

Stephen Wadsworth

## Organic Bach

**G**erman organ technique was founded on and grew around the hymnody. The chorale was Bach's daily bread, his deepest source of musical association. The *Orgelbüchlein*, for instance, simple in effect but of the greatest and most delicate complexity of design, is an unfinished series of chorale treatments, ostensibly a workbook of organ technique. Dedicated to developing organists, God, and "the instruction of our fellow man," it is of course, much more—a sermon from the loft with its roots in the Reformation, and surely as sincere an article of his faith as Bach ever produced.

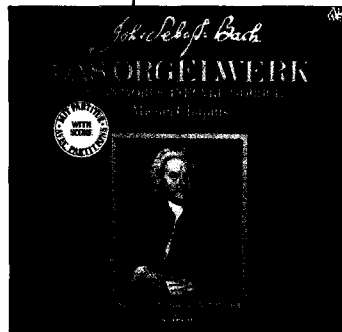
Bach may have wrestled with greater notions of worship in the virtuosic expanses of his great prelude-and-fugue couplings and other large compound pieces. There he pitted exhilaratingly, daringly free improvisatory fantasies against the organized clarity of some of his most vigorous fugues. In this

oneness of opposites, this unity in diversity, Bach asked questions of his chorales, celebrating the conflicting forces of man's imperfect nature and the ambivalence inherent in his dialogue with a perfect God.

For the collector who wants to buy **Bach's organ works** whole, or for the organist who wants to play them all, the element of choice comes heavily into play. We have no sure way of knowing what tempos Bach chose or what stops he pulled when he played his own pieces for organ. We don't always know what organs he wrote for, what purpose this music was meant to serve, or even whether he wrote it all. And no champion of the organ ever wrote in as many styles over so long a period of time.

What's right for a rhapsodic toccata—a particular instrument, organist, or sense of phrase—can hardly be right for a grave chorale written 40 years later.

All of which allows an organist a wide interpretive berth and leaves collectors with a concomitantly wide choice of recorded performances. The choices Peter Hurford has made for his unfolding cycle of Bach's organ works (Argo, eight 3-disc sets at \$29.94)—sometimes very right-seeming, sometimes simply baffling—may strike other listeners quite differently from the way they strike me. Hurford, a gifted player, avoids rowdiness and sen-



timentality. He is fleet-fingered, often has a wonderfully light touch, and projects the metric mechanism and rhythmic movement of every piece with energy and unusual clarity. But his cycle is humorless, and that is its greatest weakness. We need to get away from the image of Bach as a lethargic fatso squinting and scratching at demonic two-ton fugues that either bore or terrify innocent churchgoers.

Moreover, most of the organs Hurford chooses to play—the one in the Church of Our Lady of Sorrows in Toronto, for instance—are strident or lack warmth or distinctive sound. Again, *chacun à son goût*, but no wonder their lady is sorrowful. Also, the instruments are recorded in such a way

that we hear *their* sonorities but not the sonority of the organ resounding in its hallowed hall, which is fundamental to the effect of this music. The stazy scholarship of the notes and the questionable mixing, on every disc, of sonatas, fantasias, concertos, and so on from different periods and styles leave one without adequate orientation or information about either the music or the instruments.

Michel Chapuis has made a more satisfying, idiomatic recorded cycle of Bach's oeuvre for organ for Telefunken (ten 2-disc sets at \$19.96). Each set deals principally with a different type of

piece. The clear annotations even include exquisitely printed scores for all works. Several of the instruments used were alive when Bach was, and they all sound distinctive. (But why has no one undertaken a cycle based on the four or so organs in East Germany on which Bach is known to have played?) Chapuis is a

less reliable technician than Hurford, but he is a delightful performer who takes risks (appropriately brisk tempos occasionally get the better of him) and brings Bach—a secular soul *in flagrante venerati*—very much to life.

Eaten whole, Bach's huge body of works for organ is frankly likely to bore or terrify innocent record-buyers. A sensible way to gain access to what can easily seem a forbidding sanctum is to start with Helmut Walcha's fluent, heartwarming recording of the *Orgelbüchlein* (2-Archiv 2708 023, \$19.96) and perhaps the late Karl Richter's polished and moving performances of some of the major prelude-and-fugue pieces (Deutsche Grammophon, three separate discs at \$9.98 each). ■

# Tennstedt Triumphant

**F**ew recent New York music seasons have seen anything to equal the public and professional accolade bestowed on the German conductor **Klaus Tennstedt** at his first Carnegie Hall appearance with the Philadelphia Orchestra. At the end of Gustav Mahler's First Symphony, the audience was on its feet, cheering a superb performance. Then, the Philadelphia musicians, rather than responding to the conductor's wave to rise and share the applause with him, remained resolutely seated in a rarely rendered "olé" of its own.

Tennstedt is a product of the culture of Leipzig, which goes back to J.S. Bach and forward to the creation of Mahler's symphony in 1887. He was readily recognized as a man of uncommon musical ability when he first appeared in New York with the New York Philharmonic in 1976. But it is only after five years of enduring successes in Hamburg and London (now the center of his European activity) and in Minneapolis (where he is principal guest conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra) that Tennstedt has left behind the restrictions and inhibitions that he brought with him from the East.

Some of the super New York response to a level of performance not heard from the Philadelphians in years, might have been induced by the sight of eight brass players on their feet to blast out the mighty chorale with which the symphony ends. A curio in American concert halls, this gesture is nevertheless true to Mahler's own preferences and practices.

What made the playing even more appropriate were the dozens of other instances of Mahlerian preferences and practices that preceded. Among them were phrases molded into measures and movements, through Tennstedt's uncanny command of the swift tempo

accelerations and ritards that Mahler demanded, and the extreme dynamic and tonal definitions that ranged from a muted, doleful double bass solo at the beginning of the third movement ("Huntsman's Funeral") to the pealing brass of the finale. The all-Mahler evening began with the *Kindertotenlieder* ("Songs on the Death of Children"),

month-long guest engagement of **Rafael Kubelik**. His superbly knowledgeable, broadly human objectives stressed such subtle details as the placement of the solo singers (soprano Benita Valente, mezzo Claudine Carlson, tenor Kenneth Riegel, and baritone Paul Plishka) with the chorus where they belong, rather than beside



Conductor Tennstedt, for whom the orchestra wouldn't rise, with baritone Luxon.

and it had many similar orchestral distinctions—though baritone Benjamin Luxon's voice lacks the color and warmth to fulfill his keen understanding of the text.

For its part, the New York Philharmonic rose to nearly the same level of excellence a few days later in a performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony that brought to an end the

the conductor where they don't, and the latitude granted master hornist Philip Myers in the slow movement to phrase the passages for his instrument in a manner few others can match.

On another evening, Kubelik's superb performance of Tchaikovsky's Fourth Symphony was preceded by a work that was, in a way, a response to a question Tennstedt posed in a recent

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