

## Why transcribe the “Little Organ Book”

The “Little Organ Book” is a set of gems, religiously cherished by organists. From the first year of their studies to the end of their careers they practice and play these forty-five chorale preludes. But for the average musician, for those who don't play the organ (and that's a fair proportion), the only contact they have is through listening. That's a pity. Of course, it isn't difficult to listen to them; there are a large number of recordings. But discovering them on the keyboard is a different sort of pleasure. One notices that these chorales are full of invention, imagination, and strokes of inspiration. The theme of the chorale is usually announced in long note values, which gives it a certain grandeur, but at the same time the other voices form a highly inventive counterpoint. Almost all of these pieces are based on a striking original idea. Sometimes it's a short gay thematic motif, in some cases fairly repetitive, like the one heard twenty times in the pedal (here in the left hand of the two keyboards alternately) of number 17, or the one which invades all the voices of No. 3 (except the soprano which has the chorale line), exteriorizing in exuberant fashion the interior joy of the melody. Very often, a small cell of a few notes gives a whole page its character (7, 14, 18, 28, etc.) And then it goes off on tiptoe, without any emphatic formula, the voices disappearing one after the other leaving the little cell to conclude.

The inventiveness of these arrangements, chorale preludes which comment on a melody to draw out the most varied expressive characteristics must be discovered by exploring the counterpoint of the voices: obviously the gay and the solemn, but also less expected characteristics, particularly if one thinks of the Identikit image of a bewigged ingenious Bach. For example, the charming features which evoke a lullaby or a childhood scene (No. 8 keyboard 1).

So the first reason (other than that of delving into these treasures of counterpoint myself) was to provide a way in to these chorales for a wider public of musicians. Obviously, playing these chorales as a duo, rather than solo, is infinitely easier. Why struggle to play solo when it's more agreeable to play as a duo? In fact, it has usually been fairly easy to distribute the roles in such a way that each has an interesting part to perform separately. It is not uncommon, that by taking two of the four voices, one obtains a little piece in imitation, fairly close to the *Two-part Inventions*. The keyboard parts thus obtained are all of a very accessible technical level: they go from the extremely easy (a few weeks of piano) to the relatively easy, so that, depending on the individual case, a young pupil could play them with his teacher or a friend, or two amateurs could derive pleasure from sight-reading them as a duet (I have experienced this myself).

It is only necessary to place two keyboard instruments in the same room. But what was fairly complicated twenty years ago is no longer so. There need be no hesitation about using a five-octave portable synthesizer with a piano, or another synthesizer. After all, isn't the organ itself a synthesizer with tubes, which claims to imitate the flute, the oboe, the trumpet, and even the human voice? And just as interpretation, for an organist, begins with choosing a registration, so here, the task of finding the most appropriate timbre is left to the performers. There are an

infinity of formulae, and there is no need to avoid illuminating the same piece with different colours.

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The main goal is therefore to permit the easy appropriation of this repertoire. But beyond the opening to new practices, there is a real musical interest in presenting the chorales in a version for two instruments.

a) Most frequently the figures reply from one voice to the other, and it is both clearer for the listener, and more pleasant for the instrumentalist to materialize these imitations by exchanges between the two keyboards (1, 3, 4, 5, 14, 18, 25, 28, 29a, b and c, 32, 34, 36, 37, 41, 44).

b) In other cases, the four-part counterpoint seems obviously to have been conceived of in terms of two groups of two voices. Thus in the last (No. 45) the soprano and the bass (keyboard 1) complement each other to form together a rhythmic formula. The melody contains many repeated notes which form a relatively static melodic line, and Bach has cleverly used this feature, through a bass motif, to give an impetus to the first of the repeated notes, which leaves the second and especially the final notes in suspense. In this way this rather heavy theme, combined with the bass, becomes a miracle of lightness. And while the rhythmic structure created by these two voices ticks over slowly, the other two (keyboard 2) throw out a particularly fluid flow of semiquaver scales. A stark contrast from the formal point of view. It is vital to distinguish these two pairs, and the version for two instruments makes it easy to do so.

A similar analysis can be made of a group of chorales, in which the main idea resides in the complementarity of the melody and the bass which join together to form a single repeated formula. The two other voices then have a very different role, which is decorative and symbolic, illustrating the text (Nos. 23, 30, 33, 45).

Sometimes it is the intermediate voices which together form an original formula, while the others are only the melody and its bass (No. 7). The idea is lodged in a jig-saw of motifs which fit into one another.

Pitting the voices two against two thus often makes sense. It is not a purely practical question.

c) Moreover, the use of two keyboards sometimes allows the intermediate voices to be highlighted better than can be done on the organ. For example the tenor of No. 12 (*Jesu, meine Freude*): this is a beautiful and highly expressive continuous melody. But, on the organ, it is difficult to avoid its being drowned in the polyphony. The three upper voices are played on the same keyboard, which reinforces the harmonic fusion, but impedes the independence of the voices. Here, in particular, a superb melody loses out to the fused sound. (See also the joyful melody of the tenor in No. 32).

In general, performance on the organ brings out the chorale melody itself, which dominates from its higher position (with the exception of No. 13) – which obviously corresponds to the liturgical objective – and secondarily the pedal. But what happens in between is fairly discrete. And the effect, sublime it is true, of a slow melody which floats over a more mobile set of voices which comment on it is the stylistic constant of these chorales. It is the principle which is common to them. Moreover, the particularity and the originality of the ideas, which distinguish each one from the others, resides in the figures which reply to one another, the pedal formulae, and the superb hidden melodies.

To avoid giving the impression of preferring a version on two instruments over one on the organ, it must be recalled that the first objective is not to provide a performance that is more beautiful to listen to. It is give the performers themselves a different perception, one that is more analytical, and more playful, through the effect of the duet, and thus they can benefit more than by simply listening to the ingenious counterpoint of these chorales. The real addressees are performers rather than some unlikely listeners of the arrangements (even though it is possible to envisage attractive versions for two chamber organs, or organ and piano, or organ and harpsichord). Indeed, Bach himself dedicated to practitioners this “Little Organ Book in which the beginner is given an example so that he can play all sorts of chorales, and so that he can perfect his use of the pedal, since this is necessary in the chorales which are to be found in it”. Music is created not only to be heard, but also to be played.

### **Which instruments?**

Bach’s registrations are not noted, which leaves the choice of timbres to the organist, and to us. All these chorales can be played on two pianos, and it is sometimes the most satisfying choice. But most frequently, it is on the contrary the contrast which makes the writing clearer. One of the instruments will be more percussive, like the piano, to underline the rhythmic formulae, the other will hold the long notes, like the organ. “Piano” and “organ” have been indicated in more or less conventional fashion. But in practice, the “piano” could be a harpsichord and the “organ” a harmonium, an accordion or a bandoneon, or even an electronic keyboard which imitates melodic instruments. In certain cases, two melodic instruments, like two flutes, or two oboes, can also play the part labelled “organ”. That which is intended more for the “piano”, in the wide sense, has been grouped in the book entitled “Clavier 1”, and that which is in general more appropriate for instruments which hold notes in the book “Clavier 2”. But some chorales benefit from being played on two identical instruments, as is indicated in the commentaries.

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