

A Little Organ Book to the Honour of the most high God alone

"On the 6 November, because of his persistent and repeated requests for a leave of absence, Bach, the current Concert Master and court organist, had been locked up in the Hall of Justice. On the 2 December, his request for leave was granted, and he was set free, though declared to be in disgrace."

That is how the municipal archives of Leipzig relate this astonishing anecdote from the life of Johann Sebastian Bach. The episode took place at the end of the year 1717, on the December 2. Bach had by then spent nearly four weeks in custody. His Patron, the Duke of Weimar could not accept the idea of his brilliant musician wanting to leave his service, and had him locked up to make him think again!

Bach probably spent this four-week period concentrating on the "Little Organ Book, in which the beginning organist learns to perform a choral in many different ways, and to master the use of the pedals."

All of Bach is contained in this project, which in fact remained unfinished. Unfinished in the obvious sense that the manuscript left room for (and included the titles of) a full set of 174 chorals, set out in the order of the liturgical year, as they appear in the religious practice of the Republic of Thüringen. Yet only 45 chorals were written out.

Was it a pedagogical work? The title clearly indicates that this manuscript was intended for beginning organists, to help them master the use of the pedals. Who did the composer have in mind, isolated as he was from his family? Probably his sons Wilhelm Friedeman and Carl Philip Emmanuel, although, at the time, they were still too small to reach the organ pedals ...

Was it strictly composed? Each choral is written in four-voice counterpoint, and contains one single statement of the "cantus firmus". The original intention was for the "Little Book" to include all the chorals in the liturgical year.

And why did the work remain unfinished? We will see later how Bach brought his different collections to an end, as in the *Clavierübung*, the *Suites*, the *Partitas* and the *Sonatas*. Yet the *Little Organ Book* just stops, leaving the listener with a feeling of incompleteness. Did the composer feel that he had expressed all he had to say? Impossible. Bach always has more to say, and never ceases to amaze and move us. The true reason may be simpler. He was about to leave the service of the Duke of Weimar, in the hope of becoming a court musician at Cöthen. He may have simply profited from this period of isolation to plunge into a deep reflection on the liturgical texts and chorals which were fundamental to his spiritual sustenance. He knew that, at Cöthen, his new patron would be Calvinist, and that, in return for what he hoped would be greater financial security, he would be foregoing his responsibility for religious music. His organ works at the court of Weimar were mainly virtuoso pieces in the "stylus fantasticus" which he had learned from Buxtehude at Lübeck, and with

the rigour and intimacy of this *Little Organ Book*, he was bringing an end to his work as church musician, at least for the time being. Curiously, when he became Cantor of the Church of Saint-Thomas in Leipzig in 1723, he no longer showed any interest in this small collection.

Choral melodies have never been treated with such sensibility. Each melody is placed in its unique context, always new and always imaginative. No doubt that if he had continued, Bach would have been able to treat with equal variety the other 119 chorals he originally intended to use. The choral melody is present in each piece; sometimes moving between the different voices, but usually simply stated as a "cantus firmus", and embellished with the profound meaning that Bach gave to his celebrated "ornaments", which are not just added to decorate the musical discourse, but are integral to it. When, a short time later, he composes a "Klavierbüchlein" for his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, it is notable that the first piece is an "Applicatio" whose pedagogical aim is precisely to bring out in the fingers and in the mind of his student, the significance of these ornaments, which constitute the very essence of his musical discourse.

No doubt it is the "ornamentation" which is most remarkable in the *Orgelbüchlein*. It is true that the contrapuntal art is rigorous and perfectly expressed, and that the rhetorical figures and quasi descriptive allusions are clear, like the imposing descending sevenths in the peddle keys which so forcefully evoke the "Fall of Adam". But it is clearly the Chorals which most deeply affect the heart and the mind of the listener, when everything seems to stop suddenly to be replaced by a sense of nostalgia for this sublime singing, which only Bach could use to touch the heart of the believer. *Ich ruf zu dir, O Mensch beweine deine Sünde groß, Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein*, these chorals in which the believer feels himself alone in front of his life's destiny, where only his God can bring him comfort, consolation and compassion.

And finally, *Das Alte Jahr vergangen ist*: no one has ever found a more exact way of invoking the inexpressible sentiment of the arrival of the new year, the passing of which always brings the feeling of having left behind a time which has been irremediably lost, made up of memories both happy and sad. Where others would be content to sing superficially of their hopes for the future, Bach gives free rein to his dreams of the past.

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(translation by Ross Charnock, Paris)