

Some thoughts on J S Bach: *Orgelbüchlein*

Orgelbüchlein – autograph title page

Orgelbüchlein BWV 599 - 644 notes

This is the first time Bach made a systematic collection of preludes based on Lutheran chorales. He planned for the collection to contain 164 pieces but only actually wrote 46.

The title-page (written in 1722 or 1723) states:

Little Organ Book, in which guidance is given to an enquiring organist in how to implement a chorale in all kinds of ways, and at the same time to become practised in the study of pedalling, since in the chorales found therein the pedal is treated completely obbligato.

*For the highest God alone to Honour,
For my neighbour to instruct himself from it.*

Composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, p.t. [pro tempore] Capellmeister to the Serene Reigning Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen.

The pieces were probably started when Bach was organist at Weimar (possibly as early as 1713). Their purpose is stated on the title page and with one exception (*Christum wir sollen loben schon*) the chorale melody appears in the treble part. Bach started the collection when he was effectively chapel organist to the Duke of Weimar: when he was appointed Konzertmeister to the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, his services as an organist were no longer required, hence the lack of urgency to complete the project and, ultimately, to abandon it altogether.

At Weimar, the organ was sited high in a gallery, with a small group of professional singers nearby. Bearing in mind that a) hymns were sung very much more slowly than we do now and b) the congregational singing was remote from the organ, it IS possible that some of the settings in the *Orgelbüchlein* were actually used, or intended, as accompaniments to the singing of the professional group.

Peter Williams gives detailed notes about the preludes on pages 238 - 268 of *The Organ Music of JS Bach*, but I have added some personal observations about the individual preludes below.

The vital thing to remember when trying to understand why Bach does what he does is that the clues usually lie in the *text* of the hymns. The Baroque notion of *affekt* means that the style (or emotion) remains the same throughout a movement: there are no unexpected or dramatic changes such as we would expect from, for example the music of CPE Bach or later composers. Each movement establishes a basic mood which does not change during the piece. Often this can be easily identified from a single word or phrase in the text of the hymn. Interestingly, though, however harrowing the text, all the preludes close on a major, or implied major, chord.

The other thing worth bearing in mind is that Bach was much more than an organist and composer. He taught Latin, played the violin and, most importantly, was steeped in Lutheran theology. After his death his library was found to contain far more books on theology than on music. There is nothing to suggest that Bach ever seriously questioned the status quo: he was a conservative man in many respects and,

despite his frequent altercations with the church authorities, a devout believer. There is every reason to suppose that, although his employment required him to produce music at regular intervals, he never knowingly produced anything other than the best of which he was capable: all for the greater glory of God. Quite why he decided to produce the *Orgelbüchlein* (and then to abandon it, possibly as late as 1740) is not clear. There is no immediately obvious reason but then maybe such a fertile mind as his may have simply enjoyed it for the pleasure of its creation.

As it has come down to us today, this incomplete project offers a remarkable insight into the theology and deep understanding of a man almost entirely devoid of ego: the tiny pieces in the collection are, in microcosm, a picture of a society by and large at peace with itself and with the Creator. Bach never asks (as his sons did) why? He accepts both earthly authority (as witnessed by the title-page) and the divinely-ordained nature of the universe or, at least, the small part of it which he knew. The *Orgelbüchlein* tells us virtually nothing about the composer himself, but everything about his perception of his place in the great scheme of things.

It's worth studying the specification of the Weimar Castle organ. Although quite small, it contains a wide variety of stops and especially notable is the quite complete pedal division which includes three reed stops. There is also a tremulant, cymbelstern and glockenspiel. Perhaps a bit oddly to us, there is only one manual reed stop: an 8' trumpet:

<u>Oberwerk</u>		<u>Brustwerk</u>		<u>Pedal</u>	
Quintaton	16	Principal	8	Gross Untersatz	32
Principal	8	Viola da Gamba	8	Sub-Bass	16
Gemshorn	8	Gedackt	8	Violon-Bass	16
Gedackt	8	Kleingedackt	4	Principal	8
Quintaton	4	Octave	4	Posaune	16
Octave	4	Waldflöte	2	Trumpet	8
Mixture	VI ranks	Sesquialtera	IV ranks	Cornet-Bass	4
Cymbel	III ranks	Trumpet	8		

Tremulants, Cymbelstern, Glockenspiel (installed in 1715)

ADVENT

BWV 599 Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland *Saviour of the nations, come*

This is one of the most dissonant preludes in the collection. Look at the agonized chord in bar one, beat three. It's restless and all the semiquavers are present. Peter Williams sees an antecedent for the opening chord-breaking in Couperin's Prelude in G minor. We know that Bach admired (and copied) the music of Couperin and, of course, it was common practice to decorate simple homophonic keyboard passages by arpeggiating the notes. A piece which has a pleading quality and, despite the *forte* marking in the Novello edition, more suitably performed on a soft 8' flute, perhaps with a tremulant. The pedal overlaps the LH and so needs to be independent.

Bach wrote at least three other preludes on this chorale, including three remarkable ones in the 'Eighteen'. A musical picture of a restless world awaiting the Saviour, a theme taken up more than two hundred years later by Marcel Dupré in the first movement of his *Symphonie-Passion*. In this instance, the agitated movement (The world awaiting the Saviour) is built around the plainsong *Jesu redemptor omnium*.

BWV 600 Gott, durch deine Güte/Gottes Sohn ist kommen *God's Son is come*

A canon at the octave between the soprano and pedal parts results in some crunchy moments! The registration suggestions are by Bach but would not have been possible at Weimar as the pedal stopped at

e. Perhaps he played the pedal part an octave lower on a 4' stop. Notice the B-A-C-H motif in bar 16 which, as Peter Williams points out, occurs on the words 'in lowly guise'.

The alto part is a stream of unbroken quavers and all the tenor crotchets are present. The chorale is in 4/4 time and Bach's prelude is in triple time. The use of canon is often associated in Bach's mind with the idea of the law: the coming of Christ is not the replacement of the law, but its fulfilment.

BWV 601 Herr Christ, der ein'ge Gottes-Sohn *Lord Christ, the only Son of God*

Maybe the clue to this sparkling piece lies in the words 'morning star': the music is bright, light and 'star-like' which is thrown into particularly sharp relief by being surrounded on either side by much more severe movements. All semiquavers are present and the interplay between the three lower parts creates a mosaic of colour, disguising the basically very simple harmonies - compare this with the harmonic complexities of the previous prelude. A light registration of flutes at 8' 4' and 2' pitch, with an independent pedal is called for.

BWV 602 Lob sei dem allmächtigen Gott *Praise be to Almighty God*

The key word is 'praise'. The melody is the Gregorian *Conditor alme siderum* which Bach uses more as a template than as a literal basis for the soprano part (notice how the first two notes are reversed). At the end he adds a bar and a half (an 'amen') which rises to the highest note in the piece to end, unexpectedly, on a chord of A major. The inner parts are characterized by a dactylic figuration and the basically simple pedal part is decorated by a 3semiquaver figure which is easy to play with toes alone. A strong piece demanding a strong registration with, perhaps a 16' reed in the pedal.

CHRISTMAS

BWV 603 Puer natus in Bethlehem *A boy is born in Bethlehem*

A fascinating piece, and open to several interpretations. My own, for what it's worth, is that the 'rocking' figure, first heard in the alto of bar one, permeates the piece so much that it could be seen as the Virgin cradling her child, whilst the striding, purposeful pedal part is, maybe an allusion to the journey of the Magi, to which verse 4 of the hymn refers. Of even more interest is the fact that, despite its obvious downward tread, the pedal pattern is actually repeated higher and higher, leading to an eventual congestion of the parts in bars 8 and 9, before it descends. This creates a great deal of tension and, in Peter Williams's words 'the response to Christmas seems to be awe or fear rather than jollity.' Despite the *forte* marking in the Novello edition, this very intimate movement seems to call for soft flutes, with an independent pedal - absolutely essential unless the parts are to become completely confused with so many overlaps between the LH and pedal.

At this point, Bach intended to compose a prelude on Lob sei Gott in des Himmels Thron which he never completed.

BWV 604 Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ *Praised be thou, Jesu Christ*

Two manuals are specified and the RH has a decorated form of the melody, perhaps best played on a soft reed stop (perhaps with a slow tremulant), with an 8' flute for the LH and an independent pedal (no overlaps with the LH, but the pedal is required to play notes already sounded by the LH). The Novello edition mistranslates the word Gelobet as 'blessed': it should be 'praised'. I think that this prelude is best understood by starting with the final words - Kyrie eleison - 'Lord, have mercy'. The mood is obviously not one of praise, but rather penitence. All the semiquavers are present and the continuous movement of the two inner parts produces some quite startling accented dissonances. The pedal is designed for alternate-toe performance, keeping the semiquaver movement going where the two inner parts come to rest.

BWV 605 Der Tag, der ist so freudenreich *This is the day so full of joy*

The RH melody is hardly adorned at all and works well on a strong trumpet stop, with a strong enough combination of 8' 4' and 2' stops to stand against it in the LH. The pedal needs 16' 8' and 4' stops. 'This is the day so full of joy' starts the hymn and the striding pedal and the dactylic carillon-like LH figuration provide a musical 'alleluia'. The LH (alto and tenor) parts are actually quite limited in range and when (as in bar 11) the melody descends to E, they become squashed!

There are no fewer than eleven F naturals in this tiny G major movement, giving it a strong mixolydian feel. This, plus the fact that the final four bars were in tablature, along with the absence of a third in a number of the chords, point to the possibility of this being an earlier composition than others in the collection. There is another early prelude on this chorale (BWV 719) and although this represents a considerable advance, there are indications that this might be an earlier work which has been worked on for inclusion in the *Orgelbüchlein*. There's also the rather halting effect produced by giving the pedal a minim, along with the melody note, at the end of each line of the hymn. It's the kind of piece a young organist might produce to 'show off' a bit to a Christmas congregation!

BWV 606 Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her *From heaven on high I come*

'From Heaven above to earth I come' and the overall descent from d' to d of the hymn-tune is mirrored in the prelude. The *suspirans* figuration (alto bar 1, beat 1) becomes a *leitmotif* for the flurry of angels' wings in the inner parts where the tune has been extended in bars 3 and 8. The syncopated pedal in bar 9, in tenths with the chorale melody avoids any monotony deriving from the quaver pedal figure which accompanies the first three lines. The juxtaposition of C sharps and C naturals in the final bar and a half is probably of no particular significance, but always sounds superb! All semiquavers are present.

As with so many of the *Orgelbüchlein* preludes an independent pedal is needed. The 'glad tidings of great joy' suggest a bright combination of 8' 4' and 2' stops for the manual (only one manual is necessary), perhaps with a mixture as well. The pedal could do with a soft 16' reed and flues of 8' 4' and perhaps 2'. Bach returned to this melody at the end of his life to compose the canonic variations (BWV 769) where his contrapuntal mastery is complete.

BWV 607 Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schaar *From heaven came the angel-host*

The source of the melody is a bit confusing. It is actually 'Puer natus in Bethlehem' (on which we have already had a prelude) and the tenor part of this is actually the tune of *Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schaar*. In this prelude Bach seems to use an amalgam of both as the basis for the soprano line. Be that as it may, there seem to be two clear images here: the rushing and beating of the angels' wings in the inner scalar parts and the purposeful downward tread of the pedal suggesting God's coming down to earth as man. Both manual and pedal parts encompass a very large range: the pedals from CC-c (two octaves) and the manuals from GG to g1 (three octaves).

This is one of the most difficult of all the *Orgelbüchlein* preludes and the distribution of the inner parts suggests that it should be played on one manual. This results in uncomfortable bumps between the hands so it is probably best played on two manuals, but with the second manual coupled to the first and without any stops of its own. It is very effective when played on a very soft 8' and 2' (or 8' and 1') stops. The pedal should be independent with a soft 16' and 8' stop (or 16' and a soft 4') sufficient and prompt-speaking enough to carry its remorseless tread without sounding ponderous.

BWV 608 In dulci jubilo *In sweet joy*

Perhaps the best-known of all Christmas melodies, almost every composer down the ages has had a go at it but no-one apart from JSB has managed not only to put the tune in canon, but (until bar 25) the inner parts as well! The canon begins at a bar's distance and then in bars 26-27 is at two bar's distance. The

imagery of joyful Christmas bells is emphasised by the clashing of duplets against triplets in the inner parts and can be further enhanced by the use of the organ's own bells, the cymbelstern.

Registration needs to make the canon quite clear: perhaps 8' and 2' flutes for the manuals with an 8' reed in the pedals (or, more likely, a 4' reed played on octave lower, as Bach did not have a top F# on his organ).

BWV 609 Lobt Gott, ihr Christen, allzugleich *Praise God, all Christians*

A straightforward harmonization of the chorale. All semiquavers are present and the sense of exaltation is heightened by the 'purposeful striding' of the pedal part. Interesting is the treatment of line four - *And gives to us his Son* - notice the descending melody and rising pedal until the two converge in bar 8: a tiny picture of God and man reconciled by the Incarnation. Pedal needs to be independent to avoid playing notes already sounding in LH. The key word is 'praise' indicating use of a *pleno* registration.

BWV 610 Jesu, meine Freude *Jesu, my joy*

Freude (joy) is the key, but an awesome, fearful joy. The melody is stated almost without decoration in the soprano and, of course, the repeat is essential. All semiquavers are present. The three lower parts move in a wide variety of shapes, at first sight without any obvious pattern, but the pedal is a kind of ostinato and, very unusually, notice how it carries over between two lines of the chorale melody in bar 4. Taken on its own, the pedal line is frequently angular (bar 1, bar 4, bar 6, bar 10, bar 13). It's a remarkable page of music, because it avoids all the usual stock-in formulae of the Baroque composer and Bach invents a whole new range of patterns for the three lower parts. The other amazing aspect is the way that, within the slow harmonic rhythm of four crotchet pulses per bar, Bach creates an almost kaleidoscopic variety of rapidly-shifting harmonic coloration, changing sometimes three or four times for each crotchet. The overall effect is one of intense longing and restlessness. This is a joy coloured by the fear mentioned in verse 1 of the hymn: *Oh how long, how long is my heart afraid and longs for you!*

It's one of several *Orgelbüchlein* preludes which works either loud or soft. My own preference is for a soft 8' flute (maybe with a slow tremulant). The pedals must be independent and need a soft 16' and 8'. This tiny movement is a miracle of compression. If Bach had written nothing else, this page alone would warrant our enduring respect. It is, along with *O Mensch, beweine*, the peak of his achievement in the *Orgelbüchlein*.

BWV 611 Christum wir sollen loben schon *We should indeed praise Christ*

This is unique in the *Orgelbüchlein* for placing the chorale in the alto (this isn't entirely true, of course, as the alto *contains* the cf in the canonic settings of BWV 618 and 633/4). You can take this placing as symbolic either of the Virgin carrying the as-yet unborn Saviour in her womb, or else as a symbol of Christ pervading all. The ancient hymn *A solis ortus cardine* (from east to west, from shore to shore) suggests the latter might have been in Bach's mind. The range of the parts is huge: the manuals range from DD - c1 and the pedals from CCC-c: again, a picture of Christ, the sun at the centre of the universe, reaching to every extremity.

There are so many features to note that it is hard to know where to start: the pedal has a curious syncopated figuration with frequent octave displacements, the soprano and tenor lines, on the other hand, move largely by step in great arcs, sweeping up and down the keyboard in graceful scalic figurations. The long sustained note at the end of the chorale is accompanied (bars 14 and 15) by the intensification of the texture and the addition of a fifth part. Whether this additional part should be played by the LH or pedal is not clear: if a 16' stop is used it is probably best to play it with the LH.

It is, I suppose, a picture of the whole creation at the centre of which is its creator in the form of a tiny baby, from whom every living thing takes its being. As with BWV 610, this is a truly visionary

miniature. Registration is a problem. Obviously only manual is needed and the pedals must be independent. There is an argument for treating the LH as the true bass and playing the pedal part on a 4' stop, but my inclination is to pick a combination of warm-sounding stops which allow the clarity of the complex texture to shine through - an 8' Dulciana, 4' Flute and Nazard, for instance - with a very soft 16' flue in the pedal and also a soft 8' manual reed coupled through. My own preference with this registration would be to play the upper pedal part in bars 14 and 15 with the LH.

BWV 612 Wir Christenleut *We Christian people*

The 12/8 time-signature is not authentic: it should be C. This is a ritornello with a characteristic figuration in the tenor of bar 1 which permeates the whole movement.

We Christian people now have joy because Christ for our solace is born man, and has redeemed us. Who trusts in this and believes firmly, shall not be lost. The movement is an affirmation of faith as witnessed by the confident, striding pedal part. (Such pedal lines invariably symbolize the triumph of faith and the trampling down of death and satan).

It's interesting that the pedal is silent for the words *and has redeemed us, Who trusts in this*, making a telling return at *and believes firmly shall not be lost*. Also worth pointing out is the very flexible way in which Bach uses both the pedal quaver pattern and the manual ritornello: neither imposes a formula on the music but both act as servants of the composer. See how often each of the four big beats in the bar is actually a discord, resolving on the ensuing quaver beat and helping to propel the music forward in such a powerful way.

A confident and bold piece, a manual *pleno* is needed (up to mixture) with a strong 16' reed stop in the pedals as well as 8' and 4' stops.

BWV 613 Helft mir Gottes Güte preisen *Help me to glorify God's goodness*

Help me to glorify God's goodness. This is probably the last of the *Orgelbüchlein* preludes to be composed - maybe as late as 1740, some 27 years after the project was begun. The second half of the hymn gives the clue to the *affekt*: ... *be ever thankful to him, especially at the time when the year draws to an end*. The mood is reflective and thoughtful with maybe a regretful glance back at the year now nearly past.

The piece is highly motivic: notice how the first four notes of the inner parts mirror the first line of the chorale and how the downward movement of the second line of the chorale gives the shape of the second half of this motif. The pedal part is just as melodic, using the first part of the motif, before fulfilling its customary bass role. This notion of using the contour of the melody to produce that of the inner parts is not unique to Bach - Buxtehude is a master of the technique. The falling scales of the second part of the prelude seem to be an apt reflection of the fall of the year - unusually replicated twice in the pedal part (bars 11 and 13).

The key, too, is unusual, being the key of two of Bach's masterpieces: the B minor Mass and the great organ Prelude and fugue in that key. As with G minor and Mozart, this key seems to have been particularly special for Bach.

The *forte* marking in the Novello edition seems inappropriate. Such a reflective piece seems to need a gentle combination of, perhaps, 8' and 4' flutes, plus a nazard to give definition to the sometimes low-lying LH. The pedal must be independent and might be played on a soft 16' stop coupled to 4' and 2' flutes on another manual.

END OF THE YEAR and NEW YEAR

BWV 614 Das alte Jahr vergangen ist *The old year is past and gone*

Like BWV 622 *O Mensch, bewein'*, this is a highly-ornamented coloratura decoration of the chorale melody. Of the two, 614 is the more intensely chromatic. It's interesting that the repeat of the first line of the hymn is treated differently in the prelude. In fact, it's hard to see how Bach could have made the setting more chromatic if he had tried. On one level, it's an obvious lament for the passing of the old year, but, being hugely more intense than BWV 613, I wonder whether there isn't another reason for a level of chromaticism which almost borders on the atonal at times?

Elsewhere in the *Orgelbüchlein*, we can see that chromaticism is a symbol of sin. BWV 637 *Durch Adams Fall* is the most obvious example, where the sinuous inner parts are surely a graphic picture of the serpent tempting Eve, whilst the angular leaping pedal part is the Creator kicking Adam out of paradise. We can see it again in BWV 620 *Christus, der uns selig macht* where the chromaticism produces an extreme level of dissonance: Christ makes us holy, but the purification of evil is achieved only at the cost of His own life. Maybe the clue lies in the text of the hymn: *We thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, that in such great danger you preserved us this year so graciously* or, again, in verse 3: *from false teaching and idolatry preserve us, Lord, and stand by us*. This is, then, perhaps a graphic picture of the sin and evil which has surrounded us during the year now nearly flown away and a pleading (look at the final bar) for protection in the year ahead.

Two manuals are needed and the tempo is clearly very slow if the complexities of the coloratura writing are to be successfully negotiated. A soft 8' flute with a slow tremulant for the RH and perhaps a soft 8' string in the LH. The pedal doesn't actually need to be independent, so a soft 16' coupled to the LH would suffice.

BWV 615 In dir ist Freude *With Thee is joy*

Freude (joy) is the keyword. Notable features of this highly original piece include a tiny carillon-like ostinato in the pedal which occurs twenty times. There is a very wide pitch range - the manual parts range from DD - a¹ and the pedal from DDD - d; an exact repeat (bars 18 (starting with the LH) to 29 are an exact copy of the opening); a heavy reliance on simple I - I - V7 harmony in the first nine bars (and, of course, in the repeat); the chorale melody is used as a 'kit of parts' and is not stated complete: motifs from the melody are used to fabricate small sections but the melody is not invariably in the soprano part; bars 51-62 are a repeat of bars 39-50.

The piece includes the only pedal solos in the *Orgelbüchlein* (bars 8 and 25) and also pedal trills in bars 48 and 60. In fact, the pedal part is almost uniquely independent of the manual writing throughout.

The *affekt* is overwhelming exuberance and if the choral melody is quite lost at times it hardly matters in the overall *joie de vivre*. This is another piece (cf *In dulci jubilo*) where the use of the cymbelstern seems appropriate. Both hands should be on the same manual and obviously the pedal must be independent. A bright registration of flutes at 8' 4' and 2' with a light mixture would seem to be the best way of ensuring that the manual parts are still clear even when pitched low, with pedal flues at 16', 8' and 4' pitches, with perhaps a soft 4' reed and mixture as well.

THE FEAST OF THE PURIFICATION

BWV 616 Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin *With peace and joy I now depart*

A journey made in peace and calm: the words of the hymn are Luther's metrical *Nunc dimittis*. The aged Simeon had been promised that he would not see death until he had met the Son of God. The plodding pedals point up the slow, shuffling steps of the old man. Some commentators have seen the upward-movement as signifying joy but I wonder whether the real purpose is to convey a sense of purposeful movement – a journey which may culminate in fulfilment rather than joy. Gentle 8' flute stops (perhaps with a slow tremulant) would seem best suited to this very intimate movement. Bach does not specify two manuals.

BWV 617 Herr Gott, nun schleuss den Himmel auf *Lord God, now unlock heaven*

Another hymn referencing the departing Simeon ('Lord God, now open wide Thy heav'n/My parting hour is near' and, later: 'Enough I've suffer'd here/Weary and sad'). Bach's treatment is vivid and highly illustrative of the hymn text: the restless left hand semiquavers, ascending and descending; the syncopated pedal quavers; the curious two-part cantus firmus in the right hand (broadening out to three parts in the final bar and a half) which seems to float over the agitated accompaniment; the use of three different time-signatures for the three lines (C; 24/16 & 12/8) all combine to present a picture of a soul longing to depart this earthly life while the large range of the left hand part (GG-f¹) is, perhaps suggested by 'open wide Thy heav'n'.

PASSIONTIDE

BWV 618 O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig *O Lamb of God, all holy*

There are seven preludes making up the Passiontide section of the Orgelbüchlein, of which four make use of canon. Canon signifies divine law and, by implication, fulfilment of the law by our Lord's sacrifice on the Cross. In BWV 618 the canon at the fifth is a statement of the choral melody between the inner (alto) part and the pedal at 8' pitch. The falling accompanimental figure is an indication of pity or grief.

BWV 619 Christe, du Lamm Gottes *Lamb of God, our Saviour*

The shortest prelude in the collection is also one of the most intense and, in a mere sixteen bars, Bach gives us a perfect picture of the Divine humiliation. This time the falling figuration is almost constant whilst the canon, between the soprano and bass parts, is at the twelfth. The resulting texture is widely-spaced signifying, perhaps, the gulf between Christ's divinity and his descent into human sorrow, whilst the level of harmonic dissonance reflects the pain of our Lord's sacrifice.

BWV 620 Christus, der uns selig macht *See the Lord of life and light*

If the previous prelude was a sad reflection on the cost of Divine love, this, the most dissonant of all the preludes, offers a different perspective: that of the sheer cosmic energy necessary to purge the sins of mankind and to harrow hell. The canon, between the outer parts, is at the octave and Bach makes no attempt to soften the inevitable clashes, giving us a striking picture of the battle between good and evil. The victory is won, but the cost is terrible.

BWV 621 Da Jesus an dem Kreuze stund *When on the Cross the Saviour hung*

Hermann Keller, in his study *The Organ Works of Bach*, describes this single page of music as 'a Lamentation of Christ' worthy of the Passions of Dürer'. There is no canon here: the law has been fulfilled; 'it is finished'. What we are left with are three tiny musical symbols: the four-note pedal pattern which traces the outline of the cross and the ensuing falling figure, depicting the slumped and lifeless

body hanging there whilst the rising semiquaver figure in the accompaniment offers a picture of Mary and the beloved disciple raising their hands in despair.

BWV 622 O Mensch, bewein dein' Sünde gross *O men, bewail your grievous sins*

This is by far the longest single movement of the Orgelbüchlein preludes and, without doubt, one of the finest in this or any other collection. The chorale melody, played on a solo stop or combination, is highly decorated and, at times, almost disappears beneath the halo of ornamentation. Perhaps the sheer length of the movement itself is a metaphor for the long hours of agony our Lord hung on the Cross. The final three bars, with their intense chromaticism and dramatic shift into a key which the mean-tone temperament of Bach's day would have made for severe discomfort, are a perfect picture of Christ's words from the Cross: 'It is finished. Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.' *And He gave up the ghost.*

BWV 623 Wir danken dir, Herr Jesu Christ *We thank thee, Lord Jesus Christ*

This short and joyful movement may seem a bit incongruous after the splendour of *O Mensch, bewein*, but the clue lies in the text of the chorale on which it is based: To Thee, Lord Jesus. thanks we give./Who died for us, that we might live./And through thy holy precious blood/Has made us righteous before God. The 'joy' motif in the pedal part occurs no fewer than fifteen times and invites comparison with the similar 'carillon' motif in the earlier *In dir ist Freude*: just as the New Year affords an opportunity to open a new chapter, so the death of Christ on the Cross offers atonement and the opportunity of a new relationship with God. We do well to recall that Bach's library contained far more theological books than musical ones!

BWV 624. Hilf Gott, dass mir's gelinge *Help me, O God, to praise thee*

The final Passiontide prelude returns to the use of canon, this time at the fifth between the two upper parts. Two manuals are needed as the left hand part, ranging over more than two octaves, frequently rises above the right. Likewise, the steady tread of the pedal part, which rises above that of the last hand, needs to be independent. Another translation of the German suggests that the chorale is a request for *success*, which, of course, comes as a result of obeying God's law, hence the use of canon. The chorale melody, in canon, flows above the steady plod of the pedals, signifying the journey of the faithful pilgrim, the continuous, often chromatic, left hand semiquavers depict the worldly temptations which are only finally overcome in the final bar.

At this point in the manuscript it is clear that Bach intended six further preludes on Passiontide chorales but apart from a bar and a half of the second, they were never completed. The missing preludes are:

O Jesu, wie ist dein Gesalt
O Traurigkeit, O Herzeleid
Allein nach dir, Herr Jesu Christ, verlanget mich
O wir armen Sünder
Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen
Nun gibt mein Jesus gute Nacht.

EASTER

BWV 625 Christ lag in Todesbanden *Christ lay in the bands of death*

Hermann Keller sees the semiquaver motif which pervades this short but powerful movement as symbolising the rolling-away of the heavy stone from the tomb. More obvious, perhaps, is the very close 'all-encompassing' harmony representing the tightly-bound burial cloths.

BWV 626 Jesus Christus, unser Heiland *Jesus Christ, our Saviour*

The insistent rhythmic syncopations beneath the chorale melody again create a tight, knotted impression: possibly a further musical picture of the burial cloths, but also a reference to the third line of the hymn: Die Sünd hat er gefangen (*Our sins has He imprisoned*).

BWV 627 Christ ist erstanden *Christ is risen*

Taken together, this is the most substantial of all the preludes in the Orgel-büchlein, being in three distinct sections and reflecting the three verses of this great anonymous twelfth century Easter hymn. Keller points out that the first section with its powerful syncopated ostinato not only creates great energy but also symbolizes the ‘cutting’ of the bonds of death (‘syncope’ means ‘cutting up’). The second verse is equally energetic but gentler, reflecting the words of the second stanza of the hymn: *Had he not rysen agayne/ We had been lost, this is playne*. The third verse is a joyful Easter alleluia.

BWV 628 Erstanden ist der heilig Christ *The blessed Christ is risen today*

There’s not much doubt about what is going on here. The hymn text is peppered with alleluias and the mood of exultation finds expression in the upward-sweeping ‘suspiciens’ in the alto and tenor lines and the defiant pedal strides ‘trampling down death’.

BWV 629 Erschienen ist der herrliche Tag *The day hath dawned - the day of days*

Intended by Bach for performance on two manuals, the chorale melody is stated on a powerful reed stop and echoed in canon at the octave by the pedals. The left hand maintains an energetic rhythmic ostinato throughout. A perfect miniature depicting the arrival of ‘the joyful day’.

BWV 630 Heut triumphieret Gottes Sohn *Today God’s Son has triumphed*

The Novello edition places this as an Ascensiontide prelude but it is every bit as appropriate for Eastertide as the text of the hymn makes plain: Today God’s only-begotten Son/Arose from death and triumph won/ Alleluia, alleluia! The pedal *basso ostinato* is a powerful image of Christ bursting forth from the tomb, having destroyed the sting of death. The final pedal flourish, ranging over almost the entire compass of Bach’s pedalboard is an ecstatic celebration of our Lord’s triumphant resurrection.

At this point Bach inserts the titles of four preludes which, in the event, were not written:

Gen Himmel aufgefahen ist
Nun freut euch, Gottes Kinder, all
Komm, Heiliger Geist, erfüll die Herzen deiner Gläubigen
Komm Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott

PENTECOST

BWV 631 Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, heiliger Geist *Come, Holy Ghost, Creator, come*

This tiny piece is the sole representative of Pentecost in the Orgelbüchlein although Bach did plan preludes on several more seasonal chorales which were not completed. BWV 667 is a much-expanded version of this miniature, and now forms part of the collection known as The ‘Eighteen’ Chorales. There is division of opinion as to whether 631 is a splinter from 667 or whether 667 is an expansion of 631, but both begin in exactly the same way. The chorale melody is in the soprano part, the two inner parts have a quicksilver quality illustrating, perhaps, the ephemeral character of the Holy Spirit, whilst the oddly-placed pedal interjections on the third quaver of each beat might be intended to represent the third person of the Trinity.

The delicate and otherworldliness of this passing encounter with the Holy Spirit might be best conveyed by the use of 4' pitch only.

The autograph indicates that Bach intended four more preludes at this point:

Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist
Spiritus Sancti gratia/Des Heiligen Geistes reiche Gnad
O Heilger Geist, du göttliches Feur
O Heiliger Geist, o heiliger Gott

The intention to compose at least six further pieces marking the birthday of the Church shows the importance which Bach attached to this season of the Church's year. That he only managed to complete one (and that, a mere eight bars in length) is a great loss.

BEFORE THE SERMON

The Lutheran Church sermon was not a five-minute homily and frequently lasted for an hour or more and occupied a prime position in the service, hence the need for a short hymn before and after the preacher mounts the pulpit.

BWV 632 Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend *Lord Jesus, turn toward us*

The arpeggio nature of the opening notes of the chorale melody is cleverly reflected in the accompanying parts which also reflect the notion of 'turning':

BWV 633/634 Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier *Blessed Jesus, we are here*

Bach includes two versions of the chorale which featured in most Lutheran services. Both have soprano and alto parts in canon at the fifth (a reference to the text: *Thy holy law fulfilling*) resulting in some sharp dissonances and designated for performance on two manuals. The second version (BWV 634) omits some of the decoration of BWV 633 but includes the composer's direction that the right hand part should be *forte* and the left *piano*. The harmony of both versions is virtually identical.

Here follow blank pages for the nine preludes which Bach intended to compose:

Gott der Vater wohn uns bei
Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr (The Lutheran Gloria)
Der du bist drei in Einigkeit
Gelobet sei der Herr, de Gott Israel
Meine Seel erhebt den Herren
Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir
Es stein vor Gottes Throne
Herr Gott, dich loben wir
O Herre Gott, dein göttlich Wort

THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

BWV 635. Dies sind die Heiligen zehn Gebot *These are the holy ten commandments*

The distinctive 'hammering' figuration, which appears no fewer than twenty-five times in just twenty bars of music, is derived from the repeated opening notes of the chorale melody. Perhaps this is an oblique reference to 'Thou shalt not'!

There follow three more blank pages:

Mensch, willst du leben seliglich
Herr Gott, erhalt uns für und für
Wir glauben all an einen Gott (The Lutheran Creed)

THE LORD'S PRAYER

BWV 636 Vater unser im Himmelreich *Our Father in heaven*

Bach has left us several preludes on the melody for the Lutheran Lord's Prayer of which this is both the shortest and yet the most intimate. All the semiquavers are present and it's worth noting that the little semiquaver figuration which dominates the accompanying parts is actually an inversion of the opening notes of the chorale.

Ten blank pages:

Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam (Baptism)
Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir
Erbarm dich mein, o Herre Gott
Jesu, der du meine Seele
Allein zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ
Ach Gott und Herr
Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut
Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder
Wo soll ich fliehen hin
Wir haben schwerlich

CONFESSION

BWV 637 Durch Adams Fall ist ganz verderbt *When Adam fell, we all fell*

This is one of the most remarkable of all the preludes and paints a graphic picture of the fall. The intense chromaticism indicates the arrival of evil into paradise; the slithering alto part is the tempting serpent and the dramatic pedal part is, presumably, God kicking Adam out of the Garden of Eden with ten-league boots.

ABSOLUTION

BWV 638 Es ist das Heil uns kommen her *Salvation is coming to us*

Here is the antidote to the sin so perfectly depicted in the previous prelude - A saving health to us is brought/Of grace and love begotten. Bach decorates the chorale melody with joyous semiquavers. The wedge shape between the falling left hand and rising pedal part at the beginning symbolizes the reconciliation available from Christ's intercession.

Thirteen blank pages:

Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns den Gotteszorn wandt
Gott sei gelobet und gebenedeiet
Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt
Jetzt komm ich als ein armer Gast
O Jesu, du edle Gabe
Wir danken dir, Herr Jesu Christ, dass du das Lämmlein worden bist
Ich weiss ein Blümlein hübsch und fein
Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g mein
Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren

Wohl dem, der in Gottes Furcht steht
Wo Gott zum Haus nicht gibt sein Gunst
Was mein Gott will, das gescheh allzeit
Kommt her zu mir, spricht Gottes Sohn

SUPPLICATION

BWV 639 Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ *I call to you, Lord Jesus Christ*

This hauntingly beautiful prelude is a plea for mercy: *Lord, hear the voice of my complaint*. The first half is richly ornamented whilst the second half presents the chorale melody entirely unadorned. It would seem likely that Bach intended to maintain the same degree of ornamentation throughout but never got around to it. This is the only trio movement in the collection.

Six blank pages:

Weltlich Ehr und zeitlich Gut
Von Gott will ich nicht lassen
Wer Gott vertraut
Wie's Gott gefällt, so gefällt mir's auch
O Gott, du frommer Gott
In dich hab ich gehoffet, Herr

HYMNS OF CONSOLATION

BWV 640 In dich hab' ich gehoffet, Herr *I have put my trust in thee, Lord*

This is a sombre picture of the pilgrim's trust in God which bears comparison with the earlier setting of Vater unser. The repeated pattern of two semiquavers and two quavers signifies God's constancy. Bach marks the score *alio Modo* because the choral melody he uses is the minor key version. His version of the major key version can be found at BWV 712, which appears amongst the miscellaneous large chorale preludes.

One blank page:

Mag ich Unglück nicht widerstahn

BWV 614 Wenn wir in Höchsten Nöten sein *When we are in deepest need*

Rather like the prelude encountered earlier, *O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde gross*, Bach decorates the simple chorale melody with a vast amount of decoration, to produce a miniature masterpiece of great intensity, reflecting the words of the hymn: *When in the hour of utmost need/We know not where to look for aid . . . Then this our comfort is alone/That we may meet before Thy throne*. The same melody was used for *Für deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit* and Bach's chorale-prelude, which is an extended version of BWV 614, was Bach's final composition, dictated to his son-in-law, Altnikol. As with the *Art of Fugue*, this was left unfinished at his death.

Twelve blank pages:

An Wasserflüssen Babylon
Warum betrübst du dich, mein Herz
Frisch auf, mein Seel, verzage nicht
Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid
Ach Gott, erhöre mein Seufzen und Wehklagen

So wünsch ich nun eine gute Nacht
Ach lieben Christen, seid getrost
Wen dich Unglück tut greifen an
Keinen hat Gott verlassen
Gott ist mein Heil, mein Hülff und Trost
Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan, kein einig Mensch ihn tadeln kann
Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan, es bleibt gerecht sein Wille

BWV 642 Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten *If thou but suffer God to guide thee*

This is a powerful and confident setting. The final two lines of the hymn on which it is based provide the clues as to why Bach chose this particular treatment: *Who trusts in God's unchanging love/Builds on the rock that nought can move*. There is nothing timid here!

Seventeen blank pages:

Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein
Es spricht der Unweisen Mund wohl
Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott
Es woll uns Gott genädig sein
Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit
Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält
Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern
Wie nach einer Wasserquelle
Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort
Lass mich dein sein und bleiben
Gib Fried, o frommer, treuer Gott
Du Friedfürst, Herr Jesu Christ
O grosser Gott von Macht
Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist
Herr Jesu Christ, wahr Mensch und Gott
Mitten wir im Leben sind
Alle Menschen müssen sterben

BWV 643 Alle Menschen müssen sterben *All men must die*

This is one of the most beautiful of all the preludes in the Orgelbüchlein. Although Bach does not specify two manuals, the use of a solo stop for the unadorned chorale melody seems appropriate. The gentle rocking movement of the accompanying lines contribute to the mood of overwhelming serenity and repose.

Twenty-seven blank pages:

Valet will ich dir geben
Nun lasst uns den Leib begraben
Christus, der ist mein Leben
Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr
Auf meinen lieben Gott
Herr Jesu Christ, ich weiss gar wohl
Mach's mit mir, Gott, nach deiner Güte
Herr Jesu Christ, meins Lebens Licht
Mein Wallfahrt ich vollendet hab
Gott hat das Evangelium
Ach Gott, tu dich erbarmen

Gott des Himmels und der Erden
Ich dank dir, lieber Herre
Aus meines Herzens Grunde
Ich dank dir schon
Das walt mein Gott
Christ, der du bist Tag und Licht
Werde munter, mein Gemüte
Nun ruhen alle Wälder
Danket dem Herrn, denn er ist sehr Freundlich
Nun lasst uns Gott dem Herren
Lobet den Herren, den er ist sehr freundlich
Singen wir aus Herzens Grund
Gott Vater, der du deine Sonn
Jesu meines Herzens Freud
Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen

BWV 644 Ach wie nichtig, ach wie flüchtig *O how brief, O how fleeting*

In this final chorale Bach paints a picture of the transitory nature of life. Hermann Keller sums it up perfectly: 'The *quasi-pizzicato* bass symbolizes the 'futility' of human existence; the inner parts, passing by, shadowlike, its transitoriness - a *chiaroscuro* like an etching by Rembrandt.'

Five blank pages:

Ach, was ist doch unser Leben
Allenthalben, wo ich gehe
Hast du dein, Jesu dein Angesicht gänzlich verborgen/Soll ich denn, Jesu, mein Leben in Trauern beschliessen
Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig/O Jesu, du edle Gabe
Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele.

The *Orgelbüchlein* is a joy for life and arguably the finest introduction to both the art of playing the organ and that of musical composition.

Editions of the *Orgelbüchlein*:

Peters	Bach Orgelwerke V (Nr. 244a) Edited Straube, 1928, revised Keller 1952
Novello	Bach - Organ works Book 15 Edited Atkins, revised Emery 1957
Dover	Bach - Gesellschaft Edition (published 1970)
Bärenreiter	Bach - Orgelwerke Band 1(BA 5171) Edited Löhlein 1984

Further reading:

Grace, H	The Organ Works of Bach, published by Novello 1922
Keller, H	The Organ Works of Bach (translated from German by Helen Hewitt) published by Peters 1967
Williams, P	The Organ Music of J.S. Bach, published by Cambridge University Press, 1980, 2003

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