

Soli Deo gloria

Organ recital by
David Paul Werner

24 June 2012, 5:00 p.m.

Church of All Nations
Repulse Bay, Hong Kong

Programme

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Prelude (Fantasia) & Fugue in G Minor, BWV 542

Louis Victor Jules Vierne (1870-1937)

Organ Symphony No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 14

Prélude, Maestoso

Fugue, Moderato non troppo lento

Andante, Quasi adagio

Final, Allegro

Prelude (Fantasia) & Fugue in G Minor, BWV 542, by J. S. Bach

This stunningly dramatic work has long been and continues to be a source of fascination and perplexity to musicologists, historians and organists for its musical idiosyncrasies and its origins. It could be we can find clues to its origins in a study of its idiosyncrasies.

There is no autograph of the score and extant published editions are posthumous, so we lack an “authorized” version of the work. The Fugue exists in both G and F minor separately from the Prelude, and there is a copy of the Fugue from J. L. Krebs that has several differences from published versions. Johann Mattheson wrote that Bach played the Fugue for J. A. Reincken in 1720, but never mentioned the Prelude. This has led to speculation as to how the Prelude and Fugue became paired, and to question if Bach even intended them to be paired.

The Prelude hearkens back to organ works of the North German Organ School having multiple sections alternating free recitatives with more strictly metered counterpoint, leading some to suggest it is an earlier work than the Fugue. But the Prelude is reminiscent not imitative, having large-scale cohesion and harmonic daring not found in earlier works of Bach. Also, the Prelude demands *gravitas* from the organ but does not require an independent pedal division. These features speak of a work optimized for the organ at Weimar.

Both pieces were likely written during Bach’s tenure at Weimar but we cannot factually ascertain in which order the pieces were written. Also, we cannot tell if the Fugue was originally written in F or G. Was it transposed to F later for some particular reason lost to history? Or was it later transposed to G to be paired with the Prelude?

Regardless of the order in which these pieces were conceived and in which key the Fugue was first written, there is persuasive evidence within the form of these two pieces that they were intended to be paired:

The ending of the Fugue recalls the ending of the Prelude. The Prelude ends with a rising chromatic pedal figure followed by two large chords. The Fugue ends with a rising diatonic pedal figure followed by two large

chords. The rhythm and tessitura of these two endings are the same and the chord inversions and structure are the same.

The form of the Fugue is a mirror of the Prelude. Both have five sections: a b a' b' a". In the Prelude the sections become progressively longer. In the Fugue the sections become progressively shorter.

Perhaps the strongest evidence of a deliberate pairing is what Bach embedded in the form. Binding sections 4 and 5 of the Prelude, when there is a little over 30% of the work remaining, there is an incongruous episode of rising chromaticism. This enigmatic interlude has no thematic relationship to the rest of Prelude. Even the quality of the harmonies is different, being more simple and consonant than the diminished and extended harmonies throughout the Prelude. Then, in the Fugue, in an exact mirrored position, binding sections 1 and 2 when little over 30% of the Fugue has gone by, there is an incongruous episode of rising chromaticism that has no thematic relationship to the rest of the Fugue. The insertion of these strange little sections doesn't tell us which piece was written first, but in the carefully constructed music of Bach where there are no accidents, this is a compelling indication that the pieces were intended to be paired.

To solve the several perplexing performance questions with regard to registration and manual changes, we propose solutions here by emulating those stops and coupling arrangements that were available at the 2-manual 23-stop Weimer organ. Only hand registrations are used and the only stop changes made during performance are limited to one or two stops within the same division, *i.e.*, as would be possible at the console of the Weimar organ without use of an assistant.

Organ Symphony No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 14, by Louis Vierne

Prélude, Maestoso

Fugue, Moderato non troppo lento

Andante, Quasi adagio

Final, Allegro

Vierne's *Première Symphonie* was published in 1899 at the encouragement of Vierne's mentor, Charles-Marie Widor. It was good advice by Widor because having a major work published contributed to Vierne winning the coveted position of organist at Notre Dame Cathedral. That appointment, made in 1900, was not without its detractors because how could such an important post be given to a young organist only 29 years of age? But the appointment turned out to be a great success. Vierne remained in that post for the remainder of his life and is quite possibly the most famous of the Cathedral's organists.

Vierne's symphonies are a sort of tribute to Widor. Where Widor's first symphony is in the key of C and subsequent symphonies go up the scale to D, E, *etc.*, Vierne's first symphony is in D and subsequent symphonies ascend the scale to E, F#, *etc.* As Widor reduced the number of movements in his symphonies from 6 to 5 to 4, so too did Vierne reduce the number of movements in his symphonies. When Widor's symphonies became thematically cyclical so too did Vierne's.

The first two movements of this symphony comprise a Prelude and Fugue pairing that can stand on its own. If Vierne has a "natural state" in his compositions it is exemplified in the Prelude: melancholy with dark timbres and twisted chromaticism. Most of his compositions at least hint at despair; very few escape it entirely. The Fugue is of like mind but more energetic and optimistic. The Prelude and Fugue are meticulously constructed examples of late romantic melodrama.

The Andante is an example of almost hyper-romanticism—rich sostenuto strings, twirly flutes, lush textures, opulent harmonies—while still managing to avoid seeming "corny" or trite to our jaded post-modern sensibilities.

The *Final* is another homage to Widor, adapting Widor's own creation of what we now call a French Toccata. A French Toccata first used by Widor in Symphony No. 5, 1879, is a loud impressive work in a simplified sonata form having a singing melody in the pedal accompanied by a more rapid repeating figuration in the manuals. It is in this *Final* that Vierne successfully abandons his tendency to gloom with a result that is technically flawless and glorious.