

## DEAR UNCLE MAX

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

*Why do organists play Bach on one loud registration?*

U.N.O., Pa.

A Fable (apologies to Aesop): I have a very small dog, a twelve-pound Yorkshire named Henry. He just isn't very big and we are surrounded by large breed dogs of considerable tonnage—golden retrievers, a large poodle, an African razorback, a rottweiler, a Portuguese waterdog, and an assortment of mutts. Being insecure amidst such daunting company, Henry has thought it through; when he is put on his run rope in the morning, he attacks first with unbelievable loud and rapid barking in the backyard. Loud is always, in its way, impressive. There is never anything in the backyard to be fearful of—at best, two seed-picking grackles fly off. His idea is, by barking so frightfully in the backyard, he will also clear the side yard where other animals are apt to be. The gray cat under the bird feeder slinks away, squirrels head for the trees, crows and pigeons take to the roofs to survey what will happen next. Having cleared both yards by hard work at the back, he calmly walks to the side yard, settles down on the warm pavement in front of the garage in the sun and surveys the domain over which he has established mastery.

Moral: If feeling insecure, uncertain, and vulnerable, always Bach as loudly as possible, it's impressive.

*Did Bach use reeds in his pleno and should we?*

U.N.O., Pa.

When I first read the three questions submitted by U.N.O., I contemplated an extended vacation in South America. It isn't that the questions aren't good, they are right on for all of us and I suppose I have more or less been thinking about these and related questions the whole of my professional life and most likely will continue while I am able to think, though feebly. I have plenty of colleagues whom I know and respect who could give a definite answer without so much as a sneeze. Answered. Over. Done with. Permanently laid to rest. Onward. Just do it so. Next question.

Let me see if I can illustrate why I am uncomfortable. I am going to summarize bits and pieces from "authorities" roughly around Bach in time, place, and spirit, but am not going to follow anything through to its final resting place.

That will be your job. First of all, and most importantly, we have to decide, if we can, what Pleno means. Pro Organo Pleno, for full organ. Here we have quite a range of historic opinions as to what constitutes Organo Pleno and the stops that ought to be included or excluded:

An early definition, 1576, by K. Eckstein says, "For organo pleno, Principal, Octave, Gedackt, Quints, Mixtures, and Zimbel should be drawn."

Include Flutes? This is really quite standard except Compenius would not allow the Gedackt, nor would Werckmeister: "I can make the point straight away that one does not like to draw together two stops of the same pitch if they are not made to the same scale."

Adlung thinks that's dumb: "... when the current of wind is strong enough ... I take no notice ... but draw such equal stops together without giving it a thought."

How much makes a pleno? Kauffman, for shorter chorale-fughettas indicates organo pleno as being "Principals 8' and 4', or das volle Werk" and again as being "Trompete 8', Principal 8', and Octave 4', or das volle Werk."

At the other end of the scale, Mattheson says Organo Pleno *may* include Principals, Sorduns (Bourbons), Salicionals or Salicets, Rauschpfeifes, Quints, Mixtures, Scharfs, Quintaton ranks, Zimbels, Nasats, Tierces, Sesquialteras, and Superoctaves, and the pedal may include the Posaune.

What about the Tierces? Perhaps most often excluded; however, J.F. Walther admitted Tierces and Cornets; others suggested that they be allowed in major keys, as Mizler warns against clashes in major and minor thirds from Tierce ranks; while Mattheson would bring in Mixtures, Quints, and Tierces to fill out the church and support the congregation.

Reeds? (Your direct question!) Agricola in 1758 advocated a biggish Organo Pleno of all Principals and Mixtures, plus Reeds 16', 8', and 4', provided they were in tune. No flutes included except a 16'; Agricola, regarding Bach's use of reeds says, "... Bach was a great friend of them; he just had to know what could be played on them and how." (Did Bach ever try a reedy Grand Jeu registration borrowed from the French? He must have known of such combinations. Where might he have used it?)

An over-the-shoulder view of Bach's use of stops: The famous quotes about "no one knew so well as he the registering of organs" ... and "organists were terrified when he ... drew stops in his manner" merely suggest that we are missing something, as indeed we are.

Finally, we might be well advised to keep in mind Peter Williams's remarks that "Players today ... should consider whether labeling a prelude or fugue 'organo pleno' was meant to do more than alert the original players merely to the category of the piece in hand, i.e.,

indicating that it was not a solo-stop chorale or a two-manual trio. Such 'alerting' must have become necessary as the scope of organ music grew wider and its forms became more varied by 1725."

*Is it correct to change manuals in Bach in the preludes and fugues?*

U.N.O., Pa.

The well-educated Dr. Schweitzer (Doctor of Theology, Medicine, Philosophy, and honorary Doctor of Music, Divinity, and Literature) in his book, *J.S. Bach* (English edition, 1911, Vol. I, page 308), says, "He (Bach) gives no indications on the point (manual changes), simply because the works carry their own indications. Leading parts on the grand organ, subsidiary parts (generally recognizable by the omission of the pedal) on the supplementary manuals—this is what he expects from the player." "The first thing, therefore, is always to look for the simple architectural lines of the work. The registration that brings these out is the right one; any other, no matter how ingenious it may be, is less good ... We must keep to the principle that every fugue and every prelude is to begin and end on the great organ (p. 303)." So also the late 19th- and early 20th-century editions of Bach—Bridge/Higgs, c.1885; Straube, 1913; Widor/Schweitzer, 1912.

It is of great interest to note that in 1837, E.J. Hopkins described Mendelssohn's playing of the A-minor Fugue, BWV 543, with manual changes thus: "He played the episode commencing on the swell organ, returning to the great organ when the pedal part re-enters but transferring the E in the treble (an inverted dominant pedal—to the great organ a bar before the other parts with fine effect." (This from the Preface to the Bridge/Higgs, 1887. An 18th-century practice? A 19th-century practice? Mendelssohn's original idea? Certainly, he marked his own *Fugue in C Minor*, Op. 37, "F," "MF" at the episode where the pedal drops out, "F," "MF" again for the next episode, and concluded "F." Clearly, changing manuals is the easiest way to achieve the indicated dynamics. Again, how far back does this idea go?

In the last couple of generations, ideas have altered towards the playing of both the Prelude or Fugue on one manual throughout with no change of registration to keep just one effect within the composition; the understanding was that a constant organo pleno was conventional registration all organists of Bach's time would have understood. It is perhaps so; at least it is always possible. Peter Williams finds the "arguments balanced on both sides," and in her book, *The Registration of Baroque Organ Music* (Indiana University Press, 1997, p. 168), Barbara Owen says, "The changing of manuals becomes a hard-to-avoid question. ... where significant al-

ternations of character and texture occur . . . players were expected to rely on their good taste and common sense in making manual changes (from major pleno to secondary pleno) in some of the sectional or ritornello-like preludes. . . . There is more than one kind of prelude and fugue . . . but no rule that says all such pieces must be played on the same kind of plenum, nor indeed any that says that a fugue cannot be played on a different sort of plenum than the prelude."

What really strikes me as catastrophic is players whose definition of a Plenum is like the first quoted, who, whenever they see the marking, draw the Principals and Mixtures on the Great, then a Posaune (or worse, lacking a Posaune, a Trombone 16') and an 8' Principal, no connecting coupler, and sail away. It makes one think of a consort of viols with a sordid, solitary sackbut singing sadly behind the beat with little relationship to the parts above. If the goal is a unity of sound throughout, one must remark that the dropping out of the pedal with its reed is much more marked than changing manuals to a related plenum on a secondary manual. There is really no orchestral equivalent!

During the year 1961-62, I had the good fortune to study with Anton Heiller in Vienna. That summer, 1962, he came to America for his first recital here at the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University. He stayed in our not-too-large university apartment with our four-month-old "Viennese" son, spending the late night hours watching B-rated (if not C, D, and worse!) movies "to improve his English." Not all he learned proved useful. He apologized for always being so busy while we were in Vienna (which he was) and asked if there was anything we had not gone over that would be useful. I said I would love to sit down with the complete works of Bach and discuss registration and manual changes. I don't recall whether we actually got through everything, but a good and useful start was made. With reference to changing manuals within a composition he was convinced that:

1. If no manual changes were marked, it could always be played on one manual throughout.

2. Manual changes could be considered if

(a) Something in the form or the rhythm suggested a change, such as a rest in an inner part.

(b) Something in the notation suggested a change. He was very emphatic that there be no unnecessary contortions to achieve a change; no slipping the hand over with the thumb on the second 16th note—he was certain Bach wouldn't have done that.

3. He was strongly convinced that if manual changes were used, the organ

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had to be in one case. The reason being that the Rückpositiv, behind the organist's back, was separated by too wide a space and spoke more directly into the room so that a significant break in the texture was felt by the listeners and this was not to be allowed.

Actually, he had a great many manual changes that he *might* make in both the Preludes and Fugues (sometimes involving three or four manuals), but he considered them permissions, not mandatory, and to be decided by the possibilities the specific instrument offered.

And finally, and to me of crucial importance, Barbara Owen continues, "Players must still use their brains, taste, and knowledge of the instruments, and not submit unquestioningly to whatever the current dogmas may be when it comes to registering individual pieces." See what your instrument will do and is capable of. Analyze the music to see what it should sound like ideally. Treat each composition individually. Bring the elements together pragmatically. Then, keep your eyes and ears open for better possibilities and more information.

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