

Text Interpretation and Cyclic Unity in Buxtehude's *Nimm von uns Herr, du treuer Gott*, BuxWV 207

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Buxtehude's chorale variations

The number of chorale variations in Dietrich Buxtehude's organ works is considerably smaller than in the oeuvre of other northern and central German composers like Samuel Scheidt, Georg Böhm, and Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. Among Buxtehude's organ works the chorale variations form a rather small group of six sets:¹

BuxWV 177, *Ach Gott und Herr*, 2 variations

BuxWV 179, *Auf meinen lieben Gott*, 5 variations

BuxWV 181, *Danket dem Herren*, 3 variations

BuxWV 205, *Meine Seele erhebt den Herren*, 2 variations

BuxWV 207, *Nimm von uns Herr, du treuer Gott*, 4 variations

BuxWV 213, *Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren*, 3 variations

An overview of Buxtehude's chorale variations would, however, be incomplete without considering the use of chorale-based variation in other genres. Among his organ works, we find traditional techniques of the chorale variation in his chorale fantasies. Here, each phrase of the melody is treated "separately and in different voices,"² whereas in the chorale partita (or chorale variation) the technique of variation changes with each stanza of the hymn.³ Yet another type of "chorale variation" in Buxtehude's oeuvre is the variation of chorale melodies in his numerous chorale cantatas. The chorale cantatas are based on the texts and melodies of Protestant hymns, in which each movement (or larger section) treats a single stanza employing a different technique.⁴ Buxtehude's chorale cantatas range from rather simple settings like *In dulci jubilo*, BuxWV 52, to complex compositions that transform the traditional melody into an expressive vocal concerto, like *Jesu, meine Freude*, BuxWV 60.⁵

While there is no doubt that Buxtehude's chorale cantatas and chorale fantasies are significant contributions to their respective genres, his chorale variations stand, as far as their reception goes, in the shadow of these more elaborate compositions. Kerala Snyder, in her seminal biography of Buxtehude, gives a rather negative assessment:

Chorale variations play the least important role in Buxtehude's keyboard music. Not only are they few in number, but the style in which most of them are composed is not distinctive. [...] With one significant exception [BuxWV 179] these variation sets do not form convincing cycles, and they appear to have been composed either for *alternatim* performance or for teaching purposes.⁶

Similarly, Kathryn Welter states that Buxtehude's chorale variations have a "non-distinctive style."⁷

Armfried Edler, on the other hand, in his recent history of keyboard music, finds more positive words for Buxtehude's chorale variations:

The principle of a unifying climax in sound and tension can be seen [in Buxtehude's chorale variations] to different degrees; it is most obvious in *Nun lob mein Seel den Herren* (BuxWV 213), where the variations begin with a bicinium; then follows a tricinium with cantus firmus in the upper voice until the set is closed by a tricinium with bass cantus firmus.⁸

For other chorale variations, however, the unifying elements are less obvious and often nonexistent.

While the chorale partitas seem to lack the compelling structural coherence and the depth in text interpretation exhibited by the fantasies and the cantatas, they are more than simple *Gebrauchsmusik*,

compositions that fulfill a merely utilitarian purpose. The following essay will focus on Buxtehude's chorale variations on the hymn *Nimm von uns Herr, du treuer Gott*, BuxWV 207, examining its musical structure, its function, and its contexts in contemporary piety.

Nimm von uns Herr, BuxWV 207

The variations are based on a Protestant chorale from the second half of the 16th century. The text has seven stanzas and was published in 1584 by the 16th-century poet and theologian Martin Moller (1547–1606); the words were traditionally combined with Martin Luther's melody for the hymn *Vater unser*, in *Himmelreich*. (See Example 1: Melody, "Nimm von uns Herr.")

First movement

Buxtehude's set of variations consists of four verses. The first verse is a three-part setting, with the cantus firmus in mostly unembellished fashion in the upper voice. The occasional embellishments of the melody (mm. 8, 11, and 27) occur only at the beginning or the middle of a phrase, never at the end. This movement is basically a figuratively embellished chorale harmonization. The harmonic backdrop is dissolved into a continuous sixteenth-note motion. The lower voices serve primarily as accompaniment. Only occasionally (in the interludes between the lines of the chorale or later in mm. 21–24) does the alto voice develop a certain degree of independence and engage into a motivic dialogue with the bass.

The texture of the movement resembles the type we find in the chorale variations of Buxtehude's contemporary Johann Pachelbel, and even in the works of Johann Gottfried Walther, who was of a later generation. Buxtehude himself used this type only rarely. The single chorale setting *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland*, BuxWV 198, is very similar to the first verse of BuxWV 207. In both pieces Buxtehude employs an analogous "running" sixteenth figuration in the lower voices, while the chorale melody is played in the upper voice. Like BuxWV 207/1, the piece is not a strict trio but rather a figuratively embellished chorale harmonization. The same is true for the first verse of the chorale variations on *Danket dem Herren*, BuxWV 181, and the second verse of the chorale partita *Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren*, BuxWV 213. Even though he used it only rarely, Buxtehude seems to have preferred this type of chorale setting mostly in his chorale variations rather than in independent chorale preludes. Only one such individual setting (BuxWV 198) has come down to us; however, it cannot be ruled out that other, similar compositions by Buxtehude have been lost.

Second (and fourth) movement(s)

The second movement of *Nimm von uns Herr* is a traditional bicinium, standing in the tradition of similar pieces by Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck and Samuel Scheidt. The melody in the upper voice, even less embellished than in the first movement, is accompanied by a lower voice of extraordinarily wide tessitura, spanning the range from alto (mm. 7–9) to a low bass voice (m. 28). (See Example 2.) A comparison with similar settings by Sweelinck (Example 3) and Scheidt (Example 4) exhibits Buxtehude's roots in these traditions. All three examples begin with the first note of the cantus firmus; the accompanying voice enters later (here a quarter note) in unison, before it reaches the third of the chorale melody through passing notes.

The few embellishments of the melody (mainly simple passing notes) in Buxtehude's bicinium are encountered at the same places as they were in the first movement: in the middle of the

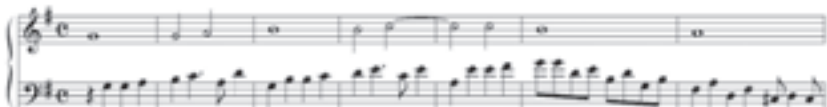
Example 1: Melody, *Nimm von uns Herr*



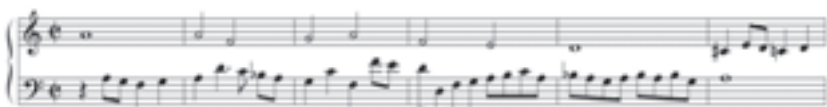
Example 2: Buxtehude, *Nimm von uns Herr*, BuxWV 207/2



Example 3: Sweelinck, *Psalm 140*



Example 4: Scheidt, *Cantio Sacra "Vater unser im Himmelreich,"* versus 4



second and the beginning of the third phrase. Only the short melismatic embellishment of the last phrase in the first movement finds no correspondence in the second movement.

We pass over the third movement for a moment and come to the last section of Buxtehude's chorale partita. It is another bicinium with the cantus firmus in the upper voice and a vivid, motivically independent lower voice of wide tessitura. The embellishments of the melodic line (again mainly passing notes) are at the same places as in the first bicinium—a feature that ensures a certain degree of motivic consistency between the two bicinia.

Monody and expression: the third movement of BuxWV 207

The third movement is exceptional. It conforms to the type of chorale setting that is traditionally labeled as "organ chorale" (*Orgelchoral*) or "monodic organ chorale" (*monodischer Orgelchoral*).⁹ The melody in the upper voice is highly embellished, while the lower three voices serve as an accompaniment and bridge the gaps between the chorale lines with short, imitative interludes. It is the type of chorale setting Buxtehude uses in most of his single-movement chorale preludes.¹⁰ The structure is the same as in the chorale preludes: the upper voice begins (here with a vivid em-

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bellishment of the first note of the hymn) before the three lower voices enter with a mostly homophonic accompaniment.¹¹ (See Examples 5 and 6.)

While the majority of Buxtehude's settings of this type begin with a simple long note in the upper voice,¹² this one is opened by an extensive, octave-encompassing embellishment of the first note of the cantus firmus, establishing the d-minor tonality, which is later confirmed by the entrance of the lower voices. Example 6, Buxtehude's setting of the hymn *Komm, Heiliger Geist*, shows that the composer occasionally employs a similar opening in other monodic chorale settings as well.

While the movement stays within the margins of Buxtehude's style, it is unusual to find a setting of this type in the context of an otherwise rather simple chorale partita, breaking up the frame established by the other movements. It is also the only movement in the partita that requires pedal. The unusual structure of the set of variations requires explanation.

One explanation could be that the chorale partita, in its current form, is not the partita Buxtehude composed. A reduction of the work to verses 1, 2 and 4 would turn the composition into a more coherent set of three variations for manual only, with a three-part setting at the beginning and two bicinia following. In that way, the composition would somewhat resemble the chorale variations on *Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren*, BuxWV 213 (Bicinium-Trio-Trio). However, the sources for the partita do not justify the exclusion of the third movement. Not a single source (even those with that are incomplete) preserves the chorale partita without the third movement.¹³ One manuscript (the now lost Königsberg manuscript, Sammlung Gotthold Ms 15.839, copied by Johann Gottfried Walther) contains only the third movement, but it is more likely that Walther (or the source he used) took the piece out of its original context than that the movement was inserted into the already existing set of the variations 1, 2, and 4.

The combination of unembellished and highly embellished verses in a chorale variation was not entirely unusual in the 17th century. We find similar combinations in the chorale variations by Heinrich Scheidemann (~1596–1663), who, as Kerala Snyder suggests, could have been Buxtehude's teacher in Hamburg.¹⁴ But even if Buxtehude did not directly study with Scheidemann, the latter's pieces were widely disseminated in manuscripts, and Buxtehude surely had access to compositions by the Hamburg organ master. In other words, Buxtehude's chorale variations on *Nimm von uns Herr*—even though they seem to be incoherent—stay within the margins of both the composer's style and the style of northern German organ music in the second half of the 17th century in general.

Form and function

How was Buxtehude's chorale partita used? We know from Lübeck sources from the 17th and early 18th centuries that chorales were sung "alternatim," which means that the congregation and the organ alternated in the performance of the hymns.¹⁵ One verse was sung by the congregation, which in Lübeck at this time still normally sang without the accompaniment of the organ. The next verse was then played by the organist while the congregation "sang" the text of the stanza, which they knew by heart, in their minds. Then another verse was sung by the congregation, and so forth. Furthermore, the hymns were preceded by an organ prelude.

We can assume that the chorale variations on *Nimm von uns Herr* were also used in alternation with the singing of the congregation. They were probably performed in the following way:

BuxWV 207/1	Organ prelude
Congregation	Verse 1
BuxWV 207/2	Verse 2
Congregation	Verse 3
BuxWV 207/3	Verse 4
Congregation	Verse 5
BuxWV 207/4	Verse 6
Congregation	Verse 7

Example 5: Buxtehude, *Nimm von uns Herr*, BuxWV 207/3



Example 6: Buxtehude, *Komm, Heiliger Geist*, BuxWV 199



The four movements fit perfectly into the seven-verse structure of the hymn. The first movement served as a prelude; the remaining movements replaced the even numbered verses, while the congregation sang the odd numbered.

A comparison between the hymn stanzas the organ replaced and Buxtehude's compositional realization suggests a correspondence between musical form and lyrical content. The first bicinium in the set of variations (movement 2) replaced the following stanza:

Erbarm dich deiner bösen Knecht.
Wir bitten Gnad und nicht das Recht;
Denn so du, Herr, den rechten Lohn
Uns geben wollst nach unserm Thun,
So müßt die ganze Welt vergehn
Und könnt kein Mensch vor dir bestehn.

Have mercy upon your evil servants.
We ask for mercy and not for justice;
For if you, Lord, wanted to give
The earned reward to us for our deeds,
The whole world would have to perish
And no man could stand before thee.

It would be too much to expect a set of chorale variations of this time to give a musical exegesis of the text; however, the movement clearly transfers the affect of the stanza into music. The restrained sonority of the two-part texture, the chromaticism and hushed thirty-second notes accompanying the third phrase of the melody ("for if you, Lord, wanted to give the earned reward," mm. 12–14), and the restless sixteenth-note motion towards the end of the setting ("and no man could stand before thee") capture the mood of the text, a feeling of trepidation and hope.

The second bicinium, replacing the sixth stanza, reflects the general affect of the words in a similar fashion:

Gedenk an deins Sohns bitterm Tod,
Sieh an sein heilig Wunden rot,
Die sind ja für die ganze Welt
Die Zahlung und das Lösegeld,
Des trösten wir uns allezeit
Und hoffen auf Barmherzigkeit.

Remember your son's bitter death,
Look upon His holy red wounds,
That are indeed for the entire world
The settlement and ransom,
From this we gain consolation always
And hope in your compassion.

The restrained sonority of the two-part texture underlines the meditative character of the text. An interesting melismatic embellishment appears in the second phrase, emphasizing the words "look upon His holy red wounds." Furthermore, the textural similarity between the two settings (both are bicinia with the melody in the upper voice) underlines the theological correspondence of stanzas 2 and 6. Both focus on the juxtaposition of grace and justice, using monetary images ("reward" in verse 2 and "ransom" in verse 6). In other words, the

musical structure reflects the theological structure of the hymn text.

Stanza four of the chorale was replaced with the extraordinarily embellished third verse of the partita.

Warum willst du doch zornig sein
Über uns arme Würmelein?
Weißt du doch wohl, du großer Gott,
Daß wir nichts sind als Erd und Kot;
Es ist ja vor dein Angesicht
Unser Schwachheit verborgen nicht.

Why would you be so angry
Against us poor little worms?
For you know well, great God,
That we are nothing but dirt and dung;
Indeed before your face
our weakness is not hidden.

Between wrath and melancholy

Even though it is possible to find correspondences between single words of the text and Buxtehude's way of embellishing the chorale melody (the wrathful God, mentioned in the initial line, could be the reason for the rhythmically agitated embellishment of the first note of the melody), it is more important to see how the movement captures the mood of the entire stanza. The most agitated and graphic verse of the text finds its equivalent in the most agitated and expressive verse of the partita. That this correspondence between text and instrumental realization is more than a coincidence is revealed through a comparison with a vocal setting of the same hymn by Johann Sebastian Bach. While Buxtehude himself in his chorale cantata *Nimm von uns Herr*, BuxWV 78, leaves out verses 4–6 of the hymn and only sets 1–3 and 7, Bach in his chorale cantata BWV 101 (composed in 1724) employs all seven verses (even though some appear in free paraphrase). Bach writes a similarly agitated aria when he sets the fourth verse of the hymn.¹⁶ He even features an agitated broken minor chord at the very beginning, just as Buxtehude does. The paraphrase of the fourth stanza in Bach's cantata can be read as a theological commentary on the chorale text, enforcing the dramatic affect of the hymn text:

Warum willst du so zornig sein?
Es schlagen deines Eifers Flammen
Schon über unserm Haupt zusammen.
Ach, stelle doch die Strafen ein
Und trag aus väterlicher Huld
Mit unserm schwachen Fleisch Geduld.

Why would You be so angry?
The flames of Your zeal already
Strike together over our heads.
Ah, leave off Your punishments
And out of paternal favor deal
Patiently with our weak flesh.¹⁷

The similarities between Bach and Buxtehude are rooted in a similar type of religiosity. In the fourth verse, the hymn talks about the remembrance of mortality, an aspect of central importance to

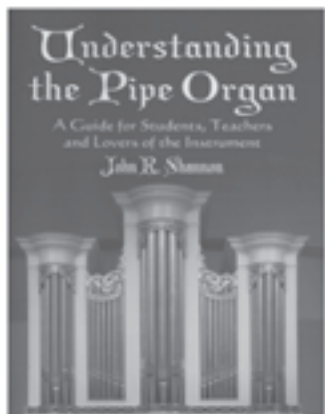
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the piety of the 17th and early 18th centuries. The recognition of one's own fallibility and transience was a precondition for salvation. Only one who recognized one's sinfulness was also able to embrace God's grace. The Lübeck Superintendent August Pfeiffer, at this time serving at the same church as Buxtehude, in his *Anti-melancholicus, oder Melancholey-Vertreiber* (1691), gives a very graphic description of the final hours:

I take fright as well whenever I think that my limbs, which I so carefully nourished and clothed and so tenderly cared for in my lifetime and which did me such steadfast service, should moulder and rot in the earth, and become a stinking carcass, dung, and filth, and perhaps be carried off by a thousand worms or maggots.¹⁸

Pfeiffer's text uses metaphors similar to the fourth stanza of the hymn. The *memento mori*, the remembrance (and awareness) of death, was a cornerstone of contemporary piety. Again, if one verse deserved an embellished treatment in the course of the chorale partita, it was the fourth one. Even if we mistrust a literal identification of single embellishments with individual words of the chorale text, we must concede that the emotional quality of the fourth stanza, a quality that found its equivalent in the contemporary religiosity, lends itself to a more emotional treatment in the set of chorale variations.

Conclusions

The initial question remains: What is a convincing cycle? The structure of the set of variations was obviously determined by the text of the chorale. It also reacts to the necessities of its intended performance practice (alternatim). The partita was not intended for performance in a recital, but was planned as a composition that needed the integration of congregational singing. In this context, the set of variations appeared as a prelude and an embellished organ chorale that was framed by two bicinia, with the congregation adding another layer of structure to the performance. One could label the resulting form a ritornello-structure—only that the "ritornello" was not provided by the composer because it was sung by the congregation.

In this way, BuxWV 207 is different from Buxtehude's partita *Auf meinen lieben Gott*, BuxWV 179, where the five stanzas of the hymn are transfigured into five dances, forming the movements of a conventional dance suite. That piece was composed for use at home, specifically for individual religious edification in the realm of domestic piety. Each of the five instrumental movements replaces the singing of the five stanzas of the chorale, and Buxtehude chose the form of a suite as the external idea to connect the movements.¹⁹ In our example, the circumstances of the performance already provided a "convincing" cyclic concept, in which the composer only had to insert the movements of the chorale partita. This granted him the liberty to react to the individual texts of the chorale melody. The chorale variation is characterized not so much by a lack of structure, but by the freedom given the composer through the existent structure in the alternatim practice.

When we perform Buxtehude's chorale variations today, we mostly do so in a concert setting and not in the context of the liturgy. However, a modern performance that simply strings together the four movements of BuxWV 207 neglects an important aspect of historical performance practice. Even if we do not ask our concert audience to sing the verses of the hymn (but why should we not?), we could insert hymn settings of the chorale between the single movements. This would also enable the listeners, most of whom are probably unaware of the actual melody, to recognize the hymn tune in the variations. This could be especially helpful for the highly embellished third movement of the chorale partita. ■

Notes

1. I follow Kerala Snyder's taxonomy of the chorale variations; cf. Kerala Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2007,

276. See also the descriptive overview in Josef Hedar, *Dieterich Buxtehudes Orgelwerke: Zur Geschichte des norddeutschen Orgelstils*, Stockholm: Nordiska Musikförlaget, 1951, 247–262.

2. Snyder, *Buxtehude*, 262.

3. See also Matthias Schneider, *Buxtehudes Choralfantasien: Textdeutung oder »phantastischer Stil«?*, Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter, 1995.

4. Regarding Buxtehude's vocal chorale variations see also Kerala Snyder, "Tradition with Variations: Chorale Settings *per omnes versus* by Buxtehude and Bach," in Daniel Zager (ed.), *Music and Theology: Essays in Honor of Robin A. Leaver*, Lanham: Scarecrow, 2007, 31–50.

5. Cf. Snyder, *Buxtehude*, 187–196; see also the overview in Friedhelm Krummacher, *Die Choralbearbeitung in der protestantischen Figuralmusik zwischen Praetorius und Bach* (Kieler Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft XXII), Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter, 1978, 160–192.

6. Snyder, *Buxtehude*, 276.

7. Kathryn J. Welter, *Johann Pachelbel: Organist, Teacher, Composer. A Critical Reexamination of His Life, Works, and Historical Significance*, Diss. Harvard University 1998, 155.

8. "Das Prinzip der einheitsbildenden klanglichen und spannungsmäßigen Steigerung ist in unterschiedlicher Prägnanz zu erkennen, am deutlichsten wohl in *Nun lob mein Seel den Herren* (BuxWV 213), wo die drei Variationen vom Bicinium über das Tricinium mit Cantus firmus in der Oberstimme zum Tricinium mit Baß-Cantus firmus voranschreiten." Armfried Edler, *Gattungen der Musik für Tasteninstrumente 1: Von den Anfängen bis 1750* (Handbuch der musikalischen Gattungen 7,1), Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1997, 62.

9. Cf. the definition in Werner Breig, "Die geschichtliche Stellung von Buxtehudes monodischem Orgelchoral," in *Dieterich Buxtehude und die europäische Musik seiner Zeit: Bericht über das Lübecker Symposium 1987* (Kieler Schriften zur Musikwissenschaft XXXV), ed. by Armfried Edler and Friedhelm Krummacher, Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1990, 260–261; Lawrence Archbold suggests the term "expressive chorale prelude," see Archbold, "Towards a Critical Understanding of Buxtehude's Expressive Chorale Preludes," in *Church, Stage, and Studio—Music and Its Contexts in Seventeenth-Century Germany*, ed. by Paul Walker, Ann Arbor and London: UMI Press, 1990, 87–106.

10. Friedhelm Krummacher has described this type of chorale setting by Buxtehude as "eccentric," and has pointed out its roots in the northern German *stylus phantasticus*, see: Krummacher, "Intimität und Exzentrik—Buxtehudes Choralbearbeitungen für Orgel," in: Krummacher, *Musik im Norden: Abhandlungen zur skandinavischen und norddeutschen Musikgeschichte*, ed. by S. Oechsle and others, Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter 1996, 60–74.

11. The technique is historically based on the coloration of motets, cf. Werner Breig, *Die Orgelwerke von Heinrich Scheidemann* (Beihefte zum Archiv für Musikwissenschaft III), Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1967, 96–100.

12. See for instance the chorale prelude *Vater unser im Himmelreich*, BuxWV 219, based on the same melody as BuxWV 207; cf. the short analytical study of that piece by Gary Verkade, "Dieterich Buxtehude, *Vater unser im Himmelreich*: A Study in Expressive Content," in: *THE DIAPASON* 98/10 (October 2007), 30–33.

13. Cf. critical commentary in Christoph Albrecht, *Buxtehude: New Edition of the Complete Organ Works* 5, Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter 1998, 79.

14. Snyder, *Buxtehude*, 25.

15. Cf. Snyder, *Buxtehude*, 99–100.

16. Alfred Dürr called the aria "passionately dramatic," a description that would be appropriate for the movement in BuxWV 207 as well; see Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach: With their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 485.

17. Translation after Dürr, *The Cantatas*, 482.

18. August Pfeiffer, *Anti-melancholicus, oder Melancholey-Vertreiber*, Leipzig 1691 (1st edition 1683): "Ich erschrecke auch/ wenn ich daran denke wie diese mein Glieder die ich bey Lebzeit so sorgfältig ernehrt und bedeckt die ich so zärtlich gehalten/ die mir so viel treue Dienste gethan sollen in der Erden verwesen/ verfaulen zum stinkenden Todten-Aas/ Koth und Unflath und vielleicht von 1000. Würmern oder Maden verschleppt werden." Pfeiffer, 583, translation by David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meaning of Counterpoint*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, 7.

19. Cf. Markus Rathey, "Buxtehude and the Dance of Death: The Chorale Partita 'Auf meinen lieben Gott' and the Ars Moriendi in the 17th Century" (in preparation).

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