

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, COLUMBIA, MD

It **is** a competition:
Music from the repertoire lists of
European organ contests

Adam Detzner, *Organist*

Sunday, December 6, 2020 | 5:00 PM

Prelude, Trio and Fugue in B-flat Major, BWV 545b

Johann Sebastian Bach
(1685-1750)

i. Praeludium

ii. Adagio

iii. Trio a 2 Clav. e Pedal

iv. Tutti

v. Fuga pro Organo. Pedaliter

Puer nobis nascitur, SwWV 315

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck
(1562-1621)

Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her, BWV 701

Bach

Prelude and Fugue in a minor, BWV 543

Bach

NOTES ON TONIGHT'S PROGRAM

As I wrote in an article for this past week's Thursday Gatherings e-newsletter, I have been working on the repertoire for the pre-recorded and live rounds of a few European organ competitions. I have played most of it before in worship or recital here at Christ Church, but I hope there has been some improvement!

Some say that the most difficult part of these competition is getting in. To apply, one has to submit a recording of a few prescribed pieces. This recording has to be essentially note perfect, but it also can't sound too "careful." Imagine the jury for the pre-recorded round listening to the same three pieces a hundred times; how does one possibly stand out?

While I've been working on this music for a long time, I haven't ever really just sat down and played it. So here we are: music of Bach and Sweelinck, two titans of early keyboard music.

The first piece on the program, the **Prelude, Trio, and Fugue in B-Flat Major**, is a doozy. It is a version of another popular Prelude and Fugue, in C Major, but transposed down a whole step and with three intervening movements slipped in. The middle trio movement is particularly demanding. It is a transcription of a movement from a Bach sonata for viola da gamba and harpsichord. In the original trio, the gamba and the harpsichordist's right hand play the top two voices; the harpsichordist's left hand plays the bass line. In this transcription, the organist's right hand plays the gamba part, the organist's left hand plays the harpsichordist's right hand, and the organists feet play the bass. To make matters worse, I actually learned and performed this piece in its original instrumentation. It has taken some time to "unlearn" what once was learned.

Still, the piece hangs together well, despite the wide varieties of textures and tempi between the movements. I should note that Bach himself did not arrange and collate these movements; a later copyist did so. Can we then say that this composition is “by Bach?” or perhaps “derived” from Bach? Questions like this are better left for musicologists.

The next piece is a set of variations by Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck on a Dutch folk tune for Christmas, “**Puer nobis nascitur**” (A boy is born to us). Known as “the Orpheus of Amsterdam,” a generation of German organists traveled there to study with him, laying the foundations of what would later be called “the north German school.” It is hard to overstate his importance as composer, pedagogue, and aesthetic bridge between the Renaissance and the Baroque. Sweelinck composed four variations: the first is simple, with the melody clearly audible in the top voice, accompanied by two voices below; the second movement briefly shifts to a two-voice or *bicinium* texture, with the melody still more or less audible in the top voice; the third movement has the most notes, with rapid scales and figurations ascending and descending the keyboard, which sacrifices the audibility of the theme somewhat; and in the fourth verse, the theme finally moves from the top to the middle voice, accompanied by jaunty, syncopated rhythms above and below.

Bach’s fughetta (“little fugue,” or short contrapuntal piece) on the Lutheran chorale tune **Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her** (“From heaven above to earth I come”) is short, sweet, and profoundly difficult. It is written for three voices, which sometimes imitate one another and sometimes don’t. There are rapid ascending and descending scales throughout, which may symbolize Jesus’ or his angels’ descents to earth – who knows! With three voices and only two hands, the organist has to frequently juggle the inner voice, while making sure it sounds coherent and independent. Every time I sit down to practice this little piece I find something surprising – it is a tough nut to crack!

The final **Prelude and Fugue, in a minor**, of Bach, is a real tour de force. The feet are expected to be almost as athletic as the hands throughout. A sinuously chromatic opening theme is heard first in the hands, then the feet; a sequence of interesting and dramatic outbursts leads the prelude to its close. The fugue is athletic too, a dance in compound meter, and ending with a difficult pedal cadenza. I have been playing this piece for many years, though I hope it sounds fresh and exciting to you – and to a competition jury.

-AD

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