

Renewed Refreshments: Bach's Clavierübung in the Latest Authoritative Edition

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SACRED TEXTS EXIST TO BE reprinted, repackaged, translated again and again. Each generation, devout or doubting, comments and questions, elucidates and mystifies, interprets and reinterprets. The continuous interest in, and demand for, new versions of central texts, can testify both to their enduring cultural relevance and to a monastic obsession with obscure and often seemingly irrelevant details.

And so it is with the Bachian bible of organ music. The library shelves buckle with complete editions and individual volumes that present Bach's music in a numbing array of musical fonts and formats. These sometimes disagree on a few notes or confront larger questions: which pieces are for organ and which aren't, and which should therefore be included in a complete edition? Were certain pieces (even the most famous of all "Bach" organ works, the Toccata and Fugue in D minor) actually written by the great man, or by someone else altogether?

How fitting that the music of the obsessive tinkerer Bach, a composer who could never leave his own music alone when he returned to it, should have been obsessed over continuously for the last 150 years by editors and interpreters.

Most of Bach's diverse, and often daunting repertoire was transmitted in personal manuscript copies. Some of these survive in the composer's hand and in copies made by his students and admirers. The abundance of these manuscripts document the admiration this music enjoyed, an admiration that ultimately ensured its survival. Bach amassed a huge body of organ music, most of it used for the training of his students, who learned much in the very

process of copying—a skill, and also a vital facet of musical education, that has all but vanished in our present age of the photocopier and download. Much like photocopying today, copying by hand was cheaper than buying the printed music that was produced in Bach’s Germany through the laborious process of engraving copper plates.

Bach was the most famous organist in Germany, itself the land of the greatest organists (at least according to the Germans themselves). Yet he was well into his fifties when he decided at last to produce his first published volume of organ music, which was to appear as the third installment of his *Clavier-Übung*—Keyboard Practice—series. This was a program of keyboard exercise far more encompassing than the purely physical finger workouts of Czerny and Hanon, regimes that have been inflicted on generations of would-be pianists since the nineteenth century. What was offered up by Bach was not only technically challenging but was also meant to survey all major genres of European keyboard music and to uplift in almost religious terms—“refreshment for the soul” (*Gemüths Erzeugung*) as was proclaimed by Bach’s title pages. The first two volumes of the series, collected in 1731 and 1735 respectively, were travelogues through Europe in the form of suites touring various nations and their dances, with a racing Italian concerto thrown in for good measure. These two volumes claimed to be suited to amateurs, though experts would also have been challenged. Even dilettante women are known to have tried their hand at these, and were both delighted and dismayed at their difficulty. Luise Kulmus wrote about her own attempts at Bach’s partitas to her future husband, the Leipzig poet, professor and one-time Bach collaborator, J. C. Gottsched: “If I play them ten times, I still feel myself to be a beginner with them,” she wrote.

Bach raised the stakes when he set out to extend his Keyboard Practice project to the organ, that most demanding of musical instruments. In an appeal to marketability, this volume too would be accessible to amateurs, but the title page stressed that the contents were “especially for connoisseurs.” In a letter to a musical colleague, Bach’s cousin and sometime secretary Johann Elias Bach described the forthcoming collection as “mostly for organists”—that is, organists who were up to tackling the well-known difficulties of Bach’s renowned approach to the instrument.

In the newest, and to date best, edition of the *Clavier-Übung*, George Stauffer, like others before him, notes in his introduction that the year Bach chose for his organ publication may have been significant. Two centuries earlier, in the spring of 1539, Luther had delivered sermons in Leipzig; the city accepted the Reformation in August of that year. In 1739 Leipzig commemorated Luther’s

visit with bicentennial celebrations, and, as Stauffer suggests, Bach may have been intent on having his first organ publication coincide with these festivities. Accordingly, he planned to offer it for sale at the 1739 Easter trade fair—one of the twice-yearly events that brought merchants and other visitors from around Germany, and indeed Europe, to Leipzig.

Bach did not make that self-imposed deadline. Author of a towering stack of comprehensive collections, from the two books of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* to the *Art of Fugue*, to name only two of many, Bach's ambitions for his first public book of organ works grew even while the project was in production at the engravers. The collection as it was initially conceived was stridently Lutheran: it began with austere, antique settings of the German-texted versions of the Kyrie and Gloria of the Reformer's German Mass, and then proceeded to monumental settings of Lutheranism's founding chorales underpinning the Catechism: the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, Baptism, and Holy Communion. Thrown in for good measure would be a six-part treatment with double pedal of Luther's austere setting of Psalm 130. Almost all of these melodies are archaic in profile, their modal character hearkening back not only to Luther's sixteenth century, but also to the Catholic past. Bach demonstrated not only his brilliance at subjecting these hymn tunes to Renaissance-style contrapuntal manipulation, but also to fitting them into the most up-to-date musical styles—clothing the Lutheran body not only in the academic robes of evangelical doctrine but also in the fine fabrics of the French court or even the Venetian carnival: the modal by turns revered and made modish. Yet, as Bach's followers were at pains to argue, this concession to fashion was itself rendered timeless by the great man's recourse to strict counterpoint, as when Bach treats the chorale in canon against itself in long notes while the other contrapuntal voices in feet and hands comment with graceful gestures.

In dipping into the font of Lutheran song, Bach's vision of the collection expanded along with his ambitions. Plates already engraved had to be repaginated and some completely redone so the notes could be compressed to make room for new pieces. Bach decided to frame the entire volume with one of his largest Prelude and Fugue combinations, in E-flat major, which was apparently, like all the other works in the collection, newly composed. This Prelude and Fugue is a tour-de-force of musical internationalism and visionary architecture, sublime erudition and glittering virtuosity.

Bach also added smaller settings of the same Lutheran hymns but without pedals. This was, among other things, an appeal, to a wider market of buyers, and was in line with the comment that the collection was “mostly for organ-

ists”—and therefore not just for them. Bach provided simpler works that could also be managed by the devout amateurs, even clavichord-playing ladies. Yet these smaller additions were no less finely-wrought, nor less full of verve and genius. The last in this series of sublime afterthoughts seems to have been four Duets not based on chorale-tunes; like sprawling two-part inventions, these pieces at first suggest unthreatening accessibility, which quickly reveals itself as a beachhead for Bach’s obsessions with either counterpoint or chromatic modulation—or both. These afterthoughts are among the most idiosyncratic pieces in the set.

In the midst of the publication process, Bach parted company with his initial engraver Johann Krügener, who perhaps had become tired of the incessant additions and reconceivings that Bach visited upon himself and them. It’s a pity for, the style of the Krügener house, which specialized in pictorial prints, can be seen in the lush ductus of the work it did for Bach. It is more appealing than that of Balthasar Schmid, whom Bach had used for his early projects, and would turn to again for the culminating fourth part of his *Clavier-Übung* series, the Goldberg Variations. Both the graceful ductus of Krügener and the utilitarian blockiness of Schmid relied on carefully written manuscript sheets of the music prepared by Bach. These pages were soaked in kerosene so that the notes would be visible in reverse on the back of the page, thus providing the template for etching the copper plate. When pressed against paper in the actual printing, this image would, in yet another reversal, produce the music in its proper left to right direction.

In the end the volume was expensive, three Thaler, or, as Stauffer points out again in one of the many illuminating observations included in his introduction and critical commentary, as much as the value of either the viola da gamba or small harpsichord listed in the effects of Bach’s estate. The high price and even higher composerly aspirations did not put off buyers: the print sold well. At least two runs were made from the plates and something like 200 copies sold. Twenty-one copies are known to be extant: an impressive 10 percent survival rate that again shows how treasured these prints, and the music they contained, were and are.

Given the far from smooth production process caused by busy Bach, it is surprising how accurate the printed volume is. Nevertheless there were errors and Bach corrected many of these by hand. Eight of the surviving copies contain hand-written corrections of sixty-five printing errors; as can be read in Stauffer’s succinct and useful account of the state of the remaining sources, most of the various other copies have lesser numbers of emendations.

Particular, even obsessive about the shape his volume would take, Bach seemed intent on giving the cleanest version he was capable of supplying to buyers. Aside from succinctly providing an excellent background for the musical context and publishing process behind the collection, Stauffer's edition is based largely on a copy of the *Clavier-Übung III* now in the Princeton University library, an exemplar with still more corrections made carefully in red ink. Stauffer shows that these are in the hand of the composer, the highlighted color suggesting this print's status as a master copy for other corrections. These fixes confirm some readings, already agreed upon by many because of their inherent musical logic; also to be seen is Bach's fussiness over the exact nature of his ornaments. While articulating fundamentals of counterpoint, Bach was also a stickler for the refinements of fashion. No detail was too small for his attention. Stauffer was also able to confirm that another copy in the British Library with nearly three dozen additional corrections is also in Bach's hand, one rather more indistinct and characteristic of his script in the last few years of his life. Many of these corrections as well as the changing spacing and engraving style can be seen in the twenty-two facsimile pages spread out in this sturdy modern volume, well-laid out and published by Wayne Leupold.

I happened to bump into Stauffer—a leading Bach scholar who has written on the performance of Bach's free organ works, the B-minor Mass, and Leipzig's unique commercial architecture and publishing business among many other topics—the day before he examined a copy of the *Clavier-Übung* in Sibley Library in Rochester; this copy had once been owned by Ernst Ludwig Gerber, whose father had studied with Bach. A lively writer and personality, with a warm and often irreverent sense of humor, Stauffer has for more than a decade been the Dean of the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, on whose website can be read his forthright statement elevating the value of art over the lures of military might and electronic gadgetry (<http://mgsa.rutgers.edu/deanbio/>). While Stauffer has done great things in that post, he told me about his planned day in the library with the kind of enthusiasm that seemed to stem from both genuine appreciation for Bach's achievement and a joy at being granted momentary refuge from the bureaucratic maelstrom of university administration.

Though the *Clavier-Übung* copy he examined the next day did not lead to alternate readings of Bach's text, the Sibley Library copy's title-page contained an annotation to Bach's lofty rhetoric substituting for his promise of "Gemüths Ergezung" (refreshment of the spirit) that transformed it to the mocking phrase "zur Augen Ergezung und Ohren Verletzung" (for the refreshment of the eyes

and the injury of the ears)—that is, it looks good on paper but sounds terrible; at least one owner of the volume held its contents to be indigestible. It was a complaint Bach had recently heard from one notorious critic and to which his *Clavier-Übung III* was at least partly intended as a response. The heretical remark confirms that once music has left the composer's desk for the wider world it is open to all judgments.

Likewise, Stauffer's edition acknowledges with a rigor that is unflinching, but never pompous, that while there are a few devils in the details of this sacred text, the search for a definitive version is, as it was for Bach himself, always a work in progress. Nonetheless, this robust and beautifully produced volume, thoroughly researched and meticulously produced, is a monument of twenty-first-century scholarship that will long encourage organists, musicologists, students, and brave amateurs not only to appreciate anew the scope of Bach's ambition and accomplishment, but also to experience the refreshment of the spirit this music promises.