

ON BUXTEHUDE'S *TOCCATA IN F MAJOR*, BUXWV 156

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Dietrich Buxtehude's keyboard music is organized into a handful of groups. The majority of works fall either into the categories of *Praeludia* or Chorale Settings, which are quite different from each other. *Praeludia*, as we see in this toccata, rely on free, improvisational sections with fugues or fugue-like elements interspersed throughout. The chorale settings always integrate a hymn melody in the composition. Therefore despite being an instrumental work, a text is present in the listener's mind. The melodies in chorale settings borrow song-like phrasing from vocal music, and meaning in the text is often projected onto what is heard as meaning in the music.

Buxtehude's *Praeludia*, and this toccata in particular, make use of an improvisational technique called *stylus phantasticus*.

[1] Ton Koopman, world-renowned organist and conductor, provides a few notes on this style and how to play Buxtehude's organ music:


Buxtehude is clearly using at full this new style, descended from Italy. It is a rhetorical style, full of improvisation... full of unexpected changes of mood, tempo, colour, sudden pauses, etc.

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The organist should feel him/herself as an actor, who is controlling the whole theatre with the audience hanging on his/her every word.

The *stylus fantasticus* is a magic style that wants to surprise. It should bring the audience into a feeling of utter astonishment about an extremely fast pedal-solo, unexpected silences, waiting until the echo of the church is gone, keyboard changes, sudden changes of registration... everything too... is fine: too fast, too slow, too much, too soft, too much articulation, too legato, etc.[2]

We might argue that one of the hindrances to understanding musical improvisation as an art, which contains meaning beyond acrobatics, is a widespread belief that the improvising musician desires to surprise the listener chiefly through virtuosity. Ton Koopman's comments are helpful for an organist to perhaps understand why sudden changes are written into the musical score. In performance, however, if this is the only sentiment or meaning the performer wishes to express — that is, “surprise,” and qualities of excess, immoderation and being “extra” — one may leave the performance impressed with the organist's skill yet have little notion of a greater meaning the musical work may have had. Thus in the following we will attempt to understand the *Tocatta in F Major, Bux 156*, as more than an expression of “Buxtehude — here surely at his most *phantasticus* — leads one through a labyrinth of remarkable textures,”[3] and describe what is more than texture and change.

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Buxtehude's *Tocatta in F Major, BuxWV 156* (not to be confused with the *Tocatta in F Major, BuxWV 157*), was most likely composed before 1690.[4] The chronology of Buxtehude's music has been, and continues to be, a tricky problem. There are a few of Buxtehude's works for organ that exist in autograph copies, but the majority of his organ music was not published during Buxtehude's lifetime. Buxtehude's organ music performed now, for the most part, has its source in manuscripts made by Buxtehude's students and his

students' students. The most reliable versions are those that have been highly scrutinized and contain scholarly commentary.^[5] This toccata, nevertheless, is representative of the toccata style for organ music in northern Germany, current in the 17th and 18th centuries. This type of composition combines two opposing skills in music: improvisation (or at least the impression of improvisation) and fugues. Improvisation requires skill, of course, but its execution illustrates lightness and an unbound mind. A good fugue is a more difficult academic exercise that requires attention to detail. A good improvisation, with its extemporaneous sentiment looks at the learnedness of a fugue, like a peacock with broad colorful feathers beside a barn owl that shows off its majesty at hours when those who know what to look for may see it.

There is a famous story that J. S. Bach went to Lübeck, Germany, to study with Buxtehude at the Marienkirsche for an extended period of time in 1705 and 1706. As BuxWV 156 has the elements that characterize a toccata of this period, this helps to place the musical form at a specific stage of development that Bach learned from. In fact, a J. S. Bach toccata is one of the most familiar pieces of classical music and organ literature — namely, the Toccata movement of the Toccata and Fugue in D Minor BWV 565.

BuxWV 156 is different from that more famous work for a few reasons. One reason is that BuxWV 156 is a stand-alone piece — the fugues in this toccata are recognizable and presented in a simplified fashion within a larger form. The improvisational parts are integrated into the whole as transitions to mini-fugues. Buxtehude's work comes together in a balance characteristic of toccatas where moments of academic exercise are joined with imagination of another kind (following Ton Koopman, this would be the “magic” of *stylus fantasticus*). Coherent improvisation is a skill in itself, and is ultimately a question of the organist's taste as well as the listener's. When we go beyond the question of having a technique that allows for the fingers (and feet!) to execute what the mind imagines, the art of sound has its own demands. It is true that a toccata juxtaposes these two dissimilar styles (fugue and improvisation). Improvisation, however, demands coherency in the same way that one can play a fugue in a coherent way (that is, where one carefully

articulates the theme and its entrances). A badly played fugue will highlight the dry part of analysis, which pays little attention to the grace of a theme as it passes through the voices of the keyboard register.

One of the things that Buxtehude's *Tocatta in F Major* (BuxWV 156) does for sure is call attention to the greatness of the potential of a pipe organ without an over-exposure to sound. This is a real fear before any work for organ: over-stimulation of the ear. The use of rests in this work creates depth, along with the strategic writing for the foot pedals. Another way that the ear does not become tired is through a focus on rhythmic elements rather than on complex melodic material (something we find more often in Buxtehude's chorale settings). And the rhythmic elements here speak more readily to the imagination. We can explain this by pointing to the way the music changes time signature frequently and in a dramatic fashion — and it's a little funny in the way it does so. There is a consistent flip-flopping between 12/8 meter and 4/4 meter. This makes the rhythms of the piece interesting because of the inherent contrast between the pulse of common time (i.e. 4/4) and the pulse of 12/8; Buxtehude makes rhythmic patterns in this toccata, when played in 4/4 time (as in the case of the fugues), appear sometimes as though they were played in 12/8. Although it may come across as trivial, a fugue written in common time generally takes on the gait of a ticking clock and seems almost stationary in its motion. The sections in 12/8 have a dance-like lilt to them, which is a color characteristic of gigue movements in Baroque music. The 12/8 meter has a relentless cadence that keeps the piece going beyond improvisational flourishes that, despite being played at great speed, can tangle up a sense of progress within the improvisation itself.

The phrasing in this toccata is excruciatingly important. (Notice how many works for organ become tired and sloppy even when executed by an individual of skill and thought.) As much of this toccata contains the spirit of improvisation, a common interpretation of this style emphasizes scales, speed, and other displays of virtuosity. Unlike Buxtehude's chorale settings for organ (for example, *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam*, BuxWV 180), there is no identifiable "song-like" melody to assist the performer to interpret a phrase. Much to the contrary, the performer of the *Tocatta in F Major*

(BuxWV156) interprets the “improvisational” lines to the fullest extent possible to create a “song-like” phrase where one does not really exist. This kind of activity is similar to when we might think we see a face in an antique piece of furniture because the knobs are placed just so and a drawer gives the impression of a furrowed brow. In our case, however, the scale of the work turns this into a larger matter than identifying a single face. So let us imagine we find ourselves among hundreds of antique hutches and armoires. Among these objects, our job is to identify a face in all of them and to be able to defend our interpretation if questioned. A fine organist does the same type of thing when drawing out musical phrases in this toccata; instead of clearly identified melodic phrases, as in Buxtehude’s chorale settings, we have shadows of what probably is and what could be. The task of articulating musical phrases in this environment is exhausting and it follows why so many performances of this work lack attention to “song-like” phrases, which make the work more interesting for the ear.

When we listen carefully to this toccata, among the improvisation, there are three distinct moments of recognizable fugal motion. The first fugue section does not have an “official” fugue, but incorporates elements of imitation. The second and third fugue sections begin their fugues with silence; and the themes of the respective fugues start alone. The first “fugue-like” section commences with improvisation, beginning with the first note of the piece. Soon the low C in the foot pedals brings the organ’s massive sound out to the front and center. The whole thing lasts for the first minute and a half to two minutes of the work (depending on the organist).

This first episode, with its “fugue-like” section, is not a fugue in the traditional sense. It mimics, nevertheless, the imitation required in the voices to carry a theme to fulfillment. In this way, it incorporates a sense of imitation that embodies reflection on the immediate past, as in the first moments of experimenting with an idea in the voice of another, with a different tone, with the playfulness that characterizes the absence of responsibility. Consider when we rush ahead of our reasoning with spirit, it follows that we might look two

steps behind to review. It is not necessarily in doubt that one looks to the immediate past; here the sense is to memorize and instill the practice of what is right. This expression in imitation developed here strikes a subtle contrast to what comes later in the toccata — both the second and third fugues contain singular themes or ideas, which no longer need to be stabilized with the reinforcement of a mirror of itself.

This explicit and light imitation (in 12/8 meter) in the first episode is markedly different from the other two fugues because the foot pedal is sustaining a note throughout. Rather than a place of silence, the imitation starts on this low C in the foot pedals, which places the imitation in a clear tonality — C Major — and holds the theme's hand. In a way it gestures toward the scaffolding that will be removed for the later fugues (that is, the comforting support of the tonic note played for the duration of the imitation).

As the two later fugues are relatively short in length, they maintain the sentiment of imitation, but to an expanded degree. The fugal themes in these instances also pass into the depths of the foot pedals, which confirms the identity of a fugue rather than serve the purpose of tonal stability or pleasant accompaniment. The themes begin alone in these later fugues, crowded by an eerie stillness that an organ can produce when a melody is played on a single manual with a fraction of the organ's potential. Each fugue's theme is cleanly stated in this manner without supports and not in recognizable repetition of what has been heard as though learning the name of an object.

To conclude let us look more closely at this trinity of fugal sections in the toccata. What we have are these three sections that do not tell a story in the sense of “narrative-like” instrumental music that can suggest a hunt, martial fanfare or conflict, or music that leaves the listener with an overwhelming sentiment of nostalgia, loss, ecstasy, or even surprise. When we hear the three stations of the toccata pass by, the first episode certainly leaves us with the sense of a novice — the joy of discovery and imitation. Yet as the music progresses the academic fugues, which are distinct and elegant, disintegrate into massive illustrations of sound. The fact that the fugues are a product of learned practice seems

far from the musical expression. Once the ingenuity of imitation as a style has worn off, Buxtehude is able to address the details of fugue with the silence that envelopes the theme making it heard above the ornaments and scales. What is incredible is that the academic quality of a fugue cannot be found here. One reason is because the fugues are brief. But importantly, the fugues do not seem to want to sound *like* fugues. They start off like a fugue, of course, but the art is such that they resemble the lightness of the earlier imitation. This may in fact be a secret of this toccata — the first fugue-like episode begins a thematic imitation as though it carried a yoke of integrity without realizing the toll that work takes on the spirit; yet the second and third fugues start with the sincerity of an academic exercise but depart almost immediately from the mold (not from compositional technique, but in our aural perception of the same). For a fugue to express joy as imitation, demonstrates perseverance in musical art where the horizon of form takes on the expression of another. A happy fugue, which seems like a contradiction in terms, is perhaps this combination of delight in imitation with the honesty of a learned trade. What is a particularly difficult type of musical composition comes off as being as sunny as the improvisations in 12/8 meter. And Buxtehude does this twice in the toccata. In this way the work is extraordinary, but it is not through pulling the wool over the listener's eyes with virtuosic displays of the unexpected. The toccata manages to topple the projection of the player's ego with the illustration of imitation and the lightness of fugue.

Suggested recordings:

Buxtehude, Dietrich. *Buxtehude: the Complete Organ Works*, volume 4. Christopher Herrick. Organ of Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge. Recorded January 9–11, 2011, Hyperion Records, CDA67876, 2011, compact disc.

Buxtehude, Dietrich. *Sämtliche Orgelwerke* [7 LP]. Marie-Claire Alain. erato serie, EMI Electrola (n.d.), 1C163-28285XB (*Seite* 10), 33 1/3 rpm.

- [1] Buxtehude's *chorale fantasia* works for organ also utilize *stylus phantasticus*, for example BuxWV 210 "Nun freuet euch, lieben Christen g'mein". See Grove Music Online, s.v. "Buxtehude, Dietrich," by Kerala J. Snyder, accessed September 18, 2018, doi:10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.04477 (published in print 20 January 2001; published online 2001).
- [2] Ton Koopman, "Dietrich Buxtehude's Organworks: A Practical Help," *The Musical Times*, Vol. 132, No. 1777 (March 1991), 148-153, 150.
- [3] Relf Clark, liner notes to *Buxtehude: The Complete Organ Works*, volume 4. Christopher Herrick. Organ of Trinity College Chapel, Cambridge. Recorded January 9-11, 2011, Hyperion Records, CDA67876, 2011, compact disc, 5.
- [4] See Michael Belotti, *Die freien Orgelwerke Dieterich Buxtehudes: überlieferungsgeschichtliche und stilkritische Studien*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995.
- [5] For example, the five-volume set of Buxtehude's Complete Organ Works, edited by Christoph Albrecht, and published by Bärenreiter. This is the edition Christopher Herrick follows in the suggested recording.