

CONCERTS *at* SAINT THOMAS



THE GERMAN CHORALE: MASTERWORKS OF BACH, DISTLER, AND REGER

Nicholas Quardokus

The Loening-Hancock and Miller-Scott Organs

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2020

3:00 P.M.

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE

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CONCERTS *at* SAINT THOMAS

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE

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PROGRAM

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17, 2020

3:00 P.M.

- Partite diverse sopra “Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig”, BWV 768 *Johann Sebastian Bach*
(1685-1750)
- Partita “Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland”, Op. 8, no. 1 *Hugo Distler*
I. Toccata (1908-1942)
II. Choral mit Variationen
III. Chaconne
IV. Toccata
- Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein, BuxWV 210 *Dieterich Buxtehude*
(c. 1637-1707)
- Fantasie über den Choral “Straf mich nicht in deinem Zorn” *Max Reger*
Op. 40, no. 2 (1873-1916)

PROGRAM NOTES

Today's program, centered around the German chorale, is a multifaceted exploration of the genre. The music alone is enough, but the pieces presented today also uncover deeper connective strands of music history, church history, theology, and even politics. The chorale genre unofficially took root in the 1520's during Martin Luther's attempts at liturgical reform. Both *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* and *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* are counted among Luther's earliest efforts and form part of the backbone of the chorale repertory. On the other hand, *Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig* represents the great outgrowth of Pietist hymnody during the end of the seventeenth century. Similarly, both the text and tune of *Straf mich nicht in deinem Zorn* originated in the late seventeenth century. Perhaps the most interesting musicological thread presented in today's program is the idea of historicism. Both Distler and Reger modeled their music after that of Bach and Buxtehude, but their compositional outcomes diverge greatly. In the case of Reger, he takes Bachian counterpoint and adds his own romantic voice, with intense chromaticism. Hugo Distler, writing his *Nun Komm* partita (1932) in post-World War I Germany, writes in direct opposition to the excesses of Reger, with a clean-cut, economical approach. Moreover, the transfer of ideas between composers on this program is not limited from the Baroque to the twentieth century. One must not forget Bach's famous 250-mile pilgrimage on foot to visit and learn from Buxtehude. Additionally, recent scholarship has uncovered the earliest example of Bach's handwriting, and it not-so-coincidentally is a fragment of Buxtehude's *Nun freut euch* which appears on today's program. That Bach, as a thirteen-year-old, was already engaging in what is Buxtehude's most extended and complex keyboard work speaks to an even more deeply-rooted admiration and familiarity towards Buxtehude than previously thought.

Bach's monumental *Partite diverse sopra “Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig”* is his longest chorale partita. He wrote this piece early in his life, perhaps during his first position as organist in Arnstadt. Bach would have been extremely familiar with chorale partitas from both Southern Germany (namely by Johann Pachelbel) as well as those from Northern Germany (namely by Georg

Böhm). However, as is typical, Bach takes the genre to new heights. In the case of *Sei gegrüßet*, his extended use of the pedal is nearly unprecedented. Furthermore, the ordering of the variations creates a dramatic arch, with each exploring a different rhythmic and stylistic idea. Though there is no compelling analysis matching any variation to a particular verse of text, the chorale text includes a reoccurring refrain: “Lass mich deine Liebe erben/ und darinnen selig sterben” (Let me inherit your love/ and therein faithfully die). In the penultimate variation, Bach harmonizes this refrain in thirds over an accompaniment laden with thirds and sixths, seeming to portray divine love as in a love duet. If this variation indeed evokes divine love and blessed death, then the last variation, *pro organo pleno*, must portray the splendor of heaven.

Hugo Distler’s appointment as organist of Lübeck’s *Jakobikirche* in 1931 was greatly influential to his output. There he presided over the church’s famed Stellwagen organ built in 1637. Distler’s partita on the Advent chorale *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* was conceived entirely with this specific instrument in mind. To him, the Stellwagen organ was not a museum piece or stumbling block to his creativity. He was able to use not just the compositions of the past, but also the historic instruments to create a uniquely contemporary voice. The partita fuses several genres from the Baroque and Renaissance. The opening Toccata is decidedly influenced by North German organ praeludia, with its virtuosic pedal solo and perpetual manual figuration. Immediately after, Distler quotes a setting by Balthasar Resinarius (ca. 1483-1544), a contemporary of Luther. The ensuing variations mix both vocal and instrumental idioms, including a contemporary homage to Resinarius in Variation 3 and a stunning presentation of the chorale in canon in Variation 6. The Chaconne begins as an intimate dialogue between the Brustwerk and Oberwerk divisions of the organ. It particularly shows off some of the flutes and reeds of the Loening-Hancock Organ (Taylor & Boody, 1996). As the movement progresses, it gains in momentum and intensity, eventually breaking into a free toccata. This is then followed by a reprise of the opening movement, giving the work a rounded close.

Dieterich Buxtehude’s chorale fantasia *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g’mein* is without doubt the epitome of seventeenth century organ music based on chorales. With over 250 measures, it is Buxtehude’s most extensive and elaborate choral fantasia. Scholarship by Pieter Dirksen has suggested that the piece was perhaps presented as a *Meisterstück* to demonstrate Buxtehude’s worthiness to be organist of the *Marienkirche* in Lübeck. If this is indeed the case, it would date the composition to the mid 1660’s, putting Buxtehude in his late 20’s. The fantasia on *Nun freut euch* does indeed exhibit a youthful exuberance and abandon. The material throughout the piece relates to the text of the first stanza of the chorale. The energetic opening section portrays the first phrase: “Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g’mein/ und lasst uns fröhlich springen” (Now rejoice, dear Christians together/ and let us happily jump). As the piece continues, it treats each successive phrase of the chorale at length, with the chorale melody appearing in different voices in the texture, sometimes in a fragmented, almost unrecognizable fashion. The most poignant moment of the piece occurs when the last phrase of the chorale is treated: “Gar teu’r hat er’s erworben” (At a great price he redeemed us). Buxtehude combines the tune with a mournful, descending chromatic countersubject, depicting the pain and agony of Jesus on the cross. However, the end of the piece sums up the chorale, ending with celebratory music resembling trumpets and drums. The pedal leaps in fourths and fifths emulating tympani. Meanwhile, the left hand has punctuated chords, resembling trumpet fanfares. If one thinks that only romantic organ music is orchestral, one need to look no farther than this chorale fantasia.

On the other end of the spectrum is Max Reger’s chorale fantasy on “Straf mich nicht in deinem Zorn”. The piece was written in 1899, amidst a prolific period of several years during

which Reger produced most of his organ output. Reger was Roman Catholic from birth, but was enthralled by the Lutheran chorales, chiefly because of their vivid texts. His early biographer, Guido Bagier stated, "... Reger was so violently seized by the power of the text that his musical imagination was completely filled with its images." In the case of *Straf mich nicht*, the text is a paraphrase of Psalm 6 (O Lord, rebuke me not in thine indignation, neither chasten me in thine displeasure). The text makes frequent reference to the weakness of the human state and the need for God's help. Though Reger's compositional style for the organ is most frequently associated with the counterpoint of Bach, the influence of Wagner and Strauss is often downplayed. *Straf mich nicht*, of all the chorale fantasies, markedly shows romantic leanings. A three-note descending sigh, akin to a leitmotif, appears at the very beginning of the piece in the pedal and permeates throughout the composition. Reger's devotion to the text is obvious, having carefully wrote the text for each stanza into the score. The nature of the text lends itself to the bipolar, almost tortured nature of the piece. However, by the last stanza the text shifts to a tone of thankfulness and praise, reflected in Reger's triumphant treatment of the chorale at the conclusion. Reger wrote of *Straf mich nicht*, "What a terribly heavy piece of music! But with my penchant for mysticism, it would hardly have turned out 'lighter'". One cannot help but think of Richard Strauss' tone poems of the 1880's and 90's, similarly based on programmatic texts. Maybe they could have served as a loose model for what would become Reger's fantasies: perhaps the closest thing we have in the organ repertory to tone poems.

Nicholas Quardokus, October 2020

NICHOLAS QUARDOKUS, organist

Nicholas Quardokus came to Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue from St. Paul's Parish K Street, Washington D.C., where was an Organ Scholar assisting in playing, conducting, and chorister training for weekly services. In addition to duties at St. Paul's, he was a part-time organist at Washington National Cathedral. He has held similar posts at Yale Divinity School's Marquand Chapel, Trinity Church on-the-Green, New Haven, CT, and Trinity Church, Indianapolis. He earned Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music and the Yale Institute of Sacred Music. His principal teachers included Janette Fishell and Martin Jean (organ), Elisabeth Wright and Arthur Haas (harpsichord), and Jeffrey Brillhart (improvisation).

Nicholas has garnered top prizes in competitions around the country, winning first prize at the 2014 Albert Schweitzer Organ Competition in Wethersfield, Connecticut. In 2013, he took first prize in the American Guild of Organists Regional Competition for Young Organists. As a solo recitalist, he has performed throughout the Eastern United States, including appearances at conventions of the American Guild of Organists, the Kennedy Center, and the Piccolo Spoleto Festival in Charleston, SC. His solo performances have been broadcast on public radio's *Harmonia Early Music* and *Pipedreams*. He was the featured organist in the 2018 German documentary *The Unanswered Ives*, which is to be broadcast on French and German television. He has appeared with the Cathedral Choral Society, the Orchestra of St. Luke's, and the Washington Master Chorale.



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OCTOBER 24, 2020
SATURDAY at 3:00 pm

Adam Golka, *piano*





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II. HUMOR AND PASSION

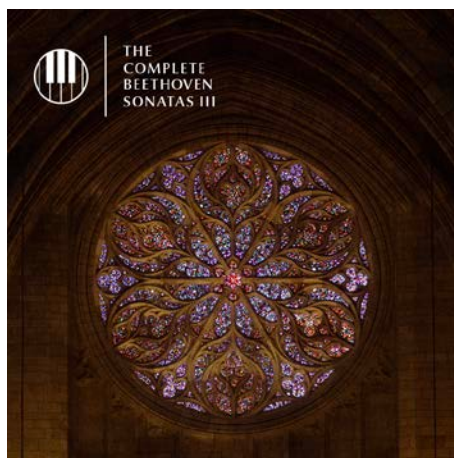
OCTOBER 31, 2020
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THE COMPLETE BEETHOVEN
PIANO SONATAS
III: FANTASIES AND THE
MOONLIGHT

NOVEMBER 21, 2020
SATURDAY at 3:00 pm

Adam Golka, *piano*



MESSIAEN:
LA NATIVITÉ DU SEIGNEUR

DECEMBER 5, 2020
SATURDAY at 3:00 pm

Nicolas Haigh, *The Miller-Scott Organ*

