

NEPA Bach Festival Organ Recital

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First Presbyterian Church, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania

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Chaconne in D minor, BWV 1004..... Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)
from Violin Partita No. 2 *arranged for organ by* Henri Messerer (1838-1923)

A *Chaconne* is a dance in triple meter, with its roots in Latin America. Once established in France, however, it developed into a slower dance that was more dignified, often for instruments alone. It was in this form that it spread to Germany and England, and composers found great potential for expression in the form. Early on it was linked with the Sarabande, and therefore has the distinct character of an accent on the second beat of the triple meter. This monumental piece, the final movement of BWV 1004, is longer than the four previous movements combined. Regarded as one of the masterpieces of the violin repertoire, it has drawn the respect and admiration of composers and performers alike. The four-bar theme serves as the impetus for the sixty-four variations that follow. Regarding the *Chaconne*, Johannes Brahms wrote in a letter to Clara Schumann, "On one stave, for a small instrument, the man writes a whole world of the deepest thoughts and most powerful feelings. If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind." Yes, as Bach conceived it, it is for violin solo, but esteemed French organist Henri Messerer who held the post at the Cathedral of Marseille for many years, thankfully decided to arrange the piece for organ, realizing the harmonies in a manner most brilliantly suited for the instrument.

Fugues No. 1, 5, and 2..... Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
from Six Fugues on the name B-A-C-H, Op. 60

During the first half of the 19th century, J. S. Bach began to assume his rightful place as a central figure in the history of European music after years of neglect. The ongoing Bach Revival had no supporters more devoted than the three great romantic composers who were born in 1810, and who all helped to further the cause in various ways — Mendelssohn through his conducting of the choral works and his influential performances on the organ, and Schumann and Liszt through their involvement in the founding of the Bach-Gesellschaft in 1850, as well as their own performances and arrangements of Bach's music. Both Schumann and Liszt were also inspired to compose a tribute to Bach in the form of works based on the four-note musical theme derived in German from the letters of his name (in English, B flat–A–C–B natural).

"The work which, I believe, will longest outlive my others" was Schumann's own verdict on his Six Fugues on B-A-C-H. He completed this monumental work in November 1845 after working on it for almost a year, striving to "make it worthy of the great name it bears". Schumann is generally regarded as a quintessential romantic composer, and this makes his achievement in these fugues all the more remarkable: this is a work of supreme contrapuntal mastery that recreates and redefines the discipline and structural logic of Bach's music, but in 19th century terms.

The slow Fugue No. 1 introduces the four-note B-A-C-H theme, and with beautifully constructed and colorful counterpoint, builds in intensity until the rather pillow-like landing at the end. In Fugue No. 5, the severely chromatic theme is transformed into a dancing staccato scherzo of absolute delight and delicacy. For Fugue No. 2 Schumann compresses the four-note theme and creates a new subject by adding some baroque-like 16th note figures (which compare quite nicely with the Fugue from the "famous" Toccata & Fugue in D minor). With propelling dotted rhythms and exciting virtuoso writing for both hands and feet, this is the most energetic and least academically-bound of the Six Fugues, and represents the composer in his most fiery and heroic mood.

Passacaglia quasi Toccata sul tema B-A-C-H Miloš Sokola (1913-1976)

Clearly moving a bit forward to the 20th century, Sokola uses the same theme as did Schumann, and actually as J. S. Bach himself used on occasion. For instance, by using this theme in his own *Die Kunst der Fuge* (BWV 1080), the *Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch*, (BWV 769), and a number of others, he achieved what many musicians have aspired to — he literally became the music he was composing. Miloš Sokola was a Czech musician who worked most of his life as a violinist in the Prague National Theatre orchestra. His fascinating piece pays respect not only to J. S. Bach himself and the well-known passacaglia form of the Baroque era, but also to the *tradition* of paying respect to Bach in music, as has been done by Schumann, Liszt, Reger, Ginastera, and others.

Two Lenten Chorales..... Johann Sebastian Bach

Ach Gott vom Himmel sieh darein (BWV 741)

Ah, God, look down from the heavens and have mercy upon us

Individually transmitted chorales are sometimes referred to as miscellaneous chorales, giving labels to those many of Bach's chorale settings that are not part of a larger group or set. This title is by no means meant to lessen the interest or quality of these amazing creations. This particular chorale is likely an early work, modeled to a degree after that of Böhm, Buxtehude and/or Pachelbel. The tune (cantus firmus) is found in the pedal (double-pedal near the end) in sustained notes with successive phrases separated by interludes. But it's the harmonic colors with at times jarring dissonances that are fascinating — extreme and daring, perhaps daunting, truly an example of pushing the envelope to its very limit!

O Mensch, beweine deine Sünde groß (BWV 622)

O mankind, mourn your great sins

The *Orgelbüchlein* is one of Bach's most familiar collections composed around 1713-1716 at the end of his time in Weimar, even though his signature reads "Capellmeister to the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen." The *Orgelbüchlein* is simultaneously a compositional treatise, a collection of liturgical organ music, an organ method, and a theological statement. (*Stinson, p. 25, Orgelbüchlein*) A two-line dedication in Bach's hand on the title page reads "to the highest God to praise him, and to my neighbor for his self-instruction . . . wherein the beginning organist may learn to perform chorales of every sort and also acquire facility in the use of the pedals . . ." Indeed, in this group of chorale-preludes, the pedals are treated in a fully obbligato manner so the feet are no longer considered an add-on, but are given equal-footing with the keyboard parts. When Bach set out to compose this *Little Organ Book*, he wrote the titles of 161 different chorale melodies for 164 settings on 92 sheets of paper which were about 6 x 7.5 inches. Only 46 pieces were completed, with one left as a fragment. The first 33 works follow the order of the liturgical year, beginning with Advent (*de tempore*). The remaining 13 settings relate to the Christian life (*omne tempore*). Since Bach accepted the new job as court musician for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen in 1717, he was no longer required to play such music, and therefore never completed the book.

A highly ornamented chorale setting with coloratura that is unmatched, 'O Mensch' is perhaps one of the best known and loved of all the chorales in this collection. This aria for keyboard is literally filled with imagery and depiction — melancholy, sighing, solemnity, stretching or lengthening, and eternity. Its harmonic language is without question the most complex, colorful, and haunting of any other chorale, and most often these harmonic colorations occur at the moment of a textual emphasis — sins, cross, lament, etc. A marvel that will remain hidden from the listener is a quote of the chorale 'Vom Himmel hoch' as Bach did also in 'Christe, du Lamm Gottes;' the reference is thought to represent Christ's Incarnation amid his Passion (of course, this happens in measure 14 which is the number that is Bach's signature: B(2) + A(1) + C(3) + H(8) = 14, and again in measure 20 where the text is "He bore the heavy burden of our sins"). The next to last measure is some of the most powerful and daring of any of Bach's writing — the use of a C-flat major chord in the key of E-flat. This coloration happens at the very same

junction in the *St. John Passion* and again (recycled) in the *St. Matthew Passion*. The right hand coloratura is given to execute a virtual catalogue of Baroque ornamentation, both written out and in symbol notation. This is a unique, startling, magnificent work. In addition to the tutorial on ornamentation, this piece is a lesson to the organ student in patience, since the slightest tendency to rush or push the rhythm at any point is detrimental to the overall *Affekt*.

Four Duetti from *Clavierübung*, Part III (BWV 802-805) J. S. Bach

Prior to the *Clavierübung*, Bach had composed *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Part I*, the *St. Matthew Passion* (to significantly unfavorable reception and reviews), and the *Brandenburg Concertos*, but none of them had been published and would not be in his lifetime. To have pieces published seemed not very high on Bach's priority list. However, the *Clavierübung* was indeed Bach's first venture into self-publishing and promoting, which was ultimately not very successful. Unlike other more successful composers like Telemann and Handel, Bach tended to compose for and target the "connoisseurs" of music rather than entertain popular tastes. In this obvious competition amongst composers, even though Bach was always concerned with money, he chose to be one of the finest composers rather than among the wealthiest. It was this constant raising of standards that led to his dismal failure as a music publisher, but, on the other hand, his eventual and ultimate success as a supreme musician.

In 1739, Bach completed and published this work of chorale preludes carefully organized in theological and musical terms. In fact, it has been called his 'organ mass.' From that collection, there are four two-part pieces Bach calls Duetti tucked away near the end. They 'play' somewhat like the two-part inventions, except the harmonies are much more advanced. Scholars have often scratched their heads over these 'little' pieces, which, very much unlike the other pieces of this *Organ Mass*, seem to be short an iota or two of doctrinal point or theological basis. However, in a 1998 description of these four pieces, English musicologist and writer Wilfred Mellers seems to be on to something when he suggests, "The four duets may define a human pilgrimage from the wayward fancy of the first, to the sturdy common sense of the second, to the potential bliss of the third, and in the fourth to the uncomfortable certitude of the Law." Organ virtuoso James Kibbie believes there is also the strong possibility that the Duetti may correspond to the four closing prayers of the Lesser Catechism. We can rest assured that Bach had his reasons for including these pieces, even if for educational purposes or just for the mere delight.

Duetto I in E minor

There is a constant interchange of canon and chaotic development of an odd and unlikely theme. But, as we've learned to depend on Bach's genius, he again brings unity where it seems most unlikely or impossible.

Duetto II in F Major

Again we thrust headlong into the world of canonic invention, and except for a few threats of instability with unexpected key changes, we are allowed to rest fairly easily.

Duetto III in G Major

We are given one of Bach's most delightful bits of writing here, in G major, and in 12/8 meter that's most often given to angelic music. What begins sounding like a child's melody quickly turns into a masterpiece with interdependence of lines and perfect canonic treatment and the *in paradisum* sounds of the brilliantly sparkling intervals of thirds, sixths, and tenths.

Duetto IV in A minor

Abruptly brought back to reality in the earthy A minor, we are given a strict two-part fugal invention that generates its muster from very 'lawfully' sounding counterpoint, strictly adhering to the rules, without waver.

In a recent conversation with a colleague, he asked, "How is it humanly possible to make playing two lines of music so impossibly difficult to play, and yet sound so elegantly simple?"

Fuga a 5 con pedale pro Organo pleno (BWV 552.2)..... J. S. Bach
from *Clavierübung, Part III*

The final piece or book-end of the *Clavierübung*, this is an extraordinary triple fugue in the key of E-flat Major, or three flats, continuing the reference to the Trinity that was begun in the Praeludium at the beginning of this collection. The main fugue subject begins with the *cross motive* – Luther’s Catechism directs: “In the evening, upon retiring, you should bless yourself with the Holy Cross and say, ‘In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Amen.’” This first fugue theme is in the old style ‘stile antico’ – lots of white notes moving relatively slowly in a five-voice texture, often described as extremely weighty, suited perfectly and primarily to choral music. This subject, which returns in the subsequent sections, can also be found woven into the counterpoint of the opening Praeludium and the pedaliter “Aus tiefer Not” near the beginning of the collection. And, yes, the first theme does sound very much like a hymn-tune that we in English-speaking countries know well, and the nickname “St. Anne” has indeed stuck. But Bach would not have known the hymn, or the attached name. *However*, it is undeniably similar to the fugue subject of Dietrich Buxtehude’s Praeludium in E Major, a work that Bach most certainly would have known very well. The second fugue subject is a traveling and winding black-note theme in four-voice texture. There is an ambiguity about the rhythm – a bit playful or youthful, perhaps. The third fugue has strong downbeats, and is surely a dance tune, with the major exception of an added fifth voice. Surely, this is no accident since we know that Bach was obsessed with an architectural sense of balance and proportion.

Bach creates a synthesis of these three fugue subjects, all of very different types, representing an *unprecedented* fusion of styles, and a shining example of his expertise and skill at mastering the form of organ fugue.

– Notes by Stephen Williams