earlier stints in Mühlhausen and Weimar his works were little more than amply received. Only in Cöthen, in the employ of Prince Leopold, did Bach's singular gifts meet the encomium and patronage deserved; this praise was due, in part, to the close and sympathetic friendship Bach enjoyed with this prince, who was a sophisticated amateur musician.

While few in Bach's lifetime might have understood his complex musical language, few would have denied that his abilities as organist were extraordinary. His densely textured organ music required an unparalleled virtuosity for both hands and feet. His celebrity as a virtuoso spread beyond the confines of Saxony. No composer before had written organ works with such contrapuntal intensity and mastery. Only Dietrich Buxtehude, the great organ master of Lübeck and a hero to the young Sebastian, can be considered a distant second. Bach's art, however extraordinary, was a fading æsthetic; this wonderful and majestic music never sported the light textures, slow harmonic rhythm, and singing melodic line that were the growing rage. No composer in Europe sounded like Bach in 1750 – all were embracing the growing Classical style, through its precursor, the *style galant*. So, it is little wonder that it took a century after Bach's death for the Romantics to rediscover the depth of his organ music; today, while still not as popularly received as, say, Bach's concertos, the two hundred fifty compositions Bach wrote for the "King of Instruments" are regal adornments like no other.

Bach's mature organ style, evident even before 1723, was the fruition of years of self-study of works of past masters from central and northern Germany as well as his discovery of several key Italian masters. That which is unmistakable and ineffably Bach is an assimilative synthesis of many composers including Dietrich Buxtehude, Georg Böhm, Johann Pachelbel (yes, that one), Johann Adam Reincken, and Girolamo Frescobaldi. These composers were the foundation of his early organ style. However, Bach's "musical thinking" was influenced by other Italians: Giovanni Legrenzi, Arcangelo Corelli, and above all, Antonio Vivaldi. The solo concerto, *concerto grosso* and *sonata da chiesa* – forms that matured in Italy by these great masters – were to prove vitally influential not only in Sebastian's own concerti and sonatas, but in the way Bach structured the formal elements of hundreds of arias, choruses, and keyboard preludes. Bach especially regarded Vivaldi's *L'Estro armonico* (op. 3, 1711) and transcribed five concertos for keyboard, as evidence of his esteem.

The *Concerto in D Minor (S.596)* is Bach's transcription of Vivaldi's *Concerto Grosso (Op. 3, No. 11)*. Until the discovery of the autograph in 1911, this work was believed to be a composition by Bach's son, Wilhelm Friedemann. As is the case with other transcriptions, Bach was forced to transpose violin passages downwards to properly fit in the compass of the organ keyboard, and typically, Bach augmented Vivaldi's bass lines to provide greater contrapuntal interest. However, Vivaldi's own contrapuntal mastery is vividly revealed in the exciting Allegro fugue with an extended subject and countersubject: without knowing that it is Vivaldi we hear, we might be tempted to believe Bach alone created this tapestry. The *Concerto in D Major (S.594)* was long thought to be a transcription of Vivaldi's Violin Concerto, Op. 7, No. 11, RV 208a. However, we know it is not from the opus 7 collection, but an independent variant, RV 208. The title, *Il Grosso Mogul*, may refer to the sixteenth-century Mogul emperor, Akbar the Great, who had been known in Europe as a lover of the arts as well as a great expansionist of Mogul culture. The fascinating chromatic sequences peppering the first movement and the achingly chromatic line in the subsequent recitative lead one to believe that Vivaldi was trying to evoke the mysterious sounds of an anonymous Orient, known only in the imaginations of most Europeans. The final movement, of such spacious pomp befitting a Mogul emperor, ends with a wildly arrant solo cadenza. Indeed,

in Bach's pungent transcription to organ, these passages sound little like anything else in eighteenth-century continental music.

In the *Tocatta and Fugue in F Major (S.540)*, written between 1714 and 1716, virtuosic display alternates with more structured, contrapuntal sections, as is the case in Bach's other organ toccatas. What is different here is the work's real sense of humor and surprise – qualities seemingly sparse in Bach's *œuvre*. Several musical events are unfolded: first, a hypnotic pedal point anchors canonically ascending and descending passages; next, the pedal begins a solo journey through some harmonically daring territory; and then a chordal “oom pah pah” buildup leads to a deceptive cadence with more trailing harmonically gnarled sequences. The fugue, by contrast, is a stately *ricercare*: *Toccatas* and *Ricercare* were instrumental forms Bach had learned from studying Frescobaldi's *Fiori Musicali* (“Musical Flowers”) of 1635.

From 1735 until his death in 1750, Bach was concerned with writing works that had no occasional value but would be synoptic statements about various forms of compositions. The B Minor Mass, for example, was without practical purpose (a full Catholic Mass from a devout, orthodox Lutheran), but became a compositional summation of Bach's greatest choral and vocal writing. The Art of Fugue existed only for Bach and his circle, or for instruction in composition, as an exhaustive statement on fugal technique. Similarly, the *Canonic Variations*, the *Clavierübung III*, the *Well Tempered Clavier II*, and *Goldberg Variations (Clavierübung IV)* were fruits of these final years. Such is the case of the *Achtzehn Choräle von verschiedener Art (S.651-668)*, eighteen arrangements of chorale preludes based on works written years before in Weimar. Each piece, a masterful miniature, demonstrates a way in which a chorale hymn tune can be placed, like a jewel, in a musical “setting.” The result is not only a testament to Bach's musical ingenuity, but each piece expresses the essence of the hymn's text and musical *affekt*. The *Trio Super ‘Herr Jesu Christ dich zu uns wend’ (S.655a* “Lord Jesus Christ, Turn to Us”), a delightful piece in G Major, uses the triadic “motto” from the hymn's first phrase in the pedal part which propels a buoyant trio texture with the manuals. Only after fifty measures does the pedal part intone the chorale tune, almost as if Bach had forgotten the piece's purpose. Bach set the tune *Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr* (“All Glory Be to God on High”) three times in this collection, as a probable symbolic reference to the Trinity. The elegant and expressive *Adagio* setting, S.662, sets the hymn in the soprano, in a highly embellished and decorated musical line. Bach gleaned such ornate settings from Georg Böhm (1661-1733) who popularized slow, florid arrangements of hymns accompanied by gently contrapuntal accompanying voices. Like most Lutheran chorale hymns, *Allein Gott* is in bar-form, requiring a repeat of the opening two phrases.

Giuseppe Torelli (1658-1709), a seminal figure in the development of the *concerto grosso*, while being a string player, had a penchant for writing trumpet concerti. One of Torelli's violin concerti, with its vigorous fugal ritornello, may have inspired Bach's celebrated *Double Concerto in D Minor (S.1043)*. Bach also arranged one of Torelli's concerti for harpsichord (S.979). Torelli's *Sinfonia in D Major (G.8)*, is a fine example of how skillfully Torelli could exploit the bright sonority of the trumpet's *clarino* range. Scoring the trumpet in combination with the lower strings while subtly shifting from major to minor, Torelli lends this work an unmistakable grandeur using the simplest of compositional means.

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Walter Hilse, a native of New York City, earned his advanced degrees from Columbia University. As a solo performer he has appeared throughout the United States, Europe, and the Far East, making triumphant tours of Sweden in 1990, 1994, and 1995. Of special note are his five critically acclaimed solo organ recitals at New York City's Alice Tully Hall, and several complete performances of Bach's *The Art of Fugue*. Dr. Hilse has collaborated with many singers and instrumentalists, as well as with performance organizations such as The New York Virtuoso Singers, the Florilegium Chamber Choir and the Alliance for American Song. A prize-winning Fellow of the American Guild of Organists (A.G.O.), he is currently on the faculty of the Manhattan School of Music. A CD of his live 1995 performance of *The Art of Fugue* at St. Peter's Church, New York City, has been released by the Berkshire Bach Society; a CD featuring performances of organ music by various composers has been released by J.A.V. Recordings.

Dr. Hilse's compositions cover over 80 art songs; an a cappella Mass for SATB chorus (performed at several New York City churches); over 20 anthems and psalm settings; a setting of various Sabbath-morning texts; compositions for solo organ; a piano suite; and numerous works for instrumental ensemble. Awards have included the Joseph H. Bearns Prize of Columbia University (1966) and the Choral Composition Prize of the Boston Chapter A.G.O. (1974). Among his commissioners have been the Alliance for American Song, the 1996 A.G.O. National Convention, the Greenwich Village Singers, the New York Treble Singers, Jo Ann Rice, David Shuler, Rush Swayze, Patricia Sullivan and the Berkshire Bach Society.

EDUCATION: Teachers at Juilliard Preparatory Division were Beveridge Webster and Edgar Roberts (piano); Vincent Persichetti, Suzanne Bloch and Norman Lloyd (composition); and Bronson Ragan (organ). Teachers in Paris (1962-1964) were Maurice Duruflé (organ); Nadia Boulanger (composition); and Manuel Rosenthal (Paris Conservatory conducting class).

Degrees from Columbia University: B.A. in mathematics (valedictorian in 1962); M.A. in composition (1966); Ph.D. in musicology (1971). Composition teachers at Columbia included Otto Luening, Jack Beeson and Chou wen-Chung.

Musicological works: "Factors Making for Coherence in the Works of Paul Hindemith, 1919-1926" (doctoral dissertation); "The Treatises of Christoph Bernhard," in *The Music Forum III*, pp. 1-196; and several articles in *The American Organist*.

APPOINTMENTS: Present appointments in Manhattan: Artist-in-Residence, St. Peter's Lutheran Church; Associate Organist, Congregation Rodeph Sholom; Organist, Redeemer Presbyterian Church; Faculty Member, Manhattan School of Music.

Allan Dean is Professor of Trumpet at the Yale School of Music. He is a member of the St. Louis Brass Quintet and Summit Brass. Dean is also cornet soloist with the New Sousa Band. After 20 years of free lancing in New York City on both modern and early brass, Dean joined the faculty of Indiana University. In 1988 he moved full time to Monterey, MA and joined the Yale faculty. He appears locally with Berkshire Bach and the Columbia Festival Orchestra. Each summer he performs and coaches chamber music at the Norfolk Chamber Music Festival in Connecticut.