

J.S. Bach: *O Mensch, beweine dein Sünde groß* (BWV 622)

ORGAN LESSON BY DANIEL MOULT

This intense and hauntingly beautiful chorale prelude from J.S. Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* ('Little Organ Book') has become both a cornerstone of the Passiontide repertoire and one of the most celebrated of Bach's organ works.

The *Orgelbüchlein* ranges from the relatively straightforward to the distinctly challenging. I would regard this piece as a challenging one, both musically and technically (maybe around ABRSM Grade 7 or 8). As with all Bach, though, it is well worth the careful preparation if your technique is sufficiently secure!

As well as reminding the congregation of the outline of the hymn tune about to be sung, these preludes reflected the emotional tenor of the words and communicated theological thought. The start of the first verse translates as:

*O man, bewail your great sins
for which Christ left his Father's bosom
and came to earth...*

The subsequent 23 verses detail the events of the Passion. Although the chorale was conceived exclusively for Passiontide, it could serve equally well for other liturgies given the fact that the tune is not familiar to British congregations. Many players, for instance, perform it before funerals and memorial services.

LEARNING THE NOTES

As with any piece which demands independence of movement, slow practice with parts rehearsed separately is essential in the early stages. I would suggest a plan along the following lines:

- ▶ Start with the final phrase (bar 22, beat 4) to the end. When this is very secure, start to learn the previous phrase (bar 20, beat 4). Learning 'back-to-front' like this is an excellent practice technique! (See Example 1.)
- ▶ In each phrase, learn each line separately. As you learn each line, pencil in all the fingering or pedalling you need (see below).
- ▶ At a much slower speed, coordinate in pairs: hands together, then L.H. and Pedal, then R.H. and Pedal.

Example 1

The musical score for Example 1 consists of three systems of organ music. The first system (bars 20-21) is labeled 'Learn this phrase next' and shows a complex rhythmic pattern in the right hand with a trill in the final measure. The second system (bars 22-23) is labeled 'Learn this phrase first' and shows a more melodic line in the right hand with a trill. The third system (bars 23-24) is labeled 'adagissimo' and shows a slower, more sustained passage in the right hand with a trill. The left hand and pedal parts provide a steady accompaniment throughout.

- ▶ Live with these pairs for some time before considering coordinating everything together. The first few times of total coordination ought to be very slow so as to aim for total accuracy, control and relaxation.

While such a thorough approach might sound time-consuming, you will perfect the piece much more quickly than if you take short cuts. Being rigorous early on in the practice process also helps to ensure control and authority under the pressure of live performance. If it is combined with less demanding tasks in your practice sessions (e.g. playing through previously learnt pieces or hymns, etc.), it need not feel like a penance to learn!

If you are familiar and comfortable with 18th-century fingering patterns ('position' fingering) you might wish to adopt such ideas here. Many modern performers,

however, now choose to use modern fingering patterns for ease and comfort, as well as for stability under pressure. Assuming you follow modern practice:

- ▶ Avoid substitutions: they are only necessary for a more binding, Romantic legato and are an unnecessary complication in this style.
- ▶ Mark in changes of position and anything which is not obvious or intuitive (if in doubt, mark it in)!
- ▶ There are many ornaments in the R.H. *coloratura* line, which can often be realized with the strong fingers, 3 and 2. There are some exceptions which require trilling on fingers 4 and 3, such as (arguably) bar 6, beat 2; bar 9, beat 2; and bar 16, beat 2 (see 'Ornaments' paragraph opposite).

Pedalling in Bach's era would probably have avoided using the heel in most instances. In this piece, a toes-only approach is also very comfortable (often using alternate toes from the beginning: Left Right Left Right, etc.). There are many instances where moving the same foot on consecutive notes is both necessary and desirable (e.g. bar 2, Left toe for B flat to E flat; bar 6, beat 4 onwards, Right Right [bar line] Right Left Left Right, etc. See also Example 2 below). Keep the ankles relaxed at all times and release notes gently, so as to avoid any chopped-up music!

Example 2 (bars 21–23, pedal)

21 R R R R R R R R
L L L L R L L L

TOUCH

It is worth listening carefully for a stylish touch in all parts from when you first start learning the notes. This should help you to attain a natural, unmannered feel to your performance. We are aiming for a gently clear and singing touch, avoiding the overlapping effect of Romantic legato. This can be an elusive touch to master, but these points might help you:

- ▶ If possible, practise at least some of the time on a responsive mechanical action organ, where you will hear the minute differences of articulation which are possible.
- ▶ Keep movements as small as possible, and stay on the key surfaces once you have released notes.
- ▶ Keep wrists, fingers and ankles as loose as possible.
- ▶ Keep listening – if you can't monitor your articulation when practising, you might be practising too quickly or coordinating more parts than you're ready for!

Chromatic bass lines (from bar 18, beat 4 to bar 19, beat 3 and bar 22, beat 4 to bar 23, beat 3) suggest a more connected touch – just stopping short of that overlapping legato! The R.H. slur in bar 22 (beat 1) is original. Such slurs were derived from 18th-century string bowing practice. Here, accent the first note of the slur and release the final note early, while keeping a light legato touch.

ORNAMENTS

It is advisable to learn the R.H. line with all ornaments from the outset. This will help ornaments to feel more natural and an organic part of the line.

The ornament shapes encountered in *O Mensch, bewein...* are:

Example 3

Start most trills slowly, so that they sound singing and natural. Stop the trilling before the next note. The *schnellers* (fast trills) on demisemiquavers, e.g. at the end of bar 4, have to be realized quickly, of course, but do still listen for clarity here.

The R.H. trills in bar 11, beat 2 and bar 16, beat 2 are tied, which means that you do not repeat the first notes of the trill (B flat and D respectively) – it should sound as if the trill has emerged out of the tie.

TEMPO

Bach specifies *Adagio assai* [very slow]! Given that the range of tempi at the time was smaller than our current extreme notions of *adagissimo* to *prestissimo*, I would suggest an approximate metronome mark of quaver = 50. When performing, it would be best to aim for the main crotchet beats, so that we keep a slow flow in four per bar (even though the harmony is moving mostly in eight).

The *adagissimo* ending (moving initially to a remote key) might suggest Christ giving up the ghost on the cross. I would suggest semiquaver (sic) = c. 60 here.

REGISTRATION

Bach writes 'à 2 Clav. et Ped.' underneath the title, indicating a R.H. line soloed out on a separate manual throughout. The following scheme might provide a useful starting point:

R.H. Principal (Open Diapason – not heavy or opaque) 8' or a Cornet (Flutes 8' 4' 2 2/3' 2' 1 3/5') or Flutes 8' 4' 2 2/3' or a Vox Humana + Flute 8'

L.H. Any combination of 8' and 4' Flutes or possibly a small 8' Principal only (no 4' Principals!) to balance the R.H. registration. If using an 8' Flute only, ensure that is sufficiently clear in lower passages (e.g. in bars 9 and at the end).

Pedals Light 16' (Subbass or Bourdon) + 8' Flute (if clear enough) or light 16' coupled to the L.H. manual (if this helps clarity).

Whatever scheme works best on your instrument, it's always worth bearing in mind these guidelines when registering J.S. Bach:

1. Clarity – each note of each line must be heard clearly throughout.
2. Balance – the L.H. and pedal registrations must be the same dynamic as each other, and the R.H. solo line should not be drastically louder!

3. Beauty – it's easy to overlook the fact that a beautiful sound is paramount, which might mean some unorthodox solutions on certain instruments!

AND FINALLY ...

If you are playing from an older edition littered with performance directions (extra slurs and dynamics, etc.), it would be advisable to consult a 'clean' edition (e.g. the new Breitkopf or Bärenreiter) so that you can discern Bach's markings from the editor's!

As with any new piece, and especially a more demanding one, consider recording yourself in the very final stages of preparation. This will give you musical feedback and gear you up for the adrenaline of a real performance.

Enjoy!

EDITIONS

J.S. Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* is published in the following editions available from RSCM Music Direct:

Bach: Complete Organ Works Volume 7 (Breitkopf), £17.95, order no. N1112

Bach: Organ Works Volume 1 (Bärenreiter), £20.00, order no. N0085

O Mensch, bewein... is listed on page 45, Fifth Sunday of Lent, and is suitable for Passiontide.

Reviews of printed music

CHORAL MUSIC

KEY

- E Easy
- M Medium
- D Difficult

UPPER-VOICE CAROLS

FULL OF JOY, IN SWEET ACCORD [E]

Simon Mold
Unison voices and organ
Banks Music Publications ECS 578
£1.50

The words are translated from a Latin sequence, *Laetabundus*, but Simon Mold has composed his own attractive melody with the feel and shape of a plainsong Kyrie, although each verse builds to an Alleluia climax. Unison throughout (with an optional three parts for the final two chords) and underpinned by a supportive organ part, this is as musically satisfying as it is easy to perform.

LITTLE BABY BORN AT DARK MIDNIGHT [E/M]

arr. John Bertalot
Unison voices (with optional descant) and piano ECS 569 (or SATB unaccompanied ECS 568)
Banks Music Publications
£1.75 each

SING NOEL [E/M]

John Bertalot
Unison voices and piano ECS 572 (or SATB unaccompanied ECS 570)
Banks Music Publication £1.75 (or £1.95)

Although there are unison and SATB versions for both pieces, one version is not an arrangement of the other. Not only do the unison versions have piano introductions and links, but the harmonies are reimagined so as to produce idiomatic parts for piano or ATB respectively – and very successful they are, with plenty of interest in all parts. Each was written for one of John Bertalot's godchildren (biographical information included), and the composer has written appropriate lyrics for each.

The music, dating from the late 1970s and early 1980s, has jolly syncopations that bounce along in *Sing Noel*, contrasting with an affective Appalachian folk-song melody used for *Little baby born at dark midnight*.

TOMORROW SHALL BE MY DANCING DAY [E/M]

Bob Chilcott
SSA and piano
Oxford BC177 £2.20

MY LORD HAS COME [M]

Will Todd
SSAA
Oxford W185 £2.60
Bob Chilcott's *Tomorrow shall be my dancing day* is not an arrangement of the traditional carol but an original composition with dancing syncopations that remind one of John Gardner's setting – coupled with Chilcott's musical inventiveness, especially in some of the lesser-known verses. The characterization of verse 3 'Into the desert', of verse 4 'Then down to hell' and of verse 5 'Then up

to heaven' will delight a carol-service congregation.

Will Todd's *My Lord has come* is an intense and, in some ways, demanding piece with second altos repeatedly singing bottom F sharps (in one place optionally bottom E). Yet it is also highly singable, with harmonies that are easy to hear in advance and well-shaped vocal lines. The words are by the composer, describing the shepherds called by love and sages searching for love, but as a fortissimo climax 'his love will hold me' because, in the words of the title that are also a refrain, 'My Lord has come.'
James L. Montgomery

CRADLE LULLABY [E]

Owain Park
2-part upper voices (and solo) and piano
Novello NOV165363 £2.25
AWAY IN A MANGER [E/M]
Owain Park
2-part upper voices (and solo) and piano
Novello NOV295152 £1.75