



22 March 2017

**Bach’s ‘Orgelbuchlein’
(Little Organ Book)**

Richard Townend

Good evening, and welcome to St Margaret, Lothbury, the friendliest church in the City of London, and the one with the best organ too. This organ was built in 1801 by George Pike England and it is in its original state and it is the sort of organ that Bach expected. When you see the CD covers with the great St Bavo, Haarlem, on the front, Bach never played organs like that. All his organs in Thuringia were very dumpy instruments, all contained within a case, just like the one up here. The other connection is on the sheet of paper you have here – this is Mendelssohn’s autograph of the chorale from the Ich ruf zu dir, which we will come to very shortly. The connection is that of course Mendelssohn came here in 1837, but more important than that, Mendelssohn was the man who re-discovered Bach – incredible to think that this composer we think of as one of the greatest composers ever was completely forgotten after his death. His music was just left on library shelves. It was Mendelssohn, when he was in Leipzig, who went to the Thomaskirche Library and discovered, among other things, the St Matthew Passion and made the first modern performance of St Matthew Passion, and from there, he discovered other parts of Bach and he brought it to England, the connection through Prince Albert and Queen Victoria, and there he met William Sterndale Bennet, and Samuel Wesley, and those two people began the renaissance of Bach and his music and his playing and performance in England. Samuel Wesley was the man who brought Felix Mendelssohn to this church, so here is a big connection to us.

But, first of all, I need your help this evening. If you thought you were just going to sit there and listen, you are quite mistaken. I need your help. I want you to pretend that it is 1714 and you are in the Ducal Chapel in Weimar, and up there is Johann Sebastian Bach, and you are Thuringian peasants. You are in church, Sunday morning, and you have to sing the chorale, Vater unser im Himmelreich. This is the great Lutheran chorale of the Lord’s Prayer and this is the year of the Reformation – this is very important here – and to make this lecture work today, I want to take you through the book and solve all the problems with music, so you have to be the first problem-solvers, so I hope you are in good voice. Now, you are peasants, so you must not sing like King’s College, Cambridge – you have really got to let it rip. If you cannot do the German, just be Italian and sing “Ah”. So long as you make a big noise, we will be alright. So, we will have a little practice of Vater unser, and do not forget, they do not sing very fast. So, let us have a go.

[Music]

Johann Sebastian Bach was the greatest organist of his time, without a doubt. He had made his time in Weimar up until 1717, he had been the great ducal organist, he had written most of his organ music at that time, he had played his organ music, he had started writing the cycles of cantatas, he was famous for approving the building of new organs, but he was a difficult man and he thought I want a change – I do not want to get up early on Sundays anymore and have a three-hour sermon. I want a change. The Prince wants chamber musician, some of my better sons are already playing very nicely on their violins and suchlike and they could play in the orchestra too and I could start writing orchestral music instead. So, he popped off and he got the job and, being a difficult man, he came back and he said to the Duke of Weimer, “I have got this job and I would rather like to go and I am leaving.” You cannot say that to a Duke. The Duke said, “Oh no, you are not!” and put him in prison.

Prison was like house arrest, one month prison. What should he do? So, he took a book and he wrote a title page and he wrote, at the top of every page, the title of a chorale, per page, one chorale, and started off writing these wonderful chorale preludes, all one-page long, and on the front, he put that it was to make a beginning organist into a really good organist – that was the idea of the book, every way you could make a chorale prelude, because that is the main thing that an organist had to do in those days. You would have to play, at the beginning of the service, a praeludium, at the end, a sorti, but in between, he had to prelude on the chorales – that was the important thing in the Lutheran church. So, that is what Bach did and he made this wonderful collection. The only thing is, the story is not true. It was put around by his first biographers. It was put around particularly by Spitta, and it is just not true. This book was an amalgam of pieces, and with modern possibilities of carbon dating the paper, we can say that, certainly, this book began in 1714, not 1717, and some of the chorales actually began even earlier than that, in versions. Bach would always tinker with his music, perhaps to improve it a little tiny bit. So, we cannot really date the “Orgelbuchlein”, other than saying somewhere between 1707, perhaps the very earliest ones, up until 1717 when he left Weimer and the last time he needed to do this sort of thing, that is when this book was actually written or compiled, and the title page was the last thing he did. He put that on at the end, so the title page is completely fictitious. Why did he do it? Possibly because he wanted the job in Hamburg, where there was a really beautiful and wonderful organ, and he would send this book along and say, look, this is what we will do if you will give me the job. So, I am sorry, the story is not true at all. So, why on earth did he write this book? This is what Schweitzer said was the insight into all of Bach – this was the greatest collection.

This is a book which I have been playing and studying since 1956, and I still think it is the most wonderful music of Bach in it. They are all miniatures, they are all superb, and every single one is different, and the great thing is, you can make up your mind how the thing should be played. So, I want to ask you six questions, and I want to answer them with the music. Rather than a great musicological discourse, I hope the music, will answer the questions.

The other interesting thing is: what did Bach do with this book? Well, he used it for his teaching. Do you know, in his lifetime, he had some 70 pupils and they all studied from this book, and many of the later copies are by his best pupils, and that in itself leads to some problems because, of course, pupils do not always write things down without mistakes, and so you have to decide for yourself what are the ones. We will find one later on in which they are so many mistakes, you have to make up your own mind as to what you do. The other problem is that, when he started out, and he was only having one page for each chorale, he sometimes ran out of space, and he left great gaps too where he did not quite get round to it, you see. It is just like being in a magic show, this. He had to put little tablature at the bottom when the page ran out, so, instead of writing it in notation, he wrote it in the North German organ tablature, and it is very difficult to transcribe that – there are all sorts of questions you can make. So, some of the pieces towards the end, nobody is quite sure what’s the right version, which, if you have not practised enough, is very useful.

So, the first question then is: did he really compile this for Wilhelm Friedemann, as it says on the front? Did he really do it for his son, that he would get a good job? Did he do it just for that job he wanted himself in Hamburg, or did he do it just for his pupils and he used it for teaching ever since? And it has been used ever since for teaching - magnificent. Why did he never complete it then? Why did he abandon it? Why didn’t he get on with it? He came back to two of the chorales in Leipzig after 1727 and he expanded them and used them all over again, so why did he not do it with more of them? Why didn’t he keep…? Nobody ever knows. He never came back to it. There are two of them in the so-called Leipzig Great 18 Chorales, but he did not do it with any of the others, which is quite extraordinary. So, what was his intention? Now, Albert Schweitzer was the first person who played these in concert and made the audience sing all the chorales, all the time. So, the first one, we are going to do Vater unser im Himmelreich, and first of all, we are going to play the prelude, and then, proposing that you are the congregation in the church, you would have heard that prelude and then you would have sung the chorale. In the old days, of course, you would have known it entirely by heart because they only sang a very small selection, and, do not forget, you are peasants, and none of the peasants could actually read or write and so therefore they learnt all the chorales for every service by heart, and every service, you would have sung the Lord’s Prayer, so you will have known it. So, we are going to play it, because it is possible that in some of these chorales, this was the way in which Bach actually accompanied the congregation. You remember the famous thing of when he was in Arnstadt, Bach was told off by the parish council consistory court because he made the accompaniments so wonderful that either people just listened to them or else you were put off by what he did. Now, the question today is: will you be put off by this wonderful accompaniment or will you succeed? So, here is the prelude, and at the end of the prelude, you have got to rise up and sing, really loud, like peasants, and not be put off, and that will prove point one, perhaps, or disprove it.

[Music]

There are two more questions which always spring to mind for the organist when you are playing these wonderful preludes. First of all, what speed will you play them at? Nobody knows what speed Bach played these pieces at. It is one of these eternal questions, and most of them can be played at several speeds. Joining on with that, how shall we play them, because Bach left almost no indications whatsoever of how the registrations would be, because, of course, every single organ is different. Every single organ in the world is different. No two are the same. That is why you cannot possibly go out and buy an electronic. They are all made for the building in which you find them, and every single one is a work of art. It takes, on the average, a year to two years to build an organ for a church, even quite a small one, thousands of pieces inside an organ to make it work, all made specially for that place. So, Bach knew that, in every place you came to, you would have to make your own mind up as to how it would go. The very first chorale in this collection, Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, is the one we will take to answer this question – Now Comes the Saviour of our Race. Bach wrote several preludes on this and they are all totally and utterly different. What was in his mind when he was doing this? Now Comes the Saviour… Did the Saviour come as mystery or did he come in triumph? Because, do not forget, in those days, the organist was really like a musical stained glass window. The whole point of stained glass windows is to tell stories to those who are…uninitiated perhaps. Those who cannot read can at least see things in the stained glass window, and they can hear the music, so the music was there to interpret the Gospel, just in the same way that the priest does from the pulpit. And the idea there is Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, how does this person come in the four Sundays of Advent, and how does it change?

So, just to prove that we have no idea how to play these pieces at all, we are going to play Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, twice, first of all like a meditation. It is almost like a piece of Frescobaldi, and we know that Bach had and copied out the Fiori Musicali of Girolamo Frescobaldi, and so it is quite possible it should be like the toccata of the Elevation of the Host, and therefore it is a piece of mystery. Then, by total contrast, we will make it into a French piece because Bach was also very, very interested in French music and so it will come as a French overture. So, whereas the rhythms in the first one are very fluid, in the second version, the rhythms are precise and crisp and short, and the registration reflects that. So, two different ways for Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland.

[Music]

Now, a completely different way, Bach wrote a cantata on Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland, Cantata 61, and it begins with a French overture, so perhaps this should have been played as a French overture, with these crisp rhythms and an enormous sound so that it really takes the triumph of the Advent to you. Do not forget, in the four Sundays in Advent when they went to church, every time, they would have sung this chorale every single week. It is not like the Anglican Church where you sing a whole range of different hymns all the time. They had to learn everything by heart, so the big tunes would have been sung all through a particular season. So, Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland would have begun every single service in Advent, so they really got to know it. So, here it comes, completely different, as a French overture.

[Music]

The great interest of playing an organ is really the fact that all the stops are so important and make different sounds, the way in which you mix them all together, and when you are playing the music of the Baroque, the music of Buxtehude and Bach, you have no idea which stops to pull out. Sometimes people ask, you know, “How do you know which stops to pull out?” and the answer is you do not. You can only do it by what you think is right, but you do not know because it’s not been written down anywhere, so there is nobody who can tell you how Bach played his big pieces, what speed, what dynamic, what he did with them, whether he varied things. Nobody knows, so all you can do, and the only way to find out, is to go and play old organs, like this one, and old organs that Bach himself played, and there are plenty of them left, particularly in East Germany, where they had no money to restore organs, and I have actually played an organ which Bach opened and which has not been restored or touched ever since. It is now in the middle of a field, because there was a big plague and then they all moved. Wonderful to have this great experience because, when you play those organs, instantly you find out how this music should be played because these organs will only play at a certain speed. They will only do certain things. Because the connection in a tracker organ between the pipe and your finger is direct, you can make all sorts of things happen, but then you go to another Bach organ and you cannot do the same thing at all because it is completely different and you have to start all over again.

So, then you start from another precept. When people write music, composers, they have a characteristic, and Bach had a characteristic: it was colour. If you take the orchestral music or you take things like the Matthew Passion, you hear a fantastic way in which he uses the instruments to make colour. If you can think of the Matthew Passion, Erbame dich, with that wonderful violin solo, you are going to hear something like that in one of these chorales a little bit later on. But if you take some of the others, and you think of the colours which he got out of the orchestra of his day, by the way in which he used the instruments and the way in which he scored, making such an extraordinary sound, now you must transport that back to the organ music because you cannot say that a composer who could write and score like that in the cantatas and in the passions would not have played the organ like that, and you cannot say that he did not play with freedom and passion. He had 26 children… He cannot have been a dull man. So, he cannot have been a dull player. So, you have got to put all that into the music.

It does not mean that you romanticise it; it means that you just try and get into the feeling of Bach as a person because Bach only lives as a person through his music, and his music only lives if actually that personality is transferred into your ears, sitting here, 300 years later, listening to his music. That is the truth of being a performer, that you have to have that transmission of personality, not just the notes as they are on the page – that is just the beginning of it. So, now you have to think to yourself, how can we then choose sounds which will make these chorales come alive, given that these chorales must have an interpretation of the text? The important thing in these chorales is not just the music but the text because, remember, all these people knew the text by heart.

So, we are going to take one from Easter, Christ lag in Todesbanden, Christ Lay in Death’s Dark Dungeon. Can you play this so that it sounds pretty, like having a cup of tea in a cupboard somewhere? It has got to sound gritty. It has got to sound as if you are in prison. It has got to be dark! The organ must sound dark, so you must find stops on the organ that sound dark, and those are the reed stops. So, the way of playing this, on this occasion, is going to be dark and full of colour and full of menace and full of the sound of the reeds and the mixtures, without any foundation stops, and so it will sound really gritty. But the other thing is that you will hear every single part because of that registration too, so everything will be there. It may not be the way in which you like to hear this music, but it is the right way to hear it.

[Music]

Just to prove the point, here is something completely different, Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her, From Heaven Above, to Earth I Come. It is a beautiful Christmas chorale, and it is all about the angels coming down, and so we have to interpret that because, as I told you, he is painting pictures in sound – that is the important thing, and you will remember, the people would know Vom Himmel hoch, they would know what this chorale is all about. They do not have to be taught, as it were, the tune, because that is in their head; they do not, in a sense, have to be taught the speed at which it is going because they always sing at the same speed, at that time; and so, what they need is something to make them think about the text, so they must hear angels coming down. Bach does this magically. He makes the tune in long notes, he makes the accompaniment four times faster underneath, and at the end, it goes a whole scale, all the way down, right down to the very bottom D of the keyboard. It is amazing. And underneath, there is an extraordinary pedal part. It is almost like a Swiss clock.

So, Bach is actually making a musical Christmas carousel out of this, and you can hear it. How could we make that sound on the organ, how shall we register that? We have got to be imaginative. Sometimes, organists pull out too many stops, particularly in cathedrals, loads of them. Sometimes, the best sound on an organ is one single stop. If we play Vom Himmel hoch using only one single stop on the organ, and then we can give it a little bit more colour by using the tremulant. The tremulant makes the sound just a little uneven, wobbly, just tremulant a little tiny bit, one little stop, and then we shall say to ourselves, well, we do not have to actually do it at pitch, we can do it at a different sort of pitch. So, instead of playing at standard eight-foot pitch, we will take a four-foot flute because angels are light and angels float around, and that will make a floating around sound, so we will have a four-foot flute with a tremulant, not a great big double bass going down there, but just an eight-foot stop underneath. Here comes Christmas magic…

[Music]

Is that not perfect? Now you feel like Christmas. That is exactly the way it should be played. It must be right. If Bach came through the door now, he would say, “Oh, yeah, that is how it should go.” It is making colour. That is the way it works.

But then you have to think to yourself, how does that text actually affect the way in which you perform the music? If we take a really wonderful chorale, Ich ruf zu dir, We Call to Thee, this is an amazing chorale. This is the one I have given you in the handout, in the copy made by Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn obviously thought this was the great gem of the Orgelbuchlein, and he made this copy and it’s perfect. It is on a coloured piece of paper so it is not so easy to see, but never mind. And, you know, this tradition of this being a perfect piece went on because, later in the century, it was Widor, the great organist at Saint-Sulpice in Paris, it was Widor who brought out a very fine edition of the music of Bach and who thought this was the greatest piece in the Orgelbuchlein and he had it played at his funeral, incredible, this man who is famous for pieces like the great toccata and such like should choose this, but he chose this for his funeral, and it was played by a man called Marcel Dupré. Marcel Dupré, who succeeded him, then brought out another edition of Bach and he made all his pupils play, and there is actually a photograph in existence of Marcel Dupré teaching Louis Vierne and three others, but particularly Louis Vierne, who was actually playing the organ in the Conservatoire at the time – he was playing Ich ruf zu dir. When Dupré died, what did he have at his funeral? Ich ruf zu dir… It is the most amazing piece of music, but it has so many problems for us, so many problems to solve.

It is only in three parts, so you have got the tune, you have got the accompaniment in little quavers underneath, and you have got – in semi-quavers, and you have got a quaver in the pedal all the way through. All the way through in the pedal, it is the same. It is like the passing of time really. So, you have to think to yourself you have got to separate these three sounds somehow or other. If you leave the choice of stops just to an organist, all sorts of things might happen, but go back to the Matthew Passion. In the Matthew Passion, and also in the St John Passion, there are at least two movements which are very, very similar to this. One has a wonderful tenor solo, and a viola da gamba part as an obbligato, and there is one in the Matthew Passion too, with an alto solo and a viola da gamba, and the continuo underneath, and that is exactly right for this chorale. If you take that, then you can start to think to yourself this is the way it must go, so the continuo is the pedal. This must be only in eight-foot then, not 16-foot. We cannot have violas and double basses coming in. So, just an eight-foot cello, and then you must have the viola da gamba playing the left hand, all those quavers – [sings] – and then you must have some sort of solo sound on the top which is going to be the soloist. So, you can start off and you think to yourself, yes, that is exactly right for it, but then there comes another problem.

If you look at the copy there, you will see that Bach only put ornamentation on the first half of the tune. The second half of the tune, there is no ornamentation, so you have to think to yourself why is that – why did he only ornament the first half? Did he get interrupted? Did he never come back and finish it off? Did he mean not to do that because of some sort of piece of story behind it? Or was it because he was writing it as a teaching piece and he was in a sense saying to the pupils this is the way you ornament but now you are on your own? It is rather like that famous politician who had a very good range of speech-writers, all of whom disliked him intensely, and he came to one very, very big speech and he was going off and he sounded fantastic, and he turned over the page and it was completely blank except for one sentence – now you are on your own! And that is about what happens here – now you are on your own. So, as a performer, you have to decide – you have thought so far about how you are going to choose the stops, but now you have to decide what are you going to do halfway through when the ornamentation gives up. Are you just going to play notes? Well, you may say yes, but I always say no to that, no, it cannot be, you cannot just stop. You have got to interpret the music, and so you have got to add ornaments. So, ladies and gentlemen, this evening, you are going to be at a world premiere of a piece of Bach… This is true. You may not have thought you were going to be, but you are going to be at a world premiere of a piece of Bach because this is how David and I think it should go, with added ornamentation, and the great thing is that if you have never heard this piece before, hopefully you will not hear the join from Bach and us because you should not hear that join – that is the secret of it. If you hear the join, we have lost.

[Music]

I was telling you that Bach used to paint pictures. In all his music, you have pictures. You think of all the cantatas, you think of the scoring of so many of his pieces, he is painting pictures in sound – it is an important thing, and he does it all through the Orgelbuchlein. The Orgelbuchlein is based upon certain characteristic figures that he always used. He has a joy motif. When you hear that, you know it is a joyous piece. You hear it in a wonderful piece. That is his joy motif. You also have a chromatic motif which is for the sad pieces, and you are going to hear one of those very shortly. But the whole thing about it is these are little things that organists do. You think how many services Bach played in his lifetime, how many preludes and postludes he had to play, how many chorales he had to play, how many verses of those chorales, how many thousands of pieces he must have played in his lifetime, and how few we have left in manuscript because everything was improvised. Nobody expected to play old music in the old days. It was always modern music. In Bach’s time, everything was modern music. It was not frightening to them as it is nowadays. It was always modern music, and so, every service, he spent most of the time on improvisation, and when you are improvising, you must have control, otherwise it just becomes vacuous and does not work. One of the ways in which you can do it as an organist is of course to have a key structure, you must have a plan before you start to play, but also you can use certain figurations to, as it were, control your mind, and is going to be a joyous piece, and that will control what you do. To take another analogy, the very famous, coming back to Widor, toccata from the Fifth Symphony, which people have for their weddings now, and people play it far too fast, but the left hand is a train. He wanted it to be a train, he was writing it as a train, and that was actually what he said he was doing. Trains go very fast nowadays, true, but in France, in 1919, trains went quite slowly. Take that rhythm into one of these chorales of Bach and you immediately have an idea of the speed at which a piece should go.

Now, we are going to do one to see if it works. This is the Nunc dimittis, this is the Song of Simeon, Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin, I Leave the World with Joy and Peace. This is a very old man. This is the story of the purification. Bach has to tell, in music, the story of the purification to these people. So, this is Simeon going up to the temple, very old man and then he has the joy of seeing this baby Jesus, and you hear, in the right hand, the tune goes right soaring up to the top of the keyboard as this joy comes into him, but the whole way through, Bach is doing these two things together, but the whole time, this old man is there and he doubles that in the peddle because the man has a walking stick, so going.

[Music]

The last one is the greatest of all the chorales in the Orgelbuchlein. This is the extraordinary thing about Bach: he could take a very, very simple tune and he could ornament it in such a way that that becomes a piece of pure magic. O Mensch, bewein dein Sunde gross, Oh Man, Thy Heavy Sin Bemoan, the great Passiontide chorale. It is a very simple tune and you have got it in your handout there specially, with the simplicity of the tune and then the way in which Bach ornaments that tune. All the ornamentation is derived from that tune, and if you did not know the tune and you did not have it there to follow, you had be very hard pressed to work out what the tune was from this ornamentation. This was where Bach, the learned musician, comes in, as people have called him.

People always say: why did Bach go to Leipzig? It is the most extraordinary thing. If you think, he began his life as an organist, began in Arnstadt, and he was the great young virtuoso organist. He was feted. Then he went to Weimer and became the great organist. He became the great chamber musician, and he was very happy and having a wonderful time. Why on earth would he go to Leipzig, where in fact he was downgraded because he was just a town musician in Leipzig? He was the Director Musikalische of the Thomaskirche, and he had to play the organ but he also had to teach in the school Latin – he was a Latin teacher! He had to teach at the university, instrumentalists, and he had all these students, in those days living in his house with him, and had to teach them composition and keyboard and this, that and the other. Why on earth did he go to Leipzig?! Do you know that Leipzig had more bookshops than any other city in Europe at that time? I think that is what attracted Bach. Bach was a learned musician. Bach, all his life, was copying other people’s music. He had an enormous musical library when he died, and he had an enormous amount of Italian violin music. In this O Mensch, bewein, what you are really hearing is a violin solo derived from the chorale, the strength of the Lutheran chorale given the Italian flavour of this wonderful virtuoso violin. It is just like Erbame dich in the Matthew Passion. It is the most amazing conception, but it is not Italian music, it is German music, because of the accompaniment.

The most important thing here is not just that you play the right hand with this wonderful filigree but that the left hand is supporting that filigree – that is the important thing, and the bass is supporting all the harmony, and the harmony of the accompaniment is quite utterly astonishing, the things which he does, and if you have never heard this piece before, when you get to the cadence, the last three bars, you will hold your breath because Bach does something which no other composer in the Baroque had ever thought of doing before. It is true, somebody has to think of something for the first time ever, but this is a piece of momentous thing. If you think of Bach and you think of the Baroque and you think of the simplicity of most people’s harmony at that time, what he does in this cadence is absolutely astonishing and it takes your breath away, and it slows the whole thing down. But if you have not heard it before, you are just not going to be able to imagine it is going to happen because nobody else has ever done it since either. It is the most extraordinary modulation. It is the sort of thing which, if you did, when you are doing a D.Mus. at Durham, they would say to you “Failed! You cannot do that sort of thing.” It is pure magic, and that is what makes it so hard to play this piece. You can play this piece, I have played it for more than 50 years now, and I think only twice I have ever played it and thought that is right, and both times were completely different.

If I can tell you a little personal story, when I was trying to get in to the Royal College of Music when I was 18, you had to play a piece of Bach, and I chose this prelude, and I have never forgotten. I went there and there was a great concert hall and three judges, very old men, they looked. One was the Director at the time, a man called Ernest Bullock, Sir Ernest Bullock, and he turned the pages for me, very kind, and I played this, which I had spent hours, days, actually months learning this piece, and I thought, oh, I am fantastic! Teenagers always think they are fantastic. And I have never forgotten, when I finished, and I did this wonderful cadence and I was just sort of holding my breath, he whispered in my ear, “Young man, the Royal College of Music is the greatest conservatoire of music in the world and you cannot play a simple piece of Bach for your entrance examination!”

Now, four years later, when I thought I was absolutely the world’s best, I went to Geneva, to a man called Lionel Hogg. For my first lesson, what do you think he asked me to play? O Mensch, bewein. I have never forgotten, he made me play the first two bars 17 times! At the end, he said, “Young man, you do not know how to play the organ – you know nothing about it.”

And that is the problem with this piece of music. This is why Bach is so wonderful. You play it again and again and again and again and you never get the right answer. It is that magic of a great, wonderful composer and his music, and all the time, you are trying to find the right way to do it. You have no idea, and every single time, it is a challenge. It is like climbing Everest, you know? You have to do it because it is there. But it is the fascination of this music for the player which makes you play it again and again and again. The thousandth performance, you are still learning how to play this piece. That is what really great music is all about.

We are going to play you, first of all, just the accompaniment and the tune, and then we will play you the proper piece so that you can hear what Bach does to that tune and the wonderment which happens to it. So, here is just the plain chorale but with Bach’s harmonies underneath, the harmonies that support this simple chorale.

[Music]

So, I asked you seven questions. I hope the music has answered them.

Why did Bach compile this collection? Nobody really knows. Maybe for the job at Leipzig, maybe for the pupils, maybe for Wilhelm Friedemann – nobody knows.

Why did he not complete it?No idea! Mystery!

What was the intention of these preludes? Well, you proved that they might have been accompaniments. But they are really for colouring. They are pictures. They are oral pictures of the texts. That was the important thing. That is the real point of these preludes, I am sure.

Then the thoughts which go through our mind when we are preparing to play them now, in the 21st Century, what speed we shall go at, what registrations, I hope I have persuaded you that the way we think about playing them is the correct way, the way in which the tempo changes according to the mod of the piece, the way in which the registrations can be chosen because of reference to other works of Bach, other than organ music too, I hope we have proved to you that that is so.

So, you have a reward for coming here this evening. The last piece is the great Easter chorale, which is also an ascension chorale, Heut triumphieret Gottes Sohn, Today, God’s Son Triumphs. This is a wonderful piece of majestic music and is underpinned by a sort of chaconne bass. It is really wonderful, this chaconne bass underpins, and its joy at the top, it rushes around, and so this is your reward for coming this evening – Heut triumphieret Gottes Sohn…

[Music]

Hopefully that should send you out with joy in your hearts and convince you the Orgelbuchlein is the jewel in the crown of all of Bach’s music.

Thank you for coming this evening, and thank you for David from Stockholm for playing so wonderfully!

© Richard Townend, 2017