

On Teaching

by Gavin Black



Sonata in G Major, George Frideric Handel (1685–1759)
Thirty-two variations on "La Capricciosa,"
 Dieterich Buxtehude (c.1637–1707)

Double-manual harpsichord in the German style, Keith Hill, 1978

The first thing to notice about this program is the last thing listed, that is, the instrument. In planning performances that season, I wanted to use this particular harpsichord. It happens to be my own first harpsichord, acquired in June 1978. I hadn't used it for recitals since about the late 1990s, and I wanted to renew my own awareness of its possibilities. Also, it is a magnificent-sounding instrument, and I felt that audiences would get a lot out of hearing it—and that it had been too long.

In this case, the instrument then determined at least some of the boundaries of the programming choices. Especially since I was in part showcasing the instrument, I wanted all the repertoire to fit the style of the sound closely. It is probably true that any harpsichord piece from the earliest beginnings in the fifteenth century through Haydn could be played on this harpsichord and sound good. However, Germanic music from the mid-to-late-seventeenth century through roughly the end of the time of Bach is the music that fits it the very best.

The pieces that I started with in planning the specifics of the program were those by Kuhnau and Buxtehude. These are both fairly long works, and each is of great intensity: similar in artistic stature, and indeed in mood and style, to the great late works of Beethoven. Both are pieces that I have been playing for a long time, but have not included in recitals for a decade or so. Each of them is also a piece after which it is difficult—for a while—to focus on listening to anything else. (This is in a sense a *goal* rather than a fact, since in order for it to apply, the pieces must, of course, be played effectively.) This is the beauty of the intermission: it allows two such pieces to be included in a program without compromising the audience's ability to listen to the rest of what is on offer.

I chose to put the Buxtehude at the very end and the Kuhnau at the end of the first half for two reasons: first, the Buxtehude is longer; second, the particular kind of intensity that is projected by the Kuhnau is—as the subject matter suggests—somewhat “down” in mood. The Kuhnau certainly *could* be an ending piece, but the Buxtehude seemed like a more exhilarating one.

To be honest, the specific reason that I decided to open the program with this

Recitals—Examples

Last month I laid out some ideas about recital planning, especially how teachers can help students think about recital planning. This month, in a column with a somewhat unusual and more personal format, I will give two examples of programs of my own from the last several years—one harpsichord and one organ—and discuss some of the thinking behind the programming choices in each one. Along the way I will add a few more general ideas to the discussion as well. Nothing that I write here is meant to serve as an exact template, of course, for what anyone else—student or experienced performer—will or should do. But I hope that it will be interesting as a set of examples to think about.

The first program that I want to look at is a harpsichord recital that I gave in the exact same form about a dozen times during the 2011–2012 season:

Tocatta in D Minor, BWV 913, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Suite in E Minor, Johann Jacob Froberger (1616–1667): *Allemande–Gigue–Courante–Sarabande*

Biblical Sonata No. 6—“The Death and Burial of Jacob,” Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722):

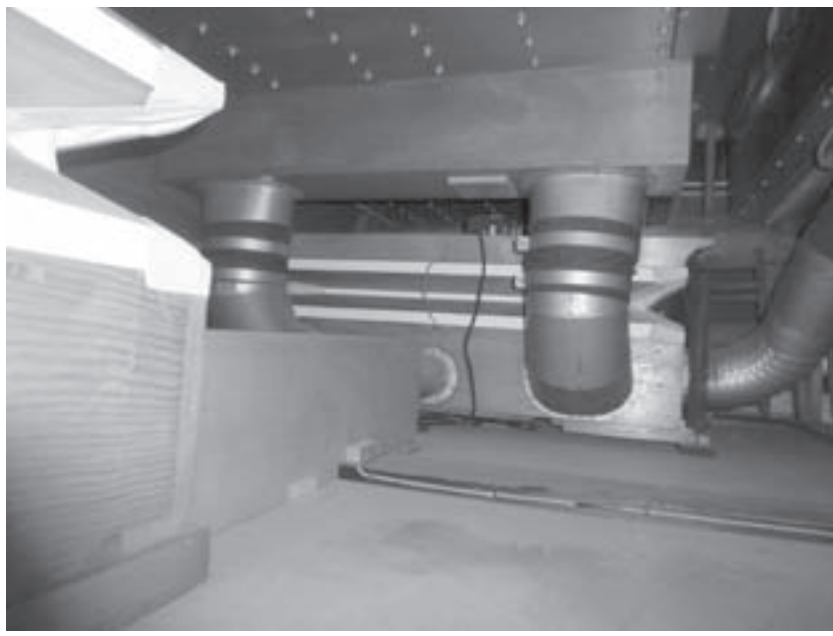
I. *The sadness of the sons of Jacob, assisting at the bed of their dying father, relieved a little bit by the paternal benediction*

II. *Thinking about the consequences of this death*

III. *The voyage from Egypt to the land of Canaan*

IV. *The burial of Israel, and the bitter lament of those assembled*

V. *The consoled spirits of the survivors*



Wind regulator

of prisoners was built using DC power, Westinghouse and AC power gained traction in the public eye. If DC could kill people, we don't want it in our houses. It was political. Today, when we hear of a construction worker getting electrocuted, it's proven to us that AC power can kill, too. Michael was lucky.

Pipe organ wind

When I talk about pipe organ wind, I keep mentioning reservoirs and regulators. Don't I really mean bellows? Like the short circuit, and the circuit breaker, I suggest we use the name that best describes what the thing is actually doing. A bellows produces a flow of air. A blacksmith uses a bellows to blow on the fire in his forge just as we use a bellows at our living room fireplace.

A reservoir is a storage device. A rooftop water tower is a reservoir. In modern pipe organs, the bellows have been replaced with electric blowers, so what we might call a bellows under the windchest of the organ is actually a reservoir. But the reservoir also regulates the wind pressure. We use weights or spring tension to create the pressure. The more weight or the heavier the springs, the higher the pressure. But in order to create pressure, we also have to limit how far the thing can open—that's another function of the curtain valve. The organbuilder sets it so the valve is closed when the reservoir is open far enough. Otherwise it would inflate until it bursts, which is the air pressure equivalent of a short circuit. So the balancing of weights, springs, and limit of travel determines the wind pressure. And, the curtain valve I mentioned earlier opens to allow more air in as you consume air by playing. So I think the most accurate term to describe that unit is “regulator.” Reservoir is correct, but incomplete. The rooftop water tank is also a regulator, though the regulation of pressure happens automatically as a function of physics—remember that hydrostatic pressure. *Hydro* means water, *static* means “lacking in movement.” You get pressure regulation without doing anything!

Stop and think about it

Many of the common names for organ stops are descriptive, even definitive. “Prestant” comes from the Latin, *pre-stare*, which means “to stand before.” So a Prestant, by definition, is an organ stop that stands in the façade. Many organs have misnamed Prestants. A Chimney Flute is a capped pipe (usually metal) that has a little chimney sticking up from the cap. The purpose of the chimney is to emphasize the third overtone ($2\frac{2}{3}'$ pitch). That's why a Chimney Flute is brighter than a Gedeckt.

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I don't need to say much about Clarinets, Oboes, Trumpets, or Flutes. But a Harmonic Flute is special because the pipes are twice as long as Principal pipes, and the characteristic hole half-way up the resonator breaks the internal sound wave in half, so the double length produces normal pitch, but with a much richer harmonic structure.

Diapason is a mysterious word, until you look it up. I found two good applicable definitions: “a rich, full outpouring of sound,” and “a fixed standard of pitch.” Go to <www.diapason-italia.com> and you find an Italian manufacturer of high-quality audio speakers—“a rich, full outpouring of sound.”

Quint = fifth. A $2\frac{2}{3}'$ Quint speaks the second overtone above fundamental pitch—one octave plus a fifth. A Quintadena emphasizes that overtone—that's why it's brighter than a Bourdon.

Tierce = third. A $1\frac{1}{3}'$ Tierce speaks the fourth overtone—two octaves plus a third.

A Resultant is a tricky one. Turns out that if you play $16'$ and $10\frac{2}{3}'$ pitch together, your mind's ear is tricked into thinking that you're hearing $32'$ pitch, because $16'$ and $10\frac{2}{3}'$ are the first two overtones of $32'$. The result is that you imagine you're hearing a $32'$ stop. Hah! Fooled you!

By the way, why does blowing on a fire make the fire bigger? Simple. Fire uses oxygen as fuel. Throwing a blanket over a fire cuts off the oxygen supply, as does the acolyte's candle-snuffer. Blow air on a fire and you increase the oxygen supply. Poof! S'mores, anyone? ■

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particular Bach toccata was that I like the very opening—the first few measures of the piece, a one-voice cello or gamba-like flourish—as the beginning of a concert. It grabs the attention well and exposes the sound of the instrument in a lucid and appealing way. Of course, this would not be enough if the rest of the piece were not also suitable. It is quite a charismatic piece, though not as tightly constructed as some (later) Bach pieces. Its multi-sectional toccata form was old-fashioned at the time when it was written, and therefore it actually fits especially well with a program based mostly on older German music. This older music is, of course, the music that Bach studied in his youth.

The Froberger E-minor suite is a piece with a lot of out-and-out beauty to it, especially on a really beautiful-sounding harpsichord, and probably most of all in the outer (slow) movements. Like a lot of Froberger it is harmonically driven, and the lush harmonies of the outer movements are quite seductive on the harpsichord. Since three of the other four pieces on the program (Bach, Kuhnau, Buxtehude) are one-movement sectional works (that is, works in which the sections clearly lead into one another and form one whole rather than separate movements), I wanted to include a piece that is in several separate movements. (The difference is of course essentially one of emphasis. The separate movements of the Froberger fit one another well, and the piece works as a bigger unit, but the movements could be played individually without seeming like fragments. This is not true, or less true, of the individual variations or sections of the other three works.) This is not just for variety on paper. It is because the demands made on listeners by a work in several movements are different—and less challenging—than the demands made by a long work in indissoluble sections. So in effect this piece is, while just as beautiful and as moving as the rest, rather relaxing to experience in this context.

The same goal—a bit of relaxation—was present in the choice of the Handel piece to start the second half. More specifically, it serves to bring the audience out of the intermission in a friendly way and let them settle down to the long and (one hopes) intense experience of the Buxtehude. The Handel is a through-composed one-movement piece: fairly short, quite exuberant, very much harmonically driven in a more-or-less Vivaldian manner. It is “officially” a two-manual piece, in that it has manual-change indications from the composer himself. (This, by the way, gives a bit of an opening for discussion, in program notes or informally with audience members after the concert, of the whole business of different manuals—why we do or don’t make changes within a piece, and who decides.)

For the first few times that I played this program, I added an encore—a piece in the spirit of the rest of the program, but adding something a bit different: in a couple of cases a rather meditative Froberger *Fantasia*, and in

a couple of other instances a Handel *Allemande*. However, I got feedback from several audience members that—in keeping, in fact, with what I wrote above—they actually did not want to hear anything after the Buxtehude. They wanted to remain in the mood of that piece for as long as they could. I decided to omit the encore after a certain number of performances.

There is one point that I have not mentioned yet in regard to recital programming: the role of key relationships in the process of choosing pieces. In fact, my honest thought about this is that it does not really make any difference. The main reason that it does not is the phenomenon of applause. When a piece ends—usually, if we are talking about pieces that are in a key at all, with some sort of cadence—the dying out of the sound is followed by unmusical, and specifically non-tonal, noise. (I don’t mean that to be disparaging. I think that the role of applause is a positive one, defining the space between pieces, allowing audience members to express feelings and regroup between pieces, creating a bond between audience and player.) I believe that there are very few listeners indeed, even among experienced concert-goers or trained musicians, who can then vividly experience the tonal opening of the next piece as being either particularly satisfying or particularly jarring. Some people can *tell* what that relationship is, many people cannot. But I doubt that even those who can tell are spontaneously affected by it, as they would be by a key relationship between movements or sections of an uninterrupted piece.

The second program of mine that I want to discuss is an organ recital from the summer of 2004. I chose it because the relationship between the programming and the instrument was different from the first example, and because there were also different considerations about the prospective audience. It went as follows:

Praeludium in F Major, BuxWV 156, Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707)
Inno della Domenica, Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–1643)
Canzona Quarta in F Major, Frescobaldi
Magnificat Primi Toni, Frescobaldi
Fugue in C Major, Buxtehude
Psalmus: Warum betrubst du dich mein Herz? (chorale with twelve variations), Samuel Scheidt (1587–1654)

Intermission

Partita: Was Gott tut das ist wohlgetan, Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706)
O Lamm Gottes unschuldig, J. S. Bach (1685–1750)
Prelude and Fugue in E Minor, BWV 548, Bach

The organ was a late-twentieth-century American (electro-pneumatic) instrument, eclectic in design, but with a bit of a Baroque “accent,” so to speak—fairly low wind pressure, stop names that could by and large have been found on an eighteenth-century German or French instrument, and mostly rather clear and crisp voicing. When they invited me to play this concert, the

church in question had known of me as someone who specialized, as a recitalist, in Baroque music. They wanted me to exploit the Baroque side of the instrument, and in doing so to show off a reasonable amount of variety. They expected that most of the people coming to the event would be enthusiastic organ-music listeners, but not necessarily themselves focused, as listeners, on the Baroque. The program, even if its composers’ dates all fell within no more than a century and a half, would have to seem not narrow.

The imperative to achieve variety of sound-color in a program tends to lead to playing pieces that have many sections or movements, or a fairly large number of short pieces. This is what suggested the Frescobaldi set, the Scheidt, and the Pachelbel to me. These three parts of the program provided nearly thirty different segments, each of which could be (should be?) played on a different sound. Furthermore, the Scheidt and to an extent the Pachelbel can be flexibly played with more or less pedal. Any flexibility of this sort increases the ability of the performer to exploit different sounds, and is particularly useful in coming to a new instrument. As best I remember, I ended up using double-pedal in the last movement of the Scheidt, pedal for the chorale melody in the bass in one or more movements, and in the tenor voice in one, pedal for an “ordinary” bass line in a movement or two, and also played several movements without pedal. In the Pachelbel, in one movement in which the chorale in the tenor could in theory be soloed out on the pedal, I didn’t do so, finding instead a manuals-only sound (one manual) that brought out the tenor range nicely and separated all three voices from one another in such a way that a listener might have thought that it was indeed a trio registration. (I should say that these are pieces that I know very well indeed, and they are not, just at the “note learning” level, extremely hard. In pieces above a certain threshold of difficulty I would not dare to show up at a recital venue uncertain of which notes I would play in the pedal and which in the manuals.)

I wanted to find fairly imposing pieces with which to open and close the program, partly just for the excitement generated by great pieces that sustain their greatness over a long period of time, and partly to counterbalance the set of short or sectional pieces that made up most of the rest of the program. The Buxtehude F-major is—like the Bach harpsichord toccata discussed above—a piece that begins with a flourish, and that makes an effective start to a listening experience. It is also just a great piece: complex, sectional (but in a way that, through various motivic and other compositional devices, adds up to a coherent whole), dramatic.

The Bach E-minor Prelude and Fugue BWV 548—the one sometimes called “The Wedge”—is of course one of the long and imposing Bach pieces. I have less of a sense with this piece than I do with the Kuhnau and Buxtehude pieces discussed above that a listener

would necessarily find it impossible to focus on something else after hearing it, but I think that it is more natural not to do so. This work increases the overall level of variety in the program in part by not being sectional. Each of the two long movements is quite unified, with the balance between unity and change being addressed in part by rondo or *da capo* devices: something not seen elsewhere on this program. I did not change sounds within each half (I did between the prelude and the fugue), so, after three-quarters of a concert in which the audience only heard any given registration for a minute or so, this piece provided them with a chance to settle in to listening to each of the two sounds for much longer: increased overall variety provided by an experience of less variety.

The two works that I have not mentioned yet—the short Buxtehude fugue and the Bach *O Lamm Gottes*—serve in part a function similar to that of the Handel in the harpsichord program. They are not bringing the audience back from intermission, but by being shorter and less imposing—not less interesting or beautiful—they provide a moment of relaxation before the challenge to the focus and attention span represented by the longer works that follow. Also, in particular, I thought that it would be good to have an additional piece specifically by each of the composers who were otherwise represented only by long imposing works.

All of the pieces on this program are “comfort food” for me: they are pieces that I know inside and out, that I have played for years—decades, really—and that I come as close as I do with any music to being able to play standing on my head. This is true even of the Bach E-minor. It is often listed as one of the most difficult Bach organ pieces, but I happen to have learned it extremely thoroughly, and I find it easier to execute than I do many simpler pieces that I have practiced and learned but not delved into as deeply as I have that one. (That is not to say, just for the record, that I never lose focus for a second or two and make a wrong note in this piece, as I might in any piece. Also, I am by no means a specialist in blockbuster virtuoso pieces: I just happen to have a very good relationship with that one.) I think that it is not a bad idea to emphasize music with which you have this kind of relationship in going to a new instrument. It is also not a bad idea to get as much practice time on a new instrument as you can, but of course schedules being what they are, this is not always as much as it should be. ■

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