

**Buxtehude: a tercentenary tribute.
Music of the Baroque avant-garde.**

An essay to accompany the Riverrun recording by Douglas Hollick, expanding somewhat on the sleeve notes accompanying the disc.

The term 'avant-garde' is usually associated with new music of our own time, but it can equally be applied to ground breaking works of any period, where composers were pushing the boundaries of the accepted (or indeed acceptable!) practices of their time. The early 17th century saw the emergence of opera and the *Seconda Prattica*, the controversy about musical theory between Monteverdi and Artusi (the new versus the old styles of music), and many changes in musical form and harmony. It is within this period of great change and experimentation that the present programme has its genesis. Linked with the keyboard music is the development towards the end of the century of tuning systems which would allow greater freedom of modulation. Perhaps less obvious in the present day is the fact that the great organs of North Germany in the first half of the 17th century were also pushing the boundaries of development. They were often very large, and their building entailed elements of architecture in the case, engineering in the mechanics and metallurgy in the production of pipe metal. These organs were among the most advanced technical products of the age.

Freedom and virtuosity are two key elements here, and of particular interest is how the musical text of the *Stylus Phantasticus* works is interpreted. This is an area of experimental research which has fascinated Douglas Hollick for more than ten years, endeavouring to engage with this dramatic and rhetorical music in a way the contemporary players might have done. The virtuosity of this music is not only in the modern meaning of the word. Kircher, who coined the term *Stylus Phantasticus* in his *Musurgia universalis* of 1650, emphasises the virtuosity of the compositional techniques, and as with the parallel madrigalian and operatic world of the *Seconda Prattica*, much of this music exhibits extreme chromaticism and fine contrapuntal writing. It is in later writings such as Mattheson's 'Der vollkommene Capellmeister' of 1739 where we are told 'this style is the freest and least restricted style which one can devise since one sometimes uses one idea and sometimes another, since one is restricted by neither words nor melody, but only by harmony, so that the players' skill can be revealed'. Here it is the virtuosity of the player that comes to the fore. In his research, Douglas Hollick has referred to contemporary writings on performance practice, and spent many hours experimenting with different ways of approaching these enigmatic texts. Of particular importance to this work was his Year 2000 Churchill Fellowship, which allowed him to visit and play many of the 17th century organs of Buxtehude's area, and to assess the particular importance of the acoustics of the large Baltic churches to the understanding of this music.

Almost without exception the churches in North Germany and Denmark are built of brick; all those where Buxtehude worked are of this material. The acoustic of these great churches has one very important and perhaps unexpected feature: clarity. From full organ there is around 4-5 seconds reverberation, but within that acoustic every detail can be heard, even in complex counterpoint. Perhaps the result of the great height and the relative plainness of the interior walls, with quite large flat surfaces, it is quite unlike our own great gothic churches, where an acoustic with a similar reverberation very often leaves detail quite muddled. It means that there is space for the large rhetorical gestures of Buxtehude's *Toccatas* (and time for some stop changes!) whilst also, if one wishes, being able to play fugal and imitative sections fast with no loss of detail.

Dieterich Buxtehude lived his entire life close to the shores of the Baltic Sea. He was most likely born in 1637 in the Danish town of Helsingborg, now part of Sweden. His father Johannes, also an organist, had moved to Helsingborg from Oldesloe in Holstein. Dieterich grew up in Helsingør, where his father was by then organist, and held posts as organist in Helsingborg S Mariae (c1658 - 60) and Helsingør S Mariae (1660 - 68). In 1668 he was appointed to the most prestigious position in North Germany, succeeding Franz Tunder as Organist and Werckmeister at St Marien in Lübeck. This great church, with a vault of 38.5m high, was where he developed the famous *Abendmusiken* which had been started by his predecessor, and it was to this church that the young Bach came in the Advent of 1705. Much of the music of Buxtehude has been lost, including all of that for the *Abendmusiken*, and his rich corpus of organ music survives mainly through copies made by Bach and his circle of family, friends and pupils - there are no surviving autographs. It is perhaps because we actually know so little of Buxtehude's music that he is so often seen simply as a predecessor of Bach, rather than the individual genius he quite obviously was!

The organs Buxtehude is known to have played, and those of the three churches where he was organist, are all typical of the 17th century North German/Scandinavian type, with a wide variety of colour, and sometimes as many as four manuals. His own instruments in Lübeck were the large west end organ, and the smaller instrument in the so-called Totentanz chapel at the east end of the church. Both were 3 manual and pedal, the main organ being of 54 stops including two 32 foot registers on the pedal, and containing a large variety of reed stops. Indeed, the reeds stops of the northern organs were something remarked on very appreciatively by Bach, in whose own home area of Thuringia organs had few reeds. Sadly very little of Lübeck survived the wartime bombing of 1942, and whilst the Marien has been rebuilt, it has none of the original interior or organs of Buxtehude's time. Only the case of the large organ remained before the war, but the smaller 'Totentanz' organ was still intact. The new organs in the Lübeck Marien do not remotely relate to the instruments Buxtehude would have known, although they do give some chance to hear the acoustic of the building. Anyone wishing to experience the sound world of Buxtehude should visit Helsingør, where in the S Mariae Kirk the organ of Buxtehude's time there has been reconstructed in the original case, and is a wonderful instrument – gentle but rich, and endlessly colourful. The Helsingør organ can be heard on Douglas Hollick's 'Buxtehude, master and pupil' CD, Riverrun RVRCD 67. Just across the water in Helsingborg S Mariae the small east end organ has recreated the style of organ building known there by both Buxtehude and his father in this church. To the east on the Baltic coast is Stralsund, where the 1659 Stellwagen organ still stands majestic at the west end of the Marienkirche there - a church and organ similar to and almost as large as that of Buxtehude's in Lübeck.

With Buxtehude's music it is to earlier composers we should look for influence - from the Netherlands comes the influence of Sweelinck, via many pupils who included Heinrich Scheidemann (Reinken's predecessor at the Katharinenkirche in Hamburg) and Samuel Scheidt, whose *Tabulatora Nova* of 1624 exerted tremendous influence. Indeed from 1631 - 1651 the organists of all four of Hamburg's principal churches had been students of Sweelinck: Jacob Praetorius at St Petri, his brother Johann at St Nicolai, Scheidemann at St Katharinen and Ulrich Cernitz at St Jacobi. Italian influence comes through Heinrich Schütz and Matthias Weckmann (both pupils of Giovanni Gabrieli), Johann Jacob Froberger (a pupil of Frescobaldi) and Johann Kaspar Kerll (a pupil of Carissimi) amongst others. French influence was also to be found, through Froberger's connection with Louis Couperin in Paris certainly, through the Danish Court during Buxtehude's youth, and the Hamburg Opera during his maturity, where Johann Sigismund Kusser, a pupil of Lully, was a composer for a few years from 1694.

Part of the Italian tradition of organ playing during the Mass was the particular style of toccata used during the Elevation. From *Fiori Musicali* of 1635 comes one such toccata by Frescobaldi, showing all the hallmarks of this style in its intense chromaticism, dissonance and fluid meter. Composers such as Kerll and Froberger brought the Elevation toccata to northern Europe, and this style of writing would have been known in Lutheran areas just as well as in Catholic ones. Also from *Fiori Musicali*, the Bergamasca of Frescobaldi illustrates another aspect of the Italian style, where different musical figures are played with in complex counterpoint, but here always with the simple Bergamasca pattern underlying the structure. This love of figural writing was to become an important part of the German Baroque tradition.

Typical of the style of Sweelinck and his pupils was the use of different keyboards of the organ to create solos and echoes, and this is heard very clearly in the Echo Fantasia. This is a quite different way of using the instrument from the Italian tradition, where organs rarely had more than one keyboard. Sweelinck's pupil Scheidemann developed his teacher's ideas, and made full use of the much larger and more fully developed organs of North Germany. His G major Toccata (of which a variant reading is used here) initially has a florid solo line for the right hand, but this later develops into echoes, and incorporates a descending chromatic figure which is answered in the final page by strong upward scales – musical figures representing the descent into hell, and resurrection respectively.

Buxtehude's organ music falls into a number of categories: the 'free' works - toccatas, praeludia, ciaconas, passacaglia, canzonas etc and chorale and chant based works. In many we find a distinct sectional form, which exploits different registrations and divisions of the organ. On this recording there are three of his major organ works in the so called *Stylus Phantasticus*, the free improvisatory style of the Toccata or Praeludium, and one for harpsichord. These often have alternating free and measured contrapuntal sections, as can be seen in the opening Praeludium in C, which begins with an extended pedal solo and has the added interest of ending with a Ciacona, or variations on a repeated bass line. In both this work and the harpsichord Toccata by Buxtehude single bass notes near the end have been harmonised in accordance with normal unfigured bass practice – the harpsichord in particular needs the extra sonority of a chord, and it increases the rhetorical power of the final bars of the organ work.

Rossi, like Froberger, had been a pupil of Frescobaldi in Rome between 1624 and 1629, and his Toccata Settima is perhaps the most extreme example of this style, with its exceptional rhetorical freedom, and strikingly original – even bizarre – use of chromaticism. It has parallels of course in the madrigals of Monteverdi, Marenzio and Gesualdo, particularly in the dramatic shifts of harmony, but here it is pure music with no words to suggest or explain the meaning. The chromatic and dissonant chords in the final section of this toccata are greatly heightened here by the use of quarter comma meantone tuning – for instance the interval of C# up to F is heard as a diminished fourth, rather than a major third as it would sound in equal temperament. Particularly relevant to this work are some of the instructions of his teacher Frescobaldi in the preface to *Il secondo libro di Toccate..... 1637*: 'This kind of playing, just as in modern madrigal practice, should not stress the beat they will be made easier by taking the beat sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, or even pausing, depending on the expression.....'

The tempo should be strongly retarded on the cadences, although written in small note values, and equally, when the conclusion is near, the passage or cadence should be played slower.

The beginnings of the toccatas should be played slowly and arpeggiated. In suspensions or dissonances, as well as in the middle of the work, the notes should be struck together in

order not to leave the instrument empty; and this striking may be repeated as the player likes'.

This last comment relates to stringed keyboard instruments where the duration of the sound is so transient that repetition is necessary to achieve the dissonances, a point emphasised by the lutenist Alessandro Piccinini, who in 1623 wrote: 'Where the music is full of dissonances, it comes out very well for a change to play as they do in Naples, restriking the very same dissonance, now soft, and now loud, and the harsher the dissonance the more they repeat it'. In this performance of the Rossi, many of the ties have been broken in order to achieve this intensity of dissonance.

Froberger is a seminal figure in the development of the *Toccata* form in Germany; a pupil of Frescobaldi in Rome between 1637 and 1640, he spent much of his life travelling, including meeting Weckmann (then organist to the Prince-Elector of Saxony) in Dresden around 1650 and visiting England in 1651 or 1652. He was highly regarded in France, visiting Paris in September 1652 - his friends there included Chambonnières and Louis Couperin. It was through Froberger that many of the ideas of the Italian keyboard players travelled north, not only to his native Germany, but also to France. His *Toccata in A minor* shows the same overall structure as the opening Buxtehude work, with five sections alternating free and measured. The opening chord, notated as a simple breve tied to a minim is here elaborated in the way we know Froberger played – his friend Louis Couperin in Paris wrote his unmeasured preludes in imitation of the playing of Froberger, and there we can see examples of the sort of arpeggiation which might have been used for the opening chords. The *Lamento* has the subtitle 'Sopra la dolorosa perdita della Real Msta di FERDINANDO IV, Ré de Romani + c.'; here we see the free style of the *toccata* transformed into a lute-like improvisation, where the player (as in so much of this repertoire) must read beyond the formal notation. Like the Rossi it has unexpected chromatic twists, and ends finally with a gentle C major ascent to heaven! The *Capriccio VI* is in four sections which take a chromatic figure rising through a fifth or its inversion falling through a fourth. Kircher's idea of virtuosity of composition can be seen in the successive sections developing the figure and presenting an endless variety of permutations, including in the third section a short excursion into triple time with syncopations. The meantone tuning is once more very telling here, and one can sense very clearly the differences in the size of the semitones.

Weckmann was a close friend of Froberger, and like Froberger travelled widely. He ended his life in Hamburg as organist of the Jacobikirche from 1655 until his death in 1674, where he was a friend and colleague of Reinken and the young Buxtehude. His teachers included Schütz, Giovanni Gabrieli and Jacob Praetorius (himself a pupil of Sweelinck), whilst Tunder, Buxtehude's predecessor in Lübeck was best man at his wedding! The text of Weckmann's *A minor Toccata* is perhaps the hardest to understand of all the works presented here – played literally it makes very little sense, and it is only by understanding the structure and harmonies that one can eventually 'improvise' this work in something like the way it must have originally been played. Unlike all the other *toccatas* in this programme, here we find virtually no contrapuntal episodes, being primarily harmonic structures with complex arpeggiations and rapid ornamental figures. Something of the problem presented by the notation can be seen in bars 54-56 where even chords and corresponding bass notes do not tonally agree. This highlights the dilemma of the 17th century composer trying to notate what is essentially an improvisation – in Germany measured notation was used whilst in France the unmeasured notation became for a short period the means of expressing this style of music. Whichever is used, the player still has to make many fundamental decisions about the performance of the music.

Kerll studied with Carissimi in Rome, and perhaps also with Frescobaldi, and spent most of his working life in Vienna. His harpsichord *Ciaccona* demonstrates the use of a simple

repeated pattern over which variations are built; particularly interesting is that the whole piece is notated in 'void' notation – in other words, all the notes are 'white', while still having the values shown by the tails and beaming. It also has a long notated trill in one section with melody notes played within the same hand as the trill, something which is also seen much later in the music of Bach.

Most of Buxtehude's Praeludia are for organ with pedals, but BuxWV 162 being for manuals only, it can be played either on the organ or the harpsichord. Like the organ Praeludia in this programme, this is again a sectional work with alternating free and measured sections. Perhaps one of the least obviously 'avant-garde' works in the programme, it does show the desire in the later 17th century for the freedom to modulate beyond the confines of the old meantone tuning, here moving to E minor, and needing the dominant of that key, B major with its D sharp. With the luxury of recording, it has been possible to use a variant of the normal meantone for this work and the Weckmann, with E flat replaced by D sharp.

The final harpsichord work by Johann Christoph Bach probably dates from near the end of the century, and is in the (then) very modern key of E flat major. This is a key completely impossible in meantone, and clearly demonstrates the move towards greater tonal freedom in keyboard tunings by the end of the 17th century. Organist in Eisenach and uncle of the great Johann Sebastian, Johann Christoph was regarded in the Bach family circle as a 'profound composer'. The influence of Johann Pachelbel can be seen in the Praeludium whilst the expressive and chromatic Fuga is an impressive example of a *Fuga pathetica*. The work was well known in the circle of J S Bach and his friends, which may have led to a mistaken attribution of this work to J S Bach for many years.

Chromaticism is also very evident in the pivotal work of the programme, Buxtehude's F sharp minor Praeludium. This is one of the finest examples of the *Stylus Phantasticus* from this period and pushes the boundaries of tonality, which at this time were severely limited by the old meantone tuning systems still used for most organs. During the 17th century there was great interest amongst scholars and performers in the question of temperament and use of more extreme keys. Old quarter comma meantone tunings were gradually giving way to circulating temperaments (called 'unequal' today) where there was more freedom of modulation. In meantone pure major thirds are on C, D, Eb, E, F, G, A, Bb, whilst unusable thirds are on C#, F#, G# (Ab does not exist!) and B; the 'wolf' fifth is from G# - Eb. As the century progressed, there are increasing signs of dissatisfaction with the old tunings, and in the F sharp minor Praeludia we see Buxtehude making a clear avant-garde statement to the world, for here is a piece which is unplayable in the old tunings.

A friend of Buxtehude, theorist and composer Andreas Werckmeister was a prominent figure in the debate about temperament, and in 1681 he published his *Orgel-Probe*, a dissertation on organ building, tuning and testing which Buxtehude would surely have known. In the later 1698 edition of this volume, Werckmeister says this: 'Since, through the grace of God, music has so progressed and changed, it would be absurd if we had not tried to improve the keyboard, so that well-composed modern pieces should not be ruined, and a howl come out of them Some would like to say that one should not compose in every key, such as C sharp, F sharp and G sharp. But I say that if one does not do it, another will And why should I set limits for this person or that, and want to prohibit him from composing in this key? The free arts want free geniuses'. Maybe Werckmeister had this F sharp minor work in mind when he wrote this? Here we have the mix of fantasy, freedom and imitative counterpoint which makes these works so fascinating, but also so hard for the modern player to understand. The opening is a good example of notation which can be read literally, with its variety of apparently precise note values, but needs to be set free from the constraints of the notes on the page. The chordal section between the opening and the

fugue might have been inspired by the central section of the Weckmann Toccata, whilst the briskly imitative section following the fugue is very similar in character to the central imitative section of the Froberger Toccata, emphasising the influence of earlier composers and complete absorption of their styles. The central free section is particularly notable, and has echoes of the Italian Elevation Toccatas, with dissonance and use of key colour very prominent. The unequal temperament of the Trinity College Metzler is very similar to the tuning systems advocated by Werckmeister, and allows one to hear this variety of key colour without any of the 'howls' of extremely out of tune tonalities. The extensive closing section includes some virtuosic pedal writing, emphasising Buxtehude's mastery of the instrument.

It has been suggested that this work and others of Buxtehude may have been transposed by the copyists in central Germany, or that they were intended for teaching, and therefore played on the pedal clavichord where tuning was not such a problem. These hypotheses are not entirely convincing, since these works are not unique – many works of this period demand some form of circulating temperament, and much of it is quite clearly organ music, requiring long sustained notes not effective on the clavichord. Modulation, not just the tonic key, is the real test, as has been seen in the G major Praeludium BuxWV 162 earlier in this recording with its requirement for D# not Eb. Then there are works in E minor and E major, not to mention C minor with the need for Ab. Buxtehude's pupil Vincent Lübeck uses both E major and C minor and these sources can be traced directly to Hamburg's Nicolai church ruling out any question of transposition.

Recent research by Ibo Ortgies suggests that organs in the Hamburg area used mean-tone tuning at this time. Kerala Snyder in her book on Buxtehude quotes a proposal made in 1641 by Heinrich Scheidemann and Jacob Praetorius for modification to the meantone tuning of the organ in Bremen's Liebfrauenkirche: 'He (Johann Sieburg) shall try *as much as possible* to tune the fifth between A and D pure and to sharpen the thirds and to distribute the beating fifth to other places' (my italics). Subsemitones (sharps divided to provide for example both Eb and D#) can provide one solution, but Werckmeister regarded them as old fashioned and not suitable for modern repertoire; he also talks about small changes to existing temperaments to alleviate at least some problems. Snyder originally suggested in the first edition of her book that maybe the organs in Buxtehude's Marienkirche in Lübeck were retuned to one of Werckmeister's temperaments around 1683, whilst Ibo Ortgies more recent research suggests that this is unlikely. I wonder if the truth is somewhere in between, with minor modifications to the temperament being made from time to time, allowing at least some intervals to be less harsh? – the recorded suggestions of Werkmeister, Scheidemann and Praetorius suggest that this might have been the case. It is also interesting to speculate about how these temperaments were heard? – musicians today generally are not aware of the painfully sharp major thirds in equal temperament, so maybe in the 17th century some more astringent keys were accepted as part of the sound world of this music. At the end of the day we are unlikely to ever know for certain about these tunings, so both an open mind and open ears are desirable!

Buxtehude's E minor Ciacona contains a great variety of textures, and some very intense chromaticism reminiscent of the Elevation toccatas. The repeated bass line which underpins the work is itself varied, but always with the same underlying structure. It might be expected that this work would also lend itself to using the different colours of the organ for the various sections, but the music is written in such a way that it runs on from section to section making it very difficult to convincingly change manuals. In this performance it is registered in just one colour throughout, relying purely on the variety of musical texture and subtlety of articulation to create the illusion of different colours.

The fourth example of the *Stylus Phantasticus* ends the programme – perhaps the greatest of all Buxtehude's Praeludia. Here, unusually, there are three fugal sections, all fully worked out, with free sections to open and close, and between the second and third fugues. The first fugue is similar in style to a canzona, but maintaining the four part texture almost throughout, and with a significant pedal part. The second fugue is a masterpiece of chromatic counterpoint, with a daring leap of a diminished fourth at the end of the subject, in essence a *Fuga pathetica*. Retrograde versions of the subject are introduced, and a new countersubject in quavers appears with the third exposition. The fugue subjects are related to each other in very subtle ways, the final fugue being in the form of a gigue which after two expositions lapses into a concertato texture; the pedal part here is particularly athletic, with both disjunct leaping passages and scales.

In Buxtehude's tercentenary year, it is hoped that this programme will have placed his free organ works in an historical perspective, illustrating a little of the background to his genius and the way these works use the size and colour of the North German organs so wonderfully. It also illustrates in a variety of ways the work Douglas Hollick has done to promote a greater understanding of these sometimes enigmatic works, taking us beyond the text on the page. Maybe this music will give some impression of Buxtehude the great player and improviser, the most famous and sought after organist of his generation in Germany.