



Bach and the North German Tradition Vol. I

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Prompted by C. P. E. Bach's assertion (in his 1775 letter to Forkel) that his father 'loved and studied' the music of, among others, Froberger, Frescobaldi, Pachelbel, Bruhns, Buxtehude and Böhm, Martin Neu has programmed some Bach alongside two of his 'north German icons', while promising a future disc of Bach and two of his south German ones. It's a good idea, but if the intention was to trace an influence, the programme chosen is hardly the most obvious. The two 'Gigue' Fugues would show much more dramatically the Buxtehude/Bach connection, while Böhm's C major Praeludium alongside Bach's in the same key (BWV 531) could have forged an intriguing aural link between teacher and pupil. That's not even to mention the golden opportunities afforded by choosing parallel preludes based on the same chorales from all three composers. In fact, Neu seems to have gone deliberately in the other direction, focusing on the differences rather than the similarities.

It's not just the programme which does that; and, to be fair, his own booklet note suggests that the choice of programme is governed more by theological than musical considerations (although quite where Buxtehude's Passacaglia or Böhm's Capriccio fit into the theological picture escapes me). Neu's own playing emphasizes the differences starkly. While with Buxtehude he adopts the practice, much currently in vogue, of underlining the improvisatory nature of the works by means of generous rhythmic and metrical freedom, with Bach he adopts a rhythmic rigour which, even in that most Buxtehudian of works, BWV 532, rarely runs out of phase with the metronome. He approaches Böhm a little closer to the manner in which he plays his Bach, and there is a wonderful sense of purpose in the two large sets of chorale variations; but, while he does try to forge a link between the Capriccio and the Fugue of BWV 532, apart from the fact that they are both in D major and have a lively mien, I don't readily hear any connection, not least since the Böhm was intended for harpsichord rather than organ.

In isolation, though, I derive huge satisfaction from everyone of Neu's performances. Indeed, I'd say these are some of the most rewarding performances of any of these pieces currently available on disc, the Bach works brilliantly paced while the unashamed virtuosity of Buxtehude's three pieces is conveyed with sparkling flamboyance. It helps, too, that this new Ahrend organ is such a splendid vehicle for this music. It's an object-lesson in how, in organ design (as in so much else in life), less is best, for barely two dozen stops offer just about every sound and effect we could want. The sheer vitality and colour of the instrument is best revealed in the Böhm Freu dich sehr, o meine Seele variations, and all Neu's registrations are mapped out (although not particularly clearly) in the booklet. A somewhat drainpipe quality to the pedal Trompetenbass is the only thing which doesn't quite fit, giving a faintly ridiculous air to the Bach Fugue.

In short, then, Martin Neu comes up with some very good performances indeed, all of which are well worth hearing on their own terms, the organ is one of the sweetest and most attractive I've heard on disc for a while, and the Audite SACD recording is of the highest quality, mixing a nice sense of comfort with a vivid presence. Yet the sum of the parts doesn't add up; as aural evidence of the link between Bach and his 'north German icons', this misses the mark by a mile.

