

MUSINGS FROM THE BENCH – Visitation

Among organists, there are certain compositions by Bach loved and revered more than others, among these the first of the three settings of the chorale “Savior of the Nations, Come,” often referred to by its catalogue number - BWV 659 - to distinguish it from the others. It is a meditative piece, with an intricately ornamented melody -- not technically challenging, but difficult to render with grace and eloquence. I was working on that piece one afternoon, and I was frustrated. I was playing all the notes right, but the phrasing was unnatural; it felt labored. I couldn't make it sing. On top of that, I was pestered by the memory of a comment one of my grad-school colleagues made when I had played the piece for studio class – “It sounds like you're playing it the way Mr. Glasgow told you to play it.” Meaning: you're just parroting a bunch of techniques, not transcending the printed page, not giving the music life, as we all strived to do. The comment stung.

I planned to play the piece six weeks hence for the dedication concert for the new organ. It had to be stunning, it had to be delicately articulated and phrased, oozing artistry. I felt the pressure of the high-profile performance looming. It was an exciting time, but a nerve-wracking time, too, a time requiring tremendous hard work. I stuck to my task. I remained on the bench for quite a stretch, wrestling with the recalcitrant composition. I reached a trance-like state, hoping somehow that sheer perseverance would pay off, when I gradually became aware of something. My playing had become effortless. I was aware of the physical sensations of pressing keys and I was concentrating deeply on the music, but I was keenly aware of a new energy nearby. Sometimes when everything is going right, music seems to transcend performer, time and place and go soaring straight through the rafters into the endlessness of the sky. Occasionally, I had known such experiences, but this was not the same. Also, I had experienced what some call the “musician's trance” when playing from memory, becoming so focused on the music as to lose touch with my surroundings, sometimes rising from the bench for applause, yet not remembering the actual experience of playing. But the day of the struggle with BWV 659, I felt a new sensation. I felt something – someone – present with me, beckoning me to let its essence soak into my skin, penetrate my soul, to know without an inkling of uncertainty the meaning of Immanuel. God with us. God with ME. Here. In this moment.

I hardly dared to lift my eyes from the music, not wanting to see nothing, not wanting this experience not to be real. I thought - If I look up, if I stop playing, it will be over - and I didn't want it to be over. I came to the end of the piece. I sat stone still. The air seemed dense with the presence, the room absolutely silent. I felt utterly calm. I raised my eyes, but I saw nothing out of the ordinary. As I sat waiting, the feeling ebbed into the ordinariness of an afternoon of organ practice. I closed the score, turned off the organ, changed my shoes. I walked slowly down the center aisle, pausing to look over my shoulder several times.

I played the piece for the dedication concert. Afterwards, a colleague greeted me and commented that he had particularly enjoyed Bach's first setting of “Savior of the Nations, Come.” He mentioned that he had heard me perform it before, but that evening noticed I had played it very sensitively, with a great deal of feeling. I smiled for a moment, then thanked him for the compliment.