

## DEAR UNCLE MAX

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

As an organ student I was planning to prepare J.S. Bach's "Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir" (BWV 686), for the Associate Exam at the Royal Conservatory in Toronto. Several organists have told me the piece is difficult, and several others have told me they have tried to learn it but have given up on it.

I really like this chorale prelude and want to learn it. Could you please give me some ideas how to approach the "tricky" sections, such as the double pedal passages?

A.R.E., Ont.

What a wonderful exam piece to choose! I think it is great when the exam choices direct you to something of lasting value to work on. I am sorry for the negative comments of your colleagues, as I am sure you will learn the composition with your expressed interest in it. Sure, it is difficult, but the difficulties are really in knowing the piece well enough to follow the counterpoints easily and comfortably, hearing them as you play. Six parts are always challenging to follow, but I think the double pedaling will fall into line of its own accord. Let's talk about this masterpiece rather obliquely; I want to overcome the negatives you have been fed!

The text for the tune is Martin Luther's translation of Psalm 130, the "De profundis" ("Out of the deep have I called to Thee, O Lord"). It was among the first of Luther's hymns to be associated with funerals and memorial services and was used at Luther's own funeral; it was among his favorites. It is one of the seven penitential psalms; an old prayer book of mine says at the top, "Against Envy." The opening line of the Phrygian tune is very striking with its falling interval of a fifth. It matches perfectly the descent into the "depths" of the German text. Not so easy to get a truly matched opening line in English—Catherine Winkworth has "From deepest woe I cry to Thee," while George Macdonald has "From trouble deep I cry to Thee," and a newer translation by Gracia Grindal has "Out of the depths I cry to you," which sadly puts the *of* on the low note. Bach's four-part chorale setting begins strikingly with a major  $\frac{4}{2}$  chord, masking the modal character more than a bit, but dramatically emphasizing the falling interval.

Aus tie - fer Not schrei ich zu dir,  
Dein gnä - dig' Oh - ren keh'r' zu mir,



This amazing organ prelude, comprising a scant 54 measures, counting the second ending as bar 22, is a motet type with short expositions, imitations, countersubjects—all the contrapuntal artifices. Almost no filler material; it is worth your while to go through it one part at a time. Note in the initial exposition that the fugal answer is at the subdominant level to preserve the modality, the second entrance being already in stretto with the third entry, also at the subdominant level. Note, too, how subtly the eighth notes enter in measure 5 with their use increasing to the coda. A rhythmic crescendo marks the progression from a more choral to a more instrumental style for a strong conclusion.

Riemenschneider classes this work in scope and mastery with the "larger choruses of the *Mass in B Minor* and with the six-part 'Ricercare' from the *Musical Offering*." Ax-

iomatically, the larger the number of parts the more difficult to write fluidly flowing lines. Bach, of course, does both.

A word about double pedaling—really independent part writing rather than an occasional octave doubling. According to Willi Apel (*History of Keyboard Music to 1700*), the technique of double pedals was in use in Germany as early as the 15th century. Certainly, a unique example in the repertoire is Arnold Schlick's (1460–1521) ten-voice setting of "Ascendo ad Patrem," of which Schlick writes, "I have succeeded in setting the chant 'Ascendo ad Patrem' for ten voices, which one may play on the organ, four parts on the pedals and six on the manual, as I can illustrate for the eyes and ears of an audience." The translation is taken from Apel, as well as the example below:



Apel finds the work "massive" and full of power. It is Mattheson whose notes refer to Bruhns as accompanying himself on the violin while playing on an appropriate stop with the feet. One would love to have watched Schlick play his "Ascendo" and heard Bruhns do his violin/pedal duet—how sad he left no written examples! An unexplored field for ground-breaking composers: Sonata for Organ Pedals and anything but cello!

All of the following composers left some examples of double pedaling: Bruhns, F. Couperin, Ileborgh, Lübeck, Marchand, Reincken, Schlick, Senfl, and Tunder. Tunder's *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* is an especially beautiful chorale prelude. Of course, Bach himself left other examples.

Now, after this long smoke screen—really an exhortation to keep you from giving up—I will try to see what ideas I do have that may help you approach the tricky passages.

Basically, the manual parts divide rather naturally into two parts per hand—the easiest way to keep part writing clean in your own mind as well. Early on, be sure you decide and mark where this pattern, two parts in each hand, must be changed.

Regarding the two pedal lines, you will find your own way as you work on it. Old-fashioned, fully marked legato pedaling may be found in Dupré's edition, or, if you can find it, Albert Riemenschneider's *Clavierübung, Part III*. Still, I think it better if you work with your body's limitations from scratch and see what your feet tell you. I think the whole effect should give the *impression* of being legato, but it doesn't actually have to be so. In the pedal parts, observe that Bach has written it so that at no time do both parts jump; one part is always in stepwise motion, masking the breaks. In measure 12, where the left foot must go from low E to A to the octave E, necessary breaks fit the music. I would do a good bit of heel/toe, toe/heel on one note, such as the first low E. When an absolute leap must be made, think ahead, prepare for the shortest possible movement and keep breaks of *consistent* duration for the ease of the listener.

The registration indicated is simply full organ, "Pro Organo Pleno." The following articles in Peter Williams's *The Organ Music of J.S. Bach*, Vol. III, will be of special interest: No. 19, Organo pleno; and No. 27, Pedals and Pedaling. We all know that organo pleno can be interpreted in various ways. However you register this, aim for a singing clarity throughout. Hermann Keller even suggests that one might perform the right-foot part, the chorale tune in long notes, by having a trombone play it. Bach has already underlined the tune in red pencil by its note values. You know, it's not the power of the light source in a lighthouse that gives the strong beam, but rather the ever-reflecting and reflected light from the carefully ground mirrors surrounding the light source. Just to pound out the tune is to obscure its reflected glory in the derived counterpoints.

Enjoy, and good luck with your examination.