

## The Orgelbüchlein

The Preface to the collection reads:

*Little Organ Book, in which guidance is given to a beginning organist in how to set a chorale in all kinds of ways, and at the same time to become practiced in the study of pedalling, since in the chorales found therein the pedal is treated completely obbligato. For the highest God alone in his honor; for my neighbor, tht he may instruct himself from it. Composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, p. 1. [pleno titulo –with full title?] Capellmeister to the Serence Reigning Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen>*

### Types of Organ Chorales

1. The Melody Chorale – the entire tune is presented in the upper-most voice, in more or less continuous fashion and basically without embellishment.
2. The Ornamental Chorale – the complete hymn tune appears in the soprano in a highly embellished form. The chorale phrases either occur one after the other or are separated by short, modest interludes. Three of these: Das alte Jahr vergangen ist; O Mensch, bewein dein Sünde gross; and Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein – four-part texture in all three, as in the melody chorales.
3. The Chorale Canon – here the entire chorale tune is set canonically. The only other known composer to have set any chorales in canon was Bach's kinsman and Weimar colleague, J. G. Walther. Bach's canons are stricter and more systematic than those of Walther; they make minimal use of interludes and have a relatively constant overlapping of canonic parts—they are real canons.
4. Miscellaneous forms -  
Christum wir sollen loben schon – melody treated as in the melody chorales, but is placed in the alto, thus making it barely audible

WEIMAR -- THE PRIMARY SETTING FOR THE ORGELBÜCHLEIN

- 1703 Bach may have studied Italian string music in Weimar.  
 1705-6 Bach's winter visit to Buxtehude  
 1708 Appointed organist to the court of Weimar  
 1710 Birth of Wilhelm Friedemann, eldest son. Johann Tobias Krebs, organist at Buttstedt near Weimar, studied with Bach. Later his sons studied with him in Leipzig.  
 1714 Promoted to Konzertmeister; birth of Karl Philipp Emanuel; his copy of Frescobaldi's Fiori Musicali is dated 1714, and contains 104 pages in his hand.  
 1716 Johann Mattheson calls Bach "der berühmte Organist, der berühmte Bach."

Here he became known as a performer on the organ, and he was in demand to test organs or to examine candidates for vacant positions. Here he probably became acquainted with Telemann and associated with Johann Gottfried Walther. In Weimar most of his organ works were composed, including most of the Orgelbüchlein.

The castle in Weimar, called Wilhelmsburg, was destroyed by fire in 1774. A picture of the chapel remains, however, and it was known as "Der Weg zur Himmelsburg" or "Himmelsburg" for short. It was "incongruously baroque and bizarre," according to Terry, and "its interior, a parallelogram of confused color, rose in three stories from a slabbed floor of reddish brown, its walls and roof blue-grey.....The organ in the gallery in the roof was set against the south wall, on which, amid a background of blue sky and white clouds, cherubs made music on either side of the projecting organ-case, whose gilded pipes, graded and festooned, were disposed in the heavy frame to expose an oval window in the outer wall. Accommodation for singers and players can have been found with difficulty, and Bach's consumption of winter charcoal was imperative!" Compared to the organ at Mulhausen, Bach's previous location, Peter Williams says, "Weimar must have been for him a retrograde step as far as the organ specification itself was concerned."

Aug.,  
1717

Offered position as Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, but was not allowed to leave Weimar until Dec. 2, 1717.

SOURCES

- P 283** (1714-1717): Autograph located in Berlin, Deutsche Staatsbibliothek. Microfilm 896 of P 283 is in Sibley Music Library, Eastman School of Music.  
 P 801-2 (c. 1714): J. T. Krebs copied 29 chorales in P 801, 6 into P 802 with Walther also copying one. There are empty pages in P 801; perhaps Krebs intended to copy more of them. Here the source cannot be proved to be P 283  
 BB 22541/1-3 contained in the Berlin library contains 8 copies by Walther.  
 P 1216 (1727-30) was an incomplete copy made by C. G. Meissner and contained over 20 chorales. At one time it was thought to be an autograph, was called the "Mendelssohn autograph," but has been missing since 1945. Only 6 survive in private possession.

Those are the important sources before 1750. The most complete copies are since that date but none indicates having been copied from P 283. Current scholars feel it is likely another autograph, now lost, was available for the many copyists. Some of these copyists are Penzel (P 1109 in 1766); Oley (P 1113/1114) and Kirnberger (Am B 46, 47).

## DATES

3

Current scholars such as Dadelson and Wolff believe that most of the Orgelbüchlein was written at Weimar c. 1713-16; that in Leipzig, c. 1740, BWV 613 (#15, Helft mir Gott) appeared; and that the title-page was written at Cöthen, later than almost all of the contents. These dates are based on the evidence of note and clef forms shown in the handwriting as well as the <sup>watermark and the</sup> watermark and the staff lines. For a complete picture of the current state of scholarship in this area, as well as future areas of presentation, consult Peter Williams' The Organ Music of J. S. Bach, Vol. II (Works based on Chorales), who concludes that "some questions must await the publication of NBAiv/I KB". His preface states that "Even were the NBA to be complete or near-complete, neither this nor any other book on Bach's organ music could claim to have the last word. Each generation must look anew at this incomparable body of music, re-examine it in the light of contemporary knowledge, view it in a way relevant to its own attitudes towards music and towards the role of the music scholar. Because it is now nearly thirty years since this music last received a complete commentary, the need for one has grown as the wider possibilities of contemporary musical research have made it opportune. Current attitudes are not always those of 1950, much less 1900."

Other considerations, such as hymnology and organ-building at Weimar, are not clear enough to support dogmatism in conclusions about many aspects of the composition of the Orgelbüchlein. The above dates no longer support the conjecturing that the Orgelbüchlein chorales were written while Bach was detained at Weimar before being allowed dismissal to accept the Cöthen position.

P 283 is a bound volume and was set up in advance by Bach for the purpose of entering short organ chorales, following the general plan of the Weimar Gesangbuch (1713 ed.). He first wrote in the titles, allowing one title per page. Most of the titles are accompanied by a chorale setting at the beginning of the manuscript, but the rest of the manuscript has mostly blank pages with titles accompanied by few settings. There are 164 titles, but only 46 complete settings. He might have used this manuscript in one of two ways: by copying a previously composed setting into the ms., or composing new pieces directly therein. While the order of titles in the OB P 283 essentially follows the church year (and those finished were for the important seasons) they were probably not entered in any order but unsystematically over several years, according to Dadelson's study of the handwriting. Bach's plan can be found on page 28 of the Appendix.

PW has an interesting theory that while Bach and Walther were friends and relatives and working at the same time in Weimar, Walther published two sets of chorale variations in 1713; that while Walther's extant chorales are inferior to Bach's there are some similarities such as use of motifs and canonic treatment. He ponders the question that since perhaps Walther's work is the earlier, Bach's OB may be the latter's response.

## TITLE PAGE/PURPOSE

PW translation of the title page reads: "Little Organ Book, in which guidance is given to an inquiring organist in how to accomplish a chorale in all kinds of ways, and at the same time to become practised in the study of pedalling, since in the chorales found therein the pedal is treated completely obbligato.

For the highest God alone Honour,

For my neighbour, that he may instruct himself from it.

Composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, p.t. (pleno titulo, 'with full title?') Kapellmeister to the Serene Reigning Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen.

The highlights seem to be: composing chorales, improve pedalling, and provide instruction. Yet the title page, having been written after the composition of many of the chorales, does not prove all this was Bach's original intention. The current theories of dating erases many previous theories concerning the unfinished product: detention in Weimar, the move to Cöthen and the promotion to Konzertmeister. It is still likely the rebuilt organ at Weimar was in mind or that it was simply because of involvement in other work. Schweitzer claimed that Bach set only those chorales which lent themselves to musical description, but this cannot be proven.

4

How were they performed? as organ preludes to a congregational or choir hymn?  
as interludes between verses?  
simply as organ solos on appropriate days of the church year?

PW: "Certainly the album as a whole can be neither purely didactic, since the order is inconvenient for pedagogic purposes, nor purely accompanimental, since many are too complex, too slow and (in the coloratura settings) too awkward for congregational use." This latter statement is in conflict with Harald Vogel's view that the OB preludes are related to congregational singing with the tempo. In 1976 at the Oberlin Summer Organ Institute he stated that basic congregational singing was slower than today--slower because there were so many people singing that they had to sing slowly in order to keep everyone together. The quarter note was related to pulse beat; tempo ordinario (quarter note=70) was the tempo of congregational singing and almost all pieces (except those marked largo and adagio) are the same tempo--tempo ordinario.

Certainly the location of the organ in an extremely high gallery above the altar would discourage any primary connection with the congregation--choir perhaps. The clarity of the CF would have been meaningful to a lay congregation--whatever it was at Weimar court chapel, where the hymns were undoubtedly mostly dominated by the choir.

FORM/STYLE

Characteristics of the OB settings were: CF uninterrupted without interludes (exceptions are 615, 617)  
contrapuntal harmonizations of soprano melody (exceptions: 611, 615, 618)  
in four parts (excluding cadences) (599, 615 show 5 parts)  
(other exceptions: 619, 634, 633, 639 partly)  
no introduction, commencing with melody, alone (or accompanied)  
ends of phrases are sometimes extended (606)  
accompaniment shows variety and dominance of CF with concentrated motifs and ostinatos

In both volumes, PW comments on the importance of the motifs and expresses their relationship to performance in Vol. I/3: "In general, Bach performance can be considered to be still in its infancy as far as the harpsichord and organ music is concerned, since no more than a tiny minority of performers are yet able to convey the motivic inventiveness of this music.....they comprise specific shapes and motif types, sometimes listed and described as such in contemporary theory books, and they deserve as much liveliness of thought from the interpreter as they required inventiveness of creation from the composer in the first place. I think awareness of the compositional detail brings to the alert performer awareness of his role as 'interpreter'--a word much misused but essentially suggesting that the performer has his own understanding or 'interpretation' to convey, but only if or when he has understood how the composer reached the finished product."

In his article for Spectrum (material drawn from the dissertation listed in the Bibliograph), Dr. Alexander Brinkman of the Eastman theory department faculty writes: "A number of scholars have briefly addressed the subject of motivic derivation in the OB. They agree that most of the preludes in this set are based on recurrent motives, but no one has thoroughly investigated the derivation of the contrapuntal lines." Schweitzer and Spitta agreed that the counterpoint for the most part was independently devised and this point of view has been perpetuated by later authors.

ex: #1, 3,

"The study described in this (Brinkman's) paper used extensive computer-assisted analysis to test another hypothesis--that much of the counterpoint is derived from