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Organ chorale forms of the Baroque era

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ORGAN CHORALE FORMS

OF THE BAROQUE ERA

by

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The development of protestant chorales reflected the new goals
which the reformation brought to the church service. Martin Luther, a
primary leader of the protestant Reformation, recognized that the goal
of the service was to make his revelation of faith understandable to the
people of Germany. The church service now became more than a sacra-
mental act of obedience; it was a time for people to willingly proclaim
the word of God.[1] Through the singing of the chorale, the congregation
took an active part in proclaiming the new faith found in the
Reformation.

These sacred songs, composed by Luther and his followers, contain
elements of both the plainsong and folk song tradition. They consist of
a simply worded text, an easily singable melody, a rhymed metrical
verse, and a strophic musical and textual form.[2] The chorales were
intended to be sung unaccompanied and in unison by the congregation, but
this congregational singing was often performed in alternation with
organ settings, and polyphonic settings sung by the choir.

Due to secular associations and disapproval of displays of vir-
tuosity, there are no extant North or Central German organ chorale
settings from the Reformation period.[3] The post-Reformation generation
left more examples. The first important publication to contain Protest-
ant organ chorale settings was compiled by Ammerbach and appeared in
Leipzig in 1571. The settings are in four homophonic parts with the
cantus firmus in the discant. This publication corresponded to a new
trend which took place at the end of the century.

secular variation technique of the English virginalists. Like English variations the cantus firmus may appear in any voice. Unlike secular variations the sacred cantus firmus is usually unornamented and stated in long note values. The number of voices, usually two to four, may increase throughout the variations resulting in a climax which is resolved by a "rhapsodic coda in toccata style."[4] Usually there are four variations in a set. The variations are connected by transitional passages, but each variation has its distinct form.

The specific forms of Sweelinck became the foundation for future composers. He continued the previously established cantional style consisting of four parts with the melody in the soprano. He also used a more freely contrapuntal four voice texture known as the chorale ricercare. The melody is in one voice but not necessarily the soprano voice. It is in half-note motion with occasional figural embellishment. The other voices are based on motives, which are derived from the cantus firmus and are structured on points of imitation. In contrast to the four voice texture, Sweelinck established a setting for two voices--the bicinium. In the bicinium the chorale melody is usually in one voice in whole or half notes. The other voice moves more quickly in figuration. Sweelinck also used the tricinium which is similar to the bicinium except that it has an added voice. Of the tricinium's three voices the outer two are usually mechanistically figured, and the inner voice contains the melody. Occasionally the bicinium will change into the tricinium style. Both styles employ rhythmic figures, eighth and sixteenth note scale passages, and repeated rhythmic patterns which outline the harmony.[5] The final influential form established by Sweelinck is the ornamented chorale. In this setting, extended

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embellishment is based on the melody which is located in the soprano. The role of the other voices is supportive. Sweelinck probably intended for the melody to be played on a separate manual apart from the other voices.

Sweelinck's influence was strongly felt in North Germany. The forms that he established were carried home by his North German students. Upon returning to Germany, Sweelinck's students adapted his musical language to German traditions. Not only did they inherit Sweelinck's established forms (bicinia, tricinia, chorale ricercare, and ornamented chorale), but they also acquired his countrapuntal and cantus firmus techniques. Like their teacher, they were influenced by the variation style of the English virginalists. This new generation, however, added new dimensions to Sweelinck's chorale melodies. Each variation corresponded to a strophe of the chorale. Therefore the different variations could be used in the alternatim practice of the church service. Sweelinck's students gradually incorporated the German tradition into his chorale variation technique.

Two significant German heirs of the Sweelinck technique brought the chorale variation form to its height. These two composers were Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654) and Heinrich Scheidemann (1596-1663). Scheidt's variations on "Wir gläuben all an einen Gott" is an excellent example of both composers' techniques. In this setting the melody is treated simply. The composers neither embellished nor altered the melody, nor did they add echo effects. The actual variation takes place in the accompaniment rather than in the melody. Measure 37 of the first variation of "Wir gläuben all an einen Gott" (Example 1-1) is a good

example of Scheidt's ornamentation. The inner voices of this variation are filled with passing tones, suspensions, and syncopations. In this measure the first "G" in the tenor is a syncopated passing tone. This "G" moves to an "A" which causes a 4-3 suspension with the alto. In his history of keyboard music, Bukofzer explains Scheidt's purpose for placing the plainly stated cantus firmus amidst a more elaborate accompaniment. He states, "In his extended variations Scheidt sharpened the contrast between the chorale melody and the abstract patterns of the other voices in order to emphasize the structural function of the cantus firmus and to make it as prominent as possible."[6] Certainly in "Wir gläuben all an einen Gott" the cantus firmus stands apart from the surrounding voices. Further developing Scheidt's style, Scheidemann carried this technique a little further and occasionally colored the melody with decorations such as passing tones, suspensions, and trills. However, he still kept the statement of the cantus firmus simple with few displays of keyboard virtuosity.

A second characteristic of these two composers is their use of the chorale melody as thematic material for the accompaniment. This can be seen in the third variation of "Wir gläuben all an einen Gott," measure 8 (Example 1-2). Finally, both Scheidt and Scheidemann linked their individual variations together in a similar manner. In contrast to Sweelinck's variations, the variations of his students are usually not connected by transitional passages, although their settings do have an internal order which serves as a cohesive factor. Both Scheidt and Scheidemann used various voice formulas, which are number patterns (4,2,3,4) corresponding directly to the number of voices of each separate movement. "Wir gläuben all an einen Gott" is organized according

to the fairly symmetrical pattern of 4,2,3,4. A stylistic order also holds the movements together. Scheidt usually composed four to five variations. The first of these is a chorale ricercare with the cantus firmus in the discant, the second is a bicinium, the next two are bicinia or tricinia, and the final movement is usually an arrangement with the cantus firmus in the bass. "Wir gläuben all an einen Gott" strictly adheres to this pattern. Scheidemann, who wrote mostly three verse variations, slightly modified Scheidt's order but kept Scheidt's plan of contrasting styles. In the study of both men's compositions it is apparent that Scheidt and Scheidemann developed Sweelinck's chorale variation form, placing it in a position of prominence among German keyboard works.

The development of the North German variation continued in the generations following Scheidt and Scheidemann. Weckmann (1619-1674), a pupil of Scheidemann, wrote seven sets of chorale variations, all of which contain two to six movements. The opening movement is the same ricercare form as that of his teacher, but the thicker and more solid texture of these variations indicates that Weckmann was interested in forming his own style. The second movement is often as dense as the first and may even be considered an extended chorale fantasy. In the generation following Weckmann, Dietrich Buxtehude (1637-1707) composed variations in the traditional forms of bicinia and tricinia, but he did not set the cantus firmus in the traditional long note values. He stated the cantus firmus in the original rhythm. Thus through the years the North German variation gradually changed and matured.

In Central Germany the variation form developed in a different direction. Like the North German chorale variation the Central German chorale variation, known as chorale partita, evolved from the forms of Scheidt and Scheidemann. The influence of secular variations on these sacred compositions was much greater in Central Germany than in North Germany. Central German composers used secular, decorative patterns and figurations rather than contrapuntal devices. Much more characteristic of the Central German partitas than of the North German forms is the retention of the original harmonic and structural principles in the statement of the cantus firmus. The most obvious difference between the northern chorale variation and the central partita is the presentation of the chorale stanzas. In the chorale partita each variation of the chorale is in the form of a movement from a secular dance suite. The separate verses appear as allemandes, courantes, sarabands, and gigues.

The dance suite, characteristic of the chorale partita, rose to prominence with Georg Böhm (1661-1733). Böhm's partitas are dominated by the manual style. It is likely that he intended his works to be performed on stringed keyboard instruments rather than organs. Shannon points out the pervading keyboard style: "Even in those partitas in which the pedal plays a prominent role and in which the trio style is more suggestive of organ performance, the light, open harpsichord style is still evident."[7] Böhm's harpsichord style gave him the freedom to make a significant contribution to the German chorale partita--the addition of French agréments. A good example of Böhm's use of agréments can be found in his chorale partita "Freu dich sehr o meine Seele" (Example 2).

It is true that the chorale variation and chorale partita maintained important roles in the early baroque period, but they were not the only forms of the organ chorale known during this time. The chorale fantasia quickly rose to a position as significant as the variation forms. Just as German chorale variations evolved from Sweelinck's variations, so the chorale fantasia evolved from the secular toccata and chorale ricercare forms.

In structure the chorale fantasia does not differ from the chorale ricercare. It is based on the imitative, contrapuntal use of motives usually derived from the first line of the cantus firmus. The difference between the chorale fantasia and the chorale ricercare lies in the treatment of the motives. The motives of the chorale fantasia may be freely embellished, used in echo style, or passed between the voices in complementary rhythmic patterns.[8]

Samuel Scheidt was a significant influence in the transformation of the ricercare into the fantasia. He was one of the first to use the term chorale fantasia. His setting of "Ich ruf zu dir" reveals the shape of the early chorale fantasia. Each line of the chorale is treated in basically the same way. First, it is preceded by pre-imitation in small note values as in measures 1-23 (Example 3-1). Then the cantus firmus is presented in long note values in different voices. In "Ich ruf zu dir" the chorale line first appears in measure 24 in the soprano (Example 3-2); the tenor and the bass follow in the same manner. While the cantus firmus is being stated, the counter voices increase in number until they reach a four part chordal texture in measures 51-56 (Example 3-3). In measure 57 (Example 3-4) the whole process begins

again for the second line of the chorale. Likewise the other lines of the chorale are similarly spun out.

After Scheidt the organ fantasia expanded into a brilliant composition filled with echo effects and numerous ornaments. This expanded chorale fantasia is most characteristic of the North German composers particularly Heinrich Scheidemann, Franz Tunder (1614-1667) and Dietrich Buxtehude. These men used the chorale melody as merely a starting point on which they based a free work. Each line of the chorale is treated several times in different ways. Elaborate coloratura is used throughout the fantasia and often disguises the melody. Shannon states, "The well known melody stands mystically hidden in the musical structure which, nonetheless, depends on it."[9] In presenting the cantus firmus melody Scheidemann combined elements from the ricercare, the bicinium, and the free toccata. He often used embellishing tones to fill in intervals between two chorale notes. He used descending scales ending on an accented note and ascending scales ending on the final of the mode.[10] Scheidemann sometimes displaced a cantus firmus note by an octave, thus completely obscuring the melody. Tunder used ornamented and cantus firmus styles in presenting the chorale lines. Often he presented the melody twice, once in the soprano with ornaments and once in the bass without ornaments. Tunder also divided the cantus firmus into fragments and formed them into motives. He applied a number of stylistic devices to these motives including rapid sixteenth notes, double pedal, echo passages, and brief imitative sections.

Dietrich Buxtehude left five pieces which qualify as chorale fantasias. These pieces reinforce the principles of the chorale

fantasias of Scheidemann and Tunder. "Wie schön lechtet der Morgenstern" is typical of the chorale fantasia style. It included the mixture of forms that is prevalent in the chorale fantasias of all three men. This fantasia begins with a slow section in cantus firmus style (Example 4-1) followed by a gigue-like section (Example 4-2). Next it includes a fugal section (Example 4-3), and finally it concludes with a section in toccata style (Example 4-4). Other characteristics of this piece which follow the fantasia style are the thirty-second note passage in measures 58-62 (Example 4-2), the broken thirds and sixths in measures 181-184 (Example 4-4), and the change in meter between the different sections. On the whole this chorale fantasia along with others can be defined in terms of three features: the combination of forms, the toccata-like quality, and the use of embellishments.

The use of embellishments noticeably increased and the chorale melody was swept into the trend of ornamentation. The origins of a new form, the chorale prelude, were closely related to the development of this trend. The chorale prelude grew from the monodic practice of the baroque era. Composers found in the chorale prelude the instrumental equivalent of an aria or arioso with basso continuo. The chorale prelude is a single variation on a chorale melody. It is a short piece with only one statement of the entire melody. The song-like statement, which may be plain, ornamented, or paraphrased, is in the soprano. It is presented over a figured or mildly contrapuntal accompaniment with either no interludes or very brief interludes separating the individual chorale phrases.

Dietrich Buxtehude was the most significant contributor to the development of the chorale prelude. In his thirty chorale preludes he interpreted the chorale in a subjective, expressive manner sometimes using word painting as in "Durch Adams Fall."[11] Although not excessively ornamented, the statement of the chorale melody is expressively embellished in the vocal style. Pauses and rests often interrupt the middle of chorale phrases. Such a pause occurs in measure 44 of the prelude "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" (Example 5). This stylistic trait is an indicator of the subjective approach to the chorale melody. Pre-imitation of the melody sometimes occurs in the accompaniment. Two frequently used imitative devices are dimunition and inversion. In measure 47 of "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" the chorale line is preceeded by its inversion (Example 5).

Following Buxtehude's lead, Johann Nikolaus Hanff (1665-1711) and Johann Pachelbel (1653-1706) continued to develop the chorale prelude. The compositions of Hanff are very similar to those by Buxtehude; however, these works contain more imitative treatment in the lower voices. Pachelbel's chorale preludes are more in the old cantus firmus style with the chorale in long note values. Often the melody is a two part cannon. Both Hanff and Pachelbel made a conscious attempt to translate the meaning of the chorale text into musical language.

Even though Pachelbel composed a number of chorale preludes, he is best known for his contribution to the Central German form known as the chorale fugue. Before Pachelbel brought the chorale fugue to its peak, the form underwent several changes. The origins of the chorale fugue can be found in the chorale ricercare. While North German composers

were developing the toccata quality of the chorale ricercare into the chorale fantasy, Central and South German composers were developing the fugal quality of the chorale ricercare into the chorale fugue. In their chorale settings Erasmus Kindermann (1616-1655) and Johann Rudolf Ahle (1625-1673) experimented with fugal passages. Their settings represent the transitional stage between the chorale ricercare and the chorale fugue. They were the first composers to use only the first or second line as material for the fugal subject. Later composers followed their example. Johann Christoph Bach (1642-1703) also used the first phrase as subject material, but in addition he wove some or all of the remaining chorale melody into the fugue. Finally, paving the way for Pachelbel, Johann Michael Bach (1648-1694) set the entire melody, phrase by phrase, in a chain of fughettas.

The chorale fugue was now passed to Pachelbel in a well-defined form. He brought the chorale fugue to its height by developing this existing form. He continued to work out each phrase in fugal texture and to use the older method of writing chorale fugues based solely on the initial phrase of the melody. But Pachelbel did not stop there. He created a new type of combination chorale setting which was to be an influence on later composers.

Pachelbel expanded the chorale fugue into two sections. His "combination-form" begins with a chorale fugue on the opening phrase and continues with a three or four part cantus firmus setting of the entire melody. "Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her" is representative of Pachelbel's fugue-cantus firmus type of organ chorale. First the opening phrase of the chorale melody is fugally developed (Example 6-1). Then
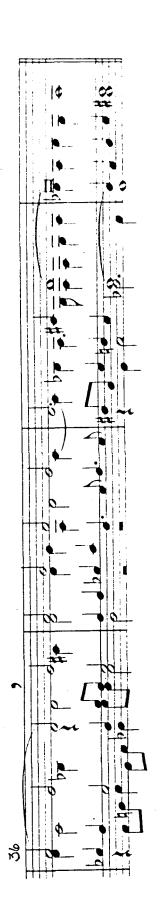
settings. He composed chorale variations, the best known being the canonic variations on "Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her." He composed fantasias, treating the chorale melody freely by using all or some of this melody and tossing it between the various voices as in "Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns wend." He composed chorale preludes of all types. In his _Orgelbüchlein_ settings, the cantus firmus may be ornamented or unornamented. It may retain its shape or appear in long notes or it may be presented canonically. And finally he composed fugal types of settings ranging from the old type of chorale ricercare to the chorale fugue such as "Aus tiefer Not." As Tusler says, "We see that Bach created no new forms. Rather, he combined the traditional patterns into new and vital musical expressions. . ."[13] The given forms were now well-known and firmly established. Bach and other Baroque composers no longer looked for new types of chorale settings. Instead they created new styles and techniques (word painting) within the boundaries of the old forms.

Gradually, after Bach, the Baroque style organ chorale settings were almost completely abandoned. The "doctrine of affections" transformed the organ chorale into a work that rarely contained any reference to the chorale melody. Only a few composers of the nineteenth century returned to the North and Central German organ chorale tradition in an attempt to revive it. Three such composers were Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) in his _Elf Choralvorspiele_, Heinrich von Herzogerber (1843-1900) who wrote chorale fantasias, and Johann Georg Herzog (1822-1909) who returned to the long note cantus firmus style. Even though these men contributed to organ chorale literature, organ chorale settings were still sparse.

There were, however, new interests developing among organ composers. Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847) and Max Reger (1873-1916) greatly admired the Baroque traditions. Both men began their own personal revival of these traditions. In his organ sonatas Mendelssohn included not only chordal, chorale-like sections, but also sections based on pre-existing chorales. Reger composed seven large chorale fantasias and seventy small chorale preludes. By the turn of the century, the trend had caught on and the liturgical reform began.

The twentieth century revival continues and in the center lies the regenerative force of the chorale melody. That force motivated the organ masters of the seventeenth centuries to establish organ chorale forms, and the same force motivates present day composers to continue the tradition in a modern context.
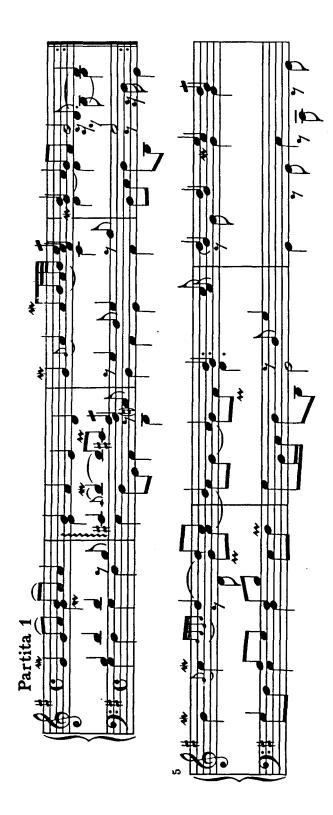
Example 1-1. Samuel Scheidt, "Wir glauben all an einen Gott,"

1st variation, measures 36-39.

Example 1-2. Samuel Scheidt, "Wir glauben all an einen Gott,"

3rd variation, measures 7-9.

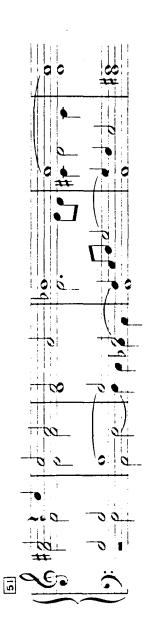Example 2. Georg Bohm, "Freu dich sehr o meine Seele,"

Partita 1, measures 1-7.

Example 3-1. Samuel Scheidt, "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,"

measures 1-6; 21-23.

Example 3-2. Samuel Scheidt, "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,"

measures 24-30.

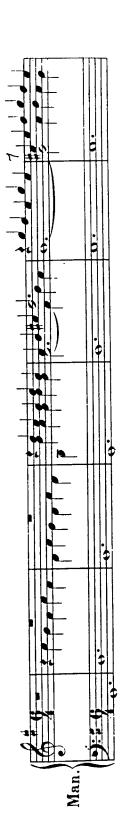Example 3-3.   Samuel Scheidt, "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,"

measures 51-56.

Example 3-4.   Samuel Scheidt, "Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ,"

measures 57-61.

Example 4-1. Dietrich Buxtehude, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern,"

measures 1-7.

Example 4-2. Dietrich Buxtehude, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern,"

measures 121-127.

Example 4-3.   Dietrich Buxtehude, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern,"
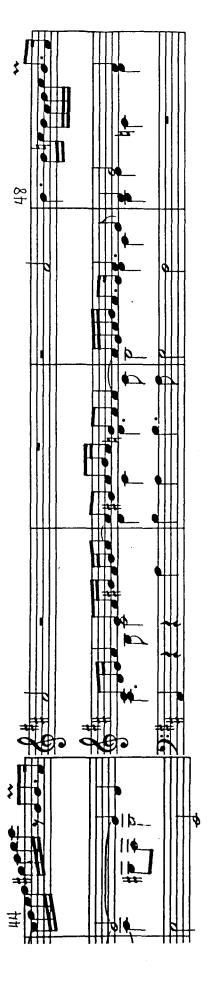
measures 136-140.

Example 4-4.   Dietrich Buxtehude, "Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern,"
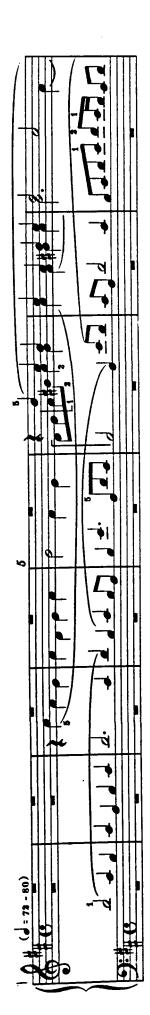
measures 170-173.

Example 5. Dietrich Buxtehude, "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott," measures 44-48.
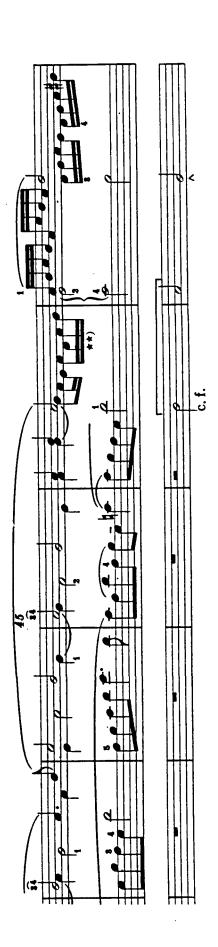
Example 6-1. Johann Pachelbel, "Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her,"

measures 1-8.

Example 6-2. Johann Pachelbel, "Von Himmel hoch, da komm ich her,"

measures 43-47.

NOTES

[1] Robert L. Marshall, "Chorale Settings," The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, IV, 314.

[2] Marshall, p. 312.

[3] Marshall, p. 330.

[4] Manfred F. Bukofzer, Music in the Baroque Era (New York: W. W. Norton and Co. Inc., 1947), p. 76.

[5] Corliss Richard Arnold, Organ Literature: A Comprehensive Survey (Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1973), p. 65.

[6] Bukofzer, p. 105.

[7] John R. Shannon, Organ Literature of the Seventeenth Century: A Study of Its Styles (Raleigh: The Sunbury Press, 1978), p. 239.

[8] Marshall, p. 333.

[9] Shannon, p. 211.

[10] Shannon, p. 212.

[11] Bukofzer, p. 11.

[12] Shannon, p. 283.

[13] Robert L. Tusler, The Style of J. S. Bach's Chorale Preludes (New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), p. 39.

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