JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
1685-1750

Sinfonia from Cantata 29, "We thank thee, Lord"

This delightfully sparkling piece began life as the prelude to the third Partita in E for solo violin. Later on, Bach reworked it for organ and small orchestra as the prelude to a new cantata to celebrate the seating of the Town Council of Leipzig in 1731. (Judging from Bach's title, those town elections must have gone well.) This piece has been transcribed countless times for organ solo. I play my own version assembled from my favorites.

Chorus from Cantata 79, "Now thank we all our God"

Bach's cantata "God is a light and shield" contains this setting of the now-familiar Thanksgiving chorale tune. Several arrangements have been created for various instruments. E. Power Biggs created a solo organ version. Then along came Virgil Fox, and all bets were off.

Sacred song: Komm, süßer Tod, BWV 478

Bach contributed a few sacred songs to a collection being published by a contemporary. "Come, sweet death; come, blessed rest" has been transcribed many times. It took on a decidedly Romantic bent when Leopold Stokowski reimagined it for full orchestra. Then the organ got involved when flamboyant organist Virgil Fox prepared a sumptuous transcription intended for the enormous instruments he preferred to play, not least of which was the Wanamaker organ in Philadelphia and the monumental Aeolian-Skinner organ he designed for the Riverside Church in Manhattan.

Sonata in E-flat, BWV 525

Bach's six Sonatas in "trio" format are musical and contrapuntal masterpieces, but their light texture and enormous difficulty are often passed over in preference to the larger preludes and fugues. The first sonata in E-flat is particularly cheerful and is but one of hundreds of examples of Bach's consummate elevation of the common ground between contrapuntal mastery and musical elegance.

Sonata in C Minor, BWV 526

The six "trio" Sonatas have it all: marvelous harmonic activity, flawless invertible counterpoint, supreme technical pedagogy, and an enchanting character that belies their devilish difficulty – all accomplished with only three voices. The Sonata in C Minor is particularly fast-paced and challenges our modern perception that a minor key must equal "sad" or "serious." Indeed, only Bach could make C Minor sound like a birthday party.

Prelude and Fugue in D, BWV 532

At the same time that Bach informs us, he eludes us: we know so much about him in some ways, yet scholars are so often teased mercilessly by lack of evidence elsewhere. For example, we are not able to assign definite dates to Bach's organ works, but we see that he tended to put into a given piece everything he had learned up to that point. This makes his early works easier to detect. Picture a young man – destined to be the linchpin of all organ composers – seeking new ways to exploit the work of the hands and feet in performance. Picture him temporarily adopting the style of another composer (or two) and stretching it to its limit, making pieces longer, flashier and more difficult. One possible result of this could be the Prelude and Fugue in D. The organization of the Prelude in several contrasting sections suggests Bach was imitating the style of venerable composer and teacher Dietrich Buxtehude. The sheer virtuosity of the Fugue is the product of a young genius composer who perhaps had not quite learned to channel his virtuosity in service to the music. But no matter – the organ can be an appealing diversion as well as a serious musical instrument, and audiences should have no problem enjoying this piece for its music, along with its shameless pyrotechnics of pedal scales, lightning quick manual work and a fiendishly unrelenting fugue.

Prelude and Fugue in A, BWV 536

Bach was constantly breaking new ground. Nearly every piece explores something new, whether a compositional device or a textual illustration or a formal layout defying all previous molds. To this organist, the Prelude and Fugue in A adds fresh measures of charm and loveliness to the list of attributes. The prelude is brief and yearning, the fugue stately and handsome. My quiet registration, somewhat rare in these modern times for preludes and fugues, is intended to heighten an awareness of the notes themselves and allow the piece to speak for itself, as only Bach's can.

Toccata and Fugue in F, BWV 540

Bach's objective in his free organ works was to expand existing styles to their limits and compose the longest organ works yet. The Toccata in F behaves much like an Italian concerto, with contrasting sections of dramatic blocked chords (*ripieno*, "full orchestra") and flowing broken triads (*concertino*, the "concerto soloists"). That may

sound innocuous enough until we discover that in merely getting to that starting point in this piece, Bach takes a remarkable detour through a completely different style, namely, the North German virtuosic style. The two hands create a fifty-four measure long, note-for-note canon above a static pedal note. Then the pedal breaks away and plays a twenty-eight-measure fantasy of its own. But Bach is still not ready to "begin" the "concerto" yet. The hands trade parts and play the same canon again, followed by another pedal fantasia. The "concerto" finally gets underway at that point. Bach throws in other delights such as deceptive cadences, musical statements of his last name (B-flat, A, C, B), and three "trio" sections. Measure for measure (at 438), this is Bach's longest single movement for the organ, but the brisk 3/8 meter sends it quickly past the ear. As if all that weren't enough, the Fugue is a huge double fugue with two contrasting subjects: the first slow and grand (*alla breve*), the second livelier and based on broken triads (in a keyboard-idiomatic, *spielfuge* style). And of course, true to his genius, Bach finds ways to combine statements of the two subjects simultaneously, all within the textural confines of only four voices. This Toccata and Fugue are two masterpieces whose total swirling effect certainly outweighs the sum of their parts.

Prelude and Fugue in G, BWV 541

The chatty Prelude is a short "concerto" of sorts, with brief sections linked together that sound rhapsodic but upon closer inspection are actually quite formally sophisticated and forward-looking to the "Sonata-Allegro" form of later generations. The Fugue is a wonderfully ebullient creation that tends to put the listener in a good mood (and the organist in traction).

Prelude and Fugue in C, BWV 547

The prelude from this handsome opus is a triumphant *tour de force* of running passages in the manuals against an accented marching motive in the pedal. The fugue is the only complete surviving example of a pure "art fugue" by Bach for the organ – a fugue showcasing the *art* of writing a fugue. The subject is very short and is stated no fewer than forty-four times. Those many statements include outright statements, inverted statements, and all manner of simultaneous combinations of the two. This fugue is also the only example in Bach's organ fugues where the pedal makes its subject statements exclusively in augmented note values. Bach's genius can sometimes be wonderfully overwhelming.

Prelude and Fugue in G, BWV 550

This especially exuberant piece exhibits the carefree spirit of a young composer happy with his job and proud of his blossoming talents as a composer. The music quite literally dances and doesn't take very long to say what it has to say. The

prelude is brief by Bach's standards but no less impressive. Then following a short interlude, the fugue launches without pause on one of the merriest chases in Bach's output.

Prelude and Fugue in E-flat, BWV 552

Bach tends to fill a single work with everything he has learned up to that point. In the Prelude and Fugue in E-flat, in addition to his customary masterful counterpoint and complete exploitation of the organ and its player, Bach takes us on a tour of Europe in the prelude and on an encounter with the number 3 in the fugue. The prelude is a study in three contrasting sections: stately French overture on full organ, light Italian dialogue and melody, and the sturdy harmonic progressions of German fugal scales. The implied numerology in the fugue (most agree that it is Trinitarian in inspiration) has kept both aficionados and scholars engaged in lively conversation and constant discovery. This fugue has three subjects, is in three sections, and is in a key signature that contains three flats. The first fugue subject appears in all three sections as an organizational anchor. Plenty more may be said about the numerology, but let us simply agree that this fugue, like nearly all of Bach's fugues, is unique. The fugue subject bears a striking resemblance to the hymn tune ST. ANNE ("O God, our help in ages past"), although there is no concrete evidence that Bach knew that tune.

Supplemental commentary on the fugue:
On a basic Trinitarian level, the piece is in three flats, and there are three sections of the Fugue, corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity, each with its own fugue theme. On a musical level, it is possible to acknowledge the *character* of each of the three Persons: if the eighth-note rhythm is kept constant throughout, then the "Father" fugue (in four-one meter) is rendered majestic, the "Son" fugue (in six-four with running eighth notes) sensitive and caring, and the "Spirit" fugue (in twelve-eight) blazing. Additionally, the "Father" fugue re-appears in the other two fugues, providing all manner of additional theological implication. All this is speculation, but it makes for good reading and great listening.

Toccata, Adagio and Fugue in C, BWV 564

Titles for Bach's music are often an issue. "Prelude and Fugue" did not exist as a concrete pairing – Bach would have inserted a full recital in between those movements. It wasn't until much later that performers began to play these pieces as paired sets. BWV 564 is a rare case with a *third* movement, and our modern title for it is now "Toccata, Adagio, and Fugue," affectionately referred to in conversation among organists as "the T-A-F." No matter what we call it, this piece is among the sunniest of Bach's organ works. The Toccata shows off hands and feet for quite a while before settling into a more formal plan with rising and falling themes. The Adagio gently lilts along, much like a slow movement by Vivaldi might have. The

Fugue does not exhibit Bach's later mastery of fugal devices (which suggests, therefore, that the piece is a fairly early one), but the fugue subject itself is catchy, swift, and satisfying.

Praeludium [Toccata] in E, BWV 566

Bach developed preludes and fugues as completely stand-alone entities, unlike our modern practice of playing them as sets. However, he inherited a musical style of connecting multiple prelude- and fugal-type passages together in a single piece, usually given the general title *praeludium*, of which BWV 566 is a fairly early example of Bach's homage to that earlier style. But of course, he infuses it with his own genius, stretching the length of the various sections, adding to the sophistication of the counterpoint, and stretching the distance that the harmonies stray from the home key of E. The sections are easy to recognize when they come along: virtuosic prelude, cheerful fugue, virtuosic interlude, stately fugue, virtuosic finish. This piece is often called "Toccata." Titles were quite interchangeable long before Bach; listeners always expected some juxtaposition of fanciful prelude with stricter fugue, no matter the titles.

Pièce d'orgue [Fantasia] in G, BWV 572

Although Bach never traveled outside Germany, he was able to study the music of other countries and in turn quite often incorporated other national styles in his music. But the similarity stops there – in the hands of Bach, a nod toward another style was never mere imitation but rather transformation. The **Pièce d'orgue**, although given a French title with a French-style middle section, is framed in the outer sections by distinctly German passagework. Those three seemingly mismatched sections produce a whole greater than the sum of its parts, a typical stroke of genius for Bach.

"Gigue" Fugue in G, BWV 577

This piece has found a niche as an encore and showpiece. Virgil Fox encouraged his audiences to get up and dance the jig in the aisles as he played (which some did), and Hector Olivera sets up a digital drum beat when he plays it. This very short piece – and the nickname we added later – speak for themselves.

Passacaglia, BWV 582

A passacaglia is essentially a set of variations, but the "melody" being dealt with appears in the bass, thus imposing an expanded field for *harmonic* variation, as well. Bach wrote only one Passacaglia for organ, surely the finest ever composed. He

stretches the harmonic restriction of the bass melody to its limit, demonstrating its possibilities to the point that he is able to abandon the melody itself from time to time. Also present are Bach's usual high standards of textural variety, numerological implications, dynamic contrast, taut formal structure, and perfect counterpoint. Formally, the piece presents the melody alone in the pedal at the beginning, followed by twenty variations. Bach then concludes with a fugue based on the first eight notes of the original melody. The fugue is unique among Bach's fugues for its strict treatment of the subject and *two* countersubjects, and although it is a complete fugue, it is sometimes called the "twenty-first variation" of the Passacaglia.

Concerto in G (Ernst), BWV 592

Besides being a patron for Bach, young Prince Johann Ernst (1696-1715) was also an amateur composer, and Bach transcribed several of his works for organ, including this charming concerto originally for two violins and string orchestra. Bach's arrangement handily conveys the dialogical banter between the orchestra and the solo violins. Bach made a number of adjustments to the original; whether that was to produce a more idiomatic transcription for the organ or was a subtle attempt at improving the piece itself is open to discussion. Anything is possible, given Ernst's young age and Bach's mastery.

Concerto in D Minor, BWV 596

I. [*Allegro*] - *Grave*
II. Fugue
III. *Largo e spiccato*
IV. [*Allegro*]

Bach's five concertos for solo organ are all transcriptions of other composers' works, in this case, a wonderfully striking work by Vivaldi for two solo violins and cello, with string orchestra, Op. 3, No. 11. Bach's intentions in creating these may not always be clear, but his achievement always is – his repurposing of this work for a single player is superbly crafted, clear, and occasionally barely within the bounds of playability, as many transcriptions often are.

O Man, Bewail thy Grievous Sin, BWV 622

This famous setting continues to inspire with its soothing harmonies and gentle, abundantly ornamented melody. At once plaintive and exquisitely beautiful, the piece suggests reflection on sinful humanity yet quiet contemplation of redemption. A curious chord near the end that comes from nowhere has been variously interpreted as "sinful." The chord settles on a C-flat major triad before returning to more "proper" harmonies and finishing the piece in the home key of E-flat.

Chorale fantasia: "Komm, Heiliger Geist, Herre Gott," BWV 651

Composed later in life, the set of 18 "Great" Leipzig chorales, BWV 651-668 represents Bach's profoundest and most mature writing for the organ, a veritable Mount Everest of chorale composition and performance. The first chorale in the set, based on the Lutheran hymn "Come Holy Ghost," is an aural representation, if one will, of the fire of the Holy Spirit. The hands play "fiery" broken chord figures, but despite their apparent interest and often slippery difficulty, they function as mere accompaniment to the actual chorale melody being played slowly in the pedal, a well developed example of *cantus firmus* technique.

An Wasserflüssen Babylon, BWV 653

Although chorales are usually set to a melody and the text usually does not appear, Bach always keeps the text in mind. Psalm 137, "By the waters of Babylon," is a longing text of an entire displaced people's homesickness. In a single stroke, Bach illustrates both the wistfulness of the text and the placid flow of the river. The notes are quite difficult, often containing flowing eighth notes against gentle trills in the same hand. (That should keep the tempo under control.) Add a peaceful registration, and this magnificent setting is now complete.

All glory be to God on high, BWV 664

A "chorale fantasia" can be as loosely based on a chorale tune as the composer wishes, and in Bach's case, "loosely" is the operative word. Here we have a lilting piece with only three intertwining voices, based on a few notes of a chorale tune but presenting no recognizable part of that chorale tune until the very end, in one lonely phrase buried in the pedal on the last page!

Partita on "O Gott, du frommer Gott," BWV 767

A *partita* is essentially a set of variations. Before Bach's time, partitas would have been composed on any familiar song, sacred or secular. By Bach's time, the compositions style was used chiefly for choral tune (hymns). It may be argued that each variation ("partita") was composed to interpret loosely the text of a particular stanza of the hymn. The partita on "O God, thou merciful God" has ten stanzas. This creates a rather large group of variations, not necessarily in terms of Bach's task in musical development but rather in the sense that there were ten stanzas of a hymn(!), a rare occurrence in modern ecclesiastical practice.