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"The Organ Music of J.S. Bach. Volume III: a Background." By Peter F. Williams

Kimberly Marshall

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Peter F. Williams: *The Organ Music of J. S. Bach*. Vol. 3. *A Background*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. viii, 309p. ISBN 0-521-24412-9

Much has already been written about Peter Williams's ambitious effort to produce a complete commentary on the organ works of Johann Sebastian Bach. The first two volumes, which appeared in 1982, contain detailed observations on the extant sources and musical style of each piece, arranged according to BWV number. Despite the obvious merit of his scholarship, the author was criticized for failing to include general chapters on the performance and the historical context of the pieces, for including too many cumbersome references to other modern scholars, and for allowing numerous errors to appear in print. One wonders if these severe criticisms were the impetus for the creation of Volume 3, which provides a thorough background to the repertory, based largely upon eighteenth-century writings on music and the organ, and includes 32 pages of corrigenda to the first two volumes. Its appearance is thus a welcome one, and Williams is to be congratulated on the accuracy and scope of this noble effort.

Nevertheless, performers of the music who expected in the third volume the definitive "player's guide" will be disappointed to learn that this was not the author's goal. And while in his preface Williams "imagines" a fourth volume that would treat the practical issues of performance for each of the works, he does not formally commit himself to the project. It is hard to think of anyone better equipped for the task, and one is tempted to stress the shortcomings of Volume 3 in the hope of encouraging him to undertake the next tome.

The text is divided into four main areas concerning Bach's organ music: its role in church services and recitals, its composition (or improvisation), its instrument, and its performance. The many quotations from Bach's contemporaries and students in both the German original and English translation provide a valuable compilation of important source material arranged according to these broad headings. Modern performers will doubtless be humbled by a perusal of Werckmeister's and Scheibe's outlines of organists' duties (pp. 32-34) and Mattheson's reports of the

requirements for organists's trials (pp. 45-46). References to German treatises from the eighteenth century and musical examples from Bach's contemporaries (Walther, Kuhnau, Kauffmann, Krieger) help to establish a historical context for the music. Yet it is to the second half of the book, the sections on the organs in Bach's life and on questions of performance, that organists will most often turn, and here is where the frustration will probably begin for those who expect easy answers.

"Fragen über Fragen!" was one reviewer's perplexed reaction to Williams's overwhelming compendium of undigested material. Each new bit of evidence seems to eliminate the relevance of the preceding paragraph to the matter at hand and to raise more seemingly unanswerable questions. For example, the chapter on *organo pleno* (pp. 162-70) begins by stating the two main questions on the subject, namely: "For what kind of music was *organo pleno* used? and what exactly does *organo pleno* mean?" The answers to these basic questions are indeed of burning concern to anyone performing Bach's organ music today. But from Williams's whirlwind tour of Eckstein, Compenius, Werckmeister, Niedt, Mattheson, Adlung, Vogler, Agricola, Walther, Silbermann, Mizler, Scheibe, Kauffmann, Gronau, and Grienpenkerl (in the space of eight pages), the only general conclusions are that "the *organo pleno* meant flue-chorus only" and that "the *organo pleno* could and no doubt did gradually include more stops [as the eighteenth century progressed]," although "it was not rigidly fixed and was not used indiscriminately in all kinds of music."

It is doubtful that any performer sufficiently interested in Bach's organ music to open this volume would be enlightened by these statements. What makes Williams's evasion of conclusions all the more frustrating is that he comes tantalizingly close to salient issues without pursuing them. What could have been a bang is but a whimper: "Players today . . . should consider whether labelling a prelude or fugue 'organo pleno' was meant to do more than alert the original players merely to the category of the piece at hand, i.e., indicating that it was not a solo-stop chorale or a two-manual trio. Such 'alerting' must have become necessary as the scope of organ music grew wider and its forms became more varied by 1725." End of chapter. Surely a Bach expert of Williams's erudition could make a case for or against this theory based on internal evidence. One has the lingering impression that the author closed the subject at the very moment he should have been inspired to tackle it.

The ultimate value of Volume 3 for the performer is that it challenges him to re-evaluate established views on performance practice. Williams

argues against several widely-held views: he considers common arguments against changing manuals to be invalid (p. 182) and suggests interesting possibilities for manual changes in the C-major Fugue (BWV 564), the C-minor Prelude (BWV 546), and the D-minor Fugue (BWV 538); he rejects the "general rules" for ornamentation (rule against parallels, rule of consistency, and rule of imitation between parts — pp. 231-33); and he points out that important technical innovations attributed to Bach, including the use of the thumb, were described in Rameau's *Pièces de clavecin* of 1724 (pp. 213-14).

It is especially important to remember that Bach's organ music, written primarily at Weimar *ca.* 1715 and at Leipzig *ca.* 1740, spans a period of transition. Changing musical taste and practice towards the middle of the century must be taken into account when assessing reports of Bach's students and later writers. Thus, Williams questions the frequent use of statements by Adlung, Mattheson, *et al.*, to determine registrational habits relevant to Bach's Weimar period (p. 159). Similarly, although he includes fascinating excerpts from Kittel and Petri in his discussion of pedalling, he considers them to be "of doubtful value" for establishing Bach's pedalling practice (p. 247).

More significantly, however, Williams discusses the impact of the *galant* style on the notation of slurs and dots in Bach's organ works. He suggests that, because of the general *détaché* touch of keyboard playing during the earlier eighteenth century, slurs and phrase-marks were only necessary to point out harmonic details, such as accented passing notes or *tierces coulées*, that would require a legato touch; towards the middle of the century, the notation of slurs and dots proliferated to indicate the detailed articulations characteristic of *galant* chamber music. This would explain the general scarcity of slurs and phrase-marks in Bach autographs and the additions of such markings by younger copyists, who used notation to indicate articulation. Williams expands this argument, suggesting that Bach's exceptional use of slurs and dots in his Prelude in E-flat Major (BWV 552) lent character to the themes: slurs for the "French" dotted theme, dots for the "galant" second theme, and no markings for the third theme, implying a *détaché* manner of playing. It is a pity that such creative observations are not brought to the attention of the reader in summary paragraphs at the end of each chapter.

But an attempt at summation was not the author's goal: "The present volume . . . aims to present a background to this particular corpus of music, refining and voicing *questions* [*italics mine*] about the main areas in the study of it — purpose, style, instrument, performance — without

wishing to convey the impression that such questions can always be answered." Williams has succeeded equally well both in finding provocative questions and in avoiding easy answers. A fourth volume devoted to practical issues will require more careful organization, however. It is to be hoped that Williams will accept the challenge of synthesizing his vast knowledge of this music for the performer.

Kimberly Marshall