

DEAR UNCLE MAX

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

What past or present celebrities (this could mean actors, singers, politicians, sports figures, or even famous just for being famous) have or have had the ability to play the organ? Were any of them AGO members? I have a feeling the answers could be surprising and fun!

D.R., Westminster, Calif.

I am sure the answers could be surprising and fun. I am also sure I don't know where to begin. Let's do it this way: if enough people write me with names, identifying professions and/or Guild membership, I'll coordinate them and send them to TAO. In the meantime, I'll check with Miss Lewinsky; would you mind calling Mr. Starr?

I'm looking for a reliable and trustworthy edition of J.S. Bach's organ works. My Peters edition is worn out and I'd like to replace it with something better. Can you make a recommendation? Is the Neue Bach-Ausgabe (Bärenreiter) the "best" performing edition? How about the Alan Ridout (Kevin Mayhew) edition? Can you compare/contrast the positives and negatives of several of the best? Is there any book on Bach's organ works more current than Peter Williams's two-volume set of the 1980s?

M.K., Gurnee, Ill.

I am glad that you asked for opinions, those I can give and am happy to share. It is rather startling to discover that there are about 18 current complete editions of Bach's organ works from Europe and America alone. A few are just reprints at cheaper prices, but most have some reason for existing: a new arrangement of the order, better type, easier page turns, elegant bindings, another look at the sources, etc.

The selection of an edition for you is rather like the purchase of lingerie or underwear—it is very personal, had better fit the uses you have in mind, be reasonably priced, be durable, and above all be supportive of the user and comfortable when in use.

Many more nonmusical considerations come into play with Bach than any other organ composer because of the frequent use we make of his large output.

Some nonmusical considerations would be:

- How often am I carting one or more volumes from church to home or work?

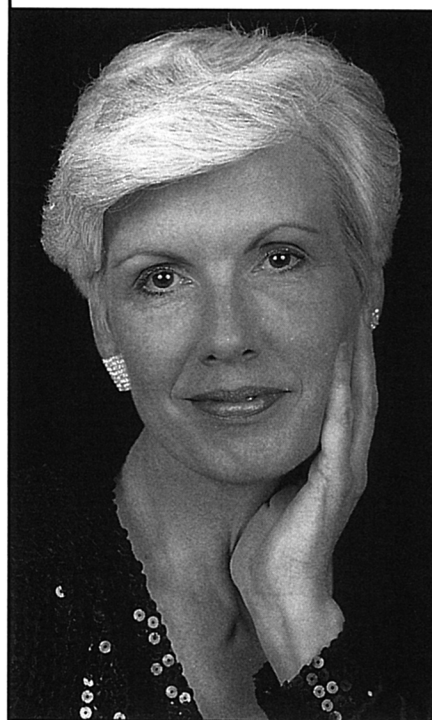
- What is the weight per volume if I am required to lug around three volumes on a daily/weekly basis? (Would you believe I took six random volumes from three editions to the post office to weigh? Peters, 2 volumes, at 1.85 pounds; Schweitzer, 2 volumes, at 3.47 pounds; NBA, 2 volumes, at 3.14 pounds).
- Is the size of the print comfortable on my music rack?
- Is the music print concise or excessively spacious, requiring unnecessary page turns?
- If I need to photocopy a third page, can I get the darn thing on the machine for a one-shot one page?
- Will the pages turn brown by the end of the year and the corners tear and fall off?
- Is the binding durable? Will it fall apart with hard use? Will the pages come loose?
- Can I train the volume to lie open without loosening the glue?

No major publishing company could afford to bring out a truly careless edition of Bach—too costly. The more recent editions have the advantage over the *Bach-Gesellschaft* (BG) and Peters of about 100 years of scholarship. Even so, that is not necessarily definitive; any edition requires editorial choices. As Christoph Wolff writes, "He [Bach] would revise and improve a work when he was copying it out, and when giving further performances would make fresh alterations and improvements. He also inserted corrections in works already in print . . . the 'final' version does not represent a definitive one but merely a further state in search of perfection." Russell Stinson carries this idea further: "As he (Bach) had his pupils copy out the collection, he could have instructed them by word of mouth to amend passages left 'uncorrected' in the autograph. This is precisely how he appears to have revised such didactic collections as the *Inventions*, the *Sinfonias*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the *French Suites*, where pupils' copies often preserve readings of greater refinement than the autograph." How difficult then to get THE READING, as we don't always have an autograph copy, and different students passed the works down in varying configurations from teacher to student. I suppose the marvel is the general consensus we do have.

There seem to be two general editorial processes at work in arriving at a performance text. The first is to decide (educated opinion) on the best readings extant, then compare them in great detail, and come up with the best reading possible (judgment call). Alan Ridout, in commenting on his new edition (see below) writes in TAO (June 1995) that

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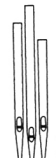
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he was sustained by "a growing awareness over the years of documentary evidence of Bach's own down-to-earth musicianship. No one could have been less precious in his approach. . . . It was performance and above all communication he was interested in—never the letter of the law." The second approach appears to give the best of variant readings, such as in the NBA, Vol. 6, which gives three differing readings of the *Fuga in C Minor (über ein Thema von Legrenzi)*: page 19, BWV 574; page 82, BWV 574a; and page 88, BWV 574b. Not to be played simultaneously! The editors leave you with choices you may or may not always be grateful for. A particularly interesting middle ground can be seen in Heinz Lohmann's edition of the Eighteen Great Chorale Preludes (Vol. 7, p. 78). *Komm Heiliger Geist*, BWV 652, is simultaneously printed in more than one version.

It has always been of interest to me that two people whom I know as Bach scholars of distinction both feel that the *Bach Gesellschaft* frequently has a better reading than the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* for the organ works. I am passing that on, not verifying it. If I reincarnate as other than a green bug, perhaps I can decide for myself.

Right now, I mostly play from the Peters edition for the following reason—if there is a way of laying the music out so the performer can turn, it has been done. This makes both practice and performance easier and more pleasurable. The initial page layout is a bit compressed from left to right, but after practicing from it, you appreciate not turning pages unnecessarily. Habit is a factor and many, many notes are penciled in.

I will give a brief summary of some of the most frequently encountered editions.

The following have been about a long time:

1. *Oeuvres complètes pour orgue de J.S. Bach*, ed. Marcel Dupré. Once much used, its dated performance practice leaves it a historic document on its own right. Occasionally useful for fingering problems, a basic direction in registration and tempo (generally a bit slow for my taste), and older insights into manual changes.
2. *Complete Organ Works*, ed. Widor, Schweitzer, and Nies-Berger. Still a good overall edition—prefaces interesting but dated.
3. *Bach-Gesellschaft*, Breitkopf und Härtel. Still an excellent edition. See also the Dover reprints; though somewhat small print, they are still usable and the most reasonably priced. Ideal for students with little cash who are just

interested in "learning a bit about the organ and organ music." A good copy to use to compare with other editions. Lea pocket scores—if you can still get them—are wonderful for study, as you can have all the volumes on your desk and still work with a book or two and go back and forth without spilling things on the floor.

4. *Johann Sebastian Bachs Kompositionen für die Orgel*, Peters, ed. Grienpenkerl and Roitzsch plus Keller. I have said why I like it. When your question arrived, I happened to have Volume II on the organ. Glancing through it, I was surprised at how many small changes have been penciled in here and there, mostly of not great consequence, such as *Prelude and Fugue in C Major*, BWV 545, the next to last bar:

Peters:



Gesellschaft:



The *Gesellschaft* reading ought to be used on a day when the sun is streaming into the church through the Transfiguration window! (Dr. Hancock take note, start improvisation training by filling in the thirds.) More problematic would be the *Fantasia and Fugue in G Minor*, BWV 542. In the Peters edition, eight bars from the end, surely this should read an A for the top C in the changing note figure on the second half of beat two; some changes in accidentals appear from edition to edition. The Fugue in the Peters is more problematic; I cop out by playing it from the Widor-Schweitzer—too many changes to write in. The Peters is playable all right, but the tightness of the motivic accompanying lines is better and the subject entries are more clearly defined in other readings. Peters does give alternate readings to both on pages 89 and 93 for what they are worth.

Some British editions are not so frequently encountered in this country:

1. *Complete Organ Works*, Augener. Rarely seen.
2. *The Organ Works of J.S. Bach*, ed. Dykes-Bower, Emery, Bridge, Higgs, and Atkins. While actually in 19 volumes, the 20th volume gives "Four-Part Harmonizations of the Chorales Used in the Organ Works." I find this very useful—most editions, when they offer the Chorales at all, give a tune version. I often like (hardly original) to play the chorale before or after the Prelude, but I'm not about to pop up and sing a solo line!

Some newer spaciously laid out editions that seem to be excellent:

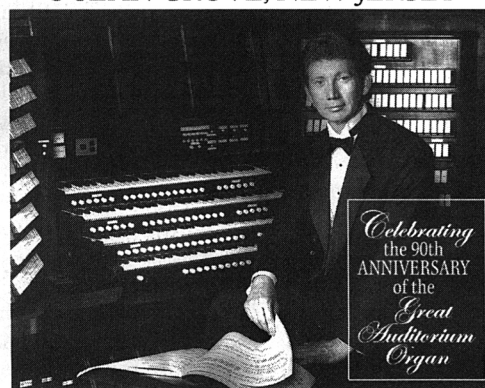
1. *Bach, Sämtliche Orgelwerke*, Breitkopf und Härtel, ed. Heinz Lohmann.
2. *Complete Organ Works*, Editio Musica Budapest, ed. Tamás Zászkaliczky, Boosey and Hawkes, Presser. Zászkaliczky writes in his introduction that the Peters, *Bach-Gesellschaft*, and the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, as well autograph sources, have been consulted to produce a wholly practical edition. Deviations are discussed in the footnotes, leaving the performer with choices. This edition also includes the three- and six-part Ricercars from the *Musical Offering*, the Neumeister Chorales, and closes with an edition of *The Art of Fugue*. *Musical Opinion* (May 1991) says this "must be one of the most practical and economically viable collected editions of Bach's organ music on the market." It is lovely.

In a special category is the *Bach Orgelwerke, Neue Bach-Ausgabe*—NBA, Bärenreiter. This is not limited to the organ works and comes with a separate set of Critical Commentaries setting forth the whys and wherefores of the edition. An edition for the serious scholar, organist or not, it should retain a central place in Bach scholarship for years to come.

Last, you ask me about *The Complete Organ Works of J.S. Bach*, Kevin Mayhew Ltd., ed. Alan Ridout. This required a trip to the Boston Public Library, an institution with which I have a love-hate relationship going back many years. After filling out my request slip, washing my hands in germicidal soap, putting on surgically hypoallergenic gloves, a gauze mask on my face, and a blue smock, I approached the desk with my request. I am accustomed to encountering a frazzled head of hair with a part in it, clearly telling when the last dye job was done, that without showing any face at all snarls in a drawn-out way, "Yees!" Then, on looking at your request, still without showing any identity, further snarls in a unisex voice, "Why would you want to see that book!" You grovel a bit and wait. I

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was prepared to remind her that I *am* a taxpayer and, further, didn't she know I was (distantly) related to the McKim who was the building's architect? (Name dropping! Disgusting.) Not necessary. The librarian, apparently new and not yet broken into the ethos of that venerable institution, could not have been nicer. She handed the request to the attendant slave, who scurried off to the tomb for the tomes, saying it would be about 20 minutes and that I should sit (where I could be watched for revolutionary activities).

In 15 minutes, the slave returned bookless. After a brief consultation, he departed again, this time returning with success. I was read my rights: no photocopying, no wandering about with the books, or leaning on them while using them—bad for the binding, etc. They were handed over. I must say, this is the coffee-table edition, beautifully boxed, finely bound in four large volumes, generously printed. The ad for the edition proclaims “40% fewer page turns.” Like salad dressing ads with their 40% less fat and cholesterol, you are not told to what it is being compared. Peters, NBA?

As Dr. Ridout says in speaking of his underlying principles for the edition, “. . . one major recurring concern was that, as far as possible, page turns would be reduced, and that, when they did occur, would be placed in such a way that the player could happily still perform a piece without either a page turner or constant worry.” This appears to have been successfully done to a remarkable degree—no small achievement. This end is aided by a somewhat larger, wider format.

Another concern was that all pages would lie flat. I certainly can't speak to that—they weren't lying flat in the library, but most likely would after use. One did have visions of a volume, like an unwaxed moustache, drooping over the sides of the music rack. However grand the four volumes look in their excellent binding, I think I would prefer eight volumes in paperback (perhaps the publisher will come to that), as then more than one volume could be used on the music rack at once (and perhaps a hymnal as well). One further goal Dr. Ridout states: “To make a performing edition, one as free as possible of problems for the modern player, and one which makes decisions, sometimes bold ones, so that the problems of scholarship and interpretation of minutiae were not simply passed on.” In other words, pick it up and play. It is good.

Any single edition that did all of the things the various editions set out to do would be costly, impractical, and intimidating. Don't expect *one* final end-all edition. The next generation will feel the need to re-edit again, regardless.

I think in summary, were I starting again, I would most likely work this way:

1. If I just wanted to play Bach, I would get the Alan Ridout, Kevin Mayhew edition—“bold decisions” made, page turns easy.
2. If I had some interest in the variant readings where they exist, I would probably choose the Tamás Zászkaliczky, Editio Musica Budapest, which includes a number of works probably—questionably—marginally for organ but certainly playable on the organ.
3. If I had interests in the whole area of Bach research, I would get the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*.
P.S. I wouldn't throw away my Peters or any other edition I owned!

BOOKS

You have the Peter Williams two-volume set that gives sources for the MSS and so much more useful information. You may also have, and will want to have if you don't, Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J.S. Bach: A Background*, Vol. III, Cambridge University Press, 1984. This volume has articles under the headings of “The Music in Service and Recital,” “The Music and Its Composition,” “The Music and Its Organ,” and “The Music and Its Performance,” plus some additions and corrections to Vols. I and II. You will enjoy it. Less of a reference volume and more to sit down and enjoy than the other volumes. And don't forget Williams's *Playing the Organ Works of Bach*, which is published by the AGO.

Stauffer, George, and Ernest May, editors, *J.S. Bach as Organist*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1986. I think all serious students would profit especially from May's “The Types, Uses, and Historical Position of Bach's Organ Chorales” and George Stauffer's “Fugue Types in Bach's Free Organ Works.”

Stinson, Russell, *Bach: The Orgelbüchlein*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1996. Composition types within the *Orgelbüchlein*, dating, formal features, and so forth. Individual comments on each chorale prelude.

Wolff, Christoph, *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991. Wide-ranging, but plenty of essays of specific interest to the organist, such as “The Neumeister Collection” and “Schübler Chorales.”

The important thing is not to be paralyzed by what you or we don't know, but to play the music *Soli Deo Gloria* as was the Master's intent.