

BACH ORGAN WORKS CARL WEINRICH – BHP 912-13

Albinoni famously referred to himself as a “dilettante musician”, one whose circumstances allowed him to compose and perform purely for pleasure. As such he was something of a rarity – most composers of the baroque would be employed by the church or the royal court; Handel earned his living largely through his operas. Composers’ backgrounds naturally influence their compositions. Bach’s vast cantata output resulted mainly from his period as Cantor to the City of Leipzig. But there were other motivations for composition in his life.

Vivaldi produced numerous compositions for a wide variety of instruments for his students at the Venice Ospedale where he was employed for most of his life – compositions of variable quality, but demonstrating the considerable virtuosity attained by his pupils. Bach too composed for students and music-lovers to whose interests he himself dedicated his harpsichord suites and partitas.

Bach’s organ compositions resulted to a large extent from his widespread reputation as an expert in organ construction and the frequent invitations he received to test newly constructed organs. Contemporary accounts relate how Bach would delight his audiences by improvising for up to two hours, carefully and systematically showing off all the different sounds and combinations of the organ’s manuals and pedals.

When invited specifically to check and officially certify an organ, Bach tested every aspect of sound and mechanism meticulously. He particularly liked to ensure that the organ had “a good lung” and contemporary accounts refer to organ-builders turning “pale with fright” as Bach put the bellows to the test by playing the full organ with all stops coupled up.

Bach and his family were great friends with the Saxon organ-builder Gottfried Silbermann, with whom Bach collaborated on questions of acoustics. They also collaborated, incidentally, on perfecting the escape mechanism for the first “pianofortes”. Listening to several pieces on these CDs with “organ testing” in mind reveals how Bach is trying out every aspect of the organ’s potentialities and sounds. Witness the Toccata, Adagio and Fugue BWV 564 as well as the following Prelude & Fugue 532 as just two examples clearly testing the organ’s capabilities. In addition to being called upon personally to certify new organs, Bach would also have provided testing compositions for organists doing checks and performing inaugural recitals on their own newly built instruments.

As fashions in music changed, so also did the organs which were to perform them. After the close of the baroque period in 1750, and into the 1800s, the clear incisive sounds of the baroque builders like Silbermann and Schnitger gave way to the romantic sounds such as violin simulations and the ubiquitous Victorian diapason. It was not really until the 1960s that a major stylistic and design move in organ building took place led by such as Metzler, Frobenius and Marcussen.

These “new wave” organbuilders not only reverted to tracker action as opposed to electro-pneumatic and brought back many of the baroque sounds; they also pioneered a new fashion in casework design, whereby the look and layout of the organ reflected its different sections, pedal pipework in tall columns at each side, the main or “great” pipework in the centre, upper manual pipes in a smaller distinct section higher up, and the choir organ, or *Brustwerk* in a separate unit behind the organist. Marcussen, and the particular organ here presented, predated this movement by a good twenty years, the Varfrukyrkan instrument at Skanninge in Sweden having been constructed in 1939.

Carl Weinrich was born in Paterson NJ on July 2, 1904. His musical studies, begun in his home town, were continued in New York, Philadelphia and Paris. After graduating from NY University where he majored in English literature, he was awarded a scholarship at the Curtis Institute when he completed his organ studies under Lynnwood Farnam. After Farnam’s death in 1930 Weinrich was appointed to succeed him at the Church of the Holy Communion in New York. Here Weinrich continued the series of recitals which had made the church a centre for music-lovers in the metropolitan district.

In 1934 Weinrich became head of the organ department of the Westminster Choir College where he remained until 1940. In 1943 he was called by Princeton University to be the Director of Music in the University Chapel where in addition to his duties as organist he conducted a male choir of eighty voices. He also taught organ at Wellesley College and Columbia University. In 1950 he was invited by Harvard University to give eight recitals as Lamb Visiting Lecturer, the first time this lectureship had been awarded to a performer.

Westminster Records, New York, became a major force during the 1950s and early 60s in the recording of Bach and Baroque music, along with Vanguard and Vox. Record companies were beginning seriously to record in complete series, and Westminster signed an exclusive agreement with Weinrich for a complete series of Bach’s organ works. But Westminster’s musical director, Vienna-born Kurt List, had not found an organ that exactly met his sharp-eared requirements. The ideal organ must be a low-pressured, sweet-sounding baroque organ whose reedy stops and scintillant overtones would be similar to the sound of Bach’s own playing, and the acoustics of the church must be sufficiently dry to let the organ sound clearly.

Many instruments were inspected and rejected, until a Swedish record fan sent Westminster a tape of the organ in Varfrukyrka (Our Lady’s Church) in the small city of Skanninge, 180 miles south of Stockholm. The organ and acoustic seemed perfect. For six weeks during the summer 1955, the Skanninge Lutheran church became a studio with 20 microphones draped through holes in the ceiling. Traffic was diverted and the town hall’s council chamber nearby became the recording control room. When it appeared, the Westminster project was front-page news in Stockholm, and the series was hailed as “a great and long-awaited triumph for Westminster Records” by Time Magazine (Monday, Jan. 23, 1956).

We have always held these recordings in very high regard. Weinrich brings to these works his own very unique, detached almost staccato style and steady tempi which greatly clarifies Bach’s often complex contrapuntal structure. We also believe that this detached style, as distinct from the more legato style which came in with the Romantic era, more closely reflects the baroque style of playing, bearing in mind that many organists of the early 1700s were still avoiding use of the thumb and little finger, also that many earlier instruments of the 1500s and 1600s may have had a less flexible key action. Weinrich also favours a strong pedal, echoing Bach’s stress on a “good fundament”.

Our double-CD album gives a representative selection from one of the great Bach recording projects of the hi-fidelity, LP record era, and the outstanding artistry of Carl Weinrich.