

DEAR UNCLE MAX

Send questions to Dear Uncle Max, AGO National Headquarters, 475 Riverside Dr., Suite 1260, New York, NY 10115.

Can the two- and three-part inventions of J.S. Bach be used on the organ? I am a high school student who is just starting the organ and I really like these pieces.

If you want to play them on the organ, I see no reason why you shouldn't. Some will work better than others, especially among the three-part ones. You will be able to tell quickly which work best. The two-part inventions are not dissimilar to the four duets in the *Clavierübung Part III*. You may be interested to know you are in good company. In 1903/4, Max Reger and Karl Straube brought out an edition called *School of Trio-playing: "J.S. Bach's Two-part Inventions with a Third Part Added."* Not having seen the work, I can't say how successful the third parts are; however, while at first it seems an odd idea, on reflection, it is pedagogically sound to start students with something they know—the keyboard parts—and add only a new line—the pedal part—so that the difficulties of starting work on the pedals may be concentrated upon.

The music of Dupré is so wonderful, but there are some things that are beyond the reach of small hands. Is it ever possible to change the voicings of chords to fit smaller hands?

If you have small hands and can't manage what is written, your only choices are: (a) change the voicings or chord positions, or (b) don't play it at all. Few composers want their music resting on the shelves unplayed! Note first the most salient and important melodic-thematic content and leave that unaltered, then alter only secondary material, trying to keep the full harmony sounding with your changes, like a bad seam in clothing, tucked out of sight or sound. Some few things may really have to be set aside and left for big-handed players.

Since this is the 100th anniversary of Brahms's death, I am curious to know of his background with the organ and why he wrote what he did for the organ.

I am sure all of us would like a fuller answer to your questions than we seem to have. This being, as you note, the anniversary of Brahms's death, scholars will be again sifting material for new information. Briefly, this seems to be the case:

With regard to his organ playing, Vernon Gotwals, in his fine article in *MUSIC: The AGO/RCCO Magazine*, April 1970, asserts that "Brahms became thoroughly acquainted with the organ in his youth." We do know that when he was 23, he wrote to Clara Schumann, "I am practicing it (his A-minor Fugue?) just now, things are going remarkably better with the organ! . . . Is organ-playing so hard for you, too? Probably not." Shortly later he wrote, "I have already thought about the possibility that I can become a passable organ virtuoso by next year. . . ." We do know he liked to be somewhere where an organ was available for practice. At least he reached a level where he could perform his own A-flat-minor Fugue—not the easiest piece in the world.

The two Preludes and Fugues, in A and G minor, were found among Clara Schumann's papers and were not preserved by Brahms himself. They are thought to come from the time, early in his life, when he was exchanging weekly compositions with Joachim, mostly contrapuntal studies.

The Fugue in A-flat Minor and the Chorale Prelude and Fugue on "O Traurigkeit, o Herzeleid" both come from the Joachim period, around 1856. These marvelous compositions Brahms did publish. After a concert Brahms conducted in 1864, Salomon Mosenthal remarked that "If Brahms is really happy, he sings: The grave is my joy." This "atmosphere . . . of profoundest grief" (Karl Geiringer) pervades these two compositions, as well as his last ones, the Eleven Chorale Preludes of Opus 122. These compositions were written

at Ischl in the Salzkammergut, where Brahms liked to vacation, after the death of Clara Schumann and while he was seriously ill. Not all of the eleven are dated 1896, causing scholars to debate which may be earlier works included in Opus 122. Nor do all of the compositions deal with thoughts of last things, but even the most cheerful, *Herzlich tut mich erfreuen*, has one eye on the eternal, as shown in the wonderful translation of Winfred Douglas:

O how my heart rejoices
To greet the summertime
When God reneweth all things
To their eternal prime.

Restored to perfect beauty
By God's almighty power,
Earth, heaven, and all creation
Shall rise in that great hour.

MAX MILLER, FAGO

EDITOR'S NOTE

In addition to the Gotwals article mentioned above, readers of this journal should consult:

- "Brahms and the Organ," Robert Schuneman, *MUSIC: The AGO/RCCO Magazine*, Sept. 1972, p. 30.
- "Brahms Chorale Preludes," Max B. Miller, FAGO, *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, April 1979, p. 43.
- "Brahms Early Music Studies and His Sacred Choral Music," Virginia Hancock, *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, May 1983, p. 41.
- "The Organ Music of Brahms," Gwilym Beechey, *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, May 1983, p. 43.
- "Brahms and the von Beckerath Family," Henry Fusner, *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, May 1983, p. 47.
- "Brahms's Organ Works: A New Critical Edition," George S. Bozarth, *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*, June 1988, p. 50.

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