

## CONCERNING THE CLAVIER ÜBUNG III

The third part of the *Clavier Übung* was engraved on copper in 1739 by Balthasar Schmid of Nuremberg and appeared for the Michaelmas fair in Leipzig. Johann Sebastian Bach had entitled it as follows :

*Third part  
of the  
keyboard exercises  
consisting of  
various preludes  
on the hymns of amateurs  
and, in particular, connoisseurs  
of this kind of work  
for the recreation of their mind  
by  
Johann Sebastian Bach,  
composer to the King of Poland and  
the Elector of Saxony,  
Kapellmeister and  
choirmaster of Leipzig.  
Published by the author.*

From a fragment of correspondence between Johannes Elias Bach (1705-1755), cousin of Johann Sebastian and Cantor, and Johann Wilhelm Koch (1704-1745), Cantor in Ronneburg, we learn that J.S. Bach's intention of being published was known.

"My cousin", one may read in this letter dated 10th January 1739, "is on the point of publishing several works for keyboard instrument intended mainly for organists, and composed as well as can be; they ought to be finished by the next Easter Fair and fill some 80 pages" <sup>1</sup>.

The original manuscript of the *Clavier Übung III* was in the possession of his son Carl Philipp Emanuel but, alas, it has since disappeared. The personal copy of this edition, kept by J.S. Bach himself, passed from the hands of Carl Philipp into those of Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749-1818) in 1774. Its last known owner was Friedrich Konrad Griepenkerl (1782-1849), a student of Forkel's. Then the trace was lost forever, it seems.

The title "*Clavier Übung*" was not original with J.S. Bach. A few years earlier, composers had already published, but at a local level, the fruits of their inspiration; e.g. :

- Johann Kuhnau  
Neue Clavier Übung I  
(Leipzig, 1689)  
Neue Clavier Übung II  
(Leipzig, 1692)
- Johann Krieger  
Anmuthige Clavier-Übung bestehend in unterschiedlichen  
Riccercaren... Allen Liebhabern des Claviers wolmeinend  
mitgetheilt  
(Nürnberg, 1698)
- Vincent Lübeck  
Clavier Übung  
(Hamburg, 1728)
- Georg Andreas Sorge  
"Clavier Übung... Sowohl auf der Orgel,  
als auf den Clavieymkel und Clavicordio mit Vergnügen zu hören"  
(Nürnberg, 1739)
- Johann Ludwig Krebs  
Clavier Übung, bestehend in verschiedenen  
Vorspielen und Veränderungen einiger Kirchengesänge  
(Nürnberg, undated)

One also finds a few examples, in the form of Masses, by French composers such as Nicolas de Grigny

and François Couperin. In Austria, Johann Caspar Kerll published a Magnificat in the collection "Modulatio Organi" (c.1686).

A year after the publication of the *Clavier Übung III*, Lorenz Christoph Mizler wrote in his musical revue, "Musikalische Bibliothek" (Leipzig, October 1740, in "Bach-Dokumente" II/482), that "here the author has given the new proof in this kind of composition. He excels with much experience and dexterity. In this sphere, no one can surpass him and, in truth, few are they who can imitate him. This work is a powerful argument against those who seek to criticise this court composer".

It was with the masterful ensemble of the four "Clavierübungen" that J.S. Bach made his powerful entrance on the musical publishing scene, thus seeking for the first time in his life to earn the favours of a broader audience. During the Mühlhausen period, Bach had already made two timid attempts in this area, but certain cantatas for the election of the Municipal Council had been published by the latter, and not on behalf of the composer.

A chronological chart will put these publications back into the context of Bach's output, such as it appeared, and in the main lines, between 1722 and 1750 :

- 1722 The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I
- 1723-33 Trio Sonatas for organ, Keyboard Concertos, Ouvertures III and IV for orchestra, Cantata's, Passions, Masses, Motets, Magnificat, Oratorios
- 1731 Clavier Übung I (6 Partitas for keyboard)
- 1735 Clavier Übung II (Italian Concerto and Ouverture à la française for keyboard)
- 1727-36 Preludes and Fugues for organ (in D minor BWV 538, B minor BWV 544, E minor BWV 548)
- 1736 Schemelli Gesangbuch
- 1739 Clavier Übung III for organ



- 1742 Clavier Übung IV (Goldberg Variations for keyboard)
- 1744 Prelude and Fugue for organ in C major, BWV 547  
The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book II
- 1747 6 Chorales transcribed for organ (Schübler),  
A Musical Offering
- 1744-48 18 Leipzig Chorales for organ
- 1747-48 Canonic Variations for organ
- 1747-49 Canons BWV 1076-1079
- 1749-50 The Art of the Fugue

In his work "Über J.S. Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke" (1802), Johann Nikolaus Forkel provides interesting information concerning the great improviser that Bach was, and which could, moreover, concern our subject. "First of all," he writes, "he used the theme for a prelude and a fugue en pleno. Next, he demonstrated his art of playing for a trio, a quartet, etc. Finally, a fugue en pleno crowned the whole."

Even though some of the pieces of the *Clavier Übung III* might perhaps be compilations of earlier pieces, the irreproachable unity of style permits entitling the whole "Mass for Organ". It seems that Bach therein sought to give a very lofty expression of the maturity of his genius as a composer for his favourite instrument.

Rigour and imagination : the miracle is that, even here, the equilibrium between these two poles is never broken, thanks to an illumination whose source is beyond perceptible reality. This work of art, sustained by a communicative and contagious dynamism, can present only - but sublimely - the offering of its beauty.

## Praeludium BWV 552/1 in E flat major, pro Organo pleno

The "Prelude in E flat major" serves as a monumental portal to the *Clavier Übung III* (also called the "Lutheran Mass", "Deutsche Orgelmesse", or yet again "Dogma in Music"). A triple fugue in the same key completes this grandiose edifice. With its three flats and three themes, the prelude (Introit), just like the triple fugue (recessional) symbolises the Trinity. Theme A : the Father, majestic rhythm of an "ouverture à la française"; B : the Son, a melody with two successive ideas, one including passages in echo, the other, descending motifs representing God, the Son and His incarnation; C : the Holy Ghost, an incessant activity of contrapuntal motivity, illustrated musically like the breath of the spirit to affirm the unity of the Trinity in the three persons. Each theme is closely linked to the other. The succession of these themes is presented in the form of a ritornello : AB AC AB CA. The prelude consists of 205 bars, from which can ensue, symbolically, the number 7 (2+0+5). From the outset, with this perfect figure, symbol of the totality of space and time (7 days of the week, 7 notes of the scale, 7 words of Christ on the cross, etc.), Bach opens this collection with a glorification of the Perfection of God.

Perhaps it might seem that, in this text, we are overemphasising the numerical issue. It goes without saying that the musical feeling, the constantly renewed joy of forever "innocent" listening dominates - and pre-exists -. Numerology is only an additional (and complementary) key amongst others to reading and analysis, a key that is certainly stimulating for the mind. But the more one believes that he is getting close to the mystery that a work presents, rather than enlightening, to the contrary, the more it grows distant and slips away. Music always has the last word.

The *Clavier Übung III* offers a remarkable synthesis between different kinds of writing. Yet, Bach was incapable of settling for recapitulating the past. One even perceives a modernity suggesting the rococo period, characterised by the style galant. However, the composer could hardly be bothered with trying to surprise or shine. The virtuoso writing is to be found at the heart of the polyphonic composition, not in its exterior aspects.



Here, J.S. Bach revives the esoteric conceptions that had already marked the late Middle Ages. The learned nature, sometimes pushed to abstraction - the "Musical Offering" and "Art of the Fugue" are not far off - of the last works never aggravates the musical discourse. To the contrary, a profound emotion always remains in the forefront.

### Chorales BWV 669, 670, 671, long versions

"Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit", Canto fermo in Soprano à 2 Clav. et Pedal

"Christe, aller Welt Trost", Canto fermo in Tenore à 2 Clav. et Pedal

"Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist", à 5 Canto fermo in Basso Cum Organo pleno

This trilogy evokes successively the Father and His majestic voice, the Son and the Holy Ghost. It adopts the form of the great motets, and its compositional technique harks back to Palestrina.

With the "Prelude and Fugue in E flat major", these three long versions of the chorales on the "Kyrie" will be the only pages of the *Clavier Übung III* with three flats in the clef, the symbol, as we know, of the Holy Trinity.

These three pages brilliantly develop the origins of the chorale, that is the Gregorian melody of the "Kyrie fons bonitatis". The cantus firmus resounds solemnly through augmentations to the soprano (BWV 669), the tenor (BWV 670) and the bass (BWV 671). Here one will see a modern - for the time - use, the softening of a modality in the broader sense that contributes to an stretching of the resources of tonality, as would later be the case with Beethoven.

Under the influence of predecessors - notably the old Flemish masters, Scheidt and Frescobaldi -, the conception and realisation of these pieces are, in fact; closely related to the writing style of the Renaissance. J.S. Bach, however, would have been incapable of settling for, or even limiting himself to slavishly reproducing them. The contrapuntal outpouring, highly developed in this extraordinarily dense

polyphony - the idea is born and flourishes starting from the smallest thematic cell - indeed comes from a boundless imagination.

Every one of these chorales, like nearly all the pieces of the collection moreover, begins with the statement by a single and unique voice. They end respectively in four, five and six parts, and always with the relief that is brought by the Picardy third.

This introductory voice, in the style of an a cappella motet, and the extremely vocal commentary of each fragment are nothing other than progressions of various strettos. Simultaneously, the harmony opens on numerous modulations of extreme purity. These are musical poems whose architecture in no way resembles those works weighed down by the frequent alternation of the arsis and thesis of oratorical art. In fact, this is a triple love song, of an affective nature, and does not cease to arouse the keenest admiration.

As in the "Crucifixus" of the "Mass in B minor", a surprising chromatic phrase appears in the final bars of the third "Kyrie", without ever breaking the continuity of the discourse. This new element coincides with the highpoint of the entire piece, and even of the three pieces, marked by a growing surge and a splendid expressive amplification. This passage illustrates the last "Eleison" : an authentic and rare manifestation of a flamboyant art taken to perfection.

### Chorales BWV 672, 673, 674, short versions

"Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit", alio modo manualiter

"Christe, aller Welt Trost", alio modo manualiter

"Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist", alio modo manualiter

The short versions ("Missa Brevis") of the *Clavier Übung III* mostly adopt the fughetta, or short fugue, style. In the present case, the more or less vigorous formulas in which the cantus firmus is reduced to a



short fragment, leads to poetry different from that of the long versions, if already due only to their miniaturisation and the concentration of time. Written in three parts, these short pages on the "Kyrie" are given new impetus by a little rhythmic motif, full of imagery or derived, respectively in 3/4, 6/8 and 9/8. The last page will superpose the two previous pages - "qui procedit Patre filioque" -. Their appeal resides not only in simple, even unadorned writing, when not reduced to the bare essentials : this extreme refinement also touches, as it is the fruit and ultimate result of a whole life of research.

### *"Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' "*

5  
6 According to the pseudo-Dionysius 2, these angels are arranged in a hierarchy of nine choirs, or three triads. For this early-Christian theologian, enamoured of neo-Platonism, this marvellous numerology attested to "the perfection of perfection, order in order, unity in unity". Doubtless impelled by similar concerns as to the profound - and hidden - signification of numbers, J.S. Bach, between the two reduced - format versions of the "Gloria" from the "Cunctipotens Genitor Deus" Mass, interpolates the long version BWV 676 with the dual intention of symbolising the Trinitarian principle (the choice of three-part writing is, in itself, already significant) and modelling this series on the character of the "Kyrie", which is itself tripartite. The final version, BWV 677, in fughetta style, constitutes the logical outcome of the three little fugues of the "Kyrie - Christe - Kyrie".

### **Chorale BWV 675, short version**

*"Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' ", à 3 Canto fermo in Alto*

In all likelihood, the writing of this first "Gloria" goes back to the early days in Weimar. The soprano and bass, in imitations derived from the intonation of the cantus firmus, constitute the first element. The second, with its dactylic rhythm, could convey the gratitude and joy of the "Und Dank für seine Gnade" ("And thanks be for His mercy"). As for the third element, whose expressive ascent seems to rise up to

heaven, it conveys "in der Höhe" ("on high"), or "In excelsis". It is also often compared to the beating of an angel's wings. This element, with its sometimes rising, sometimes falling motion, is reminiscent of the "Gloria in excelsis" from the well-known carol "Angels We Have Heard on High".

The last verse, "All' Fehd' hat nun ein Ende" ("All discord has now come to an end"), gradually fades out with an abrupt descent of more than two octaves, in the narrow space of barely three bars. This brief coda thus dramatically runs towards the low end of the soprano register.

### **Chorale BWV 676, long version**

*"Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' ", à 2 Clav. et Pedal*

This trio seems to manifest a particular intention on the part of J.S. Bach. The cantus firmus is indeed exploited to the maximum of its potential. The three parts are considered by the composer as equal, but the cantus firmus receives a denser treatment than in the other two parts of the trilogy.

5  
7 Written in three-part concertant trio style as in the other two versions of the "Gloria", this one contains a virtuoso pedal part that supports the discourse with its regular punctuations. The dimensions of the piece (126 bars) correspond to those of a trio sonata's fast movement. But the originality and appeal of this work still reside in the alternate arrangement of the hymn, which is not entrusted to a single voice, but alternatively calls upon the two upper parts and even the bass. The exceptional skill, clarity, uninterrupted flow and the colouring of the argument are quite simply the product of genius.

### **Fughetta super BWV 677, short version**

*"Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr' ", manualiter*

Despite the relatively reduced dimensions (with a mere 20 bars, this is the second-shortest piece in the whole collection, after the short version of the chorale *"Wir glauben all' an einen Gott"* that totals 15



bars), this little fugue in reality hides a double fugue. This is a large, albeit miniaturised architecture. The singularity of this piece is essentially based on the subtle and joyful quavers surmounted by a dot - staccato but expressive - that contribute liveliness and volubility.

As organist-musicologist Hermann Keller has suggested, this chorale, a sort of angelic music, can be played with a mediaeval-style sonority. Furthermore, the soft reed selected, of a sufficiently characteristic timbre, allows us to distinguish between the two "short" versions, the BWV 675 being more inclined towards elegance and transparency. Moreover, the choice of this reed relates to the last "Duetto" **3**.

### **Chorale BWV 678, long version**

*"Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot' ", à 2 Clav. et Pedal Canto fermo in Canone*

**58** Beginning with the ataraxia that manifests itself through a near-suspension of time, a fermata which was certainly ineluctable for the composer, this is the sole chorale of all that begins with two parts, permitting a realisation of a metaphorical and poetic approach, step by step, of terrestrial phenomena such as gravitation.

Tenth of the 21 chorales that make up the *Clavier Übung III*, this piece displays astonishing counterpoint. The use of the canon doubtless corresponds to the idea according to which the Ten Commandments are made to be rigorously observed by Man. The overlapping of the two canonic voices is nonetheless irregular; we may note five entrances per couple, or ten entrances in all, and the G of the first couple is heard ten times... A very eloquent illustration of Bach's symbolic use of the number ten, which corresponds to the Decalogue.

The handling of these entrances recalls the opening chorus of "Cantata BWV 77", in which the same chorale appears. Four voices sing with emotion "Du sollst Gott, deinen Herren, Lieben von ganzem Herzen, vom ganzer Seele, von allen Kräften und von ganzem Gemüte und deinen Nächsten als dich

selbst" ("Thou shall love the Lord, thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength and all thy spirit, and thy neighbour as thyself").

The balance between contrapuntal rigour (the two parts of the cantus firmus in canon) and the suppleness of the figuralism (a trio with accompaniment) mark this grandiose - but never grandiloquent - construction. To the aforementioned symbolic images Bach adds others, centred on the very personage of Moses (the two parts of the canon presumably evoke the two tablets of the Law; and the rising and descending scales, just like certain pedal passages, the idea of the prophet's journey). The pedal part takes on the role of harmonic support, as in a trio movement, and makes a line occasionally in zigzag. The evolution of the latter structure is often shown by a more or less abrupt change in orientation. Doubtless mirroring our lives?

Finally, the chromaticism of the last "Kyrieleis", an entreaty, a sudden cry, a tearing, could be justified as the reflection of the melody of a famous penitents' chant, "In Gottes Namen fahren wir" ("In the name of the Lord do we go"), that served as a rallying chant for German pilgrims during the Crusade of 1298. This long version, both divine and profound, ultimately receives an extraordinary mobility in an apparent and relative immobility that we would normally, perhaps, have the right to expect from a 6/4 bar.

### **Fughetta super BWV 679, short version**

*"Dies sind die heil'gen zehn Gebot' ", manualiter*

This fughetta, on a theme laid out in two parts, the first exploiting the very intonation of the hymn, unfolds over a jubilant gigue rhythm that seems to brilliantly herald heavenly messages.

The subject, which includes ten beats (triplets) and has ten half-tones as an ambitus, will enter ten times. However, in the same subject, the principal or pivot note of G is heard not ten times but fourteen ( $2+1+3+8=14=BACH$ ) **4**. The development of the piece is sometimes straight, sometimes inverted, and



always in the brilliant style of a keyboard concerto. Marked by the irruption of semiquaver roulades, whether tightened or not, the elaboration of the piece attains an exhilarating rhythm and leads to a pure miracle of kaleidoscopic transformation of the initial microcosm.

### Chorale BWV 680, long version

*"Wir glauben all' an einen Gott", in Organo pleno con Pedale*

6  
0 Here, Bach proposes a paraphrase on Luther's hymn, the three strophes in octosyllabic verses of which correspond to the three divine persons. But he only treats the first and last verses of the text. Even though written in four parts, it is actually a large three-part fugue. The fourth part, entrusted to the pédal, a ritornello intervening six times and in five different keys, is presented in the form of a double-spiral staircase of broken thirds (ascent in quavers, symmetrical descent in semiquavers). This assured "stride" perhaps symbolises that of the believer. The entire fugue possesses a constant, untiring tension. The subject stems directly from the first four notes of the hymn, "Wir glauben all" ("We all believe"). Melodic superimpositions show, by metathesis, a perfect union with this subject and its first counter-subject. Finally, it has been thought that this chorale theme must have had a singular importance for J.S. Bach and that might be considered the matrix of the subject of "The Art of the Fugue".

The subject will be heard fourteen times in the course of the piece, and the subject/response couple eighteen times in all ( $1+8=9=3 \times 3$ , expression of the Trinitarian God). The fourteenth and final entrance is linked to a splendid quotation: "Es steht alles in seiner Macht" ("He holds all in His power"). This is the sole trace of the cantus firmus that stands out clearly in the tenor, in long values, whose fourteenth and final note coincides, in bar 100, with the final chord.

Jean-Jacques Duparcq <sup>5</sup> emphasises that, according to the moral precept of the cabala, all that we are results from a process of expression of divinity. This spiritualist current that has crossed the ages would naturally be found in a Luther, whose teaching incited everyone to share his gifts with others. Bach

moreover showed himself a faithful servant of this doctrine. Even today, this gigantic, powerfully constructed piece, sometimes called "the fugue of the giants", is offered to us like a subject of constant wonder.

### Fughetta super BWV 681, short version

*"Wir glauben all' an einen Gott", manualiter*

6  
1 This free fughetta is the shortest piece of the whole collection. In French style with a majestic dotted rhythm, royal and glorious, it evokes the strength and power of God: "Macht", says the text. And despite this brevity, J.S. Bach pulls off a tour de force, giving this piece a dimension of exceptional intensity: at the moment of the declamation of the last five bars, the discourse intensifies to the point of becoming a drama. The adoption of a somewhat theatrical expressive force, and an equally singular stylistic form takes place, surprisingly moreover, after the previous thirteen pieces. It thus occupies the fourteenth position which, it so happens, is the centre, and will in turn be followed by thirteen other pieces. In this way, it is presented as a new exordium (the beginning of a discourse), the overture to a hypothetical second part of the *Clavier Übung III*, the four "Duetti" included. Might its role be comparable to "Variatio 16" of the "Goldberg Variations"?

### Chorale BWV 682, long version

*"Vater unser im Himmelreich", à 2 Clav. et Pedal e Canto fermo in Canone*

Sonata a tre (two soloists and basso continuo) writing combines with a canon at the octave to form a whole with five intensely expressive voices, like a choir of real human voices. In this concertant dialogue we find the synthesis of the dramatic instrumental sinfonia and the chorale in canonic duet, of the cantata type. The Lombard rhythm or Lombardic style (a semiquaver followed by a dotted quaver), which is used preponderantly here, is not to be used elsewhere in the *Clavier Übung III*. Even though Quantz (1752) and Agricola (1757) mention it in their treatises, the Lombard rhythm was however already used at the time



of Ganassi (1535) and Caccini (1601), not to mention Purcell. It was quite widespread throughout Europe, found in Sammartini and Vivaldi as well as in Handel's chamber music, and especially Trabaci, or yet again in toccata-style keyboard pieces by Frescobaldi and Muffat.

The piece is marked by an insistent chromaticism. With its varied and diversified ornamentation, the effect of the appoggiature is even more remarkable given that the harmony turns out to be rich in prodigious modulations, and that a counterpoint in full and constant expansion abounds.

Impelled by a moto perpetuo, as in the second movement of the "Trio Sonata in G major", without warning, the pedal line receives as of the 41st bar ( $9+18+2+1+3+8 = 41 = \text{J.S. Bach}$ ) **4**, and following a rest such as there had never been up to now and would not be in the rest of the piece, pathetic inflexions and rhythms (the pedal climbs in Lombard rhythm, whereas the soprano descends chromatically). Here we can see, symbolically, a sort of personal "credo" claimed, asserted, proclaimed and declaimed.

**6**  
**2** The juxtaposition and superposition of highly different rhythmic personages - including subtle triplets - create considerable difficulties for the musician (a single organist!). But if this complex piece is rightly considered one of the most difficult to play of all of Bach's organ music, this difficulty is counterbalanced by its immense beauty. The high perfection of the slightest details is immediately conveyed in pure emotion, and this construction submits to a beauty that is always luminously intelligible. This audacious chorale is doubtless one of the summits of J.S. Bach's art. The organist and composer Johann Ulrich Steigleder (1593-1635), termed this chorale theme the "song of all songs, the prayer of all prayers". Have we never seen a sail passing on the ocean, rounded, swollen, trembling under the impetuosity of the breath of the spirit?

### Chorale BWV 683a, short version *"Vater unser im Himmelreich", manualiter*

The two versions (BWV 683 and 683a) of this chorale are both remarkable. Here, as in the variant of the chorale "Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten" BWV 690a, Bach spiritualises his expression, announcing small contrapuntal fragments that are not lacking in inner vehemence. And here too, as so often elsewhere (as such, the "Orgelbüchlein" remains a model), Bach fully respects the affective content of the text, down to the last detail. Everything speaks, everything expresses and signifies, and, the composer seems to be telling us, everything is perceptible to the human heart.

The variant, hardly changed in relation to BWV 683, differs by a ritornello that gives this cantata-form piece an admirable concertant style : a six-bars prelude, short interludes, a brief conclusion. The choice also focussed on this variant due to the irresistible beauty of the detail stops of the Kampen organ.

### Chorale BWV 684, long version *"Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam", à 2 Clav. et Canto fermo in Pedale*

The musical commentary of this chorale for baptism is literally visionary. Almost without interruption, like a linear circular movement, it presents an undulating motif of semiquavers that, with its explicit design, quite obviously depicts the waters of the River Jordan.

The motif of quavers in the two trebles could be interpreted as a sign of the baptism by Saint John the Baptist. Played by the pedal, the cantus firmus is clearly entrusted to the tenor. The music's splendid fluidity, the purifying agility of the waters of grace, all leads ineluctably to the moving concluding passage, in which a new life opens up : "Es galt ein neues Leben", as the text affirms. In nature, nor does water ever finish its way, other than to merge and cancel itself out in a great Whole. Does not this adventure without beginning or end appear as a sign of the very transience of human life?



A soft reed serves to express, in the bass, this constant flux and reflux, while a more powerful reed, entrusted to the bass, intones the hymn. The writing shows quite evidently that these two parts can merge (the semiquavers derive from the cantus), this allowing them to clash and compete, to the point of obtaining brief moments of junction/fusion, then estrangement or distance...

### Chorale BWV 685, short version

*"Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam", alio modo manualiter*

Conceived for 3 parts (four entries), this piece, which does not avoid the tritone of the first Dorian mode, confines itself to an exposition and recapitulation, separated by a short and elegant divertissement. The subject is none other than the first phrase of the hymn; its answer, the inverted subject. As for the counter-subject, it is built from notes of the subject, in diminution.

As said Johann Mattheson (1681-1764), "The short chorale preludes that ensue from the organist's fantasy must aim at expressing, through the sound figures, the very passion to which the words refer". Gilles Cantagrel admirably explains this notion of "Klangrede" (speech in music) in the chapter entitled "Le discours sans paroles" in his book "Le moulin et la rivière" 6. Would Bach, using mirror writing here, perhaps be contrasting the new life with the former?

By resorting to this technique, the composer assuredly gives it a thoroughly symbolic meaning. He also anticipates "The Art of the Fugue" : see the counter-fugue per arsis et thesis (by ascent and descent).

### Chorale BWV 686, long version

*"Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir", à 6 in Organo pleno con Pedale doppio*

Under the influence of the North German school (the works for double pedal, such as the "Modus ludendi pleno Organo pedaliter a 6 Voc." and the "Modus pleno Organo pedaliter. Benedicamus a 6 Voc."

with which Samuel Scheidt's "Tabulatura Nova, Teil III" comes to an end; or the first "versus" of Franz Tunder's chorale "Jesus Christus unser Heiland"), Bach, who also signed a variant for double pedal of the chorale "An Wasserflüssen Babylon" (BWV 653b) - the authenticity of the chorale BWV 740, "Wir glauben all' an einen Gott, Vater, Sohn und Heiligen Geist", on the other hand, being seriously in doubt - built a huge edifice in the Phrygian mode whose nobility and supremely lofty tone strike us from the very first bars.

The originality also resides in the fact of having entrusted the chorale to the upper part of the double pedal. This is the sole example of real six-part writing in all of Bach's keyboard music, if one excludes the "Ricercar a 6" from the "Musical Offering" (let us point out here the marking "Ricercata a 6 voci Sonabile sull'Organo, con Pedale obligato", written on a copy in the hand of J.F. Agricola himself, seems to imply that this is quite possible on the organ : on the pipe instrument, the adjunction, advisedly, of the pedal organ part can only clarify while, at the same time, making this great masterpiece even more profound). It is also the final ramification of the motet-type technique.

Lacking any ornament, the discourse gradually divides up the melody of the "De profundis", intended for the sacrament of penitence according to Luther. The harmonised cantus firmus, responds to a rigorous verticality. It is certainly not by chance if Bach insists, like the hymn, on the fall of the fifth that characterises the word "tief" (deep), and in bar 45, employs false relations that correspond exact to the word "Unrecht" (injustice).

Towards the end, one finds a strongly marked use of the rhythm of joy, not without an intended pathos. Might not these dactyls (a long followed by two short notes) in the counter-subject be for Bach the possibility of expressing meaningfully - and symbolically - the elation felt by the Christian for Christ the Saviour (at the same time, it could also apply to his own life, punctuated by misunderstandings and petty fights, but also successive "redemptions" gained thanks to musical creation)? The message is equally significant, when the same elation attests to the gratitude of having survived being put into pieces : "Wer kann, Herr, vor dir bleiben?" ("Who will be able, Lord, to subsist before Thee?").



Nonetheless, it is evident that the major interest of the piece does not lie only there. With his exceptional skill, Bach, by having sought to push back the limits of the organ - his favourite instrument - leaves us with a powerful spiritual emotion, based on the words "schrei' ich zu dir" ("I cry unto Thee"), an emotion in keeping with despair, since we are all mortal, and in keeping with the hope towards the infinite : while the first feeling is fleeting, the other is bound to eternity.

Might not J.S. Bach, a sorrowful prophet like all prophets, largely underestimated or even misunderstood by his contemporaries - who were perhaps unable or unwilling to understand what he had created, what he had to say -, before the era itself finally turned its back to him, have been expressing his own distress here? Equipped with this additional key, might we not grasp the meaning more completely, and hear this triumphant hymn better, this instant of joy of a man at height of his own worth?

## 6 Chorale BWV 687, short version

*"Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir", à 4 alio modo manualiter*

In the monumental and crushing proximity of the long version, the clarity and subtle mobility (of tone and rhythm) of this concertant discourse is all the more striking. While avoiding the lack of ornamentation and even the relative but grandiose austerity that characterised the latter, the short version unfolds in three parts, accompanying the fourth voice of the treble for the hymn tune, in augmentation. If all seems reduced to lesser proportions here, this reduced version - but largely surpassing its sister version in number of bars -, of uncommon richness and elaboration, is worthy of figuring amongst J.S. Bach's most astonishing works.

Its ardent impulsion and the quivering elan of each of its fragments are convincing proof that here we are on the same level as the chorale "Vor deinen Thron tret' ich hiermit" BWV 668 - doubtless Bach's final piece - and even the "Goldberg Variations". It is not, however, without pleasure that the performer plays the last six-part chord, which is of supreme sovereignty.

## Chorale BWV 688, long version

*"Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns den Gottes Zorn wandt"*

*à 2 Clav. et Canto fermo in Pedale*

The leading motif is made up of two distinct elements : one, in notes with intervallic leaps and falls of very great expansiveness; the other, more flexible, fluid, in values twice as fast. The violin figuralism, in crab-wise motion, comes down directly from Biber, Walther and Vivaldi.

This audacious antagonism between an impetuous motion and a regressive motion of equal importance is governed by the cantus firmus that intervenes, in long values, by spaced periods. In this trio writing, the tenor part, on the pedal organ, states the hymn, whereas the two hands of opposing character form an incessant dialogue, sometimes colliding in tension, with a prodigious instability due to its "moto perpetuo" gyration and speed. Here, the force is caused by a double motion of lever and counter-lever.

What is the idea contained in the commentary of the chorale? How does it relate to the Communion, to convey the subscript "Sub communion"? Unless Bach did not expressly centre this whole eucharistic meditation on spiritual communion. The text states that Jesus diverted the wrath of His Father and delivered us from the tortures of Hell. Might the impression of enigma left by this piece perhaps stem from this desire of Bach's, that we are interpreting, by giving an example as original and unexpected as possible to connoisseurs of Luther's teaching? Could we heighten this impression as far as the conflict created by the cohabitation of two such opposite elements in these chaotic motifs, from the beginning in a two-dimensional spiral form of construction, of nearly unlimited development, sustained like the wind of the organ itself? With this final chorale, Bach returns to the primacy of pure figuralist description, as in, for example, the long versions of the Ten Commandments or the baptism in the Jordan.

The sixth verse of this chorale, "Solch gross Gnad und Barmherzigkeit sucht ein Herz in grosser Arbeit" ("May such great grace and charity find a heart in great work"), perhaps also like, with the same imperious musical elan, the "Sinfonia" of "Cantata 146", "Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal in das Reich



Gottes eingehen" ("It is through many tribulations that we must enter into the kingdom of God"), ought to guide us towards the final goal, which is, for the Christian, to ardently aspire, by means of communion, to the unity between Man and God. A coda, driven by a series of rising arpeggios, symbolises, on the final majored chord, the liberation at last acquired.

### Fuga super BWV 689, short version

*"Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns..."*, à 4 manualiter

As happens in the short versions, this last chorale is also, paradoxically, the least "miniaturised". In the ethereal style reminiscent of certain fugues from "The Well-Tempered Clavier", the same plenitude of writing continues to palpitate even in these pages of a speculative vigour. Here it is more a translation of the chorale text in its main lines than in the detail.

The fugue consists of two parts of contrasting character, with a series of strettos, either on the subject or on the melismatic counter-subject, straight or inverted, or yet again on the two superposed elements.

As of the stretto (bar 36), a jubilant rhythmic element makes a subtle appearance and develops progressively like a sort of almost metaphysical intuition of the composer. Symbolic chromatic inflexions still remain. In the coda (bar 57), after having maintained an "ethereal" discourse, the cantus firmus (in augmentation) slips surreptitiously into the tenor. This definitively triumphant peroration that is, at the same time, serene, is typical of Bach's final creative period. It is the pure manifestation of a supreme celebration of the spirit : "unio mystica".

### Duetti BWV 802, 803, 804 and 805

These four pieces form an inseparable unit. The rising succession of their keys - E, F, G and A - arrives naturally at B flat, the first note of the final fugue. These pages seem to correspond, like a sort of musical addition, to the "Brief exhortation to confession" that Luther added to the second part of his "Great Catechism" **7**.

According to Pythagoreans, the number four designates both the first square and the period of ten days, the product of the addition of the first four numbers ( $1+2+3+4=10=1+0=1$ ); symbol of perfection and key to the universe. The quaternary, a sacred figure of this earthly world (the 4 elements, the 4 seasons, the 4 animals of Ezekiel, etc.), are inscribed at equal distance from One ( $4-1=3$ ) and the septenary ( $7-4=3$ ) that expresses its union with the divine Triad.

Hence these hypotheses : does not the position of the quaternary correspond to an attitude typical of Man, present at the dawn of all cosmogonies, and in the Cross, which indicates the cardinal points, thus linking the theory of initiates and alchemists searching for the philosopher's stone? Or else, do these "Duetti" not symbolise the four archangels, Michael, Gabriel, Raphael and Uriel? (cf. on this subject Andreas Werckmeister [1645-1706], chapter 26 of the "Musicalische Paradoxal-Discourse", published in 1707, which interprets the number four as the "angelic figure" par excellence). In the Middle Ages, angels were considered the governors and guardians of the four elements of the terrestrial universe, and according to Saint Thomas Aquinas (the "Angelic Doctor"), they were conceived as both intellectual and spiritual beings.

Alberto Basso **8** points out that "Duetti I and III" perhaps present the character of a prelude, while II and IV develop according to the principle of the fugue. Written in two parts, they are nonetheless comparable more to the canons of "The Art of the Fugue" than to the two-part "Inventions". These amazingly constructed pages contain games of symmetry and subtle architectonic procedures whose symbolic, speculative, educational or even liturgical source has not yet given up all its secrets.



## Fuga BWV 552/2

in E flat major, à 5 con Pedale pro Organo pleno

Finally comes the true transmutation. Written in E flat major (three flats in the clef), this triple fugue (three subjects), totals 117 bars ( $1+1+7=9$ , multiple of 3). There too, each person of the Trinity is presented musically in pertinent fashion : the first theme **9**, in five parts and in long values, illustrates the majesty of the Father.

After the "Prelude", the sum of the 21 chorales, itself followed by the four "Duetti", this first fugue, like a river arriving at its mouth, postulates breadth and majesty. Its 4/4 signature (the alla breve is not original) no longer offers the notion of normal earthly time. Moreover, in his book "Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik" (1771), Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721-1783) writes that the "broad 4/4 time must have a heavy weight. For its powerful nature suits sacred music quite well, as well as chorales and fugues". For his part, Johann Gottfried Walther (1684-1748), in his "Musicalisches Lexicon" (1732), terms this kind of fugue a "Fuga grave".

This first part, marked for the first time in the *Clavier Übung III* by the advent of a long horizontal line "very slowly", presents and develops dense material, treated in "style antico". The subject is none other than the transformation of the subject of the first "Kyrie". But here we have rather a hymn to divine love.

The second fugue, in four parts, features a subject of obvious motoric character, typical of "Spielfuge manualiter" writing. The highly fluid theme seems to illustrate the Son. Our life begins in water, and it is in this substance blessed by the Gods, this fluid so close to our soul, that Man's adventure begins.

The third and final fugue is a "fugal dance" in the style of a gigue, whose texture is made up of five voices. It is a sparkling, literally miraculous page, which, fully visited by the Holy Ghost, radiates a supreme energy.

In the construction of this triple fugue, numeric symbolism plays a profound role and significance that are far from being negligible. The first fugue is in C or 4/4, the second in 6/4, the third in 12/8. The sum of all these numbers is 34 ( $4+6+4+12+8$ ), or  $3+4=7$ . We thus arrive at the same result, condensing the symbolic value by fugue of these numbers:  $4+1$  ( $6+4=10$ , thus 1)  $+2$  ( $12+8=20$ , thus 2) = 7, as with the "Prelude".

Paul Valéry, wrote about fellow-poet Stéphane Mallarmé : "He raised the page to the power of the starry sky". Within these layers of sound, where every brushstroke on the canvas is more than an event, Johann Sebastian Bach sets off real fireworks and constructs a moving spiritual painting, raised to the immortal astral vault.

Kei Koito

Notes :

**1** "Schriftstücke von der Hand Johann Sebastian Bachs", published in 1963 by the J.S. Bach Institute, Göttingen, The Bach Archives, Leipzig, Bärenreiter Editions, Kassel.

**2** Name given by the Moderns to an anonymous Greek writer whose works have been incorrectly attributed to Dionysius the Areopagite, an Athenian converted by Saint Paul during his preaching before the Areopagus (Acts of the Apostles, XVII, 16-34). The Dionysian corpus, which includes ten letters and four treatises (Divine Names, Mystical Theology, Celestial Hierarchy, Ecclesiastical Hierarchy), is characterised by Christian syntheses of neo-Platonic inspiration. This thinking exerted a true fascination on the Middle Ages, including Thomas Aquinas.

**3** "In their book Bach en Het Getal" (Zutphen, 1985), Kees van Houten and Marinus Kasbergen carry out a remarkable analysis of the circular construction of the *Clavier Übung III*.

**4** The position of the different letters in the alphabet gives each one a number in order. This permits expressing names and concepts through figures. Borrowed from the tradition of the cabala, this procedure is known under the term of "gematria".



Bach used the Latin alphabet, in which the letters "i" and "j" are one and the same; similarly, "u" and "v". This gives, for example, a = 1, b = 2..., i, j = 9..., u, v = 20..., z = 24. The principle of gematria, applied to the name of notes in German, thus gives BACH =  $2+1+3+8 = 14$ . In the case of the note Es (E flat), one must add the two letters, which corresponds to  $E+S = 5+18 = 23$ .

This principle was notably used in 1950 by Friedrich Smend, in his book "J.S. Bach bei seinen Namen gerufen", and more recently, by Kees van Houten and Marinus Kasbergen (cf. note 3 above).

5 "De quelques aspects de la symbolique des nombres chez J.S. Bach", in "Positions luthériennes" 33/1, 1985. Also : "Essai d'analyse formelle et numérique du choral BWV 680 de J.S. Bach", in "Nombre d'Or et Musique", ed. Peter Lang, 1988.

6 Gilles Cantagrel, "Le moulin et la rivière. Air et variations sur Bach", Fayard 1998.

7 For other highly interesting interpretations, see, for example, Robin A. Leaver, "Bach's Clavier Übung III, Some Historical And Theological Considerations", in "The Organ Yearbook, 1975"; Gerd Zacher, "Zur Interpretation der Vier Duette aus dem Dritten Theil der Clavier Übung", in "Musik-Konzepte", vol. 79/80, 1973; David Humphreys, "The Esoteric Structure of Bach's Clavier Übung III", 1983, University College Cardiff Press.

8 Alberto Basso, "Jean-Sébastien Bach", Fayard, 1985.

9 The theme states in order : B flat, G, C, B flat, E flat, D or, in German solmisation, B, G, C, B, Es, D, which corresponds numerologically to 2, 7, 3, 2, 23, 4. The sum of all these figures gives 41... And if one adds the number of voices of the three fugues, one obtains:  $5+4+5 = 14$ ...