

THE BRAHMS CHORALE PRELUDES MASTER LESSON

Max B. Miller

So you have brought the Brahms organ works for us to look at? You have questions? Good. You should. Definite answers are few: questions focus us. Editions? Each represents one or more viewpoints, and all make musical sense within their own perspectives. But what is Brahms's perspective? How close can we get to an understanding of his outlook with what is known? Then, for what situational artistic reasons ought we to depart from that? If possible, you will want to examine all the standard editions, but as a basis for acceptance or departure you will need to know the Breitkopf and Härtel edition, volume 16 in the collected works, or the reprint of it by Kalmus. The beginning point for background needs to include the reading of Vernon Gotwals's excellent and very thorough article on "Brahms and the Organ" (MUSIC, April 1970), where all the biographical and historical data are summarized. Most useful, too, is Robert Schuneman's article on "Brahms and the Organ" (MUSIC, September 1972), dealing more with editions and organs qua organs.

Was Brahms an organist, and if so, how much of one? We have little conclusive evidence and opinions vary, but we do know that he played enough to perform for a wedding,¹ occasionally accompanied on the organ, and he did, after all, play his own A-flat minor fugue, for he says, "Everybody likes my A-flat minor fugue very much indeed. On Sunday I shall try it again on the organ."² (If we doubt his skill with the pedals, it should be noted that the A-flat minor has the most complicated pedal part of all his organ works.) Brahms writes to Clara Schumann that Böhme's music store in Hamburg contained an organ which he "often played with great delight."³ Would that we knew more about the instrument! It cannot be that it was so grand as St. Stephan's in Vienna or the great music halls. We also know he played his eleven chorale preludes for Ludwig Karpach: "June 24, 1896—In the morning to Brahms at Ischl. He played for me his manuscript chorale settings. Marvelous pieces! . . ."⁴ Did he merely perform them on the piano? It would help greatly if we could know just what sort of instrument Brahms may have had in mind.

Many people have taken a crack at the organ-in-mind problem. It seems worthwhile to take one more approach. We must, after all, make some sort of decisions about the crescendos indicated in Brahms's score. Do they indicate merely a change of manual (an easy solution), or the addition of stops (not always so easy), or the use of the swell pedal? If the swell pedal, then is one to be playing on the Swell or coupled to the Great? For clarification, it may be fruitful to study smaller or medium-sized instruments rather than those of the largest buildings in order to get the feel of what was considered basic to an instrument. All small instruments aspire to the effects of the large instruments and thus most clearly indicate the *direction* of the idealized sound of the times. To examine only large instruments with many luxury stops tends to blur the picture by increasing inordinately the options.

Consider the specifications on page 46, noting their similarities. Older instruments would, of course, have been about, too. Still, these two may give us valuable clues to the registers thought most essential. In each case the Swell is very limited, as is the Pedal; no reeds are included, but note the inclusion of 16' manual tone and mixtures on the Great, as well as the absence of independently controlled 2' stops.

Robert Schuneman's article, already referred to, instructively quotes Hugo Riemann's *Catechism of the Organ*. Very briefly, buildups are made, Riemann says, in the following manner: "In regard to manual stops, a soft flue stop can be gradually strengthened by the addition first of one, two or three soft flue stops, all of them indeed at 8'. Only then will the Principal 8',

then the Oktave 4', then the Bourdon or Gedeckt 16' be added. Further strengthening comes with a Quinte 2½' (which belongs to the Principal 8'), then an 8' reed stop, then an Oktave 2'; all this with the exclusion where possible of further 8' and also 4' flutes. Finally a mixture and then other available stops may be added. Through the coupling of the second manual to the first, one can achieve a fortissimo. . . ."

There are several excellent recordings but it is worth commenting that tempo and registration for a consecutive performance for a concert or recording may not be ideal when considered singly and in a liturgical setting.⁵

1. *Mein Jesu, der du mich*

Brahms's indications are by dynamic levels only: *forte ma dolce*, *più forte*, *piano*, *forte* and again *forte*. The *dolce* marking is to be taken as a "weakening of the given preceding dynamic strength."⁶ The dynamics divide the composition into a large three-part framework, softer in the middle. No manual changes are actually called for, though possibly inferred from the indications. It is easy to feel that the marking of the *forte* twice implies some sort of increase, perhaps after the pattern of the *forte ma dolce-più forte* of the opening. Most editions and performers increase at the final *forte* in bar 42.

Brahms's love of folk song, here the religious folk song of the chorales, is the foundation for all of Opus 122; this vocal base must not be forgotten at any time. The chorales for the collection are given both in E. Power Biggs's edition⁷ and in that edited by Walter Buszín and Paul Bunjes.⁸ The harmonized versions in Mr. Biggs's edition are most useful. The most literary translations are those of Canon Douglas in his *The Chorales from the Organ Works of Brahms*¹²—rather elaborately set for choirs—though the most removed from the original German. Total satisfaction in translation is rare.

"Mein Jesu der du mich" is the most extended composition of the eleven, achieved by the imitative fughettas which introduce the cantus in the Pedal.¹³ It may be the "most learned," too; observe the inversion of the subject in bar 9, and the augmentation in bar 24.

Example 1

The musical notation for Example 1 is presented in three parts. The top part, labeled 'Example 1', shows measures 8 through 18, featuring a 'Subject' in the right hand and an 'Inversion' in the left hand. The middle part shows measures 18 through 24, featuring the 'Subject' in the right hand. The bottom part shows measures 24 through 30, featuring an 'Inverted Augmentation' in the right hand. The notation is in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time, with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature (C).

In the third section, middle of bar 34, we see a small unit of counterpoint which inverts two ideas. At the final *forte* in bar 42, note the use of inversion and the closeness of the stretti.

Example 2
Voice Exchange



Inverted Stretto



It should be observed that at all significant changes in dynamics, the music drops to a position which may free one hand, slight retards being in order. Does this mean with Eibner that, "It is Brahms's innovation to alter the dynamic level and along with it the tone color of each line within the old form"?¹⁴ There is a tendency to play this composition very full, and indeed, if one plays the eleven as a set, it is almost necessary for contrast; but considered by itself it ought to stay pretty well with 8' and 4' stops until the very end. A reed for the pedals is tempting, but rarely too satisfactory; the pedal has to be musically foundational and not overly prominent. Seasonal use is for Passiontide.

2. Herzliebster Jesu

This chorale is well known to English-speaking churchgoers, again for Lent. It is the only composition where the textual overlay is by Brahms himself.¹⁵ The dynamics bring us back to the old question: *forte*, *piano*, *crescendo*. Many editions suggest changing manuals at the *piano* marking in bar 16 and returning in bar 24. What has this done to the *crescendo* which is accompanied by an increase in activity in the accompanimental parts? Each player will decide. While this is often classified as a chorale prelude with an ornamented cantus which requires "lifting out,"¹⁶ it has to be observed here and in No. 6, "O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr Frommen," that while the chorale line has additional notes and even rests introduced, the motives used are shared by the remaining parts and shifted back and forth. The ornamentation does not stand over-against or in-contrast to the accompanying parts. Arnold Schoenberg, when asked whether he would call the final portion of his *Variations on a Recitative* a fugue, since the subject was so little stated, replied, "For the musician it isn't necessary to repeat the subject so often and for the non-musical person no amount of repetition will help."¹⁷ One is inclined to feel this to be the case when the soprano line carries the melody: it is hard to imagine its not being perceived. In this composition the extraction of the melody on another color tears the fabric of the whole. The motivic drop of the diminished fifth and the carefully rhymed figures at the cadences give to this music its soul-rendering quality. The *Adagio* is to be observed together with considerable give-and-take at phrase endings.

3. O Welt, ich muss dich lassen

In this setting of the fairly familiar tune we again encounter *forte*, *ma dolce*. Might this not be, on the organs quoted earlier, all but the principals on the Great? Canon Douglas remarks that this is "probably Brahms's own favorite chorale" as it brought close the memories of Clara Schumann.¹⁸ Here, once again, the

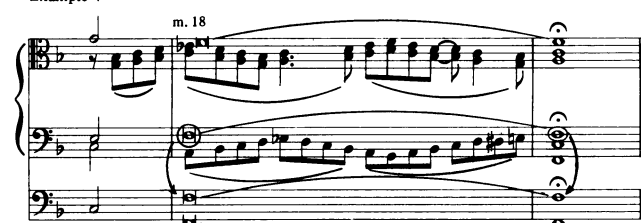
melody is ornamented and as before, the ornamentation is at one with the whole texture. The brief interlude beginning in bar 5, preceding the third chorale phrase, is worth noting for its typical cancellation of ascending half-step intervals: B natural, altered to B flat, C sharp to C, D sharp to D. Nearly all of the chorales containing direct repetitions are treated to the most subtle variations in harmony on their repetition; this is no exception. Note bar 9, both for its reharmonization and also for the long drawn out note which corresponds to the word "Spirit." To be noted, too, are the use of the sigh motive

Example 3
Varied Harmonizations



and the subtle flexibility of rhythms obtained by the variation between $\text{C}\flat$ and $3/2$. The final bars, where the six-part writing occurs, can be easily covered by small hands by taking the top tenor F in the Pedal as well (see Example 4), the hands dividing the inner parts as convenient. The closing bars are so exquisite that it is hard to refrain from broadening to point up the delicious cross-relation between the G minor chord and the Bb minor before the soprano falls gently downward to be answered by the alto. Treat the rhythm freely, with sensitivity to the harmonic tensions in the writing.

Example 4



First tenor part transferred to Pedal for easier legato.

4. Herzlich tut mich erfreuen

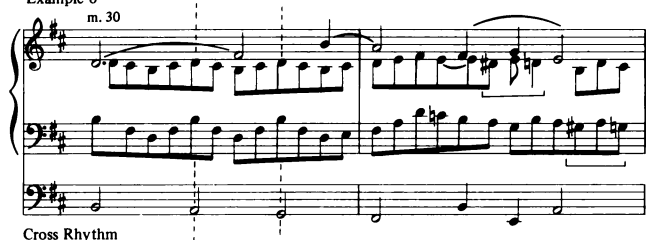
Although two manuals are not expressly called for, it is the easier solution. The delightful introductory lead marked either *mezzo-forte dolce* or *piano* would be difficult otherwise. The *piano* may have been intended to indicate the closing of the swell box. The dynamic levels are easy, too, on a three-manual instrument. Certainly bright 8', 4', 2' on the Swell coupled to Great 8' and 4' stops gives the general idea. The lead-in to each line which quotes the chorale seems to be more in keeping with piano writing and suggests the imitation of the effects of the *sostenuto* pedal. The following realization is conjectural, and though not strictly to be interpreted legato, gives, I think, the best effect:

Example 5

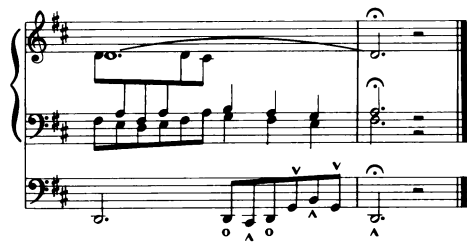


It is clear that such a procedure does not blur the harmony since the harmonic changes occur only at the release of the note. To go over to the Great too soon at the short lead-ins deprives the chorale tune of its impact on its entry. The tune as quoted in the tenor part has the permutations often associated with a fugal answer. The tapering of the inner voices requires some slackening of tempo before the interludes, and when the sub-tonic is reached in bar 24, a definite settling should be allowed. The cross rhythm in the pedal part of bar 30 keeps it pressing forward to bar 31 where the false leading tone of the sort found in "O Welt, ich muss dich lassen," No. 3, may again be seen. A good broadening in the final bar is effective. The pedaling is simple if one crosses the feet.

Example 6



Cross Rhythm



5. *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele*

With "Schmücke dich" we arrive at the first of the four preludes which are really *manualiter* (for manuals alone). "O wie selig," No. 6, and "O Gott, du frommer Gott," No. 7, have pedals only at their conclusion. The chorale melody stands clear in the soprano with no participation in the accompaniment (in contrast to No. 2 and No. 6). The effect is beautiful, with clear 8' tone; a light 4', however, may also be needed. Many prefer to take the chorale on the pedal with a 4' stop as in many of the edited versions. It can be so. This beautiful communion composition is so short that in church it may be useful to employ both methods of performance successively, like a varied repetition of a strophic hymn. *Dolce* is the only marking. To play the work on manuals alone involves some problems at the collisions of the alto part with the cantus—these need to be played down by underdoing the repeated notes. The following is suggestive, but, of course, dependent on building and the other normative variables:

Example 7

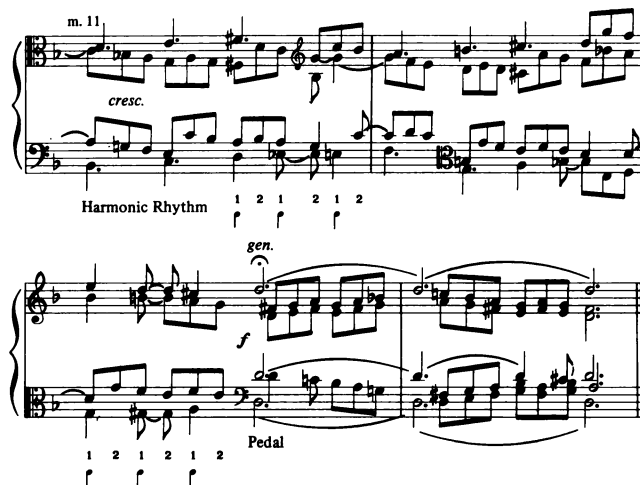


A supple rhythm within each phrase, having just a hint of *accelerando* and *ritardando*, preserves the vocal quality throughout. It is only in this and the following prelude that Brahms indicates the phrase endings with fermatas.

6. *O wie selig seid ihr doch, ihr Frommen*

The crescendo marked in bar 11 indicates that the piece is not to be dynamically static but moves to the final bar and a half *forte*. *Dolce* stands at the top. That so much of musical interest can be packed into a scant fourteen bars is a marvel. It is a study in the use of chromatics within a short, confined but stable tonality. Observe the harmonic changes within the hemiola pattern, especially from bar 11 on. A slight broadening brings this out to full effect. By far the easiest solution to the final bars will be the following:

Example 8



Harmonic Rhythm

gen.

Pedal

m. 13



Coupled to Manual, no Pedal stops.

SCHULZ ORGAN, 1869⁵
Etzelbach, Sachsen-Altenberg

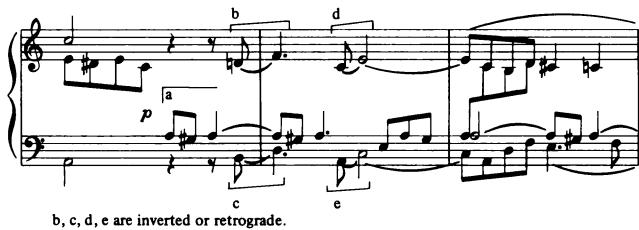
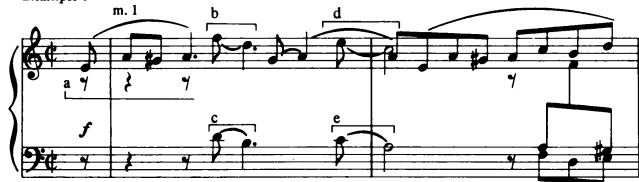
First Manual		Pedal	
16	Bordun	16	Subbass
8	Prinzipal	16	Violonbass
8	Hohlflöte	8	Gedacktbass
8	Gamba		
4	Oktave		Manual, Pedal coupling to I
III	Mixture		
 Second Manual			
8	Lieblich Gedackt		
8	Salizional		
8	Dolce		
4	Gedacktflöte		

This solves the rather complex five-part writing for the hands. The limited double pedaling is no problem to anyone: this allows for free use of the pedal, ad lib, throughout, without any addition of stops being required for the final bars. One or more clear 8' stops are exquisite with this delicate texture; a 4' for clarity might be added if needed. The participation of the soprano in the motives of the accompaniment seems to rule out solo treatment.

7. O Gott, du frommer Gott

Three manuals are called for at *forte*, *piano* and *pianissimo*, the third being no problem as the rests allow for reduction by hand on a two manual. It is interesting that the chorale is placed by Brahms on the soft (*piano*) manual while the "introductory" material which anticipates the tune and in fact gives a florid version of it, is on the louder (*forte*) keyboard. The tune itself stands forth quite straightforwardly and suggests the possibility of soloing in any of various ways. Both Biggs and Bunjes give good solutions if desired. The gentle art of varying a musical statement is subtly shown forth in this composition in so many small ways; compare bar 1 and bar 3 in Example 9. The cross relations in bars 11 and 12 are exquisite.

Example 9



8. Es ist ein Ros' entsprungen

What is Christmas without this setting of "Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming"? Here all is commentary: the original tune becomes a springboard for a newly derived melody. Non-harmonic tones must be given slightly longer duration to approximate the effect of the melody as it would sound when sung or played on a stringed or wind instrument. Two manuals are indicated with a single *dolce* marking following the *piano*. Light registration is called for on both manuals but the clearer stops will be required for Manual II when the melody dips into the tenor and alto parts at the end of bar 4 for half of the chorale line. Soloing on a distinctly different color would be more convincing if the melody stayed in that register and did not complete the musical phrase by the minimally varied repeti-

WALKER ORGAN, 1878^o
Schlosskirche, Bad Homburg

First Manual		Pedal	
16	Bourdon	16	Subbass
8	Prinzipal	8	Oktavbass
8	Flöte		
8	Gambe		Manual, Pedal coupling to I
4	Oktave		(through-coupling)
IV	Mixture (2 $\frac{2}{3}$)		
 Second Manual			
8	Lieblich Gedackt		
8	Salizional		
4	Flöte		

tion of the end of bar 2 to 4. Quite playable without pedals, small hands will find it useful to couple for some of the large intervals, especially the end of bar 18.

Example 10



9 and 10. Herzlich tut mich verlangen

In looking at the two settings of this beloved Passion chorale together, the first thing that strikes one is the fact that the rhythmic versions of the chorale are reversed—what is duple in the first is triple in the second and vice-versa. In No. 9, the two dynamic markings of *forte* and *piano* may be realized by changing manuals though this is not specifically indicated. No interludes impede the flow of the ornamented melody which rides above the rhythmic ostinato of the pedal with its carefully matched cadences. Rather full sound and not too slow a tempo bring this out to its full potential. No. 10, however, has slight pauses between the chorale line and a pianistic accompaniment riding above the melody. What a wonderful example of how to write more than one melodic line in a single voice. Note especially the opening bar as well as bars 17–18.

Example 11



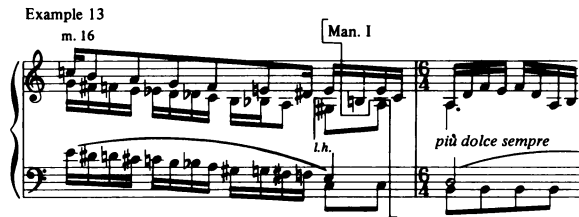
To be brought out by tenutos

Manual II has the same dynamic marking as Manual I. The off-rhythm line in bar 2 needs some careful slight prolongment to bring it out as does the reaching upward of bar 1, thus:

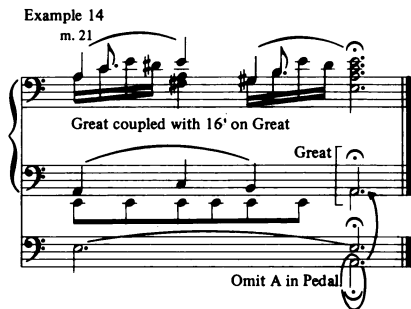
Example 12



The bridge back to Manual I at bar 16 may well be played thus:



Note the *più dolce sempre* as well as the *ritenuto sempre* in bar 19. The final bar, the *Adagio*, with the root of the chord given in the pedal 5th, is difficult on most organs. If the organ is a three manual, it is possible to take the final A on the Great with a light 16'. This gives a good conclusion.



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Johannes Brahms

11. O Welt, ich muss dich lassen

With No. 11 we come to Brahms's final musical will and testament. The chorale has already been used before at No. 3. How subtly, once again, Brahms varies his repetitions when suggested by the chorale line. The echoes are clearly structured from *forte ma dolce*, to *piano* to *pianissimo*, and marked with appropriate manual changes. The variables of building and organ will dictate how much time is to be allowed and how freely the echoes should be taken. The non-harmonic tones require spaciousness and breadth in performance; time, for Brahms, has with this last composition ceased its hurry and its very meaning.

The whole of Opus 122 includes a scant 317 bars of music for eleven compositions, but what a wealth and legacy we have been left in these profound meditations on the church's hymns.

FOOTNOTES

1. Gotwals, Vernon. "Brahms and the Organ," MUSIC, April 1970, p. 38.
2. Douglas, Winfred. *The Chorales from the Organ Works of Brahms*, H.W. Gray Co., Inc., N.Y., 1945, p. iii.
3. Gotwals, op. cit., p. 39.
4. Douglas, op. cit., p. v.
5. Metzler, Wolfgang. *Romantischer Orgelbau in Deutschland*, Verlag E.F. Walcker & Cie., Ludwigsburg, 1966, p. 42.
6. Metzler, op. cit., p. 61.
7. Schuneman, Robert. "Brahms and the Organ," MUSIC, September 1972, p. 33.
8. I acknowledge with gratitude notes from Leslie Pratt Spelman's well-known master classes on Brahms's organ works. Dr. Spelman has frequently performed the complete Opus 122 twice in the same concert to increase listener familiarity and appreciation.
9. Fellingner, Imogen. *Über die Dynamik in der Musik von Johannes Brahms*. Hesse, Berlin and Wunsiedel, 1961. Translated and quoted from Schuneman, op. cit., p. 33.
10. Biggs, E. Power. *Johannes Brahms, Opus 122*, Mercury Music Corp., N.Y., 1949.
11. Buszin, Walter E. and Bunjes, Paul G. *Brahms: Complete Organ Works, volume II*, Edition Peters, N.Y. 1964.
12. Douglas, op. cit.
13. Only No. 4, "Herzlich tut mich erfreuen," and No. 7, "O Gott, du frommer Gott," have lengthy material between the lines of the chorale and each is of such a different nature from this! No. 11, with its echoes, is yet different.
14. Eibner, Franz. Jacket notes for *Johannes Brahms, Sämtliche Werke für Orgel*. (Telefunken, SLT 430 18-B.)
15. Gotwals, op. cit., p. 48.
16. Buszin and Bunjes, op. cit., Forward.
17. Private lesson with the composer on his Opus 40 in November 1950.
18. Douglas, op. cit., p. viii.