

Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck

It's one of the more famous stories in music history: In 1706, when the 20-year old J.S. Bach (1685-1750) was working as music director of a church in Arnstadt, he secured a month's leave to travel to Lübeck (about 250 miles—on foot) to hear the organ playing of Dieterich Buxtehude (ca 1637-1707) who was renowned for his virtuosic playing. Since 1668, the Danish-born Buxtehude had been serving as music director of St Mary's Church in Lübeck, an important north German port whose status as a Free Imperial City gave Buxtehude more professional latitude than Bach would later have in Leipzig. Bach left Arnstadt in October, but wanted to stay for Buxtehude's famous *Abendmusik* concerts, which took place on Sunday afternoons in Advent and featured his large-scale choral works. Not only did Bach stay through December, he didn't return to Arnstadt until February, incurring the displeasure of the church consistory. Making the story even more memorable, Buxtehude was in the process of finding his successor during the period when Bach visited. Although the job itself was highly prized, it came with one condition—that the successful applicant marry Buxtehude's unattractive daughter Anna Margareta, just as Buxtehude himself had wed the daughter of his predecessor, Franz Tunder. Presumably, Bach turned down the possibility, as had G.F. Handel before him, ultimately ceding the field to J.C. Schieferdecker.

But Buxtehude is much more than just a footnote in the biography of J.S. Bach. Organists have long known—and deeply admired—Buxtehude's organ repertoire, just as Bach and his contemporaries had done. Along with other North German composers of the early and middle Baroque, Buxtehude helped to establish the characteristics of German Baroque organ writing: virtuoso writing not only for the manuals, but also for the pedal board; the development of the chorale prelude, in which a pre-existing Lutheran chorale is used as the starting point for a new composition; and an emphasis on contrapuntal writing, requiring true independence of the various textural voices. These characteristics may not have begun with Buxtehude, but especially in the case of highly virtuosic pedal writing, they came to maturity in his organ works. We can see this in his preludia, which feature both free, toccata-like writing as well as the strict counterpoint of fugues. We also see this in his chorale settings, and in his ostinato-based works—the two chaconnes and passacaglia. Indeed, Bach's own famous *Passacaglia in C Minor* seems to have been composed in Arnstadt, not long after his trip to Lübeck. For today's program, Trinity College organist Christopher Houlihan will be playing Buxtehude organ pieces—largely chorale preludes—between the large sections of *Membra Jesu Nostris*.

Buxtehude was long known as a major influence in the organ repertoire, but it is only in the past few decades that his importance as a composer of vocal music has been properly acknowledged. Indeed, he was a prolific composer of choral music, and left more than 100 cantatas, as well as a number of other vocal works. Sadly, no *Abendmusik* scores have survived; these “Evening Music” concerts showed Buxtehude's more entrepreneurial side, and we are relatively certain that Bach attended a performance of one such concert on his trip to Lübeck.

If Buxtehude's organ music was quintessentially north German, his vocal writing betrays a different sort of inspiration—the Italian *secunda prattica* vocal tradition. Buxtehude's most direct connection to the early Italian Baroque came through his early years in Denmark. One teacher-student lineage flows from Monteverdi to Schütz to his student Matthias Weckmann, who influenced the young Buxtehude. Another line is through Buxtehude's probable teacher Förster, who had studied with Carissimi, credited with the invention of the oratorio. Carissimi was held in such high esteem that he was offered the post at San Marco, as Monteverdi's successor. With these direct connections—to say nothing of the influence of scores that made their way around Europe—it is no surprise that Buxtehude's vocal music would bear so many of the hallmarks of composers like Monteverdi and Carissimi.

As we see in *Membra Jesu Nostri*, Buxtehude used *ritornelli* generously to establish structure, separating sections contrasting in both affect and texture. His string writing is strikingly similar to Italian baroque writing, with a combination of both the lyrical and the virtuosic, though the dour affect of this particular composition prevents the string writing from becoming too showy. Above all, Buxtehude's vocal compositional style is direct and clear; though he was famous as an organist for his fugal writing, he tends to eschew complex counterpoint in his vocal works in favor of more homophonic textures.

Membra Jesu nostri patientis sanctissima ("The most holy limbs of our suffering Jesus") was composed for Holy Week, probably in 1680. This setting of a Latin text seems to be unique in Buxtehude's output, a fact that argues against its use in a Protestant service. It is possible that the dedicatee—Gustav Düben, the Swedish King's music director, whose large collection of scores preserved Buxtehude's works for posterity—may have inspired the Lübeck composer to use this rather extraordinary set of texts. In fact, the choice of texts directly determined the cyclical and overarching structure of the work. Buxtehude sets verses from *Salva mundi salutare*, a group of seven poems, each of which reflects on a different part of the crucified Christ—feet, knees, hands, side, chest, heart and face. Originally attributed to Bernard of Clairvaux, the poem was in fact by Arnulf von Löwen (ca 1200-1250), a Cistercian monk who lived in present-day Belgium. This poem was well-known by both Catholics and Protestants in the 17th century.

Just as von Löwen's strikingly intimate poem is set in seven sections around each body part, so too is Buxtehude's *Membra Jesu nostri* cast in seven sections. The tight structure of each section (loosened a bit for the first and last parts) adds to the cyclical nature of the work. Each section begins with an instrumental ritornello that repeats throughout the section, creating unity and providing architectural signposts. That opening ritornello is followed by the choir singing a biblical text, before soloists sing short arioso settings of von Löwen's poetry. In most cases, the choir reprises the opening chorus to close the section. Sections V and VI are the exceptions to this template, perhaps because the breast and heart are the most intimate of the body parts addressed in the poem. For both of these sections, Buxtehude uses a trio rather than the full choir. There is some disagreement about whether this should be sung by a choir or soloists; in order to make the contrast more apparent, we will be using soloists. Section VI is particularly striking. In this section, Buxtehude employs a consort of viols (five *viole da gamba*) in order to provide a unique color for the section about Jesus' heart. We are using modern instruments for our performance, so we add two modern violas to the small ensemble.

Finally, a personal note. When I was a senior at the Hartt School, I took a graduate seminar in the music of J.S. Bach with Kerala Snyder, who also taught at Yale and went on to become a music history professor at the Eastman School of Music. At the time, Dr. Snyder was completing her book *Dieterich Buxtehude: Organist in Lübeck*, which remains the definitive biography of Buxtehude. We read chapters from that book in galley form, and I have never lost the sense not only of Buxtehude's huge importance in J.S. Bach's musical development, but also that Buxtehude is an important composer in his own right. I have performed several of his cantatas over the years, and I am thrilled finally to perform what is probably his most significant extant longer work. If you enjoy today's concert, I encourage you to explore Buxtehude's other choral works—I assure you that you will not be disappointed.