

SOME REFLECTIONS ON BACH'S ORGELBUECHLEIN AND RELATED MATTERS

In the absence of regular access to an organ console during the first lockdown I decided to re-examine at the piano the (uncompleted) Orgelbuechlein and other pieces, singing or humming the pedal part - and it's a mystery why this should prove so very difficult, even if you know the bass from memory, unless it is the unremitting need to re-adjust the vocal cords. Try it in BWV 612! (I was told that the brilliant and flamboyant Norman del Mar, famed for his books on Strauss and on orchestration, would make aspiring conductors play a transposing horn part on the piano while singing the viola part. That'd sort 'em out!) Although I have played two recital cycles of Bach's complete organ works and have used all but two of the Orgelbuechlein pieces as voluntaries at least seven times, I confess to having seen the latter as interesting and rewarding but in general not the equal of the extended chorale settings or the 'great' Preludes, Toccatas and Fugues. I now look upon them with more favour and see at the very least 15 of the 46 settings as surpassing excellent in both craft and musical effect; and only 2 seem to be of questionable value: 619 for its inevitable brevity and inconclusiveness, and 633 with 633A (or 634) because Bach's decision to decorate the chorale means that the canon only 'works' if you are happy with the harshness of an A major triad accompanying treble d passing to b (which might admittedly be mitigated by apt registration). In this irreverent assessment I am far from alone, and Bach himself made at least two versions. (Here I should counter a widespread belief that a great genius can't miscalculate, and that to criticise them is to raise yourself above them - which would undermine the whole business of music criticism). I am also acutely aware that it possibly borders on the reckless to be offering thoughts on Bach from a base in Glasgow, which for the past 20 years or so has been home to some of the finest Bach scholarship and performance to be had anywhere. My excuse is that, while in recitals there should be an ambition to reflect authenticity as currently perceived, in a church service the player will strive to ensure that the congregation can understand the design, i.e. get the point. So my remarks focus on the practical rather than the scholarly.

There is not much call, in this collection, for soloing-out, rendered discreditable anyway by our grandfathers' overuse. I simply record that I like to solo out the treble in BWV 610, 627 (verses 1 & 2) and 643. Accompanying figuration can slow down the treble to an extent that its flow, direction and shape become unclear. I also record that I have been so frustrated that not one in a thousand listeners would pick up on the alto part in 611 & 618 that I have long soloed them out. This is fiddly as well as wildly inauthentic as it involves dividing it between the hands (only possible on a modern console). The excuse in 611 is that the majestic chorale is in marked contrast to the soaring treble and the very wide-spaced scale passages. The practice just described does create a truly sumptuous sonority for this wonderful piece, and the Baroque was nothing if not sumptuous.

It is obvious that judicious tempi and registration can be transformative and that the 17th & 18th century notion of 'Affekt' (the composer's intentions with regard to mood/flavour/import) is to be taken very seriously. Along with my student colleagues in the 50s (help!) I poured scorn on Schweitzer's funereal tempi which seemed to portray Bach as

an antiquarian who had never quite managed to come alive. There was inevitably an overreaction, and I have long found many if not most performances too fast for the grasping of the detail, and that some of my own performances had been rather hurried. It is not just the diverse attributes of “riper years” (Book of Common Prayer) which persuade me of this. I now adopt slower than standard tempi for 604 (devotion), 605 (needs clear and biting demisemiquavers), 610 (fervent longing, and the acutely expressive harmony of the last bar), 614 (bitter regrets), 616 (Nunc Dimittis), 620 (weighty!), 621 (imploring tenor and drooping suspended bass), 625 (loud & sonorous), 632 (pastoral and flowing, with its unusual form of canon - a perfect gem), 635 (insistent dogma), 641 (intense & eloquent decorated treble). This is all open to question, but surely there can be no contention over a fast and jubilant tempo for 607, 612, 615 & 628.

It was said that a semi-detached touch was normative in Bach’s time, and often this provides a clue as to style and tempo. But are we to believe that someone of Bach’s stature (or Franck’s for that matter) would restrict himself in the main to just one form of touch? Surely the guide should be what sounds effective with regard to mood, harmony and melody. A contemporary of Bach (and I can’t now find the reference) described his playing as “enthralled and unusual”: not a bad motto for any player today.

In this collection Bach clothes and beautifies Lutheran chorales, most of which were composed or adapted by Luther and his associates around 1520/1530. Some were based on sacred and secular sources going back to the 14th century and earlier, e.g. In dulci júbilo. The best ones found a place in the Passions and Cantatas. These and also a good few that seem dull or odd or shapeless can be found in the organ works, their character marvellously enhanced or rescued. Thus, the tune Von Himmel kam der Engel Schar, which like so many begins well and then falls into inconsequentiality, is redeemed by rapid manual scales (the to-ing & fro-ing of the angel host?) and more leisurely pedal scales: a splendid piece (607).

Bach couldn’t resist canon - who can? Sometimes minor adjustments to the rhythm and accidentals were needed (600, 620). In 624 he only just manages it (see bar 13!). And canon at the 5th becomes canon at the 4th for bars 9 to 13. 629 exhibits some essential adjustments in bars 7 & 8, but I am bewildered by the premature arrival at bottom C in bar 12. Pedal minims F, E, D (with different but idiomatic harmony) could easily accommodate the left-hand pattern, and the bottom C would then have real power on the first beat of bar 13. Strange. The semi-detached touch referred to earlier as a norm is come certainly essential if the fingering is not to become impossible.

A few random points: 603 if taken at crotchet 104 provides an attractive gentle oscillation or cradling. 606: I’ve heard several performances in which the composition of the plenum obscured the treble - a great pity, as the chorale is well known in Britain; and the four-part writing is so immaculate that it would be outrageous to obscure anything! 609: Not only are the treble & bass in canon, but so are the alto & tenor (representing the pealing of bells?) till bar 23. Peter Williams in his indispensable commentary, to which I am much indebted, suggests that the ungrammatical triplet quavers (they should be crotchets) may have been adopted to ensure that the crotchets in bar 3 and elsewhere are played ‘egal’, i.e. in cross-rhythm with the quavers. 613, somewhat neglected and extraordinarily peaceful and

beautiful, shows again how much can be achieved with just 4 parts. 615 is not at the easy end of the spectrum. The pedal seems to cry out for a carillon, and I cite bars 6 & 7 as evidence that 16-foot tone is undesirable (the bass line makes more sense). Reverting to my earlier point of keeping the congregation 'on board': the important pedal entry in bar 34 can easily be missed. One solution is to add a minim D on the first beat and double the 3-bar phrase at the higher octave. Also the left hand entry 2 bars earlier could have a first-beat minim D. 616: It's strange that Bach didn't assimilate the pattern of the pedal semiquavers to that of the left hand. It works throughout except at the end of bar 10, but could be rather awkward on an ancient pedal board. 617: a terrific piece, heroic and loud. The three strands benefit from strongly contrasting registration: if there were some 16-foot tone in the (slightly reedy?) right hand, the left hand can swirl around it at every possible pitch except 16-foot. The right-hand quavers only work harmonically if they are 'inegal', i.e. crotchet plus quaver. 622 has such profuse ornamentation that recognition of the chorale cannot have been intended. Rather, the chorale serves as a peg on which to hang an eloquent and intensely expressive essay. I interpret 'Adagio assai', given by the NBA as Bach's own marking, as semiquaver 80, which is perhaps unusually slow but enables full justice to be done to bars 14, 16 & 22. 627: the minor key for this Easter setting could be disconcerting, but the accompanying rhythm patterns do encourage sturdy (and loud) vigour. It seems the tune, whose three verses are slightly different, was current as early as the 12th century. The third verse starts with a triple Alleluia, but each verse ends with a prominent four-syllable Kyrieleison; and there's a good sermon waiting to be written on why an Easter hymn should give prominence to this (and incidentally why the Russian Contakion for the Dead gives prominence to Alleluias). 628 corresponds more with normal Easter expectations especially in the strong upward movement, in all parts, of the first phrase. The pedal part is quite remarkable. 630: Peter Williams and others have suggested that the emphatic pedal represents treading the Devil underfoot. The final treble Ds are an Alleluia added by Bach himself. 635, the Ten Commandments, prompts a brief comment on the business of finding hidden meaning in Bach's works. The opening pedal phrase is heard 27 times, i.e. three cubed: a possible reference to the Trinity. [This includes two near-misses]. Precisely ten of these end, like the first phrase, with a semitone. A questionable pursuit of 'significance' is to allocate a number to the letters b a c h, the sum of which is 14 and the product 48. If 14 is significant, 41 might also be (and just happens to be the sum of j s b a c h), and so people do look for pieces or sections that are 41 bars long. John Langdon was highly sceptical of this whole industry on the grounds that there was too little allowance for co-incidence; and I myself have concluded that in an age when much music tended to be four-square a 40-bar length would often occur, and tying the last chord over gives 41! Even so, I reckon that the 10 & 27 of BWV 635, if co-incidence, is truly remarkable co-incidence. 636 gives encouragement or forgiveness to those of us who are wicked and incurable paraphrasers, for Bach has changed the 11th note of the chorale from g to b. (I remember Philip Ledger saying that he reckoned Bach's continuo playing would have amounted to paraphrase and enhancement). 637 demonstrates amazingly how a spasmodic bass (presumably denoting despair and corruption) can support a convincing harmonic, if exceedingly chromatic, plan. Some light 16-foot manual tone might add to that conviction. In the last beat of the penultimate bar one can see Bach running out of notes in the alto line - quartertones seem

to be needed - and while the last bar and a half are clearly meant to be agonized, does not the combination b/c/d#/e on the 4th beat somehow lack the masterly assurance displayed elsewhere, being irresolvable? (It will be unsurprising, if dismaying, that I long ago found a solution!!). In 639, the only trio, it can help if the left-hand semiquavers slightly overlap. The pedal quavers would of course be detached, though it is tempting to slur the suspended notes in the penultimate bar. 643: I'm indebted to Peter Williams for the insight that the bitter-sweet harmony at the end accords with a phrase in the text "fair Jerusalem, how radiantly you shine". And in 644 some means must be found to render the last bar truly "fluechtig" (fleeting, vanishing). The descending and exposed left hand suitably looks after "nichtig" (futile). And I am led to fear that these observations could themselves turn out to be "nichtig", if my suspicion is correct that even today Bach is less likely to be heard in the churches than Wolstenholme and Wesley!

I had better come clean and admit that I came to Bach's organ works very late: in my 30s and 40s. Some of my student contemporaries seemed to master his main works in their teens and early 20s. But I hadn't started the organ till I was 16 and only possessed 3 Novello volumes of Bach. So I decided to await publication of the Neue Bach Ausgabe, which I innocently thought would take 5 or 6 years. In fact it took 25. But learning many of the major works for the first time in my forties was an overwhelming revelation never to be forgotten, and Baerenreiter's tardiness proved an unexpected blessing. And, to quote John Langdon again, the quality of the counterpoint! I had therefore taken up office at Glasgow Cathedral 'knowing' less than half of Bach's organ works, and was soon told by those who knew me best that I was seen as having one or two insights into 19th-century music but not a clue about Bach, and I can find wry and rueful re-assurance in the knowledge that some things, at least, never change! So I clearly had a problem, but found no remedy in the Bach recordings and broadcasts of that time which all too often came across as dry, brittle and soulless. Was this to be the 'new normal'? [Only to an extent, as it turned out]. Deliverance came in some earlier comments of the great musicologist Thurston Dart and above all by his playing. Scrupulous scholarship allied to first-rate musicianship produced, among other things, the finest performances of the Goldberg Variations I have ever heard. There was never a hint of the soulless style of which I am complaining (now largely a thing of the past), and the same applied to his continuo playing which was wondrously inventive and captivating (one recalls the comment of Kittel, the longest surviving pupil of Bach, that no-one dared produce a sparse or meagre continuo). And on the subject of ornaments Dart was insistent that they should actually sound ornamental and should be omitted if any factor prevented this. I think he had in mind the French 18th-century keyboard school where quite often the treble so bristles with ornamentation that it is difficult to make out the basic outline. In trilling Dart showed both verve and infallible judgement. It irks me, I have to say, when the shorthand for a trill (e.g. dotted quaver E followed by two demisemiquavers D & E, passing to F) persuades the player to treat the demisemis as a separate entity rather than simply the end of the trill, which may have speeded up or slowed down as it ran its course and may even have started fractionally before the beat. I have heard good performers use both of these devices to very good effect, and can only hope that somewhere in the

formidable literature on 18th-century performance practice some hint of authority for them may be found.

During my many years at Glasgow Cathedral I worked also at the (then) RSAMD. At some time in the 80s a very senior member of staff remarked in the staffroom that he couldn't stand Bach. It soon became clear that this wasn't just provocative banter: he really meant it. I recall feeling shocked and somehow affronted. My mind went instantly to the Passions, the B Minor Mass, the Goldberg Variations, the suites for solo violin and solo cello and of course the finest of the organ works. Because we had all been reduced to silence, no discussion ensued; but I came to wonder if he was put off by the constant sewing-machine-style perpetuum mobile of some of the orchestral works, and I remembered having had the temerity to ask Dart how his recording sessions in London of the Brandenburg Concertos were going, to which he replied "we're getting there, but, you know, they don't 'wear' well: you can tire of them". And I readily admit to some Bach blind spots of my own. I don't much like the motet *Jesu Meine Freude*; I have reservations about the Vivaldi arrangements; and I'm not always comfortable with (e.g.) the frequent use of the chords of G & C to accompany treble b falling to g at a cadence, in preference to the chords of B & e or other alternatives; though I can't deny that the example in bars 4 & 5 of the first piece in the *Orgelbuechlein* is most wonderfully expressive, thanks largely to the alto line. And lastly I do wish that a repeated chorale section could have had two different treatments: one's mind goes to the many (too many) CH4 tunes where the first, second and fourth phrases are identical, so that you finish up doing the same bit eighteen or even twenty-four times. A torment! But that's just me, and in general I yield to no-one in my love of Bach. I reckon that the treble of the canon by augmentation in the *Canonic Variations*, though original to the point of being strange, is uniquely and sublimely rhetorical and beautiful, and have often wondered if this is thanks to, not in spite of, the mind-boggling contrapuntal artifice; and I recall a comment of the late Leonard Friedman, leader of the SCO, that he could write a book on Bach's idiosyncratic melody. I also relish that veritable carpet of glorious harmony, underpinned by a magnificent bass, which is the middle section of the "*Piece d'Orgue*" (an extraordinary nickname!); and I'm fed up of fidgety, spasmodic renderings which seem to fly in the face of what the actual notes mean. And finally I surely can't be alone in finding the final trumpet entry in the B Minor Mass, ascending to top D, indescribably moving.

John R. Turner, July 2021