

Thoughts on *Clavierübung III*

Stephen Keyl

Bach published four collections of keyboard music under the title *Clavierübung*, or “Keyboard Practice,” the German word *Übung* meaning practice in the sense of exercise for technical improvement and also in the sense of what practitioners do—the way things are done. Parts I, II, and IV of Bach’s *Clavierübung* are for harpsichord. Part III, published in 1739, is for organ. The title page describes the volume as “Preludes on the Catechism hymns and other hymns.” This tells only part of the story: following the chorales come four duets, i.e. two-part compositions for keyboard similar in texture to the two-part Inventions; and the whole is framed by a majestic Prelude and Fugue in E-flat.

Clavierübung III is a wide-ranging and ambitious collection. It contains both chorale-based and freely composed pieces. Each chorale is set twice (one is set three times), once using the organ pedals and a second time for manuals only. Many of the pieces, particularly the *pedaliter* settings, are substantial in length and technically challenging. They also display Bach’s mastery of counterpoint and his gift for devising short, memorable melodic motifs, either derived from the chorale melodies or invented to complement them. The notes on individual pieces that follow will give further detail, but first a word about Bach’s choice of chorales.

Martin Luther understood the power of song to carry a message. He and other early reformers wrote hymn texts and composed or adapted melodies to teach the elements of the Christian faith through music, thus beginning the distinguished tradition of Lutheran chorales. Some of these early chorales corresponded to the topics in Luther’s Small and Large Catechisms: the Ten Commandments, the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, Baptism, Confession, the Lord’s Supper. These are the “Catechism hymns” that Bach’s title page refers to. The “other hymns” are those that come at the opening of the Lutheran liturgy: German versions of the Kyrie and Gloria. The liturgical function of these two hymns has led some commentators to label Bach’s entire collection a “German Organ Mass.” Bach did not use those words—on the contrary, his term “Catechism hymns” implies that the focus of *Clavierübung III* (besides the music, of course) was theological rather than liturgical. The contrast between the longer *pedaliter* and the shorter *manualiter* settings

of each chorale has given rise to the thought that these represent Luther's Large and Small Catechisms. Bach does not state this idea outright, but it does not seem contrary to his intentions. This performance will omit the shorter chorale settings and the four duets.

Praeludium pro Organo pleno

A grand Prelude in E-flat opens the collection. Its stately tempo and dotted rhythms are in the style of a French overture, a genre that originally marked the entrance of a king. The typical French overture continued with a fugal section in a quicker tempo, sometimes ending in a return to the dotted rhythms of the opening. Bach's prelude expands this format with added alternations of the dotted-rhythm and fugal sections, set off by interludes with echo effects. Baroque composers used French overtures in a variety of contexts, but the genre never lost its royal associations. Did Bach intend this prelude as an invocation of the King of Heaven, as some have suggested? Some aspects of the corresponding Fugue in E-flat at the close of the collection lend support to the idea.

Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit–Christe, aller Welt Trost–Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist

These three chorale preludes actually set the three verses of a single hymn, and they will be played without pause. The hymn is based on a Gregorian Kyrie, with added text addressing the three persons of the Trinity. Some of Bach's contemporaries pointed to these chorale settings, among others, as examples of Bach's skill in handling the old church modes (the melody is in the third, or Phrygian mode, transposed to G). Bach's setting of the first verse presents the chorale melody in long notes in the soprano, unadorned except for cadential trills. The other voices are also based on the chorale melody, treated quasi-fugally. The second verse is set in a similar way, but with the chorale melody in the tenor rather than the soprano. The third verse is for full organ in five parts, with the chorale in the bass played by the organ pedals. The last phrase of this verse is notable for its chromaticism and dissonance.

Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr

This chorale is a German paraphrase of the *Gloria in excelsis* written by Luther's contemporary Nicolaus Decius. It was (and still is) widely sung in the Lutheran liturgy, and Bach made numerous settings of the melody, including three in *Clavierübung III*.

The large-scale setting heard in this concert is a trio: the two hands play on different manuals in the same range and at the same level of rhythmic activity, while the pedals play a bass line that is itself often quite active and wide-ranging. In contrast to the old-school counterpoint of the Kyrie and some other pieces in this collection, the trio texture was considered quite modern and fashionable. The challenge for the performer is to make it sound sparkling and effortless while dealing with three fast-moving and very independent parts! The chorale melody serves as the basis for the two manual voices and is also heard in longer notes one phrase at a time.

Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot

Using an older German melody, Luther wrote this hymn on the Ten Commandments. He devoted a stanza to each one, plus stanzas to introduce and conclude the teaching. Fittingly for a hymn on the Decalogue, Bach treats the chorale melody in canon (Latin for “rule”). The accompanying voices in the right hand frequently use a “sighing” motif consisting of descending paired notes. It has been suggested that the mood of sadness that pervades this setting reflects the first of the two purposes of the Law in Lutheran teaching: to show us our sin. The second, to show us how we can please God, has been said to account for the lively, jig-like theme of the manuals-only setting of the same chorale.

Wir glauben all an einen Gott

Luther’s hymn on the Nicene Creed uses a wonderful Dorian melody derived from a Latin Credo. Bach uses the first notes of the chorale as the kernel of a fast-moving, syncopated fugal subject. The pedal does not take part in the fugue, but punctuates it with a striding motif that occurs at different pitch levels before ending, in expanded form, in the home key in a setting of great energy and vigor.

Vater unser im Himmelreich

Luther’s hymn on the Lord’s Prayer, like his discussion of this prayer in his Large Catechism, emphasizes the importance of sincere, heartfelt prayer: “Teach us no thoughtless words to say, but from our inmost heart to pray.” Perhaps responding to these words, Bach wrote a setting of almost unbearable intensity. The piece is in five parts on two

manuals and pedal. The chorale is presented in canon; each hand must play not only the chorale melody, but also an independent line of great complexity crossing above and below it. These independent lines contain numerous short motifs, each with its own rhythmic character—one is based on the first line of the chorale, another descends chromatically, another uses Lombardic rhythms (dotted-note figures with the shorter note coming first), still another is in staccato triplets. These motifs are combined and played off against each other, leading to rhythmic and harmonic collisions as the melodic lines move inexorably forward. In many ways it is a forbidding piece. The challenge for the performer is not only to execute the notes, but also to find and convey the beauty. For me, it is helpful to remember Luther's admonition that prayer should not be a thoughtless, mechanical exercise but should come from the depths of the heart.

Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam

The Catechism hymn on Baptism begins by recalling the Baptism of Christ in the Jordan River. The rapidly coursing bass part of Bach's setting, played by the left hand, has been said to depict either the waves or the flowing of the Jordan, while the motif played by the right hand has been called a musical representation of the sign of the cross made at Baptism. Whether these associations contribute to understanding the piece is up to the listener to decide. In any case, this chorale prelude again shows Bach's inventiveness in the disposition of voices, with the chorale in the pedal in the tenor range, the bass in the left hand, and two higher parts on a separate manual in the right hand.

Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir

Penitence is represented among the Catechism hymns by Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 130, "Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord." The powerful Phrygian melody, possibly composed by Luther himself, opens with a distinctive falling and rising fifth. For *Clavierübung III* Bach wrote a massive setting for full organ in six-part counterpoint with double pedal. The chorale is given to the higher of the two pedal parts, while the other voices treat each phrase of the chorale melody in imitation. Double pedal was not unknown in northern German organ music—Bach himself wrote two pedal parts in a few other pieces—but the large scale and overwhelming impact of this piece place it in a class by itself. Needless to say, it demands the utmost concentration from the

performer. In what might be called a delayed climax, the driving rhythm of the closing measures creates a sense of great excitement.

Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns den Zorn Gottes wand

The last chorale in *Clavierübung III* represents Communion. The text is based on a Latin hymn by Jan Hus, a 15th-century Czech forerunner of the Reformation. Luther translated it into German, and it was published with this melody in 1535. Bach's setting is perhaps the most virtuosic piece of the collection: the two voices on the manuals play a theme that leaps up and down a tenth, then an octave, and then a sixth before giving way to running sixteenth notes. Some organists have called it the "grasshopper prelude." As if this weren't complex enough, later in the piece the opening theme appears in both hands with one of the voices offset by a sixteenth note. It is all very intricate. The chorale is placed in long notes in the tenor range in the pedal. The right-hand part in the last few measures contains eleven of the twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Some commentators have held that these eleven notes represent the Apostles at the Last Supper, with the missing C natural standing for Judas, the betrayer.

Fuga pro Organo pleno

Clavierübung III ends with a magnificent fugue in E-flat in three sections sharing a common theme. (The theme's resemblance to the English hymn tune *St. Anne*—"O God, Our Help in Ages Past"—is coincidental.) This tripartite fugue with a single subject has long been interpreted as representing the Trinity, and indeed, if this was Bach's intention, he could hardly have found a more apt way to suggest the Trinity of Persons and Unity of Substance. The fugue is in five voices, with the opening section in strict counterpoint and long notes—the manner known as *stile antico*, "old style." The pedal drops out in the quicker middle section, then returns in the closing section. Though Bach did not specify manual changes, this performance (like most others) will highlight the three sections by playing them on different keyboards.