



On Teaching

by Gavin Black



Buxtehude BuxWV 141 – Part 3: Practicing the first fugal section

This month we return to the Buxtehude *Praeludium in E Major*, BuxWV 141, looking at the second section of the piece, which begins at m. 13 and goes through about m. 50. This—except for its last three measures or so, which are a transitional passage, cadential in nature, and which we will in the main discuss next month—is a contrapuntal, essentially fugal, section, a fact which has implications for studying, practicing, and learning the music. Much of what I will suggest here will involve revisiting the ideas that I discussed in the series of columns about counterpoint that began in September 2008, applying those ideas to this specific passage.

The fugal section that begins in m. 13 is in four voices. The musical text could by and large be written out on four staves, accounting for all of the notes, with each staff presenting a coherently “melodic” melody. (It departs from this briefly in mm. 32–33 with the addition of a few “extra” notes, and again in the transitional passage.) The voices behave like the voices of a contrapuntal piece: each of the four voices has a different compass, each of the voices is present most of the time but not all of the time, and, melodically, the voices do the *same things at different times* and *different things at the same time*. The section is “fugal” in that the voices enter one at a time, each with a version of the same theme, and that theme recurs a lot during the section.

Theme

This theme is as follows, in its first iteration:



It enters first in the top voice, and then in the other voices in descending order. It is present in 24 of the measures of

the section, and a motive identical to the second half of this fugal subject is present in another 3½ or 4 measures. The longest stretch without any of this theme present—prior to the transitional/cadential section at the end—is about one measure.

(There is an interesting side note about this theme, one that in a sense is irrelevant to the piece on its own terms because of the chronology, but which should be intriguing to organists nonetheless. The first half of the theme is the same as the fugal subject of Bach's *Fugue in E-flat Major*, BWV 552, and the second half of the Buxtehude theme is essentially the same as a recurrent pedal motive in the *Prelude*, BWV 552. This Buxtehude work seems like a more likely source of Bach's inspiration for the so-called “St. Anne” Prelude and Fugue than is William Croft's hymn tune, which Bach most likely never heard.)

Bass voice in pedal?

The first practical question about working on this section is whether or not the bass voice belongs in the pedal. This is often a question with Buxtehude, since the sources for his music do not often indicate pedal explicitly, and in any case are rather far removed in origin from the composer. In this section, there are several reasons to believe that the bass voice was indeed intended as a pedal part. First, it works on the pedal keyboard, and, in order to make it work, the composer has shaped it a little bit differently from any of the three other voices. That is, there is no scale-wise writing in the bass voice that is any faster than the eighth-note, whereas there is such writing in each of the other voices. Second, there are many places in this passage where it is awkward to play all four of the voices in the hands and where the fingering is much more natural without the lowest voice. (This is true, for example, in m. 33 or mm. 42–43.)

There is, as far as I can see, only one spot prior to the transitional/cadential section where it is actually impossible to play all four voices in the hands, namely the second eighth note of m. 44. Someone else might be able to find a clever way to make it work, and it is certainly possible to do so by fudging the duration of some of the longer notes. (Someone with larger hands than mine would have no trouble with it, but the stretch of a tenth is beyond what is normally found in music of this time.) Furthermore, the transitional section ending in m. 50 certainly requires pedal—really *physically* requires it—and there is no particularly good place to shift the bass line to the pedal if that line has been played in the hands from m. 20 on. So on balance this seems to me to be a section to be played with pedal.

(The closing fugue of the *Praeludium in E Minor*, BuxWV 142, presents an interestingly different picture. There the fingering is made dramatically easier, more natural, and more idiomatic to the organ playing of the time by not including the bass voice in what the hands are expected to play. However, at the same time the bass line itself is, if not unplay-

able in the pedal, still extraordinarily difficult and well outside what would have been the norm at the time.)

Learning protocol

The protocol for learning this fugal section starts with the approach that I outlined in the columns on counterpoint mentioned above; that is, *playing through each voice separately and then playing pairs of voices*. Here are some specific points about applying that approach to this passage:

1) The section that we are looking at is about 34 measures long—long enough that it should be broken up into smaller sections for this kind of practicing. It doesn't really matter how it is broken up. It is fine to practice separate voices and pairs of voices in chunks of just a few measures, or in significantly larger chunks. One average way to do it would be to have breaks at around m. 23 and at around m. 36. Each voice will naturally break at a slightly different place. So, for example, it would make sense to play the soprano voice from m. 13 to m. 20, the alto from m. 15 to the middle of m. 23, the tenor from m. 17 through the first beat of m. 25, and the bass from m. 20 through m. 24. Then these sections of these voices can be combined in pairs.

2) When playing individual voices, it is fine to finger those voices in ways that will *not* be used when later putting the voices together. This is especially necessary and important with inner voices—typically the alto voice in a piece or passage that has three voices in the hands. Such an inner voice will almost certainly end up migrating from one hand to the other. However, at this stage it is important to play each voice in a way that is comfortable and natural, and that makes it as easy as possible to hear that voice as a coherent melody. It is also necessary to be flexible about playing inner voices in either hand. So, of course, when putting soprano and alto together it will be necessary to play the alto in the left hand, but when putting alto together with tenor it will be necessary to play the alto in the right hand.

3) At this stage, it is also not necessary to play the pedal part in the pedals. Practicing the pedal line as a pedal line (see below) can come later or can start in parallel with this process of getting to know the voices. However, for carrying out this approach to learning the voices, just as it doesn't matter what fingering is used, it also doesn't matter whether the feet play the bass voice or the left hand does. The important thing is that the student be able to listen carefully and hear the voices well while playing them.

4) In putting voices together in pairs it is a good idea some of the time to play the two voices on two manuals, in order to hear them with extra clarity. This is especially useful when voices cross or, as for example with the soprano and alto voices at mm. 38–39, come very close. The two sounds should be similar in volume and different in character.

Pedaling

While studying individual voices and pairs of voices, it is emphatically not a good idea also to finger and practice the manual part of the texture. That will come a little bit later. It is perfectly fine to practice the pedal part, however. It is interesting that in this piece the pedaling

choices are more straightforward, and in fact the pedal part is probably easier overall, in the more active fugal subject and subject fragments, than in the measures in which the pedal is playing long-held notes.

The fugal subject can easily be played with alternate toes, starting with the right foot; the subject fragment that occurs in m. 33 and elsewhere can also be played with alternate toes, starting with the left foot. These pedalings are natural enough that I would expect essentially every student or player to use them. (There are other possibilities: for example, using the same foot to play some of the successive quarter notes, or occasionally using heel to play some of the sixteenth notes that are on white keys when the immediately prior note was on an adjacent black key. On the whole, I doubt that many players would find these variants easier or better, but perhaps some would. They could certainly be OK.) This consistent alternate toe pedaling implies nothing in particular about articulation, phrasing, timing, or other interpretive/performance matters.

However, when the pedal part moves more slowly, particularly from m. 43 on, pedaling choices both affect and depend on choices about articulation. To the extent that the player prefers or can accept spaces between these long notes, he or she can apply the principal of playing each note with whatever foot happens to lie most comfortably above that note. As an example that would lead me to the following succession of toes for the eleven pedal notes beginning with the first note of m. 44 and going to the end of m. 50:

l-r-r-l-l-r-l-l-r-r-l

For someone else it might be a little bit different. Creating more legato in this passage would involve different pedaling choices—for example, crossing the left foot under to play the E in m. 44, and then playing the C# in m. 45 with the right foot.

Of course, practicing the pedal line once pedaling choices have been made involves the usual things: keep it slow and accurate; look at the feet as little as possible—ideally not at all; repeat small-enough passages that the memory of the feeling of the passage does not fade before you get back to it. When the pedal part has become secure, join it first to the tenor voice, then to the left hand part as such—once that has also been practiced as outlined below—then to the hands together. (Of course, it is fine also to practice pedal with right hand alone. However, as always, left hand and pedal is most important. Usually if left hand and pedal has been practiced enough, then adding the right hand is something that feels natural and almost easy.)

And do not forget what might be the cardinal rule of practicing: if you hear yourself make a wrong note while practicing, do not stop or hesitate or go back and correct it. By the time that your ears have heard the wrong note, your mind should already have moved on to playing the next note. Next time through the passage you can make sure to adjust what needs to be adjusted to correct what was wrong.

Fingering choices

Once you have played through all of the voices and all of the pairs of voices, it is time to work out a fingering for the

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three voices that will be in the hands. And, as I discussed in the column from last July, the first task is to decide which notes belong in which hand. This must come before making specific fingering choices, and it must be done in such a way as to make those fingering choices as easy and natural as possible. As I wrote before: *I have seen students waste a lot of time or even make a passage that could be fairly easy almost unplayable by assigning notes to hands in a way that was awkward.* However, there is not always only one good answer, and the answer is not the same, necessarily, for any two players.

In any situation in which three voices are present and the notes of the alto voice can be reached by either hand—that is, generally, in which neither the soprano notes nor the tenor notes are more than an octave away from the alto notes—the player can, in a pinch, try it both ways. Generally it is nice to put “extra” notes with whichever other voice is less active. So, in m. 19, for example, I would play the first three notes of the alto voice in the right hand since the tenor voice has sixteenth notes, but then play the half note E in the left hand, since the soprano voice then has sixteenth notes. In m. 24 I would play the one alto voice (whole) note in the right hand, even though the soprano voice notes are a bit farther away, since the tenor voice is more active; in m. 25, however, I would shift the alto voice to the left hand since the soprano voice become much more active. Again, these choices are not right and other choices wrong. It is simply very important that each player—each student perhaps with the help of a teacher—work this out carefully and patiently, in a way that feels right.

After the “handing” and fingering have been worked out, it is possible to try an interesting challenge, namely to play the alto voice alone with the correct fingering. This involves letting that voice move from one hand to the other according to the plan that has been worked out. The goal is to play it in such a way that it sounds as natural and *cantabile* as it would sound played in one hand. It is simultaneously harder to do this outside the cushion of the other voices and good practice for playing that voice well when it is partly obscured by the other voices.

Practice procedures

Practicing the three-voice manual texture of course follows the usual pattern for any practicing. Each hand should be practiced separately, slowly, until it seems easy. The tempo should be allowed to rise only according to a pace that is comfortable: once a passage is learned well at one tempo, it can be played a little bit faster; playing it *much* faster will often lead to its falling apart. Once each hand is solid at a given tempo, the two hands can be put together at a slower tempo. This can then also be allowed to speed up gradually. The rule about not stopping or hesitating when you hear yourself make a wrong note is always utterly important.

After a player or student has carried out all of the above—individual voices, pairs of voices, pedal part, individual hands, left hand with pedal, and all the rest—there is an interesting exercise to try. Play the section—well learned, all parts together—and consciously listen only to one voice at a time. This is easiest with the soprano voice, next easiest with whichever voice is the lowest at a given time, quite hard with a real inner voice. The ability to do this and also keep the whole thing going accurately and with a feeling of ease will help to reveal the fruits of studying the voices thoroughly and also test the solidity of the overall practicing of the notes.

Next month I will discuss both the transition measures 47–50 and the free section that follows, beginning in m. 51. ■

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Music for voices and organ

by James McCray

2010 Simple Christmas Tidings

Puer natus in Bethlehem unde gaudet in Bethlehem,
Hic jacet in praesepeio qui regnat sine termino,
Gloria tibi Domine qui natus es de Virgine.
Latin carol
14th century

Christmas Eve 2010 is on a Friday, which means the following Sunday services may shrink to a trickle of worshippers and choir members. After the exhausting weeks from Thanksgiving through December, most church choirs will not sing on that “Christmas” Sunday, especially in those churches that have multiple services on Christmas Eve. For most of the congregation, Sunday, December 26, may be a time of recuperation from the extensive month-long festivities, and it is a well-deserved rest.

During December, church choirs have been very busy preparing the annual Christmas cantata, the weekly Advent services, and in many cases, doing additional special programs for subgroups within the church. Furthermore, many choir members sing in community groups, and their Christmas concert is usually the main money-maker for their season. So their preparations and performances are often longer and more involved than usual. But, be reminded of an old saying: “When you get to your wit’s end, remember that God lives there.”

Since Christmas Eve may be the year’s largest attendance of worshippers, there is a special concern for musical quality. Potential choir members who are not regular church participants may be in the congregation, so it is important they hear music that is attractive in style and performance, in the hope that they may want to join the choir in the future. Recruitment and retention are the church choir director’s never-ending story. Yet Christmas Eve should be about beauty, sensitivity, and especially message. This is not the time for difficult music—save that for Easter morning; this is a time for warm, inspiring music that is calming and tender. When the candles are raised in the air on that final verse of *Silent Night*, that simple carol unleashes emotions that are far stronger than those felt during the more sophisticated music of the past month.

The music reviewed for Christmas 2010 does not comprise challenging, elaborate settings, but rather simple, sometimes naive anthems that will quietly inspire rather than overpower singers and listeners. Make this year’s Christmas Eve services a time of reflection and simplicity; perhaps even have the choir sing a carol from the hymnal as one of their musical offerings. A well-prepared Christmas carol will be just as effective as a pompous anthem. Jazz legend Quincy Jones put it this way: “Let’s not get too full of ourselves. Let’s leave space for God to come into the room.” Merry Christmas, dear readers; take time to enjoy the coming Christmas season. Next month’s reviews will feature music for Epiphany.

***O Thou Who Camest from Above*, Philip Lawson. SATB and organ, MorningStar Music Publishers, MSM-50-3068, \$1.70 (M-).**

This Charles Wesley text setting has four verses, but only the third has a true four-part arrangement, and it is also unaccompanied. After the unison first verse, the second is for sopranos (it could be sung by a soloist). The sopranos also sing a descant above the unison ATB in the fourth verse. There is a brief SATB Amen ending. This quiet, attractive anthem is not difficult.

***Amazing Night*, David Lantz III. SATB and keyboard, Augsburg Fortress, 978-0-8066-9820-5, \$1.60 (M).**

This syllabic anthem has a very sensitive, beautiful text and a simple accom-

paniment that often is little more than a modified doubling of the voices. The choral parts, on two staves, generally follow similar rhythms. There is a brief soprano solo, and the calm, gentle anthem remains slow throughout. This is a lovely anthem with a poignant text.

***Alleluia! Christ is Born!*, David Lasky. SATB and brass quartet or organ, Augsburg Fortress, 978-0-8006-6414-5, \$1.60 (M-).**

In this rhythmic setting the music moves back and forth between 6/8 and 3/4, which adds to the festive spirit. The opening section is antiphonal, alternating the choir and brass (organ), then the middle section is a little slower, with an unaccompanied interlude in Latin. The opening material then returns, to give an overall ABA structure. The music is not difficult and would be especially useful as an opening for a Christmas service or concert.

***Fit for a King*, Joseph Martin. SATB, keyboard and optional C instrument, Triune Music of the Lorenz Corp., 10/1884T, \$1.60 (E).**

The C instrument’s part is not on the choral score, but is included separately on the back cover; it consists of a flowing line and range that makes it especially suitable for a flute. The keyboard accompaniment has a melody in the right hand, which then dissolves into arpeggios when the voices enter. This is very easy music with some modulations, narrow vocal ranges, and a section that repeats as the final passage of the anthem.

***Love Came Down at Christmas*, Peter Pindar Stearns. SATB and organ, Paraclete Press, PPMO0419, \$1.60 (M-).**

This slow setting of the famous Christina Rossetti text opens with the sopranos singing the first verse. That melody is used in the other two verses, first in the tenors with neutral singing in the other sections, then in a four-part version, everyone singing the text, with the melody again in the soprano section. The key-

board part is on two staves and is accompanimental. This gentle, quiet setting is not difficult, and has comfortable vocal ranges in all sections.

***Silent Night*, Robert J. Powell. SATB, congregation, string quartet, and organ, GIA Publications, G-2522, \$1.60 (M).**

Although this arrangement is more elaborate than other works reviewed, it is included because of its value to many Christmas Eve services. The vocal parts are on two staves, but the choir provides a contrast to the main melody on the first and last verses; there the congregation sings the melody in the first and the strings play it in the third. In the middle verse, the men sing the melody in unison with the congregation while the women provide harmony. The strings are busy throughout, especially in the ritornello sections between the verses. The organ part, on two staves, often doubles the melody and has no solo character. There is a lovely instrumental prelude before the choir enters, and it will set a wonderful mood for everyone. This is highly recommended to those churches having a string quartet.

For children’s choirs

(Note: Although designed for children, these two-part and unison works are often useful for small adult church choirs.)

***Jesus Christ Is Born!*, Mark Patterson. Unison/two-part with piano, organ, optional handbells, Choristers Guild, CGA1192, \$1.95 (E).**

Three octaves of handbells are needed and their part will require skilled ringers. They play four-part chords and their music is included separately at the end. The congregation sings in the second half and their music also is at the end for duplication. This delightful work is bold and triumphant, yet easy for the voices. It would be very appropriate for adult or child singers, and could even work with both singing.

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