

Recital VI: 27 February 2022: The Richer Harmonies of Lent and Passiontide

The Church provides allocates a number of periods throughout the year as acts of penitence: the four weeks of Advent, preceding the feast of Christmas, four separate periods in each calendrical season of Ember Days, vigils before each of the ancient feasts, but the greatest of these are forty days of Lent. Since the Middle Ages, the practices of fasting and abstinence have been progressively weakened, with less strict requirements on the faithful. However, the Lenten season of preparation for the great feast of Easter when the Church celebrates the true bodily resurrection of the Son of God remains the single largest, with the final two weeks (Passiontide) and then the final three days (Triduum) being marked out as especially solemn and worthy of mortification.

The Church imposes this rigour, too, on her musical life: during the weeks of Lent, and at the other penitential times, She requires that the organ be silent; that its solemn melodies fall quiet in this period of deep spiritual reflection. Therefore, the Roman Church provides us with little organ music for this time of year, as it is not required. The same restrictions, however, did not apply to the reformed protestant churches and, instead, that spirit of fasting, of penitence, and of deep reflection on the suffering and death of the Son of God, give birth to a set of music that is at once deeply spiritual, and composers have used these themes to bring forth some sublimely beautiful works that seek to capture this spirit of longing and pleading for mercy.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Partite diverse sopra il Corale

Christ, der du bist der Heller Tag BWV 766

Amongst Bach's organ works are six partitas and it is not certain what purpose these pieces, essentially sets of chorale variations, may have served. Their overall length makes them somewhat unwieldy for full performance as single pieces, though they may have served as accompaniments for during the distribution of communion, or with each shorter, individual movement being used at various places throughout a liturgy; some scholars believe they may even have been used as in the home (played on the harpsichord) or as exercises in writing in different musical styles. However they were utilised originally, the six partitas take a unique place in Bach's organ works, with a rich variety of harmonic and stylistic treatments for each individual "partita" or variation on the hymn tune.

Each of the six partitas broadly follow the same musical outline, though with differing numbers of variations within each. All begin with a simple playing of the hymn tune itself, and perhaps originally the congregation may have joined in with this. The second movement is always a "bicinium" - a piece of music with only two musical lines, followed by a number of variations in different styles where the melody may appear in different parts of the work and where the style may include a number of dance-types, and final chorale on the organo pleno, the full organ, with the melody in the pedals.

The text of this work is a translation by E. Albertus of the ancient hymn *Christe, qui lux est et dies* which was the traditional hymn for the office of Compline during Lent before the reforms of the Roman breviary in the 11th century, with the melody thought to have been composed by St Ambrose.

Christ, you who are the bright day, before you the night may not endure.

You illumine us from the Father and are the preacher of light.

The remaining six verses take the form of a prayer for safety. Although this work contains seven movements, it is unlikely that they are designed to fit the text, but instead are closer to the early eighteenth-century form of chorale variations designed for music-making at home. That there is little use of the pedals (only in the last movement, and not essential in the writing) further supports the idea they were written for the harpsichord and the organ score follows later.

Partita I is the hymn tune itself, played in rich (up to seven parts) harmonies. Partita II is a traditional two-part "bicinium" whose sighing and chromatic left-hand part is suggestive of the pleading prayers of the season. Partita III has the melody joined to a light and elegant motif that repeats throughout this movement. Partita IV uses a "perpetuum mobile" (always in motion) figure in the right hand that decorates the melody. Partita V places the melody at the top of the left hand, in the tenor voice, but is echoed occasionally in the right hand parts. Partita VI takes a dance form - a gigue - with the main tune passed in places between the left and right hands. Partita VII is the "finale" - the grand movement on the organo pleno with the melody now firmly in the pedals. The latter half of this final movement has some unusual but grand effects of broken chords that brings this work to a brilliant conclusion.

Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706)

O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde groß

Comprising no less than 23 verses, this chorale is one of the great Lenten chorales of the Lutheran church. It is based on the text of a Passion hymn written by S. Heydon and published in 1525 with a theme that alternates between the crucifixion and man's great sin. The melody was published around the same time but became associated with this melody later and is used in the final chorus of the first part of J. S. Bach's St Matthew Passion.

O man, weep for your great sin, for which Christ left his father's bosom and come to earth;

Of a virgin pure and gentle he was born here for us to become the mediator [for our sins].

He gave life to the dead and banished all sickness, until the time came on that he should be sacrificed,

Bearing the heavy burden of our sins long on the cross.

Pachelbel's version of this chorale prelude is typical of his style - a relatively simple treatment with just musical parts in the manuals, based on the melody, with the fullness of the hymn tune heard clearly and cleanly, without any ornamentation, in the pedals.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde gross BWV 622

Taken from the Orgelbüchlein, this is one of Bach's most famous chorale-preludes because of the quality of the writing. The melody, unlike Pachelbel's version, is highly ornamented with a detailed and imitative accompaniment in the left hand and pedals. The speed and complexity of the melody's ornamentation and development changes throughout the work, inspired directly by the text of the first verse above. Its most startling moment comes in the penultimate bar with a sudden chromatic key change into the distant key of Cb major, the unusual tonality and descent of the melody surmised by some writers to represent the tilting of Our Lord's head as He dies upon the cross.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Erbarm dich mein, O Herre Gott BWV 721

manualiter

The chorale is a translation of the words of Psalm 50 (Miserere mei, Deus), the greatest of the seven penitential psalms, and said daily in the Roman Office throughout Lent. The musical style of this chorale prelude is unique amongst Bach's (and the wider Baroque composers as well) organ works. It was clearly well known, however: Handel's setting of the same text uses a similar style of constantly slowly repeating and detached chords with the melody woven above, and the harmonies owe much to the Italian school of the time. It is this work's simplicity that makes it so beguiling: the pulsating chords seem to evoke the heart pleading to the almighty through the words of the psalmist.

Have mercy upon me, O God: after Thy great goodness.

According to the multitude of Thy mercies, do away mine offences.

Wash me thoroughly from my wickedness: and cleanse me from my sin.

For I acknowledge my faults: and my sin is ever before me.

Against Thee only have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that Thou mightest be justified in Thy saying, and clear when Thou art judged.

Behold, I was shapen in wickedness: and in sin hath my mother conceived me.

But lo, Thou requirest truth in the inward parts: and shalt make me to understand wisdom secretly.

Thou shalt purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: Thou shalt wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Thou shalt make me hear of joy and gladness: that the bones which Thou hast broken may rejoice.

Turn Thy face from my sins: and put out all my misdeeds.

Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706)

Herzlich tut mich verlangen (Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder) (O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden)

Choral mit 7 Partiten

That this work is introduced with two alternative title shows that the melody was routinely used to more than one set of words, but it is through the third of these options that the British will know this melody best from the passiontide hymn "O sacred head", often used for devotions on Good Friday.

O sacred Head, now wounded, with grief and shame weighed down,

Now scornfully surrounded with thorns, Thine only crown;

O sacred Head, what glory, what bliss till now was Thine!

Yet, though despised and gory, I joy to call Thee mine.

This work echoes the structure of Bach's partita earlier in the programme (essentially a set of variations on a hymn tune) but being both earlier and from southern Germany the style is much simpler. As we have seen is common with Pachelbel (and other early writers) the chorale theme is presented much more clearly than with later composers, and it is the variation in accompaniment that changes the musical style rather than the development of ornamentation or placing in different voices that more typifies Bachs' writings.

The chorale melody is presented as a hymn, then followed by seven variations. Partita I has the melody unaltered with a moving left-hand bass. Partita II weaves a “moto perpetuo” figuration around the melody with simple accompaniment. Partita III introduces a more rapid left hand bass figuration. Partita IV moves the melody to the pedals with a two-part accompaniment in the manuals. Partita V is perhaps the most interesting, and is common across Pachelbel’s partitas, with a highly chromatic but slow-moving accompaniment. Partita VI has the melody in the bass, and the final movement returns to the “moto perpetuo” style of rapid figuration of the melody.

Dieterich Buxtehude (1637-1707)

Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder (O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden) BuxWV 178

Buxtehude’s treatment of the same melody shows clearly how the style is different in the north of Germany to Pachelbel’s more southern style which was more influenced by the Italians such as Frescobaldi. Here the melody is separated from the accompaniment and becomes more highly ornamented, and the accompaniment forms a musical style of its own even when the melody is silent. Buxtehude’s chorale-preludes lay the foundations for the more ornamented style and more chromatic harmonies we see with J. S. Bach.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Herzlich tut mich verlangen BWV 727

à 2 claviers et pédale

Building further on the stylistic developments of Buxtehude, Bach’s interpretation of this melody manages - as only a true genius can - to be both in some ways simpler but also richer. The melody is decorated, but in a simple and restrained way, whereas the accompaniment provides much more of the emotion connected with the text. This short work is one of the great miniatures of Bach’s organ composition: so much musicality and emotion is communicated with so (seemingly) little effort.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Valet will ich dir geben BWV 735

The text of V. Herberger's hymn was published in 1614 and its verses look to the saviour of the soul. The melody, published with the text and by M. Teschner is derived from an earlier melody from the Geneva Psalter and is used in a cantata of the same name (BWV 415) and also in the St John Passion. The melody will be better known to British ears as that most often used to the great Palm Sunday processional hymn, All glory laud and honour to Thee, redeemer King.

I shall say farewell to you, O wicked, false world;

your sinfully evil life I detest through and through.

To live in Heaven is good, and on this rests my desire;

there will God reward well him who serves Him here.

The form of the work is a simple one: manual parts which develop from the main hymn tune and rapidly grow to form a spirited, lively and brilliant accompaniment to the melody proper which sits in the pedals. The ultimate joy of the second half of the text comes through in the writing style which is economical - that is to say, there is a limited amount of material being used effortlessly - and the whole realises that bright and ultimately optimistic vision of the Resurrection which comes at the end of the Lenten season.