The Organ Works of Bach. VII. The Choral Preludes in the 'Clavierübung' (Continued)

Author(s): Harvey Grace

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 62, No. 938 (Apr. 1, 1921), pp. 240-244

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/909394>

Accessed: 23-12-2015 03:23 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Musical Times Publications Ltd. is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

rank of classics ; it has taught these concert-goers that even unknown composers, or composers whose works have given rise to adverse criticism, may deserve the same amount of attention, of patient and unprejudiced investigation, as is bestowed with one consent upon the most famous composers of the past.

Another institution founded by private initiative, the École des Hautes Études Sociales, has also done a great deal to disseminate that fundamental but often overlooked principle, and to supply more positive elements of knowledge relative to modern music. Its Art section comprises a music school which provides a wide range of public lectures and concerts. Ever since its foundation (1902, or thereabouts) the School has devoted special attention to the study of contemporary French works. In 1904, for instance, M. Laloy delivered a course on the evolution of the French lyric drama, as illustrated by the works of Vincent d'Indy, Alfred Bruneau, Debussy, and Charpentier. Works by Ravel, Florent Schmitt, Déodat de Séverac, Inghelbrecht, and many others, were performed, and commented upon during the subsequent years. And it may be added that the courses on modern music have included the performance and study of many works by foreign composers, such as Schönberg, Stravinsky, Scriabin, Ornstein, Bartók, Kodaly, Binenbaum, Egon Wellesz, Gniessin, and Senilof.

A systematic survey of all that has been done in France to encourage native composers, and to increase the receptivity of the public, ought to comprise many names and the record of many deeds. Enough has been said to show that a considerable amount of initiative and perseverance has been devoted to that duplicate task, with results on the whole as satisfactory as could be expected. Any composer—whether a laureate of the Conservatoire or not—has a reasonable chance of having his works performed, and perhaps attentively considered. Strong party feeling, it is true, prevails, and does a good deal of harm, new works being not infrequently judged from the point of view of the tendencies they embody—or are supposed to embody—rather than on their actual merit. Independent composers, who appear in the field without followers, occasionally run the risk of encountering indifference, or, maybe, of finding all cliques, great or small, united against them. But that, when all is said and done, is a minor matter.

The répertoire of modern French music—even excluding all that was not written in pursuance of a genuine artistic purpose—comprises so wide and so varied a range of works that we need not be surprised if, even under the comparatively very favourable conditions obtaining in France, a good many have not received due recognition, and some are totally or almost totally unknown. There are composers of great merit who, for various reasons, or for no particular reason, remain in the background. Others are known only by a few of their works, and perhaps not the works that would,

if given a fair trial, be most highly esteemed in France and abroad. Among the former might be named Albéric Magnard, whose music one may like or not, but whose loftiness of purpose and uncompromising faith in his ideals cannot be denied ; Paul Dukas, less austere, but equally earnest and genuine ; Paul Ladmirault, spirited and poetic ; Charles Koechlin, powerful and glowing, the composer of many works that have not yet come into their own. Among the latter I would name Vincent d'Indy first, although it is hardly accurate to describe him as little known. He is well-known enough, but he shares with at least one other very great composer, Franz Liszt, the misfortune of being the victim of a few catch-words. The world's répertoire of lyric drama comprises few finer works than his 'Fervaa,' and indeed few that are as fine. Many of his orchestral works are far less known than they deserve to be.

In further articles I shall refer to these composers more fully, and also to other representatives of the modern French school.

THE ORGAN WORKS OF BACH

BY HARVEY GRACE

(Continued from March number page 165.)

VII.—THE CHORAL PRELUDES IN THE 'CLAVIERÜBUNG'

The 'Clavierübung' is a comprehensive work in four parts, the first of which appeared in 1731 and the fourth about 1742. Bach borrowed the title from Kuhnau, who produced a 'Neue Clavierübung' (New Clavier Exercises), in 1695. Part 3 of Bach's work (1739) consists of organ music—the great Prelude in E flat, followed by twenty-one choral preludes, the whole being rounded off by the Fugue in E flat popularly known as 'St. Anne's.' Special interest attaches to the 'Clavierübung': it shows Bach at his best both as organ and clavier composer, and it was almost certainly the first of his works to attain the glory of print. Impatient young composers of to-day, with somewhat less to say than Bach, may profitably reflect on this latter point, remembering also that John Sebastian was at that time well past his fortieth year.

Consideration of the E flat Prelude and Fugue may well be deferred until we come to the final group of works in that form. It is not easy to see why these two movements were included in a collection of pieces based on chorale melodies. The Fugue is not out of place, because its subject might well pass for the opening strain of a chorale, but the Prelude is obviously an intruder. It is earlier in style than its companion, and belongs to the self-contained concerto type of movement rather than to the prelude family. Perhaps the two movements got in by chance. The conjecture is by no means wild, for this part of the 'Clavierübung,' planned to contain organ works only, contains also four duets for clavier—really two-

part inventions—which it is generally agreed were included by mistake.

In the 'Clavierübung' set of chorale preludes, as in the 'Little Organ Book,' Bach had an ecclesiastical scheme in view. Not only did he aim at an organ version of the Lutheran Catechism hymns; he even went further, and just as Luther provided a greater and a smaller Catechism—the former for adults and the latter for children—so Bach wrote two versions of each chorale, one in extended form for manuals and pedals, the other short and for manuals only. The single exception to this double treatment is 'Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr,' which, being a metrical version of the 'Gloria in Excelsis,' is appropriately given three versions as a symbol of the Trinity.

The original order of these preludes has been little regarded by editors. The point is not of great importance to English players, who will naturally be concerned with purely musical considerations. But all this side of Bach's work is so peculiarly intimate and personal that we can ill afford to ignore any details that throw light on his intentions. So far as I am able to discover, the Novello edition (Book XVI.) is the only one that gives this part of the 'Clavierübung' in Bach's own order. Putting aside the Prelude and Fugue, the scheme falls into seven sections: The Trinity: the threefold Kyrie (three large and three small movements) and 'Allein Gott' (three movements); The Law: 'Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot' ('These are the holy Ten Commandments'); Faith: 'Wir glauben all' an einen Gott' ('We all believe in one God'); Prayer: 'Vater unser' (The Lord's Prayer); Baptism: 'Christ, unser

Herr' zum Jordan kam' ('Christ our Lord to Jordan came'); Penitence: 'Aus tiefer Noth' ('In deepest need'); and Communion: 'Jesus Christus unser Heiland' ('Jesus Christ our Saviour')—twenty-one movements in all.

The set as a whole appears to have been written specially for the collection, though some of the smaller movements probably date from an earlier period.

The three preludes on the Kyrie are notable for fine polyphony of a type that suggests the influence of the Palestrina school. The third piece is so much the biggest in every way that it overshadows its companions. These are heard at their best if played with the chorale melody given to a powerful reed against a solid diapason background. The vigorous counterpoint demands a good deal more than the quiet registration usually suggested. The third, 'Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist,' must rank among the handful of Bach's grandest works. It would be difficult to find a better example of his power of taking a bald series of notes and developing from them a towering edifice of sound so perfect and satisfying that there is nothing to be said by those of us who dislike dealing in superlatives. Let the reader who does not know this piece study it—like most five-part writing it is by no means easy—and compare it with some of the hackneyed fugues that are popularly supposed to display the genius of Bach. Plenty of tone is called for, with a powerful pedal for the *cantus*. There are some fine climaxes in which the swell pedal may play a big part. The grindingly discordant *Coda* is best phrased thus:

Following as it does a long spell of animated quaver movement, the effect of this weighty peroration, with its insistent two-note motive and its daring harmony, is quite extraordinary.

The three settings of the Kyrie for manuals only are admirable little studies in part-playing.

The first of the three preludes on 'Allein Gott' is a rather dry affair for manual only, and may well be left alone. The second is a lengthy Trio, showing Bach at his happiest, as the form usually does. It is well worth a place by the side of the best of the Trio-Sonatas. For its proper performance three uncoupled manuals and pedals are called for—two of the manuals for the delivery of the two semiquaver parts, the third with a rather more telling stop for the phrases of the chorale. This beautifully finished piece is a fine study, and with good registration can be made

into an attractive solo. The third piece on this melody is a bright little fughetta for manuals only, calling for a neat finger and good phrasing.

The long movement on 'Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot' is an interesting failure. Bach writes two parts for the right hand, and a pedal part, all three moving freely. In the middle of this trio appears the chorale melody, in long notes, worked as a canon in the octave. The result is unsatisfactory, both from a musical and a descriptive point of view. The chorale contains so many repeated notes that its delivery in augmentation, especially in canon, gives an impression of stagnation. As programme music the work fails because Bach seems to have tried to do too much. No doubt Schweitzer is right when he says that the free parts represent the moral disorder of the world, while the slow canon which

forms the core of the piece stands for the law. But if Bach aimed at a musical picture of the eternal conflict between order and disorder he was asking too much of his medium. Music, above all the arts, excels at showing chaos and cosmos in alternation, but it cannot show them together. Only the painter can do that.

The manual piece on this chorale is a gay fughetta. What does Bach mean here? Perhaps he set out to do no more than enjoy himself in toying with the engaging subject evolved from the first phrase of the tune. Still, we cannot overlook the fact that this subject appears ten times, so there must be some reference to the Commandments. There may even be significance in the fact that the subject is inverted in entries 5-8, the Commandments from No. 5 onwards being concerned specially with human relationships. This is just the kind of childlike symbolism Bach indulged in all his life. We may smile at it, just as we smile at Samuel Johnson touching the tops of posts as he rolled his way down Fleet Street, but we like great men none the less—rather the more—for such little weaknesses. One thing seems to be clear in regard to this prelude. Bach surely meant its cheerful animation to express the idea that liberty, not bondage, is the result of obedience to the Law—‘whose service is perfect freedom.’

The Prelude on ‘Wir glauben all’ is one of the most familiar of all Bach’s organ works in this country, owing to its having had the good fortune to be included in the earlier books of preludes and fugues in the Novello edition. Its popularity makes one regret that the chorale preludes as a

whole have hitherto played so small a part in the organ students’ curriculum. There are dozens of preludes more attractive than the so-called ‘Giant’ fugue. Had our organ students during the past thirty years played them as often as the ‘Giant’ both players and public would have a far juster estimation of Bach than at present obtains. There is no need to dwell long on ‘Wir glauben all.’ It may be well to point out that the ground bass is obviously intended to typify faith, and that the less we think of a giant walking upstairs and tumbling down again (*vide* some programme notes) the better. The subject of the fugue is based on the opening phrase of the chorale, and Bach rounds off the movement by introducing the final phrase of the tune in the tenor, beginning on the E in the ninth bar from the end. The words to which this phrase is sung are ‘All things are governed by His might.’ This thoroughly Bachian stroke is usually overlooked, because the chorale is not well-known in this country.

The first of the two pieces on ‘Vater unser’ is one of the longest, most complex, and most difficult of all the chorale preludes. The writing is in five parts—an almost continuously moving quaver bass, and four manual parts, two consisting of the chorale melody in canon, and two highly florid counterpoints of unusual rhythmical variety. The latter are treated imitatively, and are developments of an ornate version of the opening phrase of the chorale. This piece has to be known and lived with for some time before one realises its undoubted beauty. Here is an extract showing the entry of the first phrase of the chorale and a portion of the canon in the tenor :

Ex. 2. Choral.

Note that we have here one of several examples of Bach’s feeling for the modes. The key is E minor with a C sharp in the signature—that is, the Dorian mode transposed up a tone. Free as is the harmony,

the modal flavour is evident, just as it is in the Dorian Toccata, despite its modulations.

The flow of a river is one of the easiest of subjects for musical treatment, so we are not

surprised to find Bach seizing on the word 'Jordan' in 'Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan Kam.' The tune is played by the pedals with 4-ft. or 8-ft. tone, while the river is represented by an undulating passage of semiquavers on the manuals, generally in the bass. The piece should be played at a good pace, and with fairly loud tone. The left hand may well be played on a separate manual with a soft 16-ft. added to 8-ft. and perhaps 4-ft. as well. At anything less than a quick pace the music loses on the descriptive side, and, moreover, one is conscious of a lack of originality in some of the sequential passages. The manual prelude on this chorale is a very skilful little piece in which Schweitzer sees an attempt to represent big and little waves rising and falling. As he says, the effect is one for the eye rather than the ear, and it must be confessed that the musical result is on the dry side.

It is sometimes said that architecture is frozen

music. In the first of the two preludes on 'Aus tiefer Noth' (a massive six-part affair with double pedal) we surely have the reverse—architecture in sound, and church architecture at that. The ecclesiastical type of polyphony, the pronounced flavour of the Phrygian mode, and the dark effect due to four of the six voices lying in the lower half of the keyboard, combine to produce a masterpiece of impersonal gloom. Of emotion in the ordinary sense of the term there is none: the music is simply a tremendous abstraction. The method of treating the chorale is that associated with Pachelbel, but there is a closeness of texture and a skill of which Pachelbel never dreamt. A quotation of the passage containing the first phrase of the melody augmented, in the first bass part, will repay examination. It will be seen that the first treble and the second tenor also deliver the theme, so that it appears in three parts simultaneously:

Opinions differ as to whether 16-ft. stops should be used for the pedal. I believe Best used to play the piece *ff* with heavy pedal stops. A good deal depends on the size of the building, but as a rule a safe plan will be to use loudish 8-ft. diapasons for the manuals, and 8-ft. and soft 16-ft. for the pedals. This gives the right sombre strength without turgidity. Spitta says of this monumental piece that it is the crowning point of the collection, 'from the ingenuity of the part-writing, the wealth and nobility of the harmonies, and the executive power which it requires.'

Its companion prelude, for manuals only, is in some respects even more skilful. Each phrase of the chorale is treated imitatively in the three under parts before being introduced at the top in long notes, and in every instance one of the imitations is by inversion. Nor is this all. In most cases the melody on its appearance in the treble is accompanied by itself in diminution and by inversion. The most astonishing fact, however, is that the result is beautifully expressive music. Here is the final phrase of the tune, with three diminutions in the under parts, one inverted:

In the Breitkopf & Härtel edition the bass is given to the pedals, and the tenor played on a separate manual, with good effect. The long prelude on 'Jesus Christus unser Heiland' is much less appealing. It consists of a kind of two-part fugue, the voices being played on separate

manuals, around the chorale melody in the tenor, delivered in long notes on the pedals with 8-ft. stops. The subject is a wide-straddling, energetic figure entirely devoid of feeling or grace, and its treatment does nothing to soften its rough outlines:

Ex. 5. *Allegro moderato*. ♩ = 88.

Schweitzer truly says that it is characteristic rather than musical, belonging as it does to the family of 'step' motives with which Bach was wont to depict faith. The prevailing bleakness of the work was probably evoked by the hymn's reference to the Passion. Schweitzer complains that the theme is developed at too great length, and that the work is not organic because the *cantus*, appearing in fragments at long intervals, fails to hold the music together.

There is something in this, and yet the genuine power of the piece, and its bigness (despite the fact of its being largely in two-part harmony) get hold of one on due acquaintance. I quote a few bars, showing the first pedal entry. In bars four and five observe how, by the simple expedient of retarding the right-hand passage a quarter-beat, Bach keeps up the semiquaver motion, though both hands are concerned with a subject in quavers:

Ex. 6.

mp
8 ft. *legato.*

The companion Prelude and the last of the set is a well-worked fugue, for manuals only, on the first phrase of the tune. In the Breitkopf & Härtel edition it appears with the bass played by the pedals—an arrangement which justifies itself by increasing the solemnity of an already impressive movement.

Taking the 'Clavierübung' Preludes as a whole it must be admitted that they make a less ready appeal than do most of Bach's other ripe essays in this field. From a technical point of view they show him at his greatest, but there is a lack of the intimate feeling of the 'Little Organ Book,' and only at intervals do we find the depth of expression that is so pronounced in the set of eighteen preludes collected and revised by Bach in his last years.

Perhaps this comparative coldness may be

ascribed to the fact of the pieces being written as musical illustrations of a series of doctrinal formulæ. The choice of material was thus not in Bach's hands, having been settled long before by Luther. Moreover, as we have seen, the collection appears to have been written in a comparatively short period with a view to inclusion in a work already partly published. Bach's technical and intellectual faculties were then at their height, so he had no difficulty in carrying out his project in a manner that compels admiration. No doubt the task was a congenial one, but it was task-work none the less, and so with a few notable exceptions it was accomplished by brain rather than by heart. The height to which Bach could rise in treating a chorale when both these factors played an equal part we shall see later.

(To be continued.)

SOME ITALIAN COMPOSERS OF TO-DAY

(Continued from March number, page 161.)

BY GUIDO M. GATTI

III.—VICTOR DE SABATA

Victor de Sabata cannot complain of the way Fortune has treated him: she smiled on his first steps, she was ever at his side throughout his vigorous youth, and fame was his when, at eighteen, his Suite triumphed in all parts of the world. The composition which was fresh and vigorous then is not less so to-day, when de Sabata has published other works and the public has come to recognize in him one of the most gifted of contemporary Italian composers. Since 1913 the Triestine composer—de Sabata was born at Trieste in 1892, although he may be considered a citizen of Milan by adoption—has written other works, some of which doubtless show a greater artistic maturity; but for many, perhaps for all, he remains the composer of the symphonic Suite with which he gained his laurels ten years ago.

The Suite is not the work of unskilled youth, much less is it a student work. It is a page vividly

felt, wherein—as is inevitable in the work of a young composer—the influences of other great men are evident. But they are fused by a fire of spontaneity which almost dissolves them, for here are freshness of colouring and plasticity of tone that, allied to instrumental vigour, help to define a personality which we can reconstruct to perfection when considering the composition as a whole. A pedantic critic seeking to analyse the constructive elements of de Sabata's Suite would trace therein echoes of Wagner in the harmonic elaboration—especially in the Idyll—side by side with a mixture of tone and sonority dear to Richard Strauss. But the listener who abandons himself to his emotions feels that through study of and love for these two great symphonists, de Sabata has succeeded in finding his own individuality and making his own voice heard. Moreover, the Straussian influence in the Suite—an influence which has been, and still is,