

Celebrating the Buxtehude Tercentenary

A Review of New Organ Recordings

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WHEN HARALD VOGEL released his recordings of the complete organ works of Dieterich Buxtehude in seven volumes (1986–93), he revolutionized the way we think about interpreting Buxtehude’s keyboard music. Recorded on eighteen different organs, including the restored Arp Schnitger organ in the Jakobikirche in Hamburg as well as two other organs played by Buxtehude himself, Vogel’s performances not only demonstrated the value of playing Buxtehude’s music on historical instruments; they offered a revisionist approach to the already diverse traditions of Buxtehude performance of the mid-twentieth century.¹ Since then, a new generation of recordings on a variety of historical and modern instruments has emerged. Along with a welcome reissue of Vogel’s recordings as a complete box set (MDG 314 1438), the Buxtehude year 2007 witnessed a perhaps unprecedented boom in new Buxtehude organ CDs. The quality of playing and depth of scholarly research shown by these performers serve both as a fitting tribute to Vogel’s legacy and a worthy commemoration of Buxtehude on the three-hundredth anniversary of his death.

Among the recordings of Buxtehude’s organ music released in 2007 (not all of which are listed here), no fewer than five are multiple-disc additions to ongoing complete organ works collections. Julia Brown released two new CDs, rounding out a seven-CD, multiple-artist set on the Naxos label (dual-temperament Martin Pasi organ, St. Cecilia’s Cathedral, Omaha, Nebraska [2003]; Vol. 6, 8.570311 and Vol. 7, 8.570312, *rec* 2007).² Bine Bryndorf concluded her six-CD collection with the release of two new discs (Dacapo

¹ See Peter Holman, “Buxtehude on CD: A tercentenary survey,” *Early Music* 35, no. 3 (August 2007): 385–96.

² In addition to the two volumes mentioned above, the rest of the Naxos collection includes: Volker Ellenberger, Vol. 1, 8.554543; Julia Brown, Vols. 2, 8.555775 and 5, 8.557555; Wolfgang RübSam, Vol. 3, 8.555991; and Craig Cramer, Vol. 4, 8.557195 (*rec* 2001–06).

6.220520, 6.220530; *rec* 2003–07),³ recorded, respectively, on the Arp Schnitger organ in Hamburg’s Jakobikirche and on two organs in Lübeck’s Jakobikirche, the one historic (Friedrich Stellwagen, 1636–37), the other a reconstruction in an old case (Joachim Richborn, 1673/Mads Kjersgaard 2003).⁴ Bernard Foccroulle released his five-CD set of the complete organ works on a variety of historical and modern instruments for Ricercar (RIC 250, *rec* 2003–06). In addition, Hans Davidsson and Ton Koopman each embarked on projects to record Buxtehude’s entire *oeuvre d’orgue*. Koopman’s *Organ Works 1* and *2* (Coci/Klapmeyer organ 1498/1728, Altenbruch Nikolaikirche; and Wilde/Schnitger organ 1599/1682, Lüdingworth Jakobikirche, respectively) represent the third and fourth volumes of his ongoing *Opera Omnia* (Challenge Classics CC72242, CC72243; *rec* 2007), while Davidsson’s release of two double-CDs put his project to record the complete works on the fabulous mean-tone north German organ at Gothenburg (built by GOArt, 2000) past the halfway mark (*Dieterich Buxtehude and the Mean-Tone Organ*, Loft LRCD 1090-91; and *Dieterich Buxtehude: The Bach Perspective*, LRCD 1092-93, *rec* 2006–2007). In this review essay I will focus on the recordings of Davidsson, Koopman and Bryndorf, all of which combine a critical approach to the performance of Buxtehude’s music with some of the finest Baroque organs—old and new—available to us today.

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The complete organ works of Buxtehude comprise just under ninety pieces (BuxWV 136–225). This includes twenty-six *praeludia*, forty-seven chorale settings, twelve *canzone* and three large ostinato works. A small number of *manualiter* pieces may be added to this repertory; however, they are equally suitable to the harpsichord or clavichord.⁵ Unfortunately, there is no established chronology for this important corpus.⁶ Although Kerala Snyder and others

³ Bryndorf’s volumes 1–4: Dacapo 8.226002, 8.226008, 8.226023, and 6.220514.

⁴ The Stellwagen organ has been subject to numerous restorations since 1636–7 (it was itself a rebuild of an older organ, and parts of the Hauptwerk date back as early as 1467). The windchest and pipes of the Richborn positiv were constructed in 2003 by Mads Kjersgaard of Uppsala, Sweden, in the original Richborn case.

⁵ The most recent critical edition edited by Michael Belotti presents the keyboard works in three groups, “Preludes, Toccatas, and Ciacconas (*pedaliter*),” “Organ Chorales,” and “Preludes, Toccatas, Canzonas, Suites, and Variations (*manualiter*).” See *Dieterich Buxtehude: The Collected Works XV*, ed M. Belotti (New York: The Broude Trust, 1998).

⁶ No autograph manuscripts survive, nor was any of Buxtehude’s organ music printed during his lifetime. Given the paucity of dated manuscript copies, scholars have had to rely on

previously hypothesized that the organs in Lübeck’s Marienkirche were tuned to Werckmeister III in 1683—suggesting that Buxtehude’s more harmonically daring works may have been composed later—that hypothesis was challenged in 2004 after Ibo Ortgies’s thorough examination of St. Mary’s account books.⁷ New evidence, including account books returned to Lübeck by the Soviet Union in 1988, has shown that the organs used by Buxtehude probably remained in mean-tone until well after his death.⁸ While this has made formulating a chronology even more problematic, it has also opened up new possibilities of performing repertoire in temperaments previously considered historically inappropriate or unsuitable. Hans Davidsson’s project to record all the works in mean-tone arises out of this new and important discovery.

Since Buxtehude’s most complex works, (en)harmonically speaking, may be (and have been) played comfortably on equal- or well-tempered organs, it is easy to see why an exclusively mean-tone recording poses a challenge. (It should be noted that the north German Baroque organ on which Davidsson plays is equipped with the subsemitones d-sharp, a-flat and a-sharp. Buxtehude did not have access to subsemitones on the organs in Lübeck.) A number of pieces may be transposed into nearby keys more or less without difficulty. But what of those works in “good” keys (transposed or not) that contain severely out-of-tune enharmonicism, chromaticism that exceeds mean-tone’s parameters, or excursions into remote tonalities? Davidsson offers three strategies for dealing with highly dissonant notes or passages: shorten the length of offending notes, add ornaments to conceal them, or decrease registration, “for example, changing from a Pleno registration to a Principal by itself.”⁹ He employs the latter in his performance of the Praeludium in D Major, BuxWV 139 (Vol. 1/1, Track 18). After a marvelous four-tiered echo effect (mm. 70–86), Davidsson reduces the registration down to a solo 8-foot Principal and Tremulant on the

external evidence for dating such as tuning systems, musical style, financial records and other circumstantial documents.

⁷ Ibo Ortgies, “Die Praxis der Orgelstimmung in Norddeutschland im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert und ihr Verhältnis zur zeitgenössischen Musikpraxis” (Ph.D. dissertation, Göteborg University, 2004).

⁸ See Kerala J. Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1987; rev. ed. Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2007), 82–88 (page citations are to the revised edition).

⁹ Hans Davidsson, liner notes to *Dieterich Buxtehude and the Mean-Tone Organ* (Loft LRCD 1090-91, 2007), 14.

Rückpositiv.¹⁰ Alternating manuals, each with a single 8-foot stop drawn, he ameliorates the extreme dissonance of a rather spectacular eight-bar harmonic progression through B minor, C# major, F# minor and D major, with each harmony prepared by its own dominant.¹¹

But one need not feel overly apologetic for the alleged offensiveness of mean-tone. On the contrary, as Davidsson explains, “the mean-tone temperament, regardless of registration and sound, evokes and unleashes in the performer a new degree of sensitivity to the inherent expressivity of the texture, that irresistibly demands attention and influences rhetorical shaping and timing.”¹² Indeed, some of the most captivating moments in Davidsson’s recordings are those in which the vivid color palette of mean-tone is most exposed. The descending chromatic motives in the Praeludium in D Minor, BuxWV 140 (Vol. 1/2, Track 1) and the Praeludium in E Minor, BuxWV 142 (Vol. 2/1, Track 17, transposed to D Minor) are two examples of important musical ideas for which quarter-comma mean-tone opens up new affective vistas. Elsewhere, instances of chromaticism stimulate an almost visceral reaction, as in the piquant suspensions in the haunting E-minor Ciaccona, BuxWV 160 (Vol. 2/2, Track 5, mm. 86-94). More striking, perhaps, is an instance of modal borrowing found in the Praeludium in G Minor, BuxWV 149 (Vol. 1/1, Track 9, m. 126). In Davidsson’s interpretation, the pungent B-flat-Aeolian chords emerge from the texture like a painful cry, a terse expression of the prevailing *Affekt* of melancholy.

Davidsson’s careful attention to registration and articulation allows him to subdue jarring dissonances while highlighting some of the more exquisite instabilities provoked by mean-tone temperament. His registrations are creative and varied, taking full advantage of the magnificent resources offered by the 54-stop, four-manual Gothenburg organ. Tempos seem to fall somewhat on the slow side, and there is a marked tendency to sacrifice momentum for the articulation of individual gestures—in order to highlight particularly redolent notes, Davidsson sometimes allows a shade too much time. Overall, however, the CDs are valuable contributions to the Buxtehude discography. The recordings

¹⁰ The four-tiered echo, an effect recommended by Mattheson, would, of course, have had to be created on Buxtehude’s three-manual organ by changing the registration at some point. On registration and echo effects in Buxtehude, see Synder, 397-400.

¹¹ Bine Bryndorf, using a modified one-fifth comma meantone, plays the same passage with a much fuller registration—even in this tuning, the harmonies are highly unstable.

¹² Hans Davidsson, liner notes to *Dieterich Buxtehude and the Mean-Tone Organ*, 18.

are beautifully presented, with well-written notes, full-color photographs, and useful links to supplementary material.

Ton Koopman is perhaps unrivalled among contemporary Baroque keyboardists in interpretive freedom and improvisatory flair. His attitude toward Buxtehude’s keyboard music is best expressed in his own words:

The *stylus phantasticus* is a highly personal style.... and it requires the greatest possible creativity from the performer. Dieterich Buxtehude himself was a theatrical personality, the church his theatre. To do his compositions justice we need a ‘macho’ playing style and virtuosity, but also emotion, fantasy, contrast, beautiful registers and a unique historical instrument.¹³

On these recordings, the church is Koopman’s theatre, and one cannot help but listen with rapt attention. He plays with a detached, harpsichord-like touch, employing ornaments of all kinds from simple turns and trills, to imaginative flourishes and figures reminiscent of the Monteverdian *trillo*. His caprice may be thought by some to border on—if not to cross the frontier into—excess, but the spontaneous and seemingly unrehearsed quality of his playing unashamedly pursues a personal and compelling vision of the *stylus phantasticus*.

The second volume, recorded on the quarter-comma mean-tone Wilde/Schnitger organ at Lüdingworth (1599/1682) deserves special consideration. Unlike Davidsson, Koopman here does not attempt those of Buxtehude’s works that are more problematic with respect to tuning. In fact, he (perhaps unwittingly) maintains in his commentary that the organs in the Marienkirche were retuned in 1683, and that one should use “mean tone for the early works and Werckmeister for the later.”¹⁴ Nonetheless, this installment of Koopman’s survey is thoughtfully programmed and masterfully executed. The opening five tracks form a kind of suite, orbiting around the starstruck “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern” (BuxWV 223), which Koopman begins and ends with ten seconds of shimmering *Cimbelstern*. The key of G unites the last seven tracks on the recording, but the pieces chosen (and the manner in which they are performed) provide for sufficient variety. A particularly striking juxtaposition is the pairing of the lovely chorale setting “Der Tag, der ist so freudenreich” with the enchantingly mechanical Canzonetta in G Minor. The only real disappointment on the disc is the stilted rendition of the Passacaglia in D Minor (Track 7), which sounds uneven to the point of affectation.

¹³ Ton Koopman, liner notes to *Organ Works 1* (Challenge Classics CC72242, 2007), 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The theatre is an apt metaphor not merely on account of Koopman's ability to stage musical events in a remarkable way, but also because of the warm, room-like ambience of his recordings. All too often the essence of organ performances is lost to cavernous church acoustics and poorly placed microphones. By contrast, the Koopman recordings (especially Volume 2) give the impression that the organist is sitting at a chamber organ no more than ten yards away, rather than up in a distant choir loft. This not only fosters a more intimate aura: it also transforms the way we hear these pieces by allowing certain effects frequently muddled by the recording process, notably in the realms of timbre and articulation, to be transmitted more clearly. Koopman's skillful phrasing, ingenious embellishments and flexible approach toward form energize Buxtehude's music and offer a fresh approach to this well-known repertoire.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that Bine Bryndorf's series of recordings reached its completion the same year that Davidsson's and Koopman's had their genesis, for her playing seems in large part to reflect older traditions.¹⁵ Indeed, Koopman's interpretive freedom, virtuosic flair, and intimate sound on the one hand, and Davidsson's rhetorical finesse and deliberate phrasing—not to mention his exclusive use of mean-tone—on the other, seem flagrantly radical next to Bryndorf's buttoned-down interpretations. Nonetheless, her recordings present Buxtehude's music with consistent quality, attention to detail, and often-impressive gravitas. The Praeludium in G Minor, BuxWV 149 (Vol. 1, Track 1), on the unequal temperament Lorentz organ in St. Mary's, Elsinore (an organ played by Buxtehude from 1658-68 and since restored) serves as a captivating opening for the series—here, an almost palpable sense of momentum propels the music forward with ever-gathering intensity. Indeed, one of the most refreshing things about Bryndorf's playing is her ability to articulate cleanly without jeopardizing forward drive. At the same time, I often wish that she would take more time at critical junctures. After all, the core of the *stylus phantasticus* is the juxtaposition of contrasting styles and textures, linked together or separated by silence. This kind of formal disposition—as contemporary theoreticians often remind us—recalls the grandiose, rhetorical mode that characterized speech delivery in the seventeenth century. As such, the *stylus phantasticus* demands not merely performance, but oration.

¹⁵ At the time of this writing, the sixth and final volume of Bryndorf's recordings, recorded in the Jakobikirche in Lübeck, was regrettably unavailable for review.

Bryndorf's recordings preserve the spirit of an older school of Buxtehude performance without lapsing into overly legato or rubato playing. They tend to provide the rush of that "big organ" sound many have come to expect from organ recordings. If they sometimes lack both the improvisatory quality and communicative immediacy of Koopman's recordings, seemingly so essential to Buxtehude's music, Bryndorf's considered, elegant readings project, in their place, a compelling grandeur and sweetness. Hers is a personal and extremely persuasive voice. Flamboyance is not a universal standard but a subjective register—and Bryndorf's recordings offer another important perspective on Buxtehude's gracious, grand, eloquent and urgent theatricality. All in all, both the artistry of the performer and the variety of featured instruments (including one in quarter-comma mean-tone, the Düben organ, St. Gertrud, Stockholm) make this set a valuable addition to the corpus of Buxtehude recordings.

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New research continues to shape the field of Buxtehude studies. 2007 marked the publication of a new edition of Kerala Snyder's seminal *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck* (see n. 8). This revised edition incorporates evidence that has come to light since the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as discussions of newly discovered sources such as J.S. Bach's personal copy of the chorale setting *Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmein* (BuxWV 210). As our understanding of Buxtehude continues to change, so, too, do our performances of his music. The efforts of Davidsson, Koopman and Bryndorf demonstrate the value of historical performance practice in our attempts to comprehend Buxtehude's own expressive ideals and translate them into something meaningful for our time. Koopman's and Davidsson's recordings, in particular, offer the listener the opportunity to hear Buxtehude's music as he might have heard it, while also creating a satisfying and enriching modern-day listening experience. To varying degrees these recordings reflect the continued achievements in Buxtehude scholarship, in organological research, organ building and reconstruction. The interaction between these important fields of inquiry and performance is complex, and sometimes contradictory. Interpretation of musical texts, historical data, and historic organs (restorations, reconstructions, reimaginings) are refracted in complicated ways through the prism of individual style, even personality. In this Buxtehude year and those to come, this complex equation will yield new recordings and insights into this endlessly rich repertoire.