

J.S. Bach
Clavier-Übung III



Stephen Farr
organ

The Metzler Organ of
Trinity College, Cambridge

01510120

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

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About this recording:

'Farr rises to the occasion, turning in performances that are as varied and vital as the music demands, intricate details inked with telling clarity and the elongated arc of the whole negotiated with nimble and nuanced aplomb'
Choir & Organ

'His approach is refreshingly unfussy and quirk free, and he draws on an unfailingly interesting palette of tonal colours [...] In a strong field this performance must be in the top three.'
Gramophone

Clavier-Übung III

DISC ONE

1. Praeludium pro Organo pleno, BWV 552/1	[8:57]
2. Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit, BWV 669	[3:27]
3. Christe, aller Welt Trost, BWV 670	[5:02]
4. Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist, BWV 671	[5:30]
5. Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit, BWV 672	[1:53]
6. Christe, aller Welt Trost, BWV 673	[1:44]
7. Kyrie, Gott heiliger Geist, BWV 674	[1:58]
8. Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr', BWV 675	[3:26]
9. Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr', BWV 676	[5:21]
10. Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr', BWV 677	[1:07]
11. Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot, BWV 678	[5:03]
12. Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot, BWV 679	[2:10]
13. Wir glauben all an einen Gott, BWV 680	[3:22]
14. Wir glauben all an einen Gott, BWV 681	[1:25]
15. Vater unser in Himmelreich, BWV 682	[6:29]
16. Vater unser in Himmelreich, BWV 683	[1:12]
Total playing time	[XX:XX]

DISC TWO

17. Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam , BWV 684	[4:17]
18. Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam , BWV 685	[1:26]
19. Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir , BWV 686	[6:54]
20. Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir , BWV 687	[6:03]
21. Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, der von uns den Zorn Gottes wandt , BWV 688	[4:21]
22. Jesus Christus, unser Heiland , BWV 689	[5:02]
23. Duetto I , BWV 802	[2:36]
24. Duetto II , BWV 803	[3:33]
25. Duetto III , BWV 804	[2:46]
26. Duetto IV , BWV 805	[2:51]
27. Fuga , BWV 552/2	[6:57]
Total playing time	[XX:XX]



J. S. Bach: Clavier-Übung III

Soon after Johann Sebastian Bach's *Clavier-Übung III* appeared in print in late 1739, the eminent Leipzig philosopher Lorenz Mizler – a one-time student of the composer – published a glowing review of the project: 'The author has here given new proof that in this field of composition he is more practised and more fortunate than many others. No one will surpass him in it, and few will be able to imitate him.' It would be hard to disagree: the volume easily constitutes Bach's most elaborate and significant collection of organ music. Comprising a group of chorale preludes on mass and catechism hymns, as well as four freely composed duets, all framed by a large-scale Prelude and Fugue, the set offers a compendium of all that – from a Bachian perspective – was possible on the instrument at the time. Its kaleidoscopic display of styles, textures, contrapuntal techniques and virtuosic conceits places notably high demands not only on performers but also on listeners of the work. But if some of the items could appear bewildering on first hearing, closer acquaintance delivers rich musical rewards as well as fascinating insights into the mind of Bach the organist.

Among the series of Bach's *Clavier-Übung*

publications (four in total), this third instalment forms something of an oddity, since it is the only one designated specifically for the organ, rather than other instruments in the 'clavier' family, such as harpsichord or clavichord. What it shares with the remaining volumes, however, is a title page dedicating its contents to 'music lovers, for the recreation of their spirits'; although in the case of this collection, Bach judiciously added the phrase 'and especially for connoisseurs of such work'. He was clearly aware, then, of the challenge that the level of artifice would pose for his audiences. Yet the stated 'recreational' intent still locates the collection outside an expressly liturgical context, even if the idea of recreation would have carried strong spiritual overtones for eighteenth-century Lutherans. Unlike Bach's other famous organ anthology, the *Orgelbüchlein* (1708-1717), which provides a repertoire of pieces for immediate use in the service, the intended performance occasions for the works in *Clavier-Übung III* are not as clearly defined. Some of the settings are simply too expansive to fit with contemporary practices of worship, while others have no discernible place in the liturgy at all.

As a result, the basic questions of when and how these pieces may have been performed in Bach's time, and how they can or should

be played today, are not so easily answered. The collection was undoubtedly conceived as a whole in certain ways, not only through the prelude/fugue pair that encloses the rest, but also in numerous details of careful internal ordering. Potentially the volume represents an ideal version of Bach's own organ recital programmes, in particular those he played in Dresden in 1736, or alternatively its contents were meant for devotional purposes in private settings. Yet unlike the subsequent *Clavier-Übung* book (the *Goldberg Variations*, published in 1741), the set is not obviously a cycle intended for continuous performance. Hearing it through from beginning to end is therefore not inevitably the only or best way to appreciate the variegated contents; in other words, the forward and backward skipping that a recording allows may in fact enhance the listener's enjoyment. But the most immediate addressees were undoubtedly Bach's organist colleagues, those 'connoisseurs' of the title page, who could use the challenging and sometimes eccentric offerings for their professional practice and delight. Written for his own guild, then, rather than a broader public.

In fact, there may have been a particular faction of colleagues that Bach had in mind when assembling the volume. In 1737, the

writer and composer Johann Adolf Scheibe (another of Bach's former students) famously published an acerbic critique of the composer, and it is likely that Bach considered his *Clavier-Übung III* a musical rejoinder to this attack. Mizler's review of the collection notes specifically that 'this work is a powerful refutation of those who have made bold to criticize the composition of the Honourable Court Composer.' Scheibe had reprimanded Bach primarily for writing in an antiquated, bombastic style that eschewed the current taste for pleasant, natural, singable music. If Bach was indeed responding to such charges, he certainly did not do so by changing course. Instead, the 1739 volume represents a defiant and highly artful retreat to the traditional art of counterpoint, driven to the very limits of its possibilities. Instead of flowing melodies and balanced phrasing, Bach here showcases arcane, unfamiliar and wilfully awkward musical procedures. Even where he does explore selected features of more fashionable styles – easily demonstrating his mastery of them all –, these tend to be treated in complex or puzzling ways. Across the whole collection, this generates a kind of expressive intensity audibly at odds with the emerging *galant* ideals advocated by Scheibe.

In the chorale-based pieces, the underlying hymn tunes provide some helpful structural



Facsimile from the first edition of *Praeludium pro Organo pleno*, BWV 552/1

signposts and extra-musical associations to aid the listening comprehension (particularly for Bach's eighteenth-century contemporaries who would have known the tunes inside out). Yet overall the pieces have come down to us extremely open in terms of both sound and meanings. As was typical for the time, the printed score includes very few performance instructions, leaving it to the individual player to shape each number in terms of tempo, registration, articulation and character. The esoteric nature of the collection, meanwhile, has led to sustained efforts in scholarly circles to decode its deeper messages. These interpretations range from the basic claim that the three flats of the opening key signature (E flat) refer to the Trinity, to highly speculative attempts to unearth cabalistic designs or other intricate number symbolism. Most of these theories lack historical evidence; moreover, any hermeneutic schemes encompassing the whole collection are hampered by the fact that Bach significantly expanded his original plan for the volume shortly before publication. Any large-scale symbolic properties would therefore have had to be adjusted quite radically as the project grew.

The framing Prelude and Fugue pair (BWV 552) was in fact one of those afterthoughts. Both pieces are conceived

on a grand scale, and encapsulate the breadth of styles represented in the collection. Opening with the characteristic dotted rhythms and homophonic textures of a French overture, the Prelude is structured according to the *ritornello* principles of the Italian concerto, thereby combining two of the most up-to-date musical idioms. The closing five-voice Fugue, meanwhile, is actually made up of three fugues, each based on its own distinct subject, which are contrapuntally entwined as the piece progresses. By contrast with the Prelude, the first section immediately announces its backward-looking stance through studied *stile antico* counterpoint in the vein of Palestrina. The *alla breve* time signature speeds up in the subsequent two sections to a 6/4 and then a 12/8 metre, creating an effect of gradual intensification. The middle part avoids any use of the pedal, however, making its return in the final section all the more effective. Right before the end, the texture thins out once again to the top two parts alone, setting the stage for a majestic buildup to the final cadence as the other voices re-enter one by one.

The Prelude is followed by a series of *pedaliter* (with pedal) and *manualiter* (manuals only) chorale settings that divide into two groups. The first of these is based around the German *Kyrie* and *Gloria* tunes of the Lutheran liturgy,

and again displays a wide array of styles and approaches. The opening three *Kyrie* settings (**BWV 669-671**), for two manuals and pedal, are kept in traditional contrapuntal style, with the *cantus firmus* moving from the soprano in **BWV 669** to tenor and bass in the following two pieces. They are counterbalanced by three *manualiter* works in less severe guise, with lighter textures and dance-derived characters like the *gigue* in **BWV 674**. Not that the audience is allowed to sit back complacently, though: **BWV 673**, for instance, sports several jarring dissonances and unexpected modulations to keep listeners on their toes. The ensuing *Gloria* settings (**BWV 675-677**) toy with further features of the *galant* manner. **BWV 676** is a graceful chorale trio in which the *cantus firmus* passes smoothly from voice to voice, with docile harmonic progressions and a transparent texture that simply evaporates at the end. **BWV 675** is instead pervaded by decorative triplet figurations; yet here, too, although the motivic gestures are markedly modern, the phrasing fails to follow any predictable patterns, again not granting the audience an entirely relaxed listening experience.

The second group of chorale preludes (**BWV 678-689**) uses the tunes of the six German catechism hymns, each presented

in two versions, a larger one with pedal part and a smaller one without. This alternation of *pedaliter* and *manualiter* works has been interpreted as an analogy to the greater and lesser versions of Luther's catechism, but may also have arisen from more practical considerations, with Bach wishing to provide something suitable for organists without access to a large instrument with pedals. The diversity and intricacy of these settings can only be hinted at here. Among the more extreme contrapuntal exploits in the *pedaliter* numbers we find **BWV 678**, which elaborates its hymn tune expounding the ten commandments by placing it in strict canon on a separate manual; the same device appears in **BWV 682**, a setting of the Lord's Prayer that forms one of the most unworldly items in the collection. Its imitative trio texture, with persistent dotted 'Lombard' rhythms, spins a web of filigree around the two ponderous *cantus firmus* voices. The contrapuntal tour de force of **BWV 686**, meanwhile, is both legendary and unique in Bach's output: in six-part counterpoint with two parts in each hand and two in the feet, the piece enacts the independence of contrapuntal lines by dividing them between the performer's limbs. It thereby seems to epitomise the physical act of organ playing through the most cerebrally rationalised music; although the resulting textural density, dissonant



Stephen Farr at the Metzler organ of Trinity College, Cambridge

collisions and sheer level of noise can easily end up overwhelming the listener's rational faculties.

The *manualiter* counterparts to these works offer some more easily digestible fare. In **BWV 679**, the second of the ten commandment settings, Bach uses the repeated Gs of the hymn opening to create a bouncy *fughetta* theme in 12/8; by the end, this insistence on a single note is cleverly turned into a pedal-point in the bass to lead up to the final cadence. **BWV 683**, meanwhile, offers a glimpse of the kind of unpretentious three-part prelude common in the earlier *Orgelbüchlein*. But again, the composer frequently leads his listeners over stumbling blocks and through unexpected thickets along the way. In **BWV 680**, the smaller version of the German Creed, the *fughetta* subject opens with a chain of syncopations that undermines a sense of metric grounding right from the start; clarification only arrives properly with the first cadence in the bass part, which also initially enters on an offbeat. As the work progresses, the slightly pedantic repetitions of this bass motive guide the listener systematically around all the keys associated with the piece's tonic D minor. In **BWV 687**, it is instead the dissonant first entry of the *cantus firmus* in the

soprano that disrupts the proceedings. Bach creates a different challenge for the performer in **BWV 688**, whose angular theme appears to have been conceived specifically for organists to practice their leaps in both hands. After the *cantus firmus* has already come to an end, the other voices eventually leap themselves to exhaustion in a rhythmically and harmonically skewed postlude.

Finally, the most peculiar group of pieces in *Clavier-Übung III* is undoubtedly the four duets that precede the concluding fugue. Most likely also a late addition to the volume, their purpose has seemed so mysterious to scholars that some have posited they were included by mistake. More likely Bach thought of them as an apt didactic supplement to a collection intended as a keyboard 'exercise' (*Übung*). Similar in layout to the two-part keyboard inventions, these pieces offer instruction in correct contrapuntal writing for two voices, presented in four contrasting styles, keys and affects. And while some of their themes may come across as light-hearted and even witty, they still refuse to fit the category of easy listening, completing Bach's musical refutation of contemporary *galant* ideals. **BWV 802** is intensely chromatic, reminiscent of the E-minor Fugue in the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*,

and offers a compact training course in playing scales in two hands simultaneously. The long, meandering subject of **BWV 805** similarly gets off to a chromatically charged start, inspiring some bizarre upward harmonic progressions later on. But the strangest of the group is undoubtedly **BWV 803**, a pleasant, carefree duet in F major that turns sour unexpectedly. Its middle section presents a dark and chromatically distorted mirror image of the subject, treated in uncomfortably close imitation. When the bright opening part is played *da capo*, it no longer sounds quite so innocent; suspecting that the piece might go off the rails again at any point, the listener will be glad to arrive at the final cadence safe and sound.

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Bettina Varwig is a Senior Lecturer in Music at King's College, London.



Stephen Farr



The Metzler organ of Trinity College, Cambridge (1975) containing pipework retained from earlier instruments installed by Father Smith in 1694 (Rückpositiv) and 1708 (Hauptwerk).

Hauptwerk		Schwellwerk	
1. Principal *	16	23. Viola	8
2. Octave *	8	24. Suavial	8
3. Hohlflöte 8	8	25. Rohrflöte	8
4. Octave *	4	26. Principal	4
5. Spitzflöte	4	27. Gedacktflöte	4
6. Quinte *	2 2/3	28. Nasard	2 2/3
7. Superoctave *	2	29. Doublette	2
8. Sesquialter	III	30. Terz	1 3/5
9. Cornett	IV	31. Mixtur	IV
10. Mixtur	IV-V	32. Fagott	16
11. Trompete	8	33. Trompete	8
12. Vox Humana	8	Tremulant	
Rückpositiv		Pedal	
13. Principal *	8	34. Principal *	16
14. Gedackt	8	35. Subbass	16
15. Octave	4	36. Octavbass	8
16. Rohrflöte	4	37. Bourdon	8
17. Octave	2	38. Octave	4
18. Gemshorn	2	39. Mixtur	V
19. Larigot	1 1/3	40. Posaune	16
20. Sesquialter	II	41. Trompete	8
21. Scharf	III	42. Trompete	4
22. Dulcian	8		
Tremulant			

Couplers: R-H S-H H-P R-P S-P

* Father Smith ranks

Registrations used in this recording

DISC ONE

1. BWV 552/1

man: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 13, 15, 18, 25, 26, 28-31,
33 & R-H

ped: 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39 & H-P
echoes played on SW

2. BWV 669

accpt: 14 & 16

cantus firmus: 3, 5 & 9

ped: 23, 25, 27, 34, 35, 37 & S-P

3. BWV 670

accpt: 2 & 3

cantus firmus: 14 & 22

ped: 26, 34-37 & S-P

4. BWV 671

man: 1-4, 6-8, 10, 11, 13, 15, 17, 32, 33 & R-H

ped: 34-42, R-P & S-P

5. BWV 672

man: 3

6. BWV 673

man: 25 & 27

7. BWV 674

man: 14

8. BWV 675

man: 14, 16 & 18

9. BWV 676

man: 2 & 15 (played down 8ve)

ped: 34-37

10. BWV 677

man: 13, 15, 17 & 21

11. BWV 678

accpt: 14

cantus firmus: 3, 25, 27, 28, 33 & S-H

ped: 34, 35, 37

12. BWV 679

man: 2, 3, 5, 11 & 12

13. BWV 680

man: 1-4, 6, 7, 10, 13-15, 17, 20 & R-H

ped: 34-41 & H-P

14. BWV 681

man: 2-6, 14, 16, 18, 22 & R-H

15. BWV 682

right hand: 23, 25 & 27

left hand: 5 (played down 8ve)

ped: 35 & 37

16. BWV 683

man: 25, 26, 28 & 29

DISC TWO

1. BWV 684

right hand: 13 & 16

left hand 1-3, 5, 6, 26, 29, 32, 33 & S-H

ped: 36, 38 & 42

2. BWV 685

man: 16

3. BWV 686

man: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 13, 32, 33 & R-H

ped: 34, 36, 38, 40, 41 & S-P

4. BWV 687

man: 1, 3, 23, 25 & S-H

5. BWV 688

right hand: 14 & 16

left hand: 2, 3, 5 & 12

ped: 26, 33, 36, 37 & S-P

6. BWV 689

man: 25

7. BWV 802

man: 14, 16, 18 & 19

8. BWV 803

man: 5

9. BWV 804

man: 13

10. BWV 805

man: 2-4, 6, 7 & 10

11. BWV 552/2

opening section:

man: 1, 2, 4, 6, 7, 10, 13, 15 & R-H

ped: 34-41 & H-P

central section: + 17 (played on RP)

final section: + 8, 11 & 42 (played on HW)

Stephen Farr

Stephen Farr pursues a varied career as a soloist and continuo player, activities which he combines with the post of Director of Music at St Paul's Church, Knightsbridge. He was Organ Scholar of Clare College, Cambridge, graduating with a double first in Music and an MPhil in musicology. He then held appointments at Christ Church, Oxford, and at Winchester and Guildford Cathedrals.

A former student of David Sanger and a prizewinner at international competition level, he has an established reputation as one of the leading recitalists of his generation, and has appeared in the UK in venues including the Royal Albert Hall (where he gave the premiere of Judith Bingham's *The Everlasting Crown* in the BBC Proms 2011); Bridgewater Hall; Symphony Hall, Birmingham; Westminster Cathedral; King's College, Cambridge, St Paul's Celebrity Series and Westminster Abbey: he also appears frequently on BBC Radio 3 as both performer and presenter.

He has performed widely in both North and South America (most recently as guest soloist and director at the Cartagena International Music Festival), in Australia, and throughout Europe.

He has a particular commitment to contemporary music, and has been involved in premieres of works by composers including Patrick Gowers, Francis Pott and Robert Saxton; he also collaborated with Thomas Adès in a recording of *Under Hamelin Hill*, part of an extensive and wide-ranging discography.

His concerto work has included engagements with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, Ulster Orchestra and the London Mozart Players; he made his debut in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw in 2005. He has also worked with many other leading ensembles including the Berlin Philharmonic (with whom he appeared in the premiere of Jonathan Harvey's *Weltethos* under Sir Simon Rattle in October 2011), Florilegium, the Bach Choir, Holst Singers, BBC Singers, Polyphony, The English Concert, London Baroque Soloists, City of London Sinfonia, City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, Wallace Collection, Endymion Ensemble, the Philharmonia, Academy of Ancient Music, Britten Sinfonia and Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment.

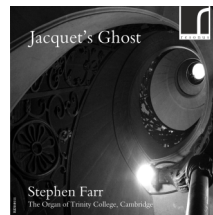
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Fanfare Magazine

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info@resonusclassics.com

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Johann Sebastian Bach.