

# The Art of Bach

Bach, the human pulse, number, and the music of the spheres:

Wilfrid Mellers undertakes a study of the last chorale prelude for organ

The chorale prelude – a composition built on the cantus firmus of a German Lutheran hymn in the vernacular, usually scored for solo organ – was to Bach what cantus firmus technique had been to composers of the Renaissance Roman Catholic Church: for whom the Latin-texted plainchant had served as a ‘firm song’ around which other relatively free parts cohered, usually scored for voices, sometimes with instrumental addenda. Bach composed chorale preludes throughout his working life, forming a diary of both his spiritual history and of the Church year. During his early Weimar days, when he assembled his *Orgelbüchlein* (an anthology of mostly brief chorale preludes for use in the diurnal activities of his Church), he made a prelude on the hymn *Wenn wir in höchstem Nöten sein*, ornamenting the tune luxuriantly, in Buxtehude’s style, and accompanying it with fairly simple harmonies. At the end of his life he made another setting of the hymn, but took his title from another stanza – *Vor deinen Thron tret’ ich*. The changed title was not fortuitous, for Bach clearly regarded this setting as a last testament which, his eyes failing, he dictated to a copyist, probably his eldest son, from his sick-bed, if not at death’s door. Even if the death-bed story is no more than apocrypha, it has mythical relevance both to the hymn’s unuttered words and to the music Bach made in response to them. After his father’s death, C P E Bach published the chorale prelude in open score, as an appendix to *The Art of Fugue*, that simultaneously theoretical and practical summation of Bach’s work as pedagogue, musical philosopher and, in Auden’s phrase, ‘composing mortal’.

In this last chorale prelude the hymn tune is presented as the top part, in readily recognisable form, though Bach added a few ornamental notes to its first clause, in order to bring the number of notes up to 14, which represents BACH in the figure alphabet. He also contrived to embrace 41 notes in the complete hymn tune, 41 being 14 backwards, and ‘standing for’ J S BACH. While Bach revelled in the allegorical ingenuities he could discover in such puzzles, he did not do so playfully – or if he did, it was because games are magic. It would not have escaped his attention that his own figure-alphabet number is twice seven; and for the Pythagoreans, seven was a peculiarly significant number, there being seven colours in the solar spectrum and seven tones in the diatonic musical scale, the pitches of which are mathematically determined. Whereas six represents harmony, concord, and marriage, seven is not a closed circle but a spiral that was, in alchemical theory, a gateway between earth and heaven. The rainbow, appearing after the deluge in its seven colours, was a sign of the meeting of the

terrestrial with the celestial; according to the seventh chapter of Genesis it was on the seventh day that God, after the six days of creation, breathed into man’s nostrils, making him ‘a living soul’.

Such hermetic speculations were common among the alchemically orientated theologians and music theorists with whose writing Bach was acquainted. They therefore conditioned the frame of mind in which he conceived his opus ultimum, if not its precise formulation. That Bach’s last composition should be a *chorale prelude* for organ solo is appropriate: for the chorale, a communal hymn in the vernacular, was a religious song of ubiquitous popularity, embodying the life and faith of his people; while polyphony was both a philosophical principle and an artistic heritage; and the organ, on the mechanics of which Bach was an expert, was at once ‘horizontally’ (or polyphonically) able to define contrapuntal strands in clearly defined tone colours, while at the same time it could ‘vertically’ (or harmonically) sustain complex and dissonant tone clusters as long as fingers and feet remained in contact with the keys, enunciating a ‘crucial’ dissonance as readily as the blandest consonance. Not for nothing did the organ attain its peak of mechanical perfection in Bach’s day. This chorale prelude is structured as a vocal motet in four ‘real’ parts; even so, its spacing is instrumental, and only a baroque organ could absorb so much harmonic stress into what appears to be diaphanous linear flow. (The complete piece appears on p. 58 in the open score in which C P E Bach presented it.)

The cantus firmus hymn tune itself, embracing four symmetrical four-bar clauses, is presented sectionally in the top line, each clause being introduced by a (magical) seven-bar period in diminished time values. These prelude and interlude sections cannot, however, be regarded as classical ritornelli, since every note of them is strictly thematic. There is no division between the ‘word’ of the cantus firmus and the musical artefact that is created from it. The key is basically G major, which was traditionally benedictory: a fifth up the cycle of fifths from ‘whitely’ rational C major, but a fifth down the cycle from ‘glorious’ D major, trumpet-key of majesty both mundane and potentially divine. In the seven-bar prelude, moving in gentle quavers, the theme appears *rectus* in the tenor, answered in inversion by the alto (bars 1-2). A chromatic tail to the tenor modulates to the dominant (bar 3) but immediately declines to the tonic. In bar 4 the pedal enters with the theme *rectus*, and chromatics creep into the bass line, hinting at ‘purgatorial’ E minor (bars 6-7). But the cadence back to G major ends the prelude section, as the cantus firmus of the hymn-tune sings clearly in the top line (bars 8-10). The hymn begins with