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The

CHORALE PRELUDES

of J. S. BACH



A Handbook by

STANTON DE B. TAYLOR



Of J. S. Bach
(J, S)

FORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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TO
MY WIFE

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FOREWORD

By W. GILLIES WHITTAKER

Mus.D., F.R.C.O.

A DISTINGUISHED virtuoso recently broadcast a pianoforte transcription of Bach's organ chorale prelude *Wachet auf!* in so slow and sentimental a style that one might have thought it to interpret the fairy-story of the gallant Prince awakening with a tender kiss the Sleeping Beauty, fearful of disturbing her from her centuries-long slumber. The pianist clearly was unaware that in its original form the piece is a transcription of part of Church Cantata No. 140 which begins with a tremendously exciting and highly dramatic chorus depicting the arrival of the Heavenly Bridegroom in the middle of the night; that the chorale in question, sung by the tenors, may be translated thus:

'Zion hears the watchmen sing,
The heart for joy leaps,
They watch and stand quickly.
Their Friend comes from heaven magnificently,
Of mercy strong, of Truth mighty.
Their Light will be bright, their Star ascends.
Now come, Thou worthy Crown,
Lord Jesus, God's Son,
Hosanna!
We follow, all, to the joy-chamber
And join in the Love-Feast.'

Nor did he apparently realize that the voices seem to come from a watch-tower high over the city; that the glorious counter-melody is played by all the violins and violas in unison (always a sign in Bach that a full, sonorous tone is required), this melody being no doubt the happy dance of the Wise Virgins waiting to meet their Lord; or that the firm movement of the continuo suggests the tramping of armed men through the streets!

Again, how often do we hear the popular *Jesu, Joy of Man's desiring* (which is an extended congregational chorale, not, as frequently called, a prelude; and not in its original form a motet, though sometimes so designated in programmes!) played pianissimo and with great unction. Yet all the worshippers in the church are singing the melody, which is strengthened by a

trumpet! The flowing triplets of the first violins are doubled by an oboe, representing the never-ceasing stream of Grace from above, and both verses of the hymn express joyful thanks. Even Busoni, in his pianoforte transcription of the prelude on *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns* makes the mistake of softening at the end to pianissimo, whereas being an interpretation of the fourth line of the stanza which speaks of redemption from the pains of Hell, the rushing demisemiquavers and building up of the final climax demand the utmost power of the organ.

These examples alone will show that understanding of any of the chorale preludes without knowledge of the hymn-verses round which they were written is impossible. Only rarely are they to be considered as pure music, for though the texts are not included, they are as closely interpreted as the actual words set in choruses or arias in the Cantatas and Passions. In this carefully-prepared and well-informed book Mr. Taylor provides a succinct and thoroughly reliable guide to a collection of compositions unique in the whole range of music, one which can never be exhausted, providing a boundless source of delight and spiritual experience. Though it is doubtless possible to read too much into the music—different commentators give varying interpretations, one's ideas change from time to time, inclining this way and that—yet fundamental principles remain the same. While each must think for himself, to use a guide such as this is invaluable. The earnest student will not rest until he has compared all the preludes on a single melody, examined the four-part choral settings and made himself thoroughly acquainted with the texts associated with it and singling out the particular stanzas concerned. He must gain a knowledge of the melody's appearances in the Cantatas, Passions, or *Christmas Oratorio*; in chorus, aria, duet, trio, or recitative. He will be richly rewarded with an insight into the infinite mind of the greatest composer who has yet lived.

Nor should this study be confined to organists, for pianists may pursue it in the quiet of the home. The writer may be forgiven for calling attention to his edition (Oxford University Press) of 'Thirty-five Chorale Preludes' in four books, which gathers together all those written for manuals only; Breitkopf issues two books of transcriptions by Busoni and one by Reger; and there are many others by various arrangers and publishers. Also, most of the Partitas are without pedal.

It is possible to play many preludes from an organ copy by

resorting to a little judicious 'cooking', and it matters not if the performance falls short of perfection if the player penetrates to the meaning of the music. There is also the old-fashioned way of two persons playing from the organ copy, one taking the manual staves, the second the pedals, at 8- and 16-foot pitch, his right hand dropping out when the manual player's left gets in its way. Where the pedal is at 8- or 4-foot pitch, the second player takes the lower manual part with his left hand, the pedal being taken either with his right or the left of the first. The only preludes which cannot be managed thus are those in which there is much crossing of the manual parts, yet even these may be most satisfactorily played if two pianofortes are used, the players deciding upon a just division of the spoils beforehand, and this method is in many ways the best for tackling *all* the preludes.

We will miss certain things of course, but four hands can accomplish even more than two hands and two feet in the matter of clearness of part-playing and sensitiveness of line. Mr. Taylor frankly confesses that the great *Clavierübung* prelude on *Vater unser* baffles him. The present writer had a similar experience until he studied it in two-pianoforte form, when it revealed itself as one of the most fascinating of all! In fact he did not understand quite a number of the preludes until his days as an organist were over and he used the pianoforte as a medium.

May Mr. Taylor's well-wrought key unlock this marvellous treasury to a very large number of earnest searching souls! That such a book can be published in the most terrible welter the world has ever known is a declaration of faith in the everlasting comfort of music to the spirit, and of the message which only Johann Sebastian can convey.

GLASGOW
April 1941

PREFACE

IN recent years markedly increased interest has been shown not only in the chorale preludes of J. S. Bach, but in those of his contemporaries and predecessors. This interest is not confined to organists, nor are all organists concerned in it. The incomparable works in this field of Bach and others of his time are still all too little known to the very people who should be playing them regularly. Even those players who have made some study of the preludes limit their use of them to a comparatively few examples which happen to make a ready appeal to recital audiences or which are based upon tunes as well known in England as in Germany. By such limitation they deprive themselves of a great deal, both in actual playing material and in self-education, for to know these preludes well is to widen one's horizon to an almost unbelievable extent. It is certainly to render oneself more conscious of the qualities of Bach's work in other fields, for without a deep knowledge of the part played by the chorale melodies in Bach's musical, and by the hymns in his religious outlook, how shall we fully comprehend the message of the *Passions*, the *Christmas Oratorio*, or the two hundred cantatas?

The object of this book is to widen the organist's acquaintance with some of the sublimest music ever conceived for his instrument, or indeed for any instrument. It attempts to show the growth of the chorale prelude from its beginnings in the sixteenth century, not exhaustively—for that would demand a work of far greater scope and scholarship, much greater than the writer can claim—but in sufficient detail for the reader to grasp its essentials and perhaps pursue the subject further for himself. It seeks, if the metaphor be allowed, to lead him to the water. He must do his own drinking.

The indebtedness of this book to the scholarly researches of Schweitzer, Sanford Terry, Harvey Grace, Hubert Parry, Spitta, and Pirro will be evident on every page, and indeed quotations from the works of those writers occur frequently. The author feels that this indebtedness to other workers will be the book's chief—indeed its only—justification. For the observations of the scholars named occur for the most part *passim* in their surveys of the music of Bach as a whole, and none of them has found it possible to treat the chorale preludes

in the detail they deserve, though Prof. Terry and Dr. Harvey Grace have come near to it. Only by collating the work of all of them is it possible to arrive at something like a complete survey, and that is the primary function of this work.

Nor is any claim made for originality in the suggestions put forward about registration and style of performance. For the registration schemes the only plea advanced is that every one has been worked out upon some organ or other—many of them upon several organs in turn. Every organist is compelled to be a law unto himself in this matter, the sole criterion being the resulting sounds in any given building. If any registration, however peculiar it appears on paper, enables the music to sound at its best in given circumstances, then that is the right registration for the piece under those circumstances, whatever may be necessary elsewhere. Any organist working on the lines set forth in Chapter II will, it is hoped, obtain good results; and the registration schemes given in the following chapters are intended to provide lines of approach from which any amount of divergence may be necessary. Endless experiment in this matter is one of the joys of organ-playing, and can only have the happiest effect upon a player's musical ear. He is advised, when he has hit upon the best way of rendering any prelude, to note the registration in his copy; noting also the building and the date. Upon returning to any piece at a later date, he may find that, even on the same organ, some different scheme will suggest itself—which is all to the good.

The author desires to acknowledge here much kind assistance from Mr. Charles Kennedy Scott, Mr. Herbert Dawson, Dr. Harvey Grace, and Mr. A. B. Ashby; and, before his lamented decease, from Professor Sanford Terry, who was kind enough to show great interest in the projected book and to read and comment upon its first draft, since considerably expanded. Thanks must also be accorded the Secretary and Executive Committee of the Incorporated Association of Organists for permission to include matter which originally appeared in their *Organist's Quarterly Record*; and to Dr. W. Probert-Jones for assistance in proof-reading.

KENSINGTON
September 1941

TEXTUAL quotations are made from the following works, whose author's names are abbreviated as given in brackets:

- THE ORGAN WORKS OF BACH by Harvey Grace (Novello): (HG)
BACH'S CHORALES: Vol. 3 by C. Sanford Terry
(Cambridge): (CST)
J. S. BACH by Albert Schweitzer, 2 Vols. (Breitkopf): (AS)
J. S. BACH by J. A. P. Spitta, 3 Vols. (Novello): (Sp)
L'ESTHÉTIQUE DE J. S. BACH by André Pirro: (AP)
Novello's Edition of the Chorale Preludes: (Nov.)

The student-player is strongly advised to procure Vol. XX of the Novello Edition of Bach's Organ Works, which contains the music of every chorale set by Bach for organ solo, together with at least one verse of each hymn in English. Even better is the four-volume edition of 'Bach's Four-part Chorals', edited by Charles Sanford Terry (Oxford University Press). This work contains every known harmonization of a chorale by Bach, in whatever work it appears, and is a mine of inexhaustible treasures. English and German words are included, together with critical notes, indices, &c.

NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS OF HYMN-TITLES

The author's aim in rendering the titles of German hymns into English has been to reproduce the exact meaning *as far as possible*; but also to give a clue to the atmosphere of the whole hymn where the original first line does not do so; and to preserve the metre of the German so that when these English translations are given in programmes the listener will not be confused. Thus, while 'Christ lay in Death's dark prison' is not the exact meaning of *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, it not only fits the first line of the melody but is also familiar from Novello's edition of the cantata of that title; and 'Christ, Who died Mankind to right' (Terry's first line), though not an exact rendering of *Christus der uns selig macht* serves to show (as a stricter translation would not) that the hymn has some relation to Passiontide, besides preserving the rhythm of the German line. For similar reasons the best-known title, 'Sleepers, wake, a Voice is calling', is given for *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, and such a plan is followed generally for all title-translations throughout the book.

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CHAPTER I

THE ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHORALE PRELUDE

No true or complete knowledge of the work of J. S. Bach in the chorale¹ prelude is possible without at least an outline in the mind of the history of the chorale itself, its gradual development from a free-rhythm adaptation of plain-song and folk-song into its final metrical form as Bach knew it. The chorale plays so fundamental a part in Lutheran worship that it must be regarded as a definite part of Luther's own exegesis, for he conceived his liturgy with the chorale as one of its most important pillars. Like John Wesley, who bears resemblance to him in so many particulars, Luther realized that communal song is one of the greatest assets to any religious movement. In fact, it is doubtful whether any such movement, from the dawn of history, has made any headway without it; and the greater part of the failure of those cults which have fallen by the wayside, making no permanent impression upon succeeding generations, can probably be traced, in part at least, to the absence of any attempt to provide a corpus of religious song embodying their tenets. In this as in so many other aspects of social development Luther might have said with a later seer, 'Let me make the nation's songs—I care not who makes its laws'.

With so firmly founded a musical tradition in Lutheranism it is not surprising that working musicians should find in the chorale their first and chief inspiration. It is a commonplace of musical history that J. S. Bach founded his immortal music upon it, and that he built up his immense output of chorale-inspired music upon the work of a great number of lesser masters who preceded him. In this chapter we shall make some attempt to assess the outstanding work of some of those men, and to measure the extent of their influence upon Bach himself. Such an assessment can only be in the nature of a hasty sketch, for adequate treatment of the huge mass of material available would require not a chapter but a whole volume. But it is hoped that sufficient will be said in outline to enable the student of Bach's music to understand how great was that composer's indebtedness

¹ The English form, 'chorale', of the German 'Choral' is used throughout this book.

to those who went before him and blazed the trail which he turned into a great highway of music. The reader who wishes to delve further must go to Schweitzer and Spitta, and to many other German writers who have dealt with the subject in their own language. He will be richly rewarded.

THE GROWTH OF THE CHORALE

It is well known that in the very earliest times congregations had a large share in the performance of the liturgy of the Catholic Church. St. Ambrose secured for them the privilege of joining in the doxologies, the *amens*, the *kyries*, and the hymns. At the end of the sixth century the Gregorian reform took place which removed these features, and substituted the singing of priests for that of the congregation. In Germany, however, a sturdy independence manifested itself, and the reforms were never adopted in their entirety as they were in the rest of Europe. The German people preserved several of their privileges, and even dared to insert vernacular lines and verses among those of the Latin liturgy, the better to satisfy their love of congregational singing. The 'macaronic' form of hymn thus came into being, of which *In dulci jubilo* may be cited as a classic example, its bilingual character being preserved in the English translations widely used in this country to-day. Not much later the authorities of the German branch of the Catholic and still universal Church were prevailed upon to allow the intrusion of wholly German renderings of the great Latin canticles and hymns, the *Credo*, the *Paternoster*, the ten Commandments, and the seven Last Words into sacred poetry and thence into the services of the Church.

At the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, therefore, Martin Luther already had an immense repertory of sacred poetry upon which to draw for his new vernacular hymns. He used it freely, altering and improving as he saw fit; at the same time adding to the material by making his own versions of psalms, hymns, liturgical chants, and Biblical fragments. Building upon the existing wealth of spiritual song, Luther used it with astonishing prescience to spread his religious teaching.

Luther's first hymn-book was the *Enchiridion* published at Erfurt in 1524. It included many paraphrases of the Psalms, among them such favourite ones as *Aus tiefer Noth, Christ lag in Todesbanden*, and *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland*. All of these had already been in existence for some time; he also added new

hymns of his own. Other collections followed, all more or less directly under Luther's influence, the last to appear during his lifetime being that published at Leipsic in 1545 by Valentin Babst. The issue of similar books of hymns continued for over one hundred years, gradually building up a mass of sacred poetry, with and without 'proper' tunes, which by the time of J. S. Bach had multiplied into thousands, constituting the greatest collection of vernacular religious poetry in the history of any race to that time. By the time that Bach was of an age to make use of them for musico-religious purposes, he had the following sets from which to choose examples, among many others: first, Luther's original book, with twenty-six hymns; that of Babst, with one hundred and one; Crüger's of Berlin, which in its forty-fourth edition contained thirteen hundred; the Lüneburg collection of 1686, with two thousand; and the 1697 Leipsic book with over five thousand hymns.

THE MUSIC OF THE CHORALES

In finding melodies for his hymns Luther acted on the same principles as with the words. From the older liturgy, and also from secular sources, he adapted whatever melody suited his purpose. For technical help in this work he relied chiefly upon two men, Conrad Rupff and Johann Walther, who during the compilation of the new hymnary were his guests. Schweitzer quotes a contemporary writer's entertaining verbal picture of the trio at work (AS, i, p. 15):

While Walther and Rupff sat at the table, bending over the music sheets with pen in hand, Father Luther walked up and down the room, trying on his fife the tunes that poured from his memory and his imagination to ally themselves with the poems he had discovered, until he had made the verse-melody a rhythmically finished, well-rounded, strong, and compact whole.

Melodies came also from secular sources, being converted to a more seemly form for the use of the church and the sacred meditation of the home. In 1571 appeared a collection whose title-page is revealing (AS, i, p. 17):

Street songs, cavalier songs, mountain songs, transformed into Christian and moral songs, for the abolishing in due course of time of the bad and vexatious practice of singing idle and shameful songs in the streets, in fields, and at home, by substituting for them good, sacred, and honest words.

From such a source came Luther's Christmas hymn, *Vom*

Himmel hoch, transformed from a popular ditty in which the singer propounds a riddle and takes her garland from the maiden who cannot solve it. This tune subsequently returned to the taverns whence it came, secular associations proving too strong. From a soldiers' song of the time, *Innsbruck, ich dich muss lassen*, came *O Welt, ich dich muss lassen*, the chorale known to our hymn-books as *Innsbruck*; a song of the infantry at the battle of Pavia was made into *Durch Adams Fall*—and there are many other examples. The tune known to us as the Passion Chorale was originally published by Hans Leo Hassler in 1601 as an adaptation of a love-song. Those who desire fuller information on this interesting subject will find it in the early chapters of Schweitzer's first volume, to which this summary survey is greatly indebted.

THE CHORALE IN THE CHURCH SERVICE

We have become so accustomed to the simultaneous use of organ and choir at services during the past hundred and fifty years that the original function of the instrument has been almost entirely forgotten. Similarly, the chorale is now so closely identified with the congregation that we are apt to forget that originally it had no official place in church, so far as the congregation's part was concerned. The first Lutheran hymn-book of 1524 makes no mention of congregational singing in church, and was meant for use *in the home*. Only the melody was printed above the words, so that the father of the household could 'give it out' or precent it to the children and servants at the daily prayer-meeting, as expressly enjoined on the title-page.

The *Church Choralebook* issued later likewise makes no mention of congregational singing, and in fact discourages it by placing the *cantus firmus* in the tenor. The chorales are thus in the form of motets which could only be sung by singers of some reading ability, i.e. a choir. That this is no mere conjecture is proved by the title-page of a hymn-book published in 1586 by Lucas Osiander of Wittenberg, which marks a new departure (AS, i, p. 32):

Fifty sacred songs and psalms, set contrapuntally in four parts in such a way that the whole Christian congregation can always join in them

and goes on to claim some credit for the fact that, for the first time, the melodies are placed in the soprano for all to sing. In

view of what will be said later about the intrusion of the organ into public worship, it is as well to note here that there is no reference to the instrument in this important work, the compiler relying on the unaccompanied choir to lead the congregation's singing. The growth of congregational music was further hastened by the issue in 1601 of Hassler's hymn-book. About this time, too, the term 'chorale' begins to take the place of 'sacred song'—a significant change.

THE USE OF THE ORGAN IN THE CHORALES

In Luther's time the organ was in disrepute through its indiscreet use in the Mass and at other times. The playing of secular songs at unsuitable moments seems to have been no unusual thing. Since at that period it could hardly render polyphonic music, organists had been led into the habit of playing quick-running passages and flourishes when 'giving out' the Tones or preluding, and in the sixteenth century this had become such an abuse that the Council of Trent (1545-63) thought it advisable to lay down rules restricting its use to the barest utility. Luther himself did not regard the organ with favour, and his references to it in his voluminous writings are rarely appreciative. The organ was required to give out the 'priest's Tones' at various points during the Mass, and to play certain verses of the hymns *solo*, alternating with the choir, which remained silent while it was being played. This antiphonal function came to be so conventional that in churches where an organ was not available any other instrument was considered suitable for the work. Luther speaks scornfully of the use of a lute on such an occasion—in those days as absurd an introduction into divine worship as a guitar would be in England to-day. Ordinances of 1598 at Strasbourg and 1606 in Nuremberg laid it down that the organ must '*strike into* the song in the churches', certain verses being played by the organist alone, the choir remaining silent. There was at this time no question of any sort of organ *accompaniment*, and in this custom we may see the origins of the chorale prelude itself.

THE CHORALE PRELUDE BEFORE J. S. BACH

Successive playing over of verses of a chorale would naturally lead organists to vary the presentation each time, by ornamentation of the melody, by varying the harmony, or by inversion of parts. The absence in many churches of an organized choir may