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C O N C E R T O R G A N I S T | O R G A N T U T O R

Organists' Review article on JS Bach and Brahms, 2006

JS Bach *Von Himmel Hoch Da Komm'ich Her* (BWV 606)

Were J.S Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* "preludes" used as chorale accompaniments? BWV 606 is a strong candidate for the argument, as the chorale melody is undecorated and in the soprano part throughout. Whilst rather brief for a final voluntary (unless coupled with a longer piece), such miniatures can work beautifully within a modern liturgy, given a little imagination.

1. Fingering and touch

I would suggest marking in the breathing before anything else. Deciding where to break within the small musical cells (or *figurae* - figures, as they're often referred to) is sometimes conjectural: the important issue is to be consistent, so that recurrent patterns and sequences break in the same place. I have marked up the first stave, using a small breath mark:

The image shows a musical score for JS Bach's BWV 606. It consists of three staves. The top staff is the soprano part, which is the chorale melody. It is written in G major and common time. The score includes various fingering numbers (1-5) and breath marks (a small vertical line with a curved top) placed above the notes. The middle staff is the left hand part, and the bottom staff is the right hand part. The left hand part also includes fingering numbers and breath marks. The right hand part is a simple accompaniment. The score is marked with 'LH' for the left hand and 'RH' for the right hand.

The fingering which I've used here (sometimes called "position fingering") fits the figures well, with small changes of hand position helping to articulate the changes of patterns. If you are comfortable with this system, and can see the logic behind it, you may wish to adopt this approach. If not, stick with modern fingering! Whichever route you take, ensure that:

- any change of position or any thumb / finger crossing is marked in. You can then use the exact same fingering each time you practice the piece, which will aid fluency and build up your musical confidence.
- you know from the start where you are breathing (or where you are pointing out the *figurae*, to be more precise), so that the projection of the music becomes an early part of the learning process.

This music is best served by a slightly detached touch: I prefer to use the term structured legato. Each note needs to be clear and distinct, but the *figurae* still need to sing! To work on this (at times elusive) touch, the following might help:

- stay on the key, even after you've released fully the note, so that you have control over every nuance. Many organists have problems with this important aspect of technique: there are some relevant exercises to build up control in *Organ Technique* by Jacques van Oortmerssen (GoArt)
- keep the wrists loose and relaxed and use as little energy as possible
- listen for good touch from the outset of your practices, and not as a "polish" at the end of the learning process!
- as you get more confident, record your results (on cassette or minidisc) - this will give you invaluable feedback.

2. Pedalling

Whatever pedalling you choose, the aim is to control the pedal touch as beautifully as we control the manual touch. If you are comfortable with toes only pedalling (arguably the "default" pedalling style of the period), ensure that your ankles are relaxed and your knees are still, so that the 'structured legato' does not become too choppy. If you use heels, be aware that you do not want to achieve a binding legato tone which often follows from this approach.

I would suggest using alternate toes throughout, except in the last two bars:

L R R L R L $\bar{\bar{}}\bar{\bar{}}$ L R L R L

3. Tempo and registration

The time signature (C) would suggest a steady tempo to an eighteenth - century German musician: somewhere in the region of crotchet = MM 56 / 58. It is perfectly feasible that, if the piece is viewed as a chorale accompaniment (chorales at the time being sung notoriously slowly) and if you play on a bigger registration, MM 48 / 50 might be more appropriate.

Whilst anything from an 8' principal upwards is possible, I think that the music and chorale text are best suited to a big plenum (principal or diapason choruses, maybe coupled), say:

manual(s) principals (16') 8' 4' 2' mixture(s)

pedal(s) principals (32') 16' 8' 4' mixture(s) and 16' (+ 8') reed(s)

This is, of course, an idealised registration: whatever the constraints of your particular instrument, clarity and a winning sound have to be the main criteria. Listen for an even balance between manual and pedal sounds.

J Brahms *Es ist ein ros' entsprungen* (Op 122, no 8)

1. Fingering and touch

At first glance, this might look like a relatively straight-forward piece. Beware! Even if you are able to sight-read this piece, avoid doing so before learning it. This should help ensure that you do not pick up bad habits or misreadings and will motivate you to achieve your musical best (rather than falling back on sight-reading sessions which become progressively less shaky).

I suggest that you mark in as much of the fingering and hand division as you can away from a keyboard, before you play a note. When you take the music to the organ, you should already have made a flying start - a great self-motivator! Bear in mind that we are aiming for a binding but clean legato within the phrases here, with very slight, subtle breathes at the end of the slurs. Editors who have added slurs or changed other musical details (manual changes etc) have, despite their good intentions towards the performer, confused the issue: we can no longer say with certainty what Brahms' intentions were when we read from some readily available publications. I would recommend either the Dover edition (which also includes Mendelssohn and Schumann organ works) or the Henle.

To achieve a good legato within the phrases, aim for maximum swapping between R.H and L.H and minimum substitution (incidentally, the Germans seem much less keen on substitution than French organists of the time). I would identify the following bars as being the least obvious in terms of fingering, and would suggest the following possible solutions:

If you are not used to playing adjacent notes legato with the thumb, play the first note with the phalanx and cover the second note with the tip before playing it. A tiny wrist rotation will then help you keep a good legato between the two notes. There are some very useful exercises to refine this technique in *Play the organ, volume 2* by David Sanger.

2. *Rubato*

The old adage of being able to play the music perfectly in strict time before considering tempo rubato is excellent advice. In a small - scaled work such as this, we need to consider slight and gentle rubato, so that we do not end up with a mannered performance. I would suggest marking in where the cadences are and where the apexes of phrases lie, so that you can consider the musical shapes whilst you build up fluency. If you are concerned that your rubato might sound false or applied rather than organic, consider:

- how would I conduct it? or - how would I expect this phrase to sound if performed by a good orchestra, chamber group or choir?
- sing it - does that differ wildly from what you were playing?
- recording yourself - and analyzing where exactly the awkwardness lies
- are you trying too hard? If you've already "practiced in" your rubato, consciously aiming to recreate every nuance can lead to an overdone and caricatured performance.

I think that the key word as regards rubato in this piece is restraint!

3. *Tempo and registration*

A tempo of around crotchet = MM 60 seems appropriate. German registrations in Brahms' day would tend to favour small combinations of 8' flue stops at 'p' and 'mp' level (e.g. Gedackt + Gamba 8'). Experiment finding two warm stops which blend well together (possibly an open and stopped diapason on the swell, with the box half open)? On some less satisfactory instruments, 8' + 4' flutes might be more pleasant than two 8' stops together.

I am sure that you will enjoy the challenge of learning these two short but beautifully crafted works. They certainly repay all the attention that you are able to devote to them!

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