

# *J. S. Bach and His Legacy*



## **Program**

Organist: Dr. Robert Parkins  
March 21, 2021

**Prelude and Fugue in E Minor, BWV 533**

Johann Sebastian Bach  
(1685–1750)

*O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig, BWV 618*

**Prelude and Fugue in A Minor, BWV 543**

*O Mensch, beweine dein' Sünde gross, BWV 622*

**Sonata in F Minor, Op. 65, No. 1**

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy  
(1809–1847)

Allegro moderato e serio

Adagio

Andante recitativo

Allegro assai vivace

**Fugue on the Name BACH, Op. 60, No. 3**

Robert Schumann  
(1810–1856)

**Prelude and Fugue in A Minor**

Johannes Brahms  
(1833–1897)

*O Welt, ich muss dich lassen, Op. 122, No. 3*

**Introduction and Passacaglia in D Minor**

Max Reger  
(1873–1916)

*Performed on the Benjamin N. Duke Memorial Organ (Flentrop, 1976)*

# Program Notes

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Although celebrated mainly as an organist during his lifetime, later generations would come to revere **Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685–1750) as the unparalleled master of composition for the organ. When the great composer’s complex harmony and counterpoint had been eclipsed by changes in musical fashion after his death, organ music also experienced a considerable decline. Although Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s *Three Preludes and Fugues* for organ (1837) reflect the influence of Bach and the late Baroque, it was the publication of his *Six Sonatas* in 1845 that signaled the resurgence of significant organ music in Germany.

The legacy of J. S. Bach as a historical model was most profound among German Romantic composers, notably Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms, and Max Reger. In 1829, Mendelssohn had already initiated a Bach revival with his celebrated performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin. He had learned to play the organ as a youngster, and he developed a reputation as an accomplished organist and master of extemporization in later years. Moreover, it was Mendelssohn who introduced many of Bach’s organ works to Schumann, who in turn showed several of the same pieces to the young Brahms.

The early **Prelude and Fugue in E Minor** (BWV 533) by Bach was a favorite of Mendelssohn, who made a still-extant copy of the prelude when he was 13 years old. Nicknamed the “Cathedral” (possibly after Mendelssohn performed it years later in St. Paul’s Cathedral, London), it is most effective when played on a large instrument in a reverberant acoustic. Although scholars disagree on the date of composition, it was quite possibly written during Bach’s early years as organist of the New Church in Arnstadt (1703–1707). This succinct but robust work could possibly be the earliest example of a Bach prelude and fugue in two discrete movements—rather than amalgamated in a single *praeludium* with alternating free and fugal sections.

After arriving in Weimar in 1708, Bach set out to compose a collection of short chorale preludes for the entire liturgical year. His plan had a pedagogical as well as practical purpose, but he finished only 46 of the 164 pieces intended for his *Orgelbüchlein* (Little Organ Book). Among them is a setting of **O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig** (O Blameless Lamb of God), a hymn tune that figures prominently as a *cantus firmus* in the opening chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion*.

In this chorale prelude, marked *Adagio*, Bach introduces the melody in the tenor voice (played by the pedal), which is imitated by the alto in canon at the fifth above. The two outer voices, not canonic but often following one another in imitation, are based on a common two-note “sigh” motive, often used to express sadness or grief. (Mendelssohn was to edit an anthology of selected organ works by Bach, including the *Orgelbüchlein*, in the spring of 1845.)

Another staple in Mendelssohn’s organ repertoire was J. S. Bach’s **Prelude and Fugue in A Minor** (BWV 543), first published in 1812 as one of *Six Great Preludes and Fugues*. In fact, Mendelssohn performed it on an all-Bach recital at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig (1840), where Bach had once served as cantor (1723–1750). Moreover, the celebrated event was reviewed by none other than Robert Schumann. (Schumann’s wife, Clara, was known for playing this popular organ work in a piano transcription by Franz Liszt.)

This familiar prelude and fugue, dating from Bach’s years in Weimar (1708–1713), is curious in several respects—not least the prelude, which displays certain aspects often associated with south German composers (e.g., Johann Pachelbel). For example, the initial role of the pedal is quite subdued, confined to nothing more

than a long “organ point” until a solo emerges just before the second half. The gigue-like fugue is of the “perpetual motion” type, and its pedal entries make far greater demands on the player than the prelude.

The Lutheran chorale *O Mensch, beweine dein Sünde gross* (Mankind, Bemoan Your Great Sin) is woven into a “chorale fantasy” that concludes Part I of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*. His organ setting of this melody in the *Orgelbüchlein*, like *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig*, is one of only four in the entire collection to bear a tempo indication (all of them slow). Labeled *Adagio assai* (and *adagissimo* for the final measure), this is one of the composer’s most beautiful settings with a highly embellished (*coloratura*) melody in the top voice. Designated for two manuals and pedal, it deftly camouflages the hymn tune within a florid solo floating above the steady bass line and accompaniment.

Even as a youngster, the prodigy **Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy** (1809–1847) was drawn into the Bach tradition. Mendelssohn became quite proficient at playing the organ as a young adult, and the organ music of J. S. Bach continued to influence him throughout his short life. The *Six Sonatas* for organ, published in 1845 just two years before Mendelssohn died, are in many ways a bridge between the contrapuntal structures of the late Baroque and the Romantic sensibilities of the early 19th century.

The impressive opening to Mendelssohn’s **Sonata No. 1 in F Minor (Allegro moderato e serio)** soon transitions into a dialogue between an imitative contrapuntal texture (*fugato*) on the full organ registration and a calm, reassuring chorale. *Was mein Gott will, das g’scheh’ allzeit* (May What My God Wills Happen Always) is not as well-known as the two chorales heard earlier in today’s program, but it too makes an appearance in Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*.

A lyrical **Adagio** provides welcome contrast after the more austere first movement. The “conversation” in this second movement, however, does not pit a massive full organ sound against a soft registration played on another manual keyboard. Rather, the dialogue alternates between quiet stops in two different divisions. This kind of lyrical, meditative slow movement is one of several by Mendelssohn to be imitated by numerous organist-composers in the 19th century.

As in the first movement, the **Andante recitativo** juxtaposes two radically contrasting sounds: a very soft “recitative” interrupted by powerful chromatic chords. The distant solo is gradually joined by additional voices in imitation until a “celestial” quartet has been formed. The mood of grave solemnity gives way—without pause—to the final movement (**Allegro assai vivace**), a rousing “toccata” propelled by pianistic, sustained arpeggios. Near the midpoint a soaring theme emerges, and after two virtuosic pedal solos the sonata reaches a triumphant conclusion.

Although **Robert Schumann** (1810–1856) was not a skilled organist like his colleague Mendelssohn, he became an ardent fan of Bach’s organ music. In the same year that Mendelssohn published his organ sonatas, Schumann composed three collections of pieces for “pedal-piano,” a practice instrument fitted with a pedalboard and an extra set of strings at 16’ pitch. In 1845, Schumann rented such a pedal keyboard for his personal use.

Schumann’s quiet **Fugue on the Name BACH** (*Mit sanften Stimmen*, or “with soft stops”) is the third from a set of six fugues based on the notes derived from Bach’s last name (B-flat, A, C, and B in German nomenclature). Published within two years after their composition in 1845, the *Sechs Fugen über den Namen BACH* were designated “for Organ or Pianoforte with Pedal.” It is fair to say that these fugues were the first significant

organ works in the 19th century to exploit the letters of Bach's last name in musical composition, a tradition continued by various composers to the present day.

**Johannes Brahms** (1833–1897), a friend of the Schumanns, was introduced to the organ works of Bach in 1853. His early **Prelude and Fugue in A Minor**, ostensibly a first attempt at writing for the organ as he was attempting to learn how to play the instrument, was sent by the composer to Clara Schumann as a gift to celebrate his own birthday in 1856. What it might lack in maturity and polish, it more than makes up for in youthful energy and exuberance. Brahms knew Bach's familiar prelude and fugue in the same key, and he performed it at the piano on several occasions. (Although it appears that he presented an arrangement for solo piano, it was not unusual to play such organ works with the assistance of a second pianist for the pedal part.)

The fugue subject, already foreshadowed in the pedal line of the brief prelude, appears also in inversion (upside down) just before it is transformed by augmentation (lengthened note values). As in Bach's A-minor fugue, Brahms's counterpoint dissolves toward the end of his own fugue into the free style of the prelude, and the final statement of the subject is nearly buried under a furious flurry of notes. Worth noting is a pedal passage toward the end that is highly reminiscent of the pedal solo in the concluding measures of the Bach fugue.

*O Welt, ich muss dich lassen* (O World, I Must Leave Thee), yet another melody included in Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (with different texts) was used by Brahms for two settings in a set of chorale preludes completed as the composer's last compositional testament the year before his death in 1897. Published posthumously as Op. 122, his *Eleven Chorale Preludes* focus mainly on death and the afterlife. Bach's *Orgelbüchlein* served as a model for Brahms's smaller collection, and the similarity between his first setting of this chorale and Bach's treatment of *O Lamm Gottes, unschuldig* is inescapable. Indeed, the very opening of Brahms's prelude recalls immediately the slurred sigh figures in the Bach work, and both are in the same key of F major.

The late Romantic composer **Max Reger**, who (like Mendelssohn and Schumann), taught at the Royal Conservatory in Leipzig, wrote a remarkable number of substantial works for organ at the turn of the 20th century. Although strongly influenced by the music of Wagner, he paid homage to the late Baroque contrapuntal tradition in his organ music. Musicologist Walter Frisch has noted that Reger's "historicist modernism" was similar to that of Brahms, resulting in an assimilation of Bach's music for his own compositional purposes.

Reger's **Introduction and Passacaglia in D Minor**, a contribution to an album of organ pieces by various composers and without an opus number, is surely one of his more accessible and frequently performed organ pieces. Composed in the fall of 1899, Reger's second of five organ works in this form seems to reflect a conscious effort on his part to avoid undue length, complexity, and technical difficulty. Although the principle of continuous variation above a *basso ostinato* imposes a certain restraint all its own, this passacaglia is unusual among similar works by Reger in its concision (only 12 variations).

As with several other organ passacaglias of the Romantic era, the historical template is Bach's *Passacaglia in C Minor*, also in triple meter and beginning with an eight-bar theme in the pedal. In fact, the rhythm of the *basso ostinato* is identical in both. The logic of the musical development in Reger's passacaglia seems somehow ineluctable, as the brooding bass theme repeats inexorably until the final climactic statement—when sunlight finally breaks through the dark clouds, and the minor mode mutates to major.

—Robert Parkins

# Biography

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Robert Parkins is the University Organist and a Professor of the Practice of Music at Duke University. He first assumed the position of Chapel Organist at Duke in 1975, then joined the faculty of the School of Music at Ithaca College in 1982, returning to Duke in 1985.

A graduate of the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and the Yale University School of Music, Dr. Parkins studied organ with Gerre Hancock, Charles Krigbaum, and Michael Schneider, as well as harpsichord with Ralph Kirkpatrick. As a Fulbright scholar, he pursued further organ study in Vienna with Anton Heiller.

Publications by Dr. Parkins include articles for *The Organ Yearbook*, *Early Music*, *The Diapason*, *The American Organist*, and *The Piano Quarterly*, as well as the chapter on “Spain and Portugal” in *Keyboard Music Before 1700* (Routledge).

His organ and harpsichord recordings have appeared on the Calcante, Gothic, Loft, Musical Heritage Society, and Naxos labels. Still available are several solo CDs featuring the Flentrop, Aeolian, and Brombaugh organs in Duke Chapel, including *Early Iberian Organ Music*, *Brahms: Complete Organ Works*, *German Romantic Organ Music*, *Iberian and South German Organ Music*, and *Organ Music of Frescobaldi*.

The most recent album, *Salome's Dance* (recorded on Duke Chapel's Aeolian organ), includes music by late German Romantic and American composers. [Digital downloads are available](#) from Loft Recordings.

# Acknowledgments

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The Chapel thanks Dr. Brian Coggins, Dr. Zebulon Highben, Mr. John Santoianni, and Mr. James Todd for helping to make today's recital possible.