

Recital IV: 12th December 2021: Advent and Christmas

The first three recitals have explored the use of the organ in liturgy through the use of Organ Masses, fully-composed suites of music, often built on liturgical melodies (either from Gregorian chant or from hymnody), for use throughout services and often replacing the singing of the choir or schola directly in the Roman liturgy, and used as preludes before the congregational singing in the reformed church. The rest of this series will mostly focus on the use of chorale preludes through the seasons of the Church's year, with some examining the Lutheran reforms in Germany more closely.

Whilst baroque organists in the Roman church tended to rely on the repository of Gregorian chant for the melodies of liturgical music, those serving the Lutheran church, whose reforms placed a greater role on the use of hymnody (which in the Roman church belongs properly to the offices, not to the Mass), used these hymn tunes as their inspiration. Many of those Lutheran hymns, composed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, derived their tunes from the well-established Gregorian chant of the Roman church and, particularly in north Germany, even the use of Latin for some hymns was maintained after the reformation. We saw in the November recital in J. S. Bach's Clavier-Übung III that Luther's reforms created two principal services: the Main Service on Sunday morning of the celebration of the eucharist, and the Catechism Service of Sunday afternoons (and often throughout the week in schools).

The Roman rite has two main forms of music that contribute to the daily and weekly round of liturgies: the ordinary and the proper. The ordinary are those texts of the mass that do not change from week to week: principally the Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei. The propers are those texts which change depending on the time of year: those normally sung are the Introit, Gradual, Alleluia, Offertory and Communion (though also include the Secret and Post-Communion, though these are not sung).

The protestant churches have, in recent times, alongside the reformed liturgies of the Roman church, tended to use hymnody more like propers, changing week by week and feast by feast, with some hymns used routinely for specific seasons like Advent, Christmas, Lent or Easter, where originally the Lutheran church used hymnody more as a catechetical tool and so formed something closer to the idea of ordinaries, often unchanging throughout the year, or at least for the principal seasons.

This recital introduces some of the chorale preludes of J. S. Bach, Dieterich Buxtehude and Johann Pachelbel alongside two of the Noëls by Louis-Claude Daquin. The German mid-baroque composers Buxtehude and Pachelbel laid the foundations for the musical style of chorale preludes which reached their height under the genius of J. S. Bach later in the period. Pachelbel's style is rather different to Bach's, coming as he did from the south German school rather than Buxtehude and Bach's north German influence.

Pachelbel's writing is more influenced by the Italian school and composers such as Frescobaldi, and the quality of his music is rather simpler with less virtuosic writing and more simple harmonic structures and where the chorale melody is unadorned with decoration and often presented as a clear cantus firmus (the melody delivered in long notes with accompaniment).

Buxtehude's style sits somewhat between that of Pachelbel and J. S. Bach: the harmonies are more developed but still simple, and the melody receives some ornamentation but is often more clearly audible than in some of J. S. Bach's works. The work of J. S. Bach is heavily influenced by that of Buxtehude, an organist who Bach both knew and admired, so much so that in 1705 he walked

the 250 miles from Arnstadt to Lübeck to spend three months with Buxtehude. Buxtehude was so impressed by the young Bach that he suggested that he should succeed him in his role as organist at Lübeck, a post which came with the condition of marrying the predecessor's daughter. History records that Bach found the appointment attractive, but not Buxtehude's eldest, and so turned down the offer.

The genre is brought to its richest at the hands of J. S Bach. With over one hundred different settings, Bach's chorale preludes were published across a number of works, primarily the Orgelbüchlein, the Schübler chorales, a set known as "The Eighteen" (or the Leipzig chorales), and the "Miscellaneous" or "Individually Transmitted" chorales, as well as those which form Clavier-Übung III that we heard in November's recital. Bach uses a wide variety of styles in his chorale preludes from simple three-part writing with melodies presented either clearly in cantus firmus or more heavily decorated, and with the melody sitting in different voices, sometimes on a separate keyboard, sometimes in the pedal, and sometimes in the middle of the texture within multiple manual parts.

The Noëls of the French baroque organist Louis-Claude Daquin take their melodies from traditional French or Italian christmas carols of the period. Daquin was born in Paris to an Italian family and was a child prodigy, performing for Louis XIV when he was six years old. He held many positions as organist in a variety of Parisian churches before being appointed to the Chapelle Royale in the court of Louis XV before becoming titular organist at Notre-Dame Cathedral. His 1757 work, Nouveau livre de noëls for organ, from which today's excerpts are taken, is perhaps his most famous work.

Advent

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme BWV 645 4'

This is the first chorale from the set of six known as the Schübler chorales and is one of J. S. Bach's most famous works, brought to the wider attention of the British public through its use in a television advertisement. In the Lutheran year book it was set for the 27th Sunday after Trinity (and Bach wrote a full cantata for this Sunday, BWV 140), the last Sunday of the Lutheran church's year before Advent begins. This Sunday occurs only rarely when Easter is particularly early, and would therefore have been heard only every few years. The cantata takes its theme from the gospel reading of the day, that of the parable of the ten virgins (five wise and five foolish) from Matthew, a reading which in the Roman church occurs only for votive masses of Holy Virgins, though is more commonly read in Advent within the protestant churches. This organ chorale prelude is a direct transcription of the fourth movement of the cantata. Its form is simple yet sprightly, written in three parts: a lively bass part in the pedal, the obbligato melody in the right hand and the chorale melody taken in the left hand.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Lob sei dem allmächtigen Gott BWV 602 1'

A very short work, this takes its melody from the Roman office hymn for vespers in Advent, Conditor alme siderum, it is set to text which presses the danger of not hearing the voice of the Son of God. The pedal part is built on a repeating pattern of alternate-foot pedalling, with quicker rhythms at the end of each beat in the manual parts. This chorale comes from the Orgelbuchlein or "little organ book", an incomplete set of organ chorale preludes which was likely written as a teaching aid for young organists with a variety of different techniques required throughout the volume. It contains 46 preludes on Lutheran hymn tunes used across the church's year and darts from between 1708 and 1717 whilst Bach was organist at Weimar. It was planned to contain 164 settings so that all aspects of the year were presented, but that which we have is more heavily focused on the beginning of the year with many settings for Advent, Christmas, Epiphany and Lent.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Herr Christ, der einge Gottes-Sohn BWV 601 2'

The text of this hymn was used for the Third and Fourth Sundays in Advent in the Weimar hymn books and is a prayer and meditation on the themes of Christmas. There is rich counterpoint within this short and simple work which is heavily based on a short melodic motif which appears throughout the manual parts but is most clearly presented in the pedals. The famous Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer refers to the pedal motif as one of calm joy with other writers seeing a reference to Christ the Morning Star.

Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707)

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland BuxWV 211 2'

One of the most popular Lutheran hymns, the melody is a simplification of the Latin hymn Veni redemptor gentium from the Ambrosian rite, developed in fourth century Milan. Luther's translation of the text became the principal hymn of the four Advent Sundays from at least 1600 and appeared in many Leipzig hymn books in both German and Latin. The words beg the arrival

of the Christ Child, saviour of the heathen, through the imagery of the light in the darkness. This version from Buxtehude shows well how the melody at this time is decorated though still clearly presented with only gentle ornamentation. The rise in the melody of an octave at the end of the work is clearly imitated in Bach's version which follows.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland BWV 659 5'

This is the first of three settings of this melody from the Leipzig chorales, likely provided to reference the Lutheran catechism's view of Jesus as the beatifier, the crucified, and the protector. Compared to Buxtehude's version just heard, this is an astonishing development of style in just a few decades. The opening begins on the pedal and is joined by two additional lines in the left hand, like cellos, before the highly-ornamented cantus carries the melody. The work is one of exquisite calmness, nobility and beauty, and has rightly become a firm staple of the Advent organ repertoire.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland BWV 661 3'

This is the third work on the same text from the Leipzig chorales and is a much more ebullient treatment of the melody. Here, a three-voice fugue in the manuals forms the accompaniment to the melody presented as a cantus firmus in the pedal. This owes something of its style to the string counterpoint found in Frescobaldi's Fiori musicali from October's recital. It combines to form a grand, majestic celebration of the season of Advent: penitential in character but filled with expectant joy.

Christmas

Louis-Claude Daquin (1694-1772) 5'

Noël VII from Livre de Noëls

en Trio et en Dialogue, le cornet de récit de la main droite, la Tierce du Positif de la main gauche

The Noëls, even when in their quieter, more reflective nature such as this trio, still contain a levity and joyfulness in their composition. Based on the French carol Chrétiens qui suivez l'Église (Christians who follow the Church), it uses typical colours and arrangements of the French baroque organ, with melodies presented on the cornet and the tierce du positif with accompaniment from the flutes of manuals and pedal.

Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706)

Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her 3'

This short work is typical of Pachelbel's earlier and more simple style. The melody is presented firstly as a motif in a short figure in the manuals before moving to a cantus firmus in the pedal with a typical baroque figure above it in the hands. The stylistic simplicity provides a high degree of clarity to the melody whilst also allowing for compositional freedom in its accompaniment, but the harmony is treated simply, and part writing remains simple with only moderate polyphonic gestures.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Christum wir sollen loben schon BWV 611 2'

Choral in Alto

Both the words and melody are taken from the Latin hymn A solis ortus cardine, the hymn for the Roman office of Lauds during Christmastide. This is a rare example of the cantus, the melody of the hymn, appearing in the alto part, in the middle of the four-part texture. Some have suggested that the "hiding" of this melody within the counterpoint is to symbolise the hidden Christ child in the womb of His Blessed Mother, and the specific direction adagio (at a walking pace) is rare in Bach's organ music (though common from Frescobaldi) and Schweitzer considers this to direct us not to boisterous Christmas joy but instead to mystical contemplation.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Vom Himmel kam der Engel Schar BWV 607 2'

The text for this hymn comes from Luther's last Christmas hymn, published in 1543 and speaks of the host of angels appearing to the shepherds to give them the good news of the birth of Christ. It continues with the reinforcement of one of Luther's key messages of Christmas, that with Christ sin and death are vanquished. This prelude is filled with running semiquavers with a rich harmonic texture. These running scales appear at the beginning to sit only ever underneath the melody, but as it progresses they reach up to it and eventually go higher still, enveloping the tune and spanning three octaves. The scales are taken to be the angels themselves pouring out the message of Jesus' birth.

Louis-Claude Daquin (1694-1772)

Noël X from Livre de Noëls 6'

Grand jeu et Duo

This is one of the best known of the Noëls, and its melody is from a French carol sung to either “Quand Dieu naquit à Noël” (When God was born at Christmas) or to “Bon Joseph, écoutez-moi” (Good Joseph, listen to me). It uses the typical French baroque sound of the grands jeux alongside duets between the colourful cornet of the récit manual and the cromorne of the positif. Like most of the Noëls, the style is simple: it is essentially a set of variations on a simple theme, but the use of tone colour, texture and changing rhythms provides an exuberance of joy fit for the Christmas season.

Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707)

In dulci jubilo BuxWV 197 2'

In dulci jubilo is still today one of the best known melodies of Christmas. The text dates from 1535 and speaks of the joy of the child in the manger, shining like the sun, the love of the Father, and the gentleness of the newborn. Buxtehude's version treats the melody with rather more ornamentation to better describe the mood of the text and of the season, though it is still clearly identifiable and supported by a simple accompaniment.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

In dulci jubilo BWV 729 3'

Taken from the “Miscellaneous Chorales”, this one of Bach's many treatments of this melody is perhaps the most well known. Its style is one of the melody being presented clearly line by line, but with rhapsodic interludes between them. It is not clear if the congregation were intended to sing during this work or not, as the alternating nature of clear melody and extended flourishes would surely make it difficult to bring an untrained body of singers along with the player. There are other examples of chorales in Bach's output that are written in this style, but no other manages to maintain the cohesiveness of this one which expresses the joy of Christmas so clearly and exuberantly.