
CONCERTS AT THE UNIVERSITY

Autumn - Winter 2016

Friday 18 November 2016

1.10pm

Reid Concert Hall

Nicholas Wearne · organ

Programme of works by J.S. BACH,
BRUHNS and SWEELINCK.



THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
Edinburgh College of Art

Toccat, Adagio and Fugue BWV 564

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland

Nicholas Bruhns (1665-1697)

Est-ce mars SwVW 321

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621)

Prelude and Fugue in G major BWV 541

Johann Sebastian Bach

Today's recital contains music suitable for the Reid Concert Hall's fantastic Jürgen Ahrend organ. Completed in 1978, its designers (who included Peter Williams and Gustav Leonhardt) were inspired by northern German instruments of the early 18th century. I offer three generations of the north German tradition: Sweelinck taught many figures who were to become leading organists and composers in this style; Bruhns was the star pupil of Dieterich Buxtehude, and Bach was indebted to all three. Although he spent his whole life in central Germany, the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue, in particular, is clearly influenced by musicians like Buxtehude and Bruhns.

There is some disagreement about when the G major was composed, but a good case can be made, on stylistic grounds, for it being relatively early. George Stauffer suggests that both Bach works in this programme were written at Weimar; the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue first (at some time between 1708 and ca. 1712), and then the Prelude and Fugue in G (ca. 1712 – 1717). At Weimar, Bach was not employed by the church but by the ducal court: he was the court organist and a musician in the duke's ensemble (playing concert music on the violin primarily), later becoming the Konzertmeister. This began a period of sustained composition of organ and orchestral works, and of Bach becoming very famous as an organist. These factors perhaps contribute to the rather 'worldly' virtuosity and affect of the pieces we will hear today, as well as their orchestral quality. Remembering that Bach was a talented violinist, it is interesting how many of the musical ideas in these pieces came from the world of string music (virtuosic openings and fugues which employ repeated notes for example).

Stauffer's dating of these works invites us to compare them. Their structure is the most obvious difference: there is no other work like the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue. The three-movement, fast-slow-fast plan seems to come from the Italian concertos of Vivaldi or Corelli, but this broad structure can be divided into smaller subsections, rather like the preludes of the previous generations of north German musicians such as Buxtehude and Bruhns (opening flourish, a pedal solo, concerto, Adagio, *durezza e legature* Grave, Fugue with final peroration). On the other hand, the G major is much more like the later preludes and fugues of Bach: the prelude is not multi-sectional, it is very highly unified, and there is just one separate fugue.

In a similar way, both open with virtuosic figures in a single voice. The C major sounds somewhat like Buxtehude - full of dramatic silences and rhetorical shapes, though considerably more developed motivically. In the G major these silences have been replaced by motoric semiquavers.

A further, long-term difference is proportion: the opening flourish in the G major it is 11 bars long, whereas in the C major it lasts for a page and a third! The Toccata continues with a massive pedal solo (it is the longest in the repertory of the period, or perhaps of all periods!); the G major does not - it incorporates pedal virtuosity into the ripieno. Peter Williams actually views BWV 541 as a later 'tightening up' of the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue.

Following the opening flourish (and the pedal solo in the C major), both first movements then become a kind of concerto form, which was a new way of writing organ preludes or toccatas: ritornelli (a refrain for the whole orchestra - mimicked by chords with many notes on the organ) alternate with episodic material for fewer voices, or just a single voice. Whilst the large structure of these two works might seem very different, this is something significant they have in common.

The C major continues with an Adagio; there is nothing quite like this in the Preludes and Fugues which have come down to us. The melody is reminiscent of Bach's earlier cantatas, and the accompaniment is rather Italian with its pizzicato bassline (just think of 'Winter' from 'the Four Seasons'), suggesting the influence of concertos by Vivaldi or Corelli. An extraordinary section of intense dissonances and intervals in the pedal follows. Perhaps this is another reference to North German models, as the works of Buxtehude or Bruhns almost always have such a section, but, true to form, in the C major it is much longer.

Both works end with a fugue on a repeated-note subject, a favourite of earlier composers of the north German tradition (who took the idea from Italian Canzonas). You sometimes wonder why this was such a popular type of organ fugue as repeating notes whilst gaining the right direction and accent is not the most natural of sensations for the keyboard player! The fugue subject of the G major is similar to the opening chorus of Bach's Weimar cantata *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* (BWV 21), which has the same shape, but a few fewer notes.

Nicolaus Bruhns died far too young, at the age of 31. He was born in Schwabstedt in Schleswig-Holstein and grew up in a very musical family. At 16 he went to Leipzig where he learnt the violin and the viola da gamba with his uncle Peter, and the organ and composition with Dieterich Buxtehude. Buxtehude was so impressed with his pupil that he recommended him to the authorities in Copenhagen, where he was a violinist and an organist for a brief period before being appointed as organist of the Stadtkirche in Husum.

The Chorale Fantasia is one of the most elaborate forms of North German organ music. It is a piece based on the tune of a Lutheran hymn, and, to a certain extent, on the text too. There are fantastic examples by composers like Heinrich Scheideman, Franz Tunder and Buxtehude. Johann Adam Reincken's *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* is twenty minutes long!

Bruhns' *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* is so full of different ideas, shapes, harmonies, and clever counterpoint that it is a real highlight of the repertoire. It is in four main sections, which set a phrase of the tune each. In my opinion, Bruhns does not word-paint a single verse, rather he incorporates elements of the text, which include the first verse:

Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland,
der Jungfrauen Kind erkannt,
des sich wundert alle Welt,
Gott solch Geburt ihm bestellt

Come now, saviour of the heathen,
known as the child of the Virgin,
at whom the whole World wonders,
that God ordained such a birth for him
(translation: NGW)

I like to imagine Bruhns using other ideas from the text too, such as the longing of man for the saviour (in his treatment of the first phrase of the tune), the shining of the Virgin's many virtues, or the shining of the Saviour's crib 'bright and clear, / in the night there is a new light' (the second phrase). The work also appears to reflect the joy, radiance, and praise found in the text, as well as Lutheran ideas of the connection between the cradle and the grave in the *theologica crucis* (the third phrase). Finally, the many repetitions of circular figures towards the end seem to reflect the eternity mentioned in the final verse of the hymn, which is a version of the Gloria.

Bruhns' treatment of the melody is unbelievably rich and varied: the work begins as a very old-fashioned piece of counterpoint, like the Chorale Ricercare of Michael Praetorius, but this is immediately broken off, and mixed with modern gestures which come from the world of opera. The treatment of the second phrase of the melody is full of quickly-changing textures and devices which include: counterpoint, continuo bass, melody and accompaniment, crossing of the hands, extreme fragmentation of the melody, toccata figurations, and echo (straight out of Sweelinck). The third phrase is in a triple metre, mixing invertible counterpoint with a melody and accompaniment texture; and the fourth phrase sounds like an updated version of the clear two-part texture of a bicinium by Sweelinck.

Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck became the organist of Amsterdam's Oude Kerk in 1577, at the age of 15. The following year, Amsterdam, which was one of the last bastions of Catholicism during the Reformation, became Calvinist. The Calvinists, like the Presbyterians in Scotland, were not keen on organs, because they were a clear (or loud) sign of Catholicism. The two instruments of the Oude Kerk were not broken up because they were owned by the town authorities, who had only just bought them, but Sweelinck's service-playing duties were greatly reduced, and he was asked to organise concerts which would use them.

Perhaps Sweelinck played his *Est-ce mars* Variations at one of these concerts. They were more likely destined for the harpsichord (which is implied by the textures and range employed) but, at the very least it is tempting to imagine he used the theme as a basis for improvisation. Like all of his keyboard music, these variations are late – composed in the last 15 years of his life.

The genre of variation – creating a piece by varying the way a tune is treated – seems to have really fired Sweelinck's imagination. In *Est-ce mars* textures include: an adaptation of multi-voice choral writing (in the first two variations particularly), keyboard figurations demonstrating the influence of British composers such as of John Bull (very clear in variations 3 and 4), and a dance (variation 6 is in 3-time).

It's fun to imagine the Dutch master as he is described in the only eye-witness account of his playing that we have: 'As I recall, some good friends and I were at the house of my good friend master Jan Pietersz. Sweelinck ... and he, having begun to play the harpsichord, continued until about midnight, playing among other things the tune 'Den lustelicken Mey is nu in zijnen tijdt', which he, if I remember correctly, played in twenty-five different ways, first this way, then that.' (Taken from Pieter Dirksen *The Keyboard Music of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck*).

Nicholas Wearne has a busy career as an organ recitalist and continuo player which has taken him to many parts of the world. He combines his freelance work with a teaching position at Birmingham Conservatoire, where he enjoys working with extremely talented young musicians in a busy department. Previously he was Organist at St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, having been Assistant Organist at St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh. This followed five years at New College, Oxford University, where he worked as Organ Scholar and later Assistant Organist with Professor Edward Higginbottom, and took BA (hons) in Music and MPhil in Musicology and Performance. He has also held organ-playing positions at Truro Cathedral and the University Church, Oxford. Winner of the Poul Ruders Prize at the 2011 Odense International Organ Competition, he was invited to record his performance, and the subsequent release received an 'Outstanding' recommendation in International Record Review and an 'Editor's Choice' in Gramophone. Nicholas has been involved in many critically-acclaimed recording projects as soloist, accompanist or continuo artist, and has recorded and given the first performances of many contemporary works. He has given solo performances in Suntory Hall, Tokyo; St Thomas Church, Fifth Avenue, New York and Cathedrals in Canterbury, Washington and Berlin.

An experienced accompanist who has performed extensively in Asia, Canada, Europe and the US, Nicholas has broadcast live on BBC Radio 3 and BBC Radio 4, on Classic FM, the BBC World Service and BBC Television. He has also worked widely as a continuo player and performed with the Academy of Ancient Music, the European Union Baroque Orchestra and the Dunedin Consort in venues which include the Barbican and the Concertgebouw.

In addition to his work at Birmingham Conservatoire, Nicholas has taught at New College, Oxford, at Trinity Laban, and at schools in Edinburgh and London. He has been a tutor on the Edinburgh Organ Academy, the St Andrews University Summer Organ School, and for the Royal College of Organists, and Oundle for Organists.

FORTHCOMING CONCERT:

Tuesday 22 November.

1.10pm.

Methodist Church, Nicolson Square

The Edinburgh Quartet

BEETHOVEN String Quartet Op.59 No.2 'Rasumovsky'.

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