

# Documentary Evidence

## Revealing the Contemporary Performance Practices For Bach's *Organo (Basso Continuo)* Parts

Prepared with transliteration and translation by Thomas Braatz © 2012

The selected quotation appeared posthumously printed in *Fraktur* in 1721 in a corrected, notated and much expanded edition of Part II of Friedrich Erhard Niedt's *Musicalische Handleitung* that had been published originally in Hamburg in 1706, two years before the latter's death in Copenhagen in April 1708. For many years, from 1708 to 1721, Johann Mattheson had been hounded by the original publisher, Benjamin Schiller in Hamburg, to revise the first edition and try to make use of the disorganized collection of notes still retained by Niedt's widow. On numerous occasions, Mattheson comments quite unfavorably in his copious footnotes how he abhorred this onerous task and how he did this mainly as a favor to the printer. Nevertheless, it becomes quite apparent how Mattheson's guiding hand is present throughout the second edition, so that it becomes difficult at times to separate the Niedt original from the Mattheson's revised and expanded version of this work.<sup>1</sup>

Modern performances and recordings of Bach's figural music have used reduced forces (often only one vocalist or instrumentalist per part). This has gradually led to faster tempi and a lighter manner of singing (*sotto voce*) and playing instruments in a more heavily accented and non-cantabile style. The sound of a church organ with its 16' pedal stops would simply be too overwhelming and slow the tempi down. As result, chest organs (generally portable and without pedal stops) with their soft 8' and 4' flute stops usually provide an unsubstantial accompaniment to the choral sections where all the voices and instruments are singing and playing together. The Niedt/Mattheson quotation affirms the proper, sensitive use of a church organ that has pedals in addition to the manuals.

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<sup>1</sup> The extracted quotation derives from a facsimile of all three parts of Niedt's *Handleitung* printed by Georg Olms Verlag (Hildesheim, 2003). Unfortunately the first editions of Parts I and II have not been included so that an accurate comparison of both versions of this quotation could take place.

The following includes: 1) the original title page; 2) the original quotation in *Fraktur*; 3) the transliteration; 4) the English translation; and 5) the bibliographic reference in English.

As an appendix, I have included two additional short quotations relating to this topic.

The first is from Johann Mattheson's *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1713) in which he discusses the proper use of *Positivs* generally. These do not have a 16' flute stop and perhaps for that reason alone they are not suitable for performing a *basso continuo organo* part in a large church. Another reason for excluding this type of organ would be the fact that such organs often have a muffled sound, particularly the non-open, chest organ type.

The second quotation is taken directly from one of J. S. Bach's handwritten reports on church organs. Here he is recommending how improvements can be made during the reconstruction of a church organ in Mühlhausen. Among other recommendations, he suggests that on the upper manual a trumpet stop be removed and replaced with a 16' reed stop which will be eminently suitable for "all kinds of new *inventiones*" [Bach, the improviser and composer is speaking here] and it would have a particularly delightful sound in accompanying as a *basso continuo* instrument in concerted music.

Friederich Erhard Niedtens  
Musicalische Handleitung /  
Zur  
V A R I A T I O N  
Des  
General-Basses,  
Samt einer Anweisung /

Wie man aus einem schlechten General-Baß allerley Sachen / als  
Prælua, Ciaconen, Allemanden, &c.  
erfinden könne.

Die Zweyte Auflage /  
Verbessert / vermehret / mit verschiedenen Grund-richtigen  
Anmerkungen / und einem  
Anhang von mehr als 60. Orgel-Wercken  
versehen durch

J. MATTHESON,  
Hoch-Fürstl. Schleswig-Holsteinischem Capellmeister.

H A M B U R G /

Bey Benjamin Schillers Wittve und Joh. Christoph Kistner im Dom / 1721.

S. 121-122.

Ist derowegen das allerbeste / daß ein Organiste / im General-Baß-Spielen dieses in Acht nehme: Wenn nur eine oder zwei Stimmen singen oder spielen/ so braucht er im Manual bloß das Gedact 8 Fuß / und kein Pedal überall nicht; sind mehr Stimmen zu accompagniren / so kan er im Pedal Untersatz / oder Sub-Baß 16 Fuß / mit dazu anziehen; wo aber ein Tenor, Alt, oder Discant-Zeichen stehet / welches man sonst ein Bassettgen nennen / so muß er das Pedal weglassen / und die Noten eben in der Octava spielen / wo sie geschrieben stehen; hergegen / fällt ein ganzer Chor von 8 / 12 oder mehr Stimmen ein / (wie dann in solchem Fall der Ort meistens mit den Wörtern Chor / *tutti, ripieno*, bezeichnet siehet) alsdann kann im Manual das achtfüßige Principal und im Pedal / zum Sub-Baß / noch eine Octava von 8 Fuß gezogen werden. Ist ein Stück mit Trompeten und Paucken gesetzt / so wird im Pedal / zur achtfüßigen Octava ein Posaunen-Baß von 16. Fuß gezogen; die Töne müssen aber nicht bey gangen oder halben Tacten ausgehalten werden / sondern man darff sie nur ansprechen lassen.

Transliteration:

“Ist derowegen das allerbeste, daß ein Organiste, im General-Baß-Spielen dieses in Acht nehme: Wenn nur eine oder zwei Stimmen singen oder spielen, so braucht er im Manual bloß das Gedact 8 Fuß, und kein Pedal überall nicht; sind mehr Stimmen zu accompagniren, so kan er im Pedal Untersatz oder Sub-Baß 16 Fuß mit dazu anziehen; wo aber ein Tenor, Alt, oder Discant-Zeichen stehet, welches man sonst ein Bassettgen nennet, so muß er das Pedal weglassen, und die Noten eben in der Octava spielen, wo sie geschrieben stehen; hergegen, fällt ein ganzer Chor von 8/12 oder mehr Stimmen ein, (wie dann in solchem Fall der Ort meistens mit den Wörtern Chor, *tutti, ripieno, &c.* bezeichnet stehet), alsdann kan im Manual das achtfüßige Principal, und im Pedal, zum Sub-Baß, noch eine Octava von 8 Fuß gezogen werden. Ist ein Stück mit Trompeten und Paucken gesetzt, so wird im Pedal zu

achtfüßigen Octava ein Posaunen-Baß von 16 Fuß gezogen; die Töne müssen aber nicht bey gantzen oder halben Täckten ausgehalten werden, sondern man darff sie nur ansprechen lassen.”

English translation:

“It would, for that reason, be best for an organist playing figured bass [basso continuo in figural music] to pay attention to the following: If there are only one or two vocalists singing or instrumentalists playing, then the organist will only need the 8 ft. *Gedackt* stop [on the manual] and no pedal whatsoever. If more voices are to be accompanied, then he [or she] can add the 16 ft. *Untersatz* or *Sub-bass* pedal stops. Wherever the figured bass has a tenor, alto, or soprano clef (this is usually called a *Bassettchen*), then he must use no pedal and simply play the notes in the octave in which they were written. However, if an entire choir consisting of 8 or 12 voices or more begins to sing (in such a case the continuo part usually indicates this with the words, *Chor, tutti, ripieno*, etc.), then a [loud] 8 ft. *Principal* stop can be added on the lower manual and, in the pedal, an additional 8 ft. *Octava* [fairly loud] along with the 16 ft. *Sub-bass* stop. If the composition calls for trumpets and timpani, then, in addition to the 8 ft. *Octava* in the pedal, a 16 ft. [very loud] *Posaunen*[trombone]-*Bass* will be used. The notes played by this latter combination of stops in the pedal should not be held out [sustained] for a half or entire measure/bar, but rather only allowed to reach their full sound and then released [‘you are allowed only to let them speak’].”

Friederich Erhard Niedt: *Musicalische Handleitung/Zur Variation des General-Basses....* ed. Johann Mattheson (Hamburg, 1721), pp. 121-122.

J. Mattheson: *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (HAMBURG, 1713); Pars Tertia, Judicatoria Oder Wie eines und anderes in der Music zu beurtheilen. Caput Tertium. Von den Musicalischen Instrumenten. §. 4. S. 265.

Positive, oder kleine Orgel-Wercke in Häusern / sind vor Liebhaber / die gerne einen Choral hören und mitsingen / sonst aber bey Concerten nicht brauchbar.

Positiv,<sup>2</sup> or small house organs, are for amateurs who like to hear a hymn being played and sing along; but otherwise these instruments are not usable for playing in concerts [with other instruments and/or choirs].<sup>3</sup>

Johann Sebastian Bach: Handwritten document dated February 21, 1708, specifying the needed changes to be made during the planned reconstruction of the organ in the *St. Blasius Church* located in Mühlhausen. *Bach-Dokumente I* (Bärenreiter, 1963), item 83, p. 152.

Was anlanget das Obermanual, so wird in selbigen anstatt der *Trompette* (so da heraus genommen wirdt) ein 7. *Fagotto* 16 Fußthon eingebracht, welcher zu allerhandt neuen *inventionibus* dienlich, und in die *Music* sehr *delicat* klinget.

In regard to the upper manual, instead of the trumpet stop which should be removed, there will be newly included [built in] a 16' bassoon stop which will be useful for all kinds of new musical ideas and which sounds quite delightful<sup>4</sup> in concerted music [as basso continuo keyboard instrument].

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<sup>2</sup> *Wikipedia/Encyclopædia Britannica* (2007) definition: A **positive organ** (pronounced “positeev”; also **positiv organ**, **positif organ**, **portable organ**, **chair organ**, or simply **positive**, **positiv**, or **positif** or **chair**) (from the Latin verb *ponere*, “to place”) is a small usually one-manual, pipe organ that is built to be more or less mobile and that usually has 8', 4' and 2' flute stops but not a 16' stop. It was common in sacred and secular music between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, in chapels and small churches, as a chamber organ and for the basso continuo in ensemble works. The smallest common kind of positive, hardly higher than the keyboard, is called **chest** or **box organ** and is especially popular nowadays for basso continuo work; positives for more independent use tend to be higher. They were used at many kinds of civil and religious functions in the homes and chapels of the rich, at banquets and court events, in choirs and music schools, and in the small orchestras of Jacopo Peri and Claudio Monteverdi at the dawn of the musical drama or opera.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Mattheson: *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1713), p. 265.

<sup>4</sup> Some 18<sup>th</sup> century definitions of *delicat* are: *zärtlich*, *niedlich*, *weichlich*, *köstlich*, *lieblich*, *leckerhaftig*, *wollüstig* = tender, loving, affectionate, /sweet, cute, /soft, weak, /delicious, delightful, exquisite, /lovely, charming, delightful, appealing, melodious, peaceful, gentle, /delicious, tasty, /sensual, lustful, voluptuous, lecherous.

“This fairly large instrument, with thirty stops on two manuals (*Oberwerk* and *Rückpositiv*) and pedal, was the organ Bach played the most in Mühlhausen.”<sup>5</sup>

The history and specifications for this organ are given in *The Organs of J. S. Bach: A Handbook* by Christoph Wolff & Markus Zepf (University of Illinois Press, 2012), pp. 71-72. As was the case with most organs in 1708 when Bach wrote this organ report, its pitch was *Chorton*, but remarkably, and perhaps because Bach was so intimately connected with this instrument, it was tuned to equal temperament.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Christoph Wolff: *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Norton/New York, 2001), p. 108-109.

<sup>6</sup> This according to Markus Rathey: “Die Temperierung der Divi-Blasii-Orgel in Mühlhausen” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 87 (2001), pp. 163-171 and Franz-Josef Ratte in his article “Temperatur” in *Das Bach-Lexikon*, ed. Michael Heinemann (Laaber, 2000), p. 510.