

# Program Notes for February 14, 2010

*Seth Lachterman*

## The Ceremony of Brass and Organ

Brass choirs have been playing in large resonant acoustic spaces for centuries. The glory and grandeur of brass trumpets (or, their cousins, the wooden *cornetti*) and trombones (*sackbuts*) was so effective in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Catholic settings – for example, Gabrielli’s splendid works composed for the Basilica San Marco di Venezia – that the appeal was hard to mute in the Reformation. German Protestant (and then, English Anglican) composers caught the “wind,” so to speak, and brass ensembles became ceremonial imperatives in churches throughout Europe. For practical and acoustic reasons, the church organ became a logical collaborator. Filling in the harmonies, the organ could stand decibel to decibel with brass in ways plucked instruments could not. Today, organ-brass ensembles have become a popular genre: partly as a medium for arrangement, and partly to recreate the sonic majesty of the past.

Johann Sebastian Bach, the culminating master of counterpoint in the high German Baroque, rarely indulged in compositions specific to the combination of organ with brass. An exception, made popular in the 1960s by Walter Carlos’s *Switched-On Bach*, was the *Sinfonia* to Cantata S.29, *Wir danken dir, Gott*, which features an organ *obbligato*, three trumpets, timpani, and strings. However, we must think of Bach’s contribution to this repertory as two-fold: that of providing the greatest solo organ music of all time, and, quite separately, that of writing the most challenging brass music in the cantatas and, of course, in the Brandenburg Concerti. Three chorales set for choir, instruments, and continuo – *Ertöt uns durch dein Güte*, S.22/5, *Nun danket alle Gott*, S.79/3, and *Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan*, S.75/7 – are heard in arrangements for brass and organ. The textural quality of these movements is convincingly recreated with the organ assuming the cantata’s *obbligati* parts, while the brass plays the slower-moving choral parts.

Bach’s true legacy was his increasingly profound influence on subsequent generations of composers, which came about only after the work of early Bach revivalists such as Baron Gottfried von Swieten, in the latter half of the eighteenth century, and Felix Mendelssohn, in the early nineteenth century. When later composers encountered and studied Bach’s works, new contrapuntal works emerged invariably freshened with new harmonic and stylistic idioms. Historically, composers most assimilative of J.S. Bach were Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Bruckner, and Brahms. The latter’s *Prelude and Fugue in G-Minor* for organ is a striking example of how the Romantic composer’s unique language can be expressed through another earlier idiom. Brahms’s penchant for scintillating harmonic sequences and two-against-three rhythmic cells are present here as always. Yet the logic of the passagework in the prelude and the stately, expressive fugue harken back to the older master, without any overt sense of derivation or artifice. Felix Mendelssohn, whose revival of Bach’s *Matthäus-Passion* in 1829 was to play such a decisive role in the initial publication and ultimate dissemination of Bach’s works, composed his six Organ Sonatas, Op. 65, in 1844-45. They amply demonstrate the young composer’s assiduous study of Bach’s organ literature.

The brilliant high trumpet parts that adorn many of Bach’s Leipzig works were composed with a particular virtuoso in mind, Gottfried Reiche (1667-1734), Leipzig’s most celebrated *Stadtpfeifer* who was also senior *Stadtmusicus*. His virtuosity as trumpeter was legendary, as were the circumstances of his death. Some of Bach’s secular cantatas were designed for outdoor performance, and such was the case with *Preise dein Glücke* (S.215) from 1734. Reiche purportedly died from a stroke the following day; legend has it that his demise resulted from exertions attendant to the performance that were exacerbated by the fumes of torches lighting the night’s event. The famous portrait of Reiche by Elias Gottlob Haussmann, who produced a similar one of Bach himself, shows Reiche’s coiled *Jäger Trompete*, which has since become a model for historical instrument reproduction. In the portrait, Reiche holds a fanfare, his “Abblasen” (possibly written by Bach, not Reiche), which is best known now as the theme for television’s “CBS Sunday Morning.” His *Vierundzwanzig neue*

*Quatricinien* (twenty-four new quartets), composed in 1696, are set for Zink (cornett) and trombones. The collection comprises *Sonatinas and Fugas* that contrast slow homophonic sections with lively contrapuntal ones.

The giant *Fantasie und Fugue* in G-Minor S.542, one of the great edifices of Bach's organ works, was probably performed before the great Dutch organist Johann Adam Reinken in Hamburg's St. Catherine's Church, as part of Bach's bid for the post of organist. Reinken, who was almost one hundred years old, was duly impressed. A job for Bach, however, did not materialize. Like his *Chromatische Fantasie und Fuge* in D-Minor for harpsichord, written around the same year, the organ work is fantastically improvisatory, chromatic, and surprisingly dissonant. The fugue, one of Bach's greatest, is based on a Dutch folk tune probably meant to honor the elder Reinken.

While Bach might have been flexing his harmonic muscles before he settled in Leipzig, his last years in that city were marked by his near obsession with both the science and art of counterpoint. His *Art of Fugue* (S.1080) remains his greatest testament to the musical genre with which he is most closely associated: the fugue. This late work consists of some nineteen *Contrapuncti*, all in D-Minor, and all based on a common theme, referred to below as the "main theme." Bach simultaneously exhausts all known contrapuntal techniques of variation, while, at the same time, he draws forth an expressive intensity rarely surpassed in his compositional oeuvre. Originally conceived for keyboard, the work is commonly arranged for string or brass quartets. It never loses its appeal or depth with varying shifts in instrumental adaptation. *Contrapunctus IV* presents the inversion of the main theme accompanied by haunting and melancholic melodic filigree. Musicologist Donald Francis Tovey appropriately refers to the repeated descending third motif as "cuckoo-like," but others have suggested a more spiritual subtext, hearing a sort of mute entreaty, "Mein Gott, Mein Gott" in the melodic sequence. In complete contrast, the *Contrapunctus IX a 4 alla Duodecima* is a double fugue in which a brilliant and athletic theme is heard combined with the main theme, at times spaced in an interval of the twelfth. Its extroverted character has been celebrated by many virtuoso brass ensembles in our time. Bach died before completing the *Art of Fugue*, and the chorale *Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit* (S.668) was added to the original publication as a post mortem. In this beautifully tender work, Bach indulged in some clever numerology which was his wont throughout his life. Bach alters the *cantus firmus* of the chorale by a certain number of decorative notes, thus expanding the first line to fourteen notes, while expanding the entire melody to forty-one notes. The numbers fourteen and forty-one, the cabalistic sums of the letters "BACH" and "J S BACH" were the composer's numerological signature.

No work seems less characteristic for brass ensemble than the tender oboe *Sinfonia* from Cantata S.156, *Ich steh' mit einem Fuß im Grabe*, but Allan Dean's arrangement pleads a convincing case. After all, this movement was a favorite of Bach's, who used it three times afterwards in various concertos. However, no work is more idiomatic for the trumpet than the ever-popular "Trumpet Voluntary" of Jeremiah Clarke, more formally known as *The Prince of Denmark's March* and, surprisingly, originally written for keyboard. Thus, an arrangement for brass with organ seems to capture all the intended and necessary pomp.