

Bach's Works and Twentieth-Century Organ Literature

Senior Organ Recital and Program Notes

Matthew Doran

Northern Illinois University

### Abstract

This paper explores examples of two significant categories of the organ repertoire: the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and organ music from the twentieth century. The latter of these categories is represented by music of Arvo Pärt, William Bolcom, and Olivier Messiaen. Each piece is examined from a musical and historical perspective; they are analyzed in terms of their stylistic qualities as well as their rhetorical or functional intents. The three twentieth-century composers are presented with an emphasis on their highly individualistic musical languages. Conclusions are drawn from secondary scholarly commentary resources and thorough research of the primary sources, which are the musical scores. Similar types of pieces across eras are compared and contrasted. This paper represents the research portion of a senior recital capstone project. Each piece discussed in this paper is performed live by the author and recorded to accompany the research. The paper is designed to inform the listener about these pieces and composers and to enrich the listening experience.

### Bach's Works and Twentieth-Century Organ Literature

The pipe organ, affectionately known as the “King of Instruments,” possesses an extraordinarily diverse body of musical compositions written for it. However, many aficionados of Western classical music are unfamiliar with even its most monumental works. With that in mind, organists have an opportunity to be curators and teachers as well as performers when they present these works to audiences. In order to maximize cultural and historical exposure along with a valuable aesthetic experience, the organist can select works from a variety of musical eras and geographic locations.

In the case of this recital, there are two main foci—organ works by J. S. Bach, and compositions from the twentieth century. The music of Bach is a clear choice; many consider Bach to be the definitive organ composer and one of the greatest musicians in history. In fact, Bach is so closely associated with the organ that more contemporary works often remain unknown to general audiences. This is why the second half of the recital focuses on modern compositions. These works communicate the continued relevance of the instrument to modern tastes and styles.

Even in these two groups of compositions, there is a greater exploration of the diversity within them. The three pieces by Bach are representative of three of Bach's vocations: performing organist (a prelude and fugue), church musician (a chorale prelude), and pedagogue (a trio sonata). The twentieth-century works reflect the multiplicity of styles in contemporary classical music, from the mesmerizing clarity of Arvo Pärt to the harmonic complexity of Olivier Messiaen and the jazz-infused language of William Bolcom. Even though the program travels through a stylistic evolution over time, a strong organ tradition is evident throughout. Music that looked back for inspiration and forward for innovation remains meaningful today.

### **Prelude and Fugue in B minor, BWV 544 – Johann Sebastian Bach**

Bach's tenure at his last position as Cantor of the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany, is often most closely associated with his monumental choral works for the church. He was obligated to work as a composer of cantatas, director of ensembles, and schoolteacher, but he was not tasked with any specific organ-playing duties (Arnold, 2003). Even so, Bach continued to write organ music that reflected his ever-maturing compositional style.

His preludes and fugues of this period relied less on the overt virtuosity of his younger years in Weimar and more on large, expertly crafted compositional structures and a complex harmonic language (Arnold, 2003). In this B minor prelude, Bach demonstrated his compositional prowess with a dramatic opening that uses only two contrapuntal voices. In fact, the piece begins with a single B high above the treble staff, but he immediately transformed a potentially precarious note into an authoritative statement. The pedal soon enters with a dotted-rhythm pedal point in octaves, and the rich harmonies that swirl above become a cornerstone of the prelude. A secondary subject is developed fugally and leads to a return of the original theme in F-sharp minor. New motives are introduced, developed, and restated at a rapid pace and in an innovative structure that leads to a densely textured conclusion.

In contrast, the subject of the fugue is rather plain—it is simply a winding stepwise line of eighth notes. Bach clearly used this simplicity to his advantage. The first four notes essentially contain the majority of the melodic material for the entire piece (Williams, 1980). A long episode without pedal in the middle of the fugue provides some relief from the prevailing density. As the piece comes to a close, the pedal states the subject three times in a row, modulating in a steady march through moments of increasing harmonic tension. Finally, the soprano line takes the subject for the last time, ending the piece with a resolute Picardy third.

### **Trio Sonata II in C minor, BWV 526 – Johann Sebastian Bach**

In addition to his extensive public responsibilities in Leipzig, Bach personally instructed several students in composition and keyboard skills. The musical training of his own children was a priority of his: Johann Sebastian was a part of a long family line of musicians, and he took meticulous steps to document this history and keep the tradition alive. He took special interest in his two eldest sons, Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel, who were particularly promising (Gardiner, 2013). Surprisingly, due to the changing musical tastes of the time, these two brothers became more popular than their father during the later part of his life, and J. S. faded out of public consciousness soon after his death.

To ensure that Wilhelm would practice music that addressed the full technical demands of keyboard playing, Bach wrote six sonatas in trio setting. These works for two manuals and pedal were perhaps originally intended for the pedal harpsichord, but they are very well suited for the organ and have been long associated with the instrument (Arnold, 2003). The written ranges support this use; the left hand part can be transposed down an octave and played on a 4' registration to sound at the written pitch while preventing excessive hand crossing.

As can be seen in the vivacious first movement of Sonata II, these pieces have a quality of chamber music. Each hand seems to represent a dueling solo instrument playing in invertible counterpoint while the feet assume the *basso continuo* role of cello or bassoon. The second movement is especially serene and string-like with slurs that evoke bowings, indicating that it could possibly be a modified transcription of an ensemble piece. Complex rhythmic figures in the final movement point to the work's pedagogical focus. Quickly alternating syncopations between parts were uncommon in chamber trio sonatas and instead indicate a primary purpose of developing mechanical independence (Williams, 1980).

***Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele, BWV 654 – Johann Sebastian Bach***

It is difficult to determine the specific ways in which Bach's sacred chorale-based organ music was used during his lifetime, especially in his years in Leipzig. They were suitable for use in the church service, but he was not responsible for playing organ in the Leipzig churches. Earlier collections such as the *Orgelbüchlein* were designed as pieces for beginning organists to develop keyboard and pedal skills; the *Clavierübung, Part III* and the "Schübler" Chorales were some of the few pieces that Bach published during his lifetime. However, *Schmücke dich* is one of eighteen unrelated chorale preludes that Bach wrote in the final years of his life, likely rewritings or revisions of sketches from his early adult years in Weimar (Arnold, 2003).

This Eucharist hymn, meaning, "Adorn yourself, dear soul," is a call to abandon sin and enter the peace and light of God—an appropriate text as the congregation goes forward to partake in Holy Communion (Williams, 1980). Bach set this chorale with exceptional serenity and lyricism. The cantus firmus presents itself as a solo voice that is very slow and richly ornamented, soaring over a peaceful ritornello form accompaniment. Even in the accompaniment, Bach wasted no notes; melodic motifs from the cantus firmus are constantly present. It is especially striking when the last chorale note of major phrases sings over many measures while the accompaniment swims underneath.

*Schmücke dich* played an important role in the revival of public appreciation of Bach's music. Felix Mendelssohn, who championed Bach's great choral works in large performances, performed this piece in Leipzig's St. Thomas Church as part of an all-Bach organ recital in the summer of 1840 (Arnold, 2003). As David and Mendel record, Robert Schumann said that *Schmücke dich* is "as priceless, deep and full of soul as any piece of music that ever sprang from a true artist's imagination" (as cited in Williams, 1980, vol. 2 p. 139).

*Annum per annum – Arvo Pärt*

Unlike Bach, Arvo Pärt has become one of the most popular and most performed contemporary classical composers during his lifetime. The Estonian composer garnered mixed local admiration during his early years of composition in the 1960s, a time in which he utilized serialist and collage techniques. Despite the prize-winning quality of Pärt's music, many Soviet musicians scorned him for relying on "Western" techniques (Shenton, 2012).

In the mid-1970s, Pärt was in the midst of developing a new compositional method to better express his ideas. He came to develop the "tintinnabuli" system, a term he created that associates the notes of a triad with the sound of bells. Pärt's move towards a non-functional expression of tonality and an external appearance of simplicity grew from his increased interest in the spirit of early music and his Russian Orthodox faith. He stated, "I have discovered that it is enough when a single note is beautifully played" (as cited in Hillier, 1997, p. 87).

*Annum per annum*, written in 1980, was born out of this newly developed tintinnabuli style. It was commissioned to celebrate the nine-hundredth anniversary of the Speyer Cathedral in Germany. To commemorate the daily mass celebrations of so many centuries (the title means "year by year"), Pärt wrote five central movements (K-G-C-S-A) that represent the five sections of the ordinary (Hillier, 1997). Each movement is based on a common form and melodic structure—eight measures that have thirteen beats—but differs in character. The *Kyrie* is presented in minor on soft 2' flute stops while the *Gloria* uses a reed in a fanfare figuration. Christ's resurrection is represented by a shift to major and the addition of mixture stops halfway through the *Credo*. A striking contrast occurs between the exuberant chords of the *Sanctus* and the slow, extended lyricism of the *Agnus Dei*. A mirror-image introduction and coda surround these movements; joyous chords first recede to silence and grow back at the end of the piece.

### **Just As I Am – William Bolcom**

An exploration of William Bolcom's works might lead a listener to wonder if Bolcom has any consistent musical persona of his own. He alternates between techniques including tonality, atonality, serialism, jazz, and popular styles—sometimes within the course of a single piece or even simultaneously. His diverse group of teachers included Olivier Messiaen (“Biography,” 2016), who famously encouraged his students to pursue their own musical directions. Bolcom followed that tradition of discovering unique personalities and goals of students during his decades of teaching at the University of Michigan (McCutchan, 1999). The unifying factor of his music is its diversity, representing a continuation of the American musical tradition.

The Dallas Chapter of the American Guild of Organists commissioned the first three of Bolcom's Gospel Preludes in 1979. “Just As I Am” is the third piece of a completed collection of twelve. Like *Schmücke dich*, this hymn is associated with Holy Communion and confession. Bolcom set this tune in three verses with rich registration, each one with more complex compositional procedures. A soft, hesitant theme that implies the hymn melody introduces the piece and serves as an interlude between verses. The first verse sets the tune above a gentle semi-thematic accompaniment while the second verse adds a diatonic canon in the left hand and pedal at intervals of a seventh and fifth. The intricacy increases in the third verse as the left hand plays two parallel voices in canon and the pedal begins an inverted canon of a third.

It is important to avoid overanalyzing these preludes for spiritual meaning. As a self-described secular humanist, Bolcom asserts that despite the sacred origins of the hymns, his settings are “outside the category of religious music—they belong clearly to the concert world” (Bolcom, 2013, para. 12). The Gospel Preludes lack the devout religious spirit of Bach and Messiaen because Bolcom “had too much wicked fun writing them” (Bolcom, 2013, para. 22).



***La Nativité du Seigneur: Dieu parmi nous – Olivier Messiaen***

A sense of mystical spirituality permeates much of Messiaen's artistic output. His deep Catholic faith led him to pursue "a *true* music, that is to say, spiritual, a music which may be an act of faith; a music which may touch upon all subjects without ceasing to touch upon God" (Messiaen, 1956, p. 8). To achieve this, Messiaen developed innovative compositional elements such as modes of limited transposition, rhythms with added values, and nonretrogradable rhythms to unobtrusively present the listener with a "strange charm of impossibilities" that leads to the "*theological rainbow*" of his musical language (Messiaen, 1956, p. 63).

Messiaen fulfilled this sacred calling in part with over six decades of service as organist of the Église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris. There he improvised and wrote most of his organ music, making him one of the few significant twentieth-century composers to produce an extensive organ repertoire. *La Nativité du Seigneur* (The Nativity of the Lord), written in 1935, was his second major organ suite and the first composition that he considered to be very characteristic of his mature musical language (Messiaen, 1956). In a series of nine meditations, the collection explores characters and doctrinal principles associated with the birth of Christ.

The last movement, *Dieu parmi nous* (God with us), is an expression of overwhelming joy and mystery that Christ would elect to descend from heaven and become human to live with us and suffer for us. This descending focus is made clear from the beginning of the piece as thunderous rhythmic chords fall from high on the manuals to the lowest pedals, leading into a gentle theme of the love between Christ and each believer. A new angelic theme of praise in the style of birdsong then alternates with the rhythmic descending theme. After a passionate development of the love theme with churning staccato notes and brightly interjecting pedal notes, an exuberant toccata built upon the descending pedal theme concludes the piece in vivid light.

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