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**BACH, BEAUTY AND BELIEF**  
**THE ORGAN WORKS OF J.S. BACH**

**Introduction – Bach and the Organ**  
The organ loomed large from early on in Bach’s life. The foundations of his multifaceted career as a professional musician were clearly laid in the careful cultivation of Bach’s prodigious talent as an organist whilst he was still a child. Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach in 1685, and after the death of his father – the director of municipal music in the town – at the age of ten moved to Ohrdruf, where he was taken in by his eldest brother, Johann Christoph. Christoph was the organist at St Michael’s Ohrdruf and had been taught by Pachelbel.¹ During his years at Ohrdruf, the young Sebastian was a choral scholar and likely had his first experiences in organ building and maintenance.² In 1700 he moved to Lüneburg, as a choral scholar at St Michael’s School; this move brought him into the orbit of many organists, including Georg Böhm and Adam Reinken in Hamburg.³ 1703 found him examining a new organ at the New Church in Arnstadt, where he was appointed as organist in August of that year, remaining for four years, his first major professional organist post (Wolff 2001 p. 526). Clearly showing remarkable talent as a player from an early age, Bach’s career remained founded upon the organ even as he moved around in a variety of posts after leaving Arnstadt in 1707: as the organist of St Blasius’s in Mühlhausen (1707 – 1708), court organist and chamber musician at Weimar (1708 – 1717), capellmeister at Cöthen (1717 – 1723) and cantor at St Thomas’ Church in Leipzig (1723 – 1750).

‘The Complete Organ Works of Bach’  
Given that strong foundation, it is no surprise that organ music flowed from Bach’s pen throughout his life. Yet how do Bach’s organ works cohere? For the monolithic notion of ‘The Complete Organ Works of Bach’ is misleading. The picture is more fluid, even unclear, both as to the veracity of individual works and of their particular chronology. The impression is of a combination of works that have reached us in their present form through an often uncertain process of revision and collection (such as the *Six Sonatas*, BWV 525 – 530) and those with a more definite origin and/or date, such as *Clavierübung III*, which was published in 1739. Even a collection with a clear didactic purpose that is apparently easy to date like the *Orgelbüchlein*, BWV 599 – 644 (its title page is dated to 1722 or 1723)⁴ can remain opaque in the chronology and detail of its contents: the title page was added later than the chorales it contains (Williams 2003 p. 227). Many of the preludes and fugues do not exist in autograph form, a fact that in most cases does not affect the question of authorship as much as that of the date of composition, although the authorship of some organ works previously assumed to have been by Bach have been called into question, like the *Eight Short Preludes and Fugues*, BWV 553 – 560. Others are easier by

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virtue of their singularity either to ascribe authorship to, such as the Passacaglia, BWV 582, or to date, such as the Con certo Transcriptions, BWV 592 – 596, which are from Bach’s Weimar years (Williams 2003 p. 202). However, the fluidity of the corpus is not as interesting – or as significant – as the stylistic and generic variety it exhibits.

Genres, Styles and Influences

Bach’s organ works are characterised, typically for the composer, by a multiplicity of genres and stylistic influences. Broadly they can be categorised into five areas, though inevitably these overlap: chorale-based works (preludes, partitas, variations, trios); the Six Sonatas; preludes/toccatas/fantasias (including the Passacaglia) and fugues (paired together, and single); transcriptions of works by other composers (concertos, trios, etc.); miscellaneous works (Allabreve, Canzona, Pièce D’Orgue, etc.). Williams catalogues the multifarious stylistic influences on Bach’s organ works. Many of these are traceable to other contemporary German organ composers whose compositional style Bach would almost certainly have known. As Williams states, these would have included Pachelbel, Böhm, Buxtehude,Bruhns, Reinken, Kerl and Froberger. Bach’s organ works also frequently betray a French influence, both specifically, such as in the famous example of the Passacaglia, BWV 582, the first half of whose main theme originates in a piece by Raison, and more generically, such as in the C minor Fantasia, BWV 562 with its stylistic debt to French composers such as de Grigny. In addition, an Italian influence is often felt in the manual writing across-the-board from the quasi-string writing in the Six Sonatas to the tripartite Toccata in C, BWV 564 via the Frescobaldian Canzona, BWV 588 and Corellian Allabreve, BWV 589.

Purposes

As the above discussion suggests, it is not surprising that many of the exact original purposes for the organ works remain unknown, though in general terms the following categories of use can be discerned: liturgical (many, if not most, of the chorales and chorale preludes; some of the prelude/toccata and fugue pairs); didactic (the Six Sonatas; the Orgelbüchlein); stylistic assimilation (the concerto transcriptions; some toccatas and fantasias; Legrenzi and Corelli Fugues). In addition, collections such as Clavierübung III and perhaps the Schübler Chorales had a purpose that transcended their immediate utility: the desire to offer a musical-theological compendium (Clavierübung III), or leave a musical legacy (Schübler Chorales).

A Note on Current Bach Scholarship

Such is the scope of Bach’s organ works. But how have they been covered in the literature? There is a fascinating dialectic evident in current Bach studies more broadly between a hermeneutic taken up with purely musical concerns for Bach’s works, and a broader analytical approach to his music that seeks to contextualize Bach’s contrapuntal, figurative and harmonic

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peculiarities and complexities within a much broader framework involving contemporary theology, aesthetics, philosophy, and science. Assessing these different approaches to Bach’s music is difficult, as the results are inevitably mixed. On the one hand, there is a need to maintain a degree of musical integrity by allowing the musical features of Bach’s compositions to come first in any attempt to understand them. Thus, some of the least convincing musical-analytical work done from the contextual side arises from an approach to Bach’s music that is too superficial. On the other hand, there is a sense in some of the ‘music-only’ approaches that any recourse to relevant external and contextual questions ought to be dismissed out of hand when clearly such factors occasionally — perhaps often — played a legitimate role in Bach’s compositional process. The ideal, then, seems to be to take an approach to describing Bach’s organ music that both honours the music itself whilst allowing for wider contextual questions to shape one’s thinking as appropriate, perhaps on a piece-by-piece basis. With that in mind, there seem to be two broad extra-musical contexts of particular relevance to the organ music of Bach in which purely musical observations can be worked out. These are theology, and aesthetics.

Theological Aesthetics

Peter Williams highlights a conundrum that needs tackling if one is to think theologically about Bach’s organ music, namely the tension that exists between Bach’s stated theological intention in composition (most famously revealed in the composer’s signature ‘S.D.G.’ — ‘Soli Deo Gloria’ (To God Alone Be Glory) — that has been found on some of Bach’s manuscripts, penned after the final bars) and the apparent self-interestedness of much of Bach’s music. The key that unlocks this dilemma is the observation made by John Butt, that for Bach, as for other Lutherans, music was intrinsically of eternal value. We can be more specific and outline two ways in which the inherent theological nature of music, as it was understood, appears to have influenced the music Bach actually wrote.

i) Music as Theological Metaphor

A theological idea that was found in the Leipzig circles in which Bach moved in the 1740s was that God’s beauty can be conceived conceptually as a type of harmonia:

God is a harmonic being. All harmony originates from his
wise order and organization... Where there is no conformity, there is also no order, no beauty, and no perfection. For beauty and perfection consists in the conformity of diversity.13

This fundamental idea of God’s beauty as expressed in His unity-in-diversity immediately invites the metaphorical projection of this concept onto His creation: His beauty is expressed though His creation via the same aesthetic of unity-in-diversity. While criticisms have been levelled at this definition of beauty when held as an absolute value, as an explanation of Bach’s contrapuntal practice it is highly suggestive. This desire for art to imitate nature in its perfection motivated Bach’s musical project throughout his career and is particularly evident in his treatment of counterpoint: ‘[c]haracteristic of Bach’s manner of composing is a way of elaborating the musical ideas so as to penetrate the material deeply and exhaustively.’14 Bach’s maximization of thematic coherence, harmonic richness, and contrapuntal complexity can be thus understood as having a theological rationale. This rationale perhaps best fits the music with which there is no accompanying text to direct one’s interpretation of the musical figures, and is particularly relevant in grasping the aesthetic behind specifically contrapuntal projects like The Art of Fugue.

ii) Music designed to move the Affections towards God

Ever since the discovery of Bach’s personal Bible commentary, the so-called ‘Calov Bible’, it has often been noted that Bach’s music appears to have been intended as an expression of a specifically, and personally-held, Lutheran faith.15 The implications of this in seeking an informed speculation of Bach’s theological views of music are significant. For the indications in Luther’s writings are not only that he saw music as inherently theological on a number of different levels,16 but specifically that he saw music as having a role in moving the believer’s affections towards God, and thus an ability to strengthen the believer’s faith in Christ.17 Combining this insight with the commonly-observed (though not unchallenged) evidence of the Baroque Affektenlehre (or ‘Doctrine of the Affections’) in Bach’s music, it can be seen how often Bach’s sacred music (chorale-based or liturgically-intended; often both) makes its spiritual utility felt through its projection of a relevant and (sometimes) dominant affekt. This primary affekt is then projected through the musical material, itself often consisting of harmonic and motivic workings-out of a single inventio, or dominant musical figure.18 In the organ

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13 Georg Vensky, 1742. Like Bach, Vensky was a member of Lorenz Christoph Mizler’s Society for Musical Science. Quoted in Wolff, Learned Musician, p. 466.
14 Wolff, Learned Musician, p. 469.
16 Robin A. Leaver, Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).
17 See Luther’s directions to believers suffering depression: ‘When you are sad, therefore, and when melancholy threatens to get the upper hand, say: “Arise! I must play a song unto the Lord on my regal [...].” Then begin striking the keys and singing in accompaniment, as David and Elisha did, until your sad thoughts vanish.’ Martin Luther, Theodore G. Tappert (ed.), Letters of Spiritual Counsel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) p. 97.
music, this notion is perhaps most useful in approaching the chorale preludes – a genre that covers many of the organ works – where in many cases the background text, where clear, often illuminates both the general affekt of a given prelude, and the specificity of particular harmonies and figurations that have been chosen to illustrate it.

Conclusion – Bach, Beauty and Belief
Although the label of ‘The Complete Organ Works of Bach’ for the corpus is a misnomer, there are still many varied ways in which to view it coherently; theological aesthetics is just one example. Theology and aesthetics combine throughout Bach’s organ music, uniting them as works that project a Christian Lutheran worldview through their specifically musical beauty. In this they serve as exemplars of the theology of another towering eighteenth-century Christian intellect, whose published thought also combined beauty and belief with an emphasis on the affections of the believer: the American pastor Jonathan Edwards, with whom Bach has once been compared.19 Edwards placed the affections-of-the-heart at the centre of his definition of genuine Christian experience, and thus taught that moving them God-ward was the primary aim of any means of grace in the church, whether preaching or music. As examples of Edward’s affection-driven theology in practice, the organ works of Bach clearly cohere in their common ability to promote both belief and beauty, or perhaps more accurately, belief through beauty.


Prelude and Fugue in D Major  BWV 532
The striking pedal scale that opens the Prelude of BWV 532 sets the tone for the piece – bold, original and arresting. Bach has taken the model of the North German Praeludium and surpassed it, creating a four-part piece whose bold gestures and harmonic daring remain in the mind long after the double-pedalling of the end has died away. The first part, announced by the pedal scale, features manual arpeggiation, setting out the key of D major. It is followed by an abrupt switch to B minor for a recitative of angular gestures over a static (dominant) pedal, before a virtuoso variation of the original ascending scale, spread over two octaves on the manuals, brings the original key back with similar abruptness. This heralds the start of the third section, an alla breve, Corellian in its employment of invertible suspensions, turning from North German keyboard idiom to Italianate string writing. The final section, balancing the D major-saturated first section with a dramatic and unstable harmonic language, is marked by diminished sevenths and ‘dark, anxious, unexpected minors’ (Williams 2003 p. 43). The Fugue’s subject transforms the scalic opening of the Prelude into a figure that turns around the first three notes of D major, before spinning a descending sequential line reminiscent of the alla breve section of the Prelude. Alternating episodes, marked by more Italianate violinistic passagework, lead to a final entry and coda that emphasize D major in spectacular fashion, capped off by an elegant final bar that, whilst replaying the fugue’s subject, has no formal cadence at the end (Williams 2003 p. 44).
Erbarm' dich mein, O Herre Gott BWV 721
This gentle *manualiter* chorale is based on the 1524 chorale text of Psalm 51, though its authenticity as originating with Bach has been questioned (Williams 2003 p. 463). The chorale melody, heard at the top of the texture, is set against a backdrop of subdued, pulsating quavers that project a sense of gravitas. The solemn feel is balanced by Bach’s harmonic language, which incorporates certain unexpected turns that suggest hope – the hope of divine forgiveness expressed by the psalmist. The sense of difficulties resolved, or guilt forgiven, is hinted at by the final cadential turn of the piece – an F sharp/E sharp dissonance resolved peacefully through an imperfect cadence onto an F sharp major chord.

Liebster Jesu, wir sind hier BWV 731
In *Liebster Jesu*, the chorale melody is given to the right hand, whose cantabile quality is brought out by elegant ornamentation. The accompaniment is marked by *suspirans* figures that propel the music forward, and by descending scales in the pedal. Williams highlights the relation between BWV 731 and its neighbour, BWV 730: the two are juxtaposed in the source. BWV 730 shares some similarities with its more famous neighbour, whilst its third chorale phrase is different (Williams 2003 pp. 472 – 473).

Prelude and Fugue in G Minor BWV 535
The small-scale, but striking, Prelude begins by laying out its minor tonality and tragic *Affekt* in gentle arpeggios that gradually ascend the keyboard. These coalesce into a short, scalar motif – an ascending minor third, that forms the basis of the remainder of the piece, dividing into three sections. The middle section, announced by a virtuosic D major scale (surely a motivic extension of the scalar motif) is characterised by a sequential chain of broken diminished-seventh chords, this time descending, at once violinistic yet highly idiomatic for the keyboard. A long dominant pedal leads to a third section, a short coda that features an engaging sequential pattern that brings the music to a satisfying conclusion. The Fugue subject takes the Prelude’s scalar motif and turns it into a theme marked by organized variety: crotchets become quavers, which then become semiquavers. The virtuosic writing of the Prelude is transformed into semiquaver figurations that echo its string-inspired style. The generally disciplined rhythmic and structural architecture of the Fugue is balanced by a quasi-cadenza on the final page. In this, the semiquavers heard throughout become demisemiquavers in spectacular keyboard runs that energize both the Neapolitan and dominant regions of the key, highlighting the rhythmic tendency in the Fugue for time values to double. A spun-out cadence over a tonic pedal brings the piece to rest.

Sonata No. 2 in C minor BWV 526
Two of the three movements of the Sonata BWV 526 exist in later string trio arrangements, previously thought to have been made by Mozart, and the whole sonata may have had an earlier version for instrumental forces (Williams 2003 p. 14). The first movement *Vivace* is a dramatic ritornello that opens ‘like a
concerto for two violins’ (Keller 1967 p. 135); indeed, the style of the whole movement is that of string music. Its sequential writing, often containing jaunty chromatic inflections, contrasts with strong thematic material. The Largo, projecting a gentle and melancholy affect, offers two upper lines whose semiquavers and suspensions weave in and out of each other. The final Allegro combines a fugal and concerto techniques. Its first group is characterized by a rising, scalic subject in a solid duple time; its second by a striking semiquaver figure that throws the emphasis off the main beat.

Concerto in G Major (after Ernst) BWV 592
Prince Johann Ernst was Bach’s employer in Weimar, and a composer in his own right. Bach’s organ transcription of his G major Concerto dates from his years of service of Ernst in Weimar, specifically from after 1713, the year that the Prince returned from a two-year visit to the Netherlands, from where he sent Italian music back to Weimar for studying and copying (Williams 2003 p. 202). The surviving copies suggest a date of 1715 or later for BWV 592: there is no autograph of the organ version surviving, though Ernst’s string original survives (Williams 2003 pp. 205 – 206). The first movement is a simple ritornello structure in duple metre, with contrasting episodes in triple metre. Much of the writing exemplifies a style based on rising sequences, and Bach’s keyboard writing, with its melody-and-accompaniment and broken-chordal texture, is new in organ music of its time (Williams 2003 p. 207). The second movement is an Italianate slow movement, with a Vivaldian unison opening and close

Fugue in B minor (‘on a Theme of Corelli’) BWV 579
The theme from Bach’s so-called ‘Corelli Fugue’ is taken from Corelli’s Trio Sonata Op. 3 no 4 (1689). Bach’s work is of uncertain date as no autograph copy of it exists (Williams 2003 p. 179), but it reflects his keen interest in assimilating the music of other composers into his organ compositions. Bach’s treatment of Corelli’s original is very much his own, though there are more similarities with Corelli’s original than merely the famous opening (Williams 2003 pp. 180 – 181). Bach’s work is marked by the use of a greater variety of figuration: one way that a sense of progression is achieved is through the tendency of the rhythmic values to increase through the piece, for example the gradual introduction of semiquavers into the counterpoint. Other striking features stand out: Bach’s richer harmonic language, often evident in the Corellian descending sequential patterns, and the tight use of stretti heard just before the subject’s final entry.

Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten BWV 690 and BWV 691
The existence of two separate settings of this chorale reflect its
popularity for Bach – there are fourteen settings through the composer’s oeuvre (Stinson 1996 p. 122). BWV 691 represents the more expressive of the two given here. It is a manualiter chorale, with the melody in the right hand given exacting ornaments above a simple two-part left hand that fills out the harmony. The floridity of the right hand’s ornamentation is expressive, yet an expressivity restrained by the sober feel of both the texture (simple three-part) and harmony (lacking the chromatic expressivity of other harmonisations of the same tune). In BWV 690 the chorale is set in the soprano register, with diatonic harmony beneath, though the accompaniment is marked by more energetic figuration. The chorale receives a less expressive treatment (with fewer ornaments) yet within a frame of increased variation and creativity: a texture of four parts (at most), and the feature of a suspire figure that gives a flowing rather than triumphant quality to the setting.

Bach’s technical restraint is projected onto the architecture of the Fugue as the pedals are withheld until the final two pages, where they enter with the subject in rhythmic augmentation – a masterstroke!

George Parsons, 2016

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**THE ORGAN OF TRINITY COLLEGE CHAPEL**

The organ of Trinity College Chapel was built by the Swiss firm Metzler Söhne in 1976. The design, by Bernhardt Edskes, incorporated the surviving pipework of the two organs built for Trinity by “Father” Bernard Smith in 1694 and 1708. The organ has three manuals and forty-two ranks, of which seven are original. The 8’ Principal on the Rückpositiv is from Smith’s 1694 organ, while the 16’ Principal on the Pedal and the 16’ Principal, 8’ and 4’ Octave, 2’ Quinte, and 2’ Superoctave on the Great are from 1708. The Victorian enlargements to both the instrument and its cases have been removed, and all the pipework is contained within the restored Smith cases, whose carving recalls the school of Grinling Gibbons. The cases are likely to have been designed by Smith and executed by him or one of his team. The salient characteristics of this mechanical-action organ are the meticulous craftsmanship and artistic integrity employed by Metzlers, the durability of the instrument, together with its rich but gentle resonance, its aptness for the acoustics of the Chapel, and its exquisite balance. It is understandably regarded as one of the finest instruments in the United Kingdom.

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45 Rückpositiv/Hauptwerk  46 Schwellwerk/Hauptwerk
47 Hauptwerk/Pedal  48 Rückpositiv/Pedal  49 Schwellwerk/Pedal  (• Father Smith ranks)
DAVID GOODE

David Goode is Organist at Eton College, combining this post with a flourishing performing career.

A music scholar at Eton, and then organ scholar at King’s College, Cambridge, he studied organ with David Sanger and in Amsterdam with Jacques van Oortmerssen. From 1996-2001 he was Sub-Organist at Christ Church, Oxford; following prizes at the 1997 St. Alban’s Competition, and the 1998 Calgary Competition, he concentrated on a freelance career between 2001 and 2003. In 2003 he moved for 2 years to Los Angeles as Organist-in-Residence at First Congregational Church, home to the world’s largest church organ.

In 1999 he made the first of numerous appearances at the Proms, and in 2002 he made his recital debuts at the RFH and at Symphony Hall, Birmingham, subsequently playing all over Europe, the US, Australia and the Far East. He plays at the AGO National Convention in June 2016. He also has an established partnership with the trumpeter Alison Balsom: in March 2014 they played for the reopening concert of the RFH organ.

Of his Bach CD for Signum in 2013 The Times said: ‘One of Britain’s finest organists puts the 1714 organ in Freiberg Cathedral through its paces …. An exemplary introduction’. 5 CDs of a complete survey of Reger’s organ music have now also appeared, to warm reviews. He has forged a strong relationship over the years on Radio 3 with the BBCNOW and the BBC Singers, and has played numerous contemporary works, including Francis Pott’s Christus (‘a stupendous achievement’ The Times), and Peter Maxwell Davies’ Solstice of Light.

He has also recently developed a profile as a composer: a set of anthems has been published, together with recordings by the choir of King’s College, Cambridge; and his Blitz Requiem was performed in September 2013 by the Bach Choir at St Paul’s Cathedral, and broadcast on Classic FM.
J.S. Bach: 1714 Silbermann
Organ of Freiberg Cathedral
David Goode
SIGCD329, 2CD Set

“Bach played Silbermann’s instruments, so this world of sound – with its silvery mixtures, blazing reeds and characterful flutes – is authentic as well as utterly compelling in a cavernous acoustic … An exemplary introduction to some of Bach’s greatest organ works.” The Times