

staircase to the tiny balcony. But as we unloaded the container on the sidewalk of Euclid Avenue (the organ had been shipped from the Netherlands directly to the port of Cleveland through the St. Lawrence Seaway—the name of the ship was *Kalliope*) I realized I was carrying a box of pipes marked *Celeste*. A bundle of Swell shutters followed. Humpf! I didn't know Flentrop built Swell boxes?

What I know now is that what's important to us is good organs. Simple. I love good organs of any description. And there are just as many bad, even decadent tracker organs as there are bad electro-pneumatic or electric-action organs. The Renaissance Revival that has been so celebrated and ballyhooed certainly was cause for the destruction or displacement of many wonderful electro-pneumatic organs. My hometown of Winchester, Massachusetts has two churches in which organs by Skinner and Aeolian-Skinner were replaced with organs by Fisk. The Skinner was a very early organ (Opus 128, 1905!). My father was rector of the church, so I had easy access to it for practicing when I first took organ lessons, but I quickly moved to the neighboring First Congregational Church (where my teacher John Skelton was organist), whose Fisk organ was installed in 1972.

I didn't know much about Skinner organs then, and I celebrated its replacement by Fisk in 1974. I don't think that particular Skinner was a very good instrument—but I'd sure love to get a look at it today to see what Mr. Skinner was up to in 1905.

§

The 1995 movie *Apollo 13* (Tom Hanks, Kevin Bacon, et al.) was a gripping telling of the nearly disastrous explosion on that mission to the moon, launched in April 1970. Two days after the launch, an oxygen tank explodes and astronauts and NASA officials scramble to devise a way to abort the mission safely. In the chaos of the first moments of the emergency, NASA flight director Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris) holds up his hand, calls for silence, and asks, "What have we got on this spacecraft that's good?"

My thanks to Ms. Levitz for noticing the organ world lurking on that lawn in Washington, and for giving her considerable energy and talent to creating the story. But she told only half the story. The rest is up to us. And we're at a great moment to do it, to tell it, to live it.

We are an energetic group of devotees to a high expression of the arts and humanities. The pipe organ stands for so much that's good about the human condition. For centuries it was among the most complex of all human contrivances, for centuries it was the source of some of the loudest sounds anyone heard. Today, too many people see the organ as the realm of dead white men. That's not the fault of the organ, it's the fault, the oversight, the result of its professional practitioners getting wrapped up in scholarship—the understanding of this special niche, its complex history, the relationships between the instruments' builders and the artists who created and played the music.

Too often we present programs to the public based on our interest and devotion to obscure styles and periods of composition. This afternoon I was talking with a colleague on the lawn outside her church building. We talked about the levels of public interest in the music of the pipe organ. I said something like, "You don't attract Joe Public into a church to hear an all-Buxtehude recital." She said, "I love Buxtehude." I said, "So do I (and I do!), but if we don't give them something else, something that excites and inspires them, something they can sing to themselves in the car on the way home from the recital, they're not going to come back." And for decades now, they haven't been coming back.

I celebrate the long list of young performers who are lighting new fires under the pews—those players whose impeccable musicianship comes first, who understand the art of performing, which is different from the art of playing, whose sense of programming inspires the

simple and necessary act of attendance, and whose public carriage brings dignity and respect to a profession that has for so long been marked by flamboyant but shallow behavior and performance.

The organ world need not be the worst world in the world. It's a world full of brilliant young talent. It's a world full of talented organbuilders. It's a world full of exciting new instruments. And it's our responsibility to project the best of all of it to the public, especially those who are still unaware of the delights and majesty of the pipe organ.

That revival, that renaissance has given us dozens of organbuilding firms who produce some of the best instruments ever made—both mechanical and electric actions. Compare an instrument built by Paul Fritts with one by Schoenstein. Compare an instrument built by C. B. Fisk with one by Quimby. Compare an instrument by Dobson with one by Nichols & Simpson. What's not to like? Ours is a small world with space for everyone.

I'm not suggesting we abandon Buxtehude, Scheidt, Scheidemann, de Grigny, and the countless masters whose efforts have collected to form what we know as the world of the pipe organ. I'm not suggesting we shouldn't celebrate the heritage of the organ. I am suggesting that a public that's offered myriad opportunities for entertainment and enrichment ranging from professional sports to video games, to symphony concerts, and to organ recitals, is going to choose an option that's exciting, stimulating, enriching, and at some level, just plain fun. You or I might think it's fun to rattle through a half-dozen Buxtehude Preludes and Fugues, but would your next-door neighbor agree? ■

On Teaching by Gavin Black



Continuo, part I

The musical practice known as *continuo playing* was an integral part of ensemble music from about 1600 until about 1750—the dates that we assign to the "Baroque Period." Indeed, it makes a lot of sense to define the Baroque specifically as the era in music history when continuo playing was the norm. During that period, almost every work of music that was not a solo keyboard or lute piece included a continuo part. (Exceptions, such as pieces for unaccompanied violin, or lute songs, probably amount to no more than five percent or so of the repertoire.) This includes sonatas, trio sonatas, works for larger instrumental ensembles, songs, cantatas, Masses, operas, and oratorios—arias, choruses, recitative, and so on. The practice of writing continuo parts certainly persisted into the second half of the eighteenth century—the "Classical" era—but became less common, less mainstream, less central to

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what was going on in the world of musical performance. Continuo died out early in the nineteenth century. (Mendelssohn, however, still included continuo parts in some of his sacred music in the 1830s.)

What is continuo?

This month's column will begin to answer that question, or, really, to address it in ways that I hope will be helpful to students. (Of course if any of us as organ teachers have students who have already studied continuo fairly deeply or who have specialized in it, then those students will already know or understand more than I am going to write about here. So this is, at least directly, for everyone else.) Next month I will outline in a fairly basic form my own approach to teaching the nitty-gritty practical side of creating and performing continuo parts at the keyboard, starting with how to read the notation, and I will discuss how to deal with the artistic choices that creating such a part entails.

I actually have a memory—a distant memory by now—of my own first encounters with the word “continuo.” These happened at a number of chamber music concerts on the Yale campus that I heard in the late 1960s, as a youngster just getting interested in music. There were pieces described as “Sonata for violin and continuo” or “Trio Sonata for violin, oboe, and b.c.” or other such phrases. (The word “continuo” and the expression “b.c.” are both abbreviations for *basso continuo*.) I noticed that some of these pieces turned out to have the wrong number of players, that is, a trio sonata might have four people playing. I still remember a sort of “Twilight Zone” feeling that I got looking at descriptions in the programs that seemed not to be written in any normal language that I could discern and that seemed not to correspond to what I was seeing on the stage. I vaguely remember asking someone (my father?) what it all meant and his not knowing either. I believe that we considered the possibility that it might be some sort of misprint.

I still get the very basic question—“What does ‘continuo’ mean?”—both from audience members at concerts and from (new) students. The basic answer is this: a continuo part is a line of music, mostly in the range of the bass clef, that forms the lowest part of the texture of a piece, that is meant to be played by one or more instruments in unison, and that is meant to be supplemented by notes not written by the composer: chords or bits of melody supplied by one or more of the performers. The choice of instrument or instruments is not, except in rare cases, specified by the composer. The performer's process of deciding what “notes not written by the composer” to add is called “realizing” the continuo part. In the Baroque period this was almost always done by actual improvisation. Nowadays it is done either by improvisation or by planning and writing a part in advance.

Elements of improvisation

Part of this picture is that Baroque composers—from the most iconic such as Bach or Handel through thousands

Third movement of Handel's flute sonata, op. 1, no. 1, as published in London in 1732 by John Walsh



of others whom most of us have never heard of—expected the actual notes of their pieces to be different from one performance to another, with part of the note picture composed not by the “composer” but by any given performer. This often blows people's minds: we associate the notion of a performer writing part of the music with certain kinds of twentieth-century experimental art—participatory or aleatory music. The music of the Baroque often seems to embody an opposite principle, one of rigorous form, often expressed through complex counterpoint.

Sometimes the simple act of becoming aware of the nature of continuo accompaniment can reset a student's sense of what Baroque music is all about, away from structure and control towards spontaneity and change, and, in a sense, away from the composer towards the performer. Of course, it is also true that a lot of Baroque keyboard and lute repertoire was improvised from scratch. In fact, we assume that something close to all of the keyboard playing that took place in the Baroque era was improvisation. However, in a funny way, improvised repertoire suggests a less radical departure from composer control than continuo accompaniment does, in that with improvised repertoire the performer is the composer.

Of course with continuo accompaniment, the additions to the music put in place by the performer exist within certain well-defined bounds—and we'll come back to that below. However, it is clear from comparing all of the recordings of just about any piece of Baroque music that the differences between one player's version of the keyboard continuo part and another's can make a huge difference in the overall effect of a piece. And, again, this is something to which composers routinely ceded control.

The key to accompaniment

So why did composers give up control over a crucial aspect of their pieces—consistently and over a period of more than 150 years? I believe that the answer lies in the nature of accompaniment and in the nature of the instruments used for accompaniment during those years. There is a lot to say about accompaniment, whether of the continuo variety or of the obbligato variety, as represented by such things as Schubert song accompaniments. Great accompaniment requires all sorts of subtleties and sensitivities.

However, one thing is absolutely fundamental, without which accompaniment runs the risk of being not just artistically sub-par but really grotesque: *the ability to vary dynamics in a way that tracks what the other instruments or voices are doing*. Without this basic ability an accompanist constantly runs the risk either of drowning out the other instruments or voices or of failing to support them adequately. If the keyboard instrument is one on which dynamic variation is inherently possible, say, the piano, then a composer can write accompaniments in which the note picture is fixed once and for all, that is, written by the composer as part of writing the piece. If, however, the accompanying instrument is, like the harpsichord or the Baroque organ, not capable of inherent dynamic flexibility, then it is important that the performer be allowed to change the number of notes being played at any one time in order to change the effective dynamics. A Schubert song piano part played as written on a harpsichord would be an almost pathetically ineffective accompaniment. It would fail to support a singer with a robust or just plain loud voice, it would drown out or at any rate compete too much with a light or delicate singer, and it would fail to reflect or mirror or complement nuances of dynamics executed by any singer. However, it is possible, in a piece with continuo accompaniment, to make the keyboard part of a whole passage louder or softer by choosing to play a thicker or thinner texture of added notes and chords. It is also possible to place an accent on certain notes or beats while allowing other notes or beats to be unaccented, again by actually playing more notes, a thicker texture, on the accented moments and fewer—or no—notes elsewhere. It is possible in the same way to respond appropriately to crescendo, diminuendo, and other dynamic gestures that singers or other players carry out.

(I should mention that years ago I subscribed, without having really consciously thought about it, to the absurd idea that Baroque composers wrote continuo lines rather than obbligato accompaniments because their composing skills were too rudimentary to concoct complex accompaniments. In this story line, the development of “real” keyboard parts for chamber music and songs in the second half of the eighteenth century was a kind of progress, akin to the scientific progress that—genuinely—characterized that era. The notion that composers who wrote the elaborate, complex counterpoint that was routine in the seventeenth century couldn't have written compositionally successful keyboard parts for their songs and chamber music is indeed absurd. However, I think that some people do fall into the trap of assuming some such thing, as we have a general tendency to believe that the passage of time brings progress. We feel that people of old simply couldn't do a lot of what became normal or easy later on.)

Some confirmation of the notion that the continuo texture really did serve the purpose I have described is found in this: when composers in the Baroque era

wrote song accompaniments intended to be played on an instrument that had dynamic flexibility—namely the lute—they did write obbligato accompaniments. This gives us the lute song repertoire, with all of the notes of the pieces written by the composers.

Continuo instrumentation

The instrumentation of a continuo part is flexible. This is one of the reasons that the part is given the somewhat abstract name that it has. It is not the “organ” part or the “harpsichord” part. It was customary for a continuo part to be played by at least two instruments: a bass melody instrument playing the continuo line itself and a chordal instrument—keyboard or lute—also playing the written continuo line, but adding the extra notes and chords that we have been referring to. It was also common for more instruments to be involved. Typical combinations include cello and harpsichord; cello and organ; bassoon and organ; gamba, organ and lute; cello, double bass, and harpsichord, and so on. This flexible instrumentation is the source of my old confusion about the number of players on stage. A “solo” sonata can have anything from two players to four or, somewhat atypically, five; a “trio” sonata might indeed have only three players, but more usually will have four, often five or more. A continuo group for a large-scale piece—a cantata or oratorio or orchestral piece—can easily have half a dozen or more players.

Regardless of the exact instrumentation—which, again, is almost always at the discretion of the performers—the structure of the part is the same. The line actually written by the composer, the bass line, which is the foundation of the harmony of the piece, is played in unison by all of the instruments participating. Notes that are added by a keyboard player or lutenist are played only by that one instrument. Thus, most of the time it is the bass line itself that, within the texture of the continuo part, is the most prominent, with the added notes always somewhat in the background. (An organist performing a continuo part without the help of a melodic bass instrument should bear this in mind in planning registrations.)

Figured bass

So, if a keyboard player performing a continuo part is supposed to add notes to the texture, how is the choice of those notes to be made? The first answer is that they must be notes that are consistent with the prevailing harmony, and not in conflict with what is going on in the written parts. The player needs to have a way of knowing what that prevailing harmony is. This can be achieved by ear, for players who are skilled at such things, or by studying the score. However, this is also where the figures that are often written under the musical notes of a continuo part come into play. Those figures are in effect a short score of the harmonic picture of the piece. To some extent they indicate what notes the other instruments and voices are actually producing. Beyond that they indicate what other notes are consistent with the harmony implied by the notes being played or sung or by the harmonic logic of the piece. *The system of figures is a system of abbreviations*. As mentioned above, I will go into detail about how to read figures next month. The figures—or more accurately the figures in conjunction with the printed notes—never tell the keyboard continuo player what to play. They tell the player what the range of possibilities is for notes to be played, or, to put it another way, they tell the player by implication what notes are not available to be played. In many pieces the abbreviated nature of the figuring is taken to its logical extreme, that is, there are no figures. This in no way implies that the player is



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not meant to add notes and chords. It is not a situation in which anything different is going on. The player has to rely on other things—the listening and studying mentioned above—to glean the information that figures could have given.

From within the constellation of notes that would be acceptable to play at any given moment, then, how can a player make specific choices? This is both the most difficult part of continuo playing and its artistic/interpretive component. It is actually rare that a keyboard continuo player has to play notes—any notes—for the purpose of providing or filling out the harmony. This is true for two basic reasons. First, in most passages of chamber or vocal music, most of the harmony is provided anyway over the course of a beat or two, amongst all of the instruments or voices. (Clearly the thicker the texture, the closer this will come to being completely true.) Second, there is nothing in the rules or expectations of tonal music that says that every part of the theoretical harmony has to be present at all times.

Instead, choices about exactly what notes to play (to add) at any given point are based on considerations that have nothing to do with completing the harmony as such. These are considerations of texture, volume, accent, rhythm, pulse, shaping of phrases or sections, and, very practically, both *helping* and *not hindering* the other performers. They all stem from the basic fact that adding more notes makes things louder and adding fewer notes or no notes makes things quieter. Thus “thicker chords on accented beats” is a simple but valid guideline, and there are plenty of others. More on this next month. ■

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Music for voices and organ

by James McCray

Christmas music—the anthropology of memory

The helmed Cherubim
The sworded Seraphim
Are seen in glittering ranks with wings
display'd

John Milton (1608–74)
On the Morning of Christ's Nativity

Twentieth-century composer Paul Hindemith wrote that “the reactions music evokes are not feelings, but . . . memories of feelings.” That would certainly seem to be the case in terms of Christmas music. The well-known texts and melodies seem to stir deep emotions from the past. Congregation members are nostalgic as the strains of Christmas carols and hymns pass through their ears on a direct line to their hearts.

Christmas music enjoys a sixty-day renaissance every year, although in the church year it has a true season of only twelve days. In fact, an annual church conflict is that members of the congregation prefer hearing those familiar works for several Sundays in December leading up to Christmas, but church doctrine precludes singing of the birth of Christ prior to Christmas Eve. After all, Advent is about anticipating Christmas, not a celebration of its aftermath—that is reserved for Epiphany, which is a much longer period than the church's season of twelve days of Christmas. In 2012, Epiphany lasts from January 6 to Ash Wednesday on February 22. The last Sunday is Transfiguration Sunday on February 19.

Clearly, by early January our enjoyment of Christmas music has faded into the misty past. Perhaps one amazing aspect of Christmas music is how eager we are to hear it again only a few months later. Musicologists teach us that “a great work is one you can never get used to.” Does that mean that Christmas music is not great music, even though it is un-

deniably a paragon of memory for the Christian world? An interesting debate might be: Could America truly enjoy the season of Christmas without Christmas music? That would be electric for sure!

So, as we head into those exhilarating yet exhausting days leading up to the overwhelming warmth that occurs at the end of many Christmas Eve services when a thankful congregation sings the simple melody of *Silent Night, Holy Night*, we should be happy for our emotional memories that music brings us. No, these kinds of settings are not art music in the intellectual, formal sense, but they are in regard to the human heart.

The ten choral works reviewed this month will bring joy to any Christmas Eve service. So, pull your chair a little closer to the fireplace and sip your egg nog as you ponder these suggestions for your church choir. They are guaranteed to stir memory in your singers! Merry Christmas to each of you.

SSA music

Love Came Down at Christmas, Derek Healey. SSAA and harp or piano, ECS Publishing, No. 7443, \$2.60 (M-).

The Christina Rossetti (1830–1894) text is set in a tranquil 6/8 meter. There are three short verses based on the same musical material. The choral writing is syllabically chordal. There are a few attractive flourishes for the harp, but in

general the music is very easy and almost always in the treble clef.

Shepherds, Keeping Watch by Night, Derek Healey. SSA and organ, Paraclete Press, PPMO 1122, \$1.70 (M-).

This other Healey setting has four verses, with only the last two using a full SSA texture. The music begins in a soprano unison; verse two is in two parts. There is a folk-song character and the Dorset melody is always plainly heard. The accompaniment is rhythmic and busy, often doubling the voices.

On this day, Edmund Jolliffe. SSA and piano, Oxford University Press, W 167, £2.20 (M-).

This is an arrangement of the popular 1582 *Piae cantiones* text *Ideo gloria* (On this day earth shall ring). Both Latin and English texts are used in the setting. The piano part is somewhat soloistic and plays an important and independent role. After opening with bell-like sustained chords, the accompaniment changes to a walking bass line with syncopated right-hand chords above it. The choral music is not difficult, with more chordal material than contrapuntal lines. This diatonic music is very appealing.

SATB settings

On Christmas Night, Bob Chilcott. SATB, upper voices, with organ or

chamber ensemble, Oxford University Press, BC 136, £4.95 (M+).

The eight carols in this collection trace the Christmas story from Adam's fall through the promise of the Christ child; each carol is about four pages in length. The carols are familiar, with the unison upper voices singing on most of them. The optional chamber ensemble is for rental only; it includes flute, oboe, harp, organ, and percussion. The music for this 23-minute work is not difficult, with the choir on two staves and the upper voices on a single line above them. The accompaniment is very tasteful and easy. This is a very attractive work.

The Animals' Christmas, Alice Parker. SATB unaccompanied, ECS Publishing, No. 7563, \$2.30 (M-).

Parker uses a Mary Hitchcock text to tell the *Ubi sunt* story of the animals talking on Christmas as they discuss the birth of a child in the stable. There is an extensive list of animals. The music has some contrapuntal passages, but is a relatively easy carol, and is delightful.

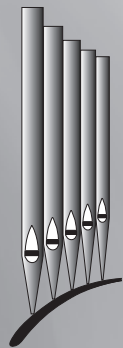
Christ Is Come! Let Earth Adore Him, arr. Austin Lovelace. SATB and organ, Paraclete Press, PPM1147, \$2.20 (E).

Although Lovelace passed away over a year ago, it is good to see so much of his music remaining in print. This setting has the organ part on two staves, and pro-

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