

BACH & TIMBRE: A VIEW FROM THE ORGAN LOFT

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In J. S. Bach's Obituary, apparently written in 1750 but published in 1754, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola reported that:

He...understood the art...of combining the various stops...in the most skillful manner, and of displaying each stop according to its character in the greatest perfection.

In his Bach biography of 1802, Forkel noted that:

[J. S. Bach] had early accustomed himself to give each and every stop a melody suited to its qualities, and this led him to new combinations which, otherwise, would never have occurred to him.

Quentin Faulkner's comprehensive survey of the extant evidence regarding Bach's organ registration practices¹ concludes that **"Bach considered the presence of stops with unique and colorful characters to be an important hallmark of a successful organ, and that he was notably gifted both in combining these and in matching them with music that displayed their peculiar qualities."** Furthermore, Faulkner opines that **"combining the various stops...in the most skillful manner' does not refer to plenum registrations, but rather to his creative use of the 8' and 4' Galanterie stops. What made his registration practice so remarkable was the skill he displayed in 'displaying each stop according to its character in the greatest perfection.'"**

Out of the approximately 265 organ pieces attributed to J. S. Bach, Faulkner discovers only the following seven instances of original specific registrational instructions:

- 1) The designation *Organo pleno* (or something similar) appears at the head of many Bach preludes and fugues.
- 2) The instruction *à deux claviers et pédale* (or something similar) prefaces a number of chorale settings.
- 3) Bach provided a registration for the setting of "Gottes Sohn ist kommen" in the *Orgelbüchlein* (BWV 600): **Manual: Principal 8'; Pedal: Trompete 8'.**
- 4) Registration instructions appear at the beginning of Bach's transcription of Vivaldi's *Concerto Grosso in D Minor* (BWV 596). However, these instructions are enigmatic and appear primarily to ensure that the various parts of the piece sound at the proper pitch level.
- 5) There are **indications for manual change** in the concerto transcriptions BWV 592-597, as well as three free works: the **"Dorian" Toccata (BWV 538/1); the Prelude in Eb Major (BWV 552/1); and the Jig Fugue (BWV 577).**
- 6) Bach entered a number of **hand-written corrections in his personal copy of the publication of the "Schübler Chorales."** Three of these pertain specifically to registration, but they pertain only to pitch level, not to timbre or stop selection:
 - (1) "Wachet auf" (BWV 645): „Destra 8 Fuß; Sinistra 8 Fuß; Pedal 16 Fuß.
 - (2) "Meine Seele" (BWV 648): „Ped. 4 Fuß u. eine 8tav tiefer.“
 - (3) „Kommst du nun“ (BWV 650): „destra forte“.
- 7) A single registration indication, „Fagotto 16“, and a number of manual change indications are found in Bach's setting of the chorale "Ein feste Burg" (BWV 720); however, these are in the hand of Bach's Weimar colleague and distant relative Johann Gottfried Walther.

Thus, it is very clear that, from a study of original sources, **J. S. Bach considered the selection of particular organ stops to be the prerogative of the performer, not the composer.**

¹ Quentin Faulkner, *The Registration of J. S. Bach's Organ Works* (Wayne Leupold Editions: Colfax, 2008).

For the purposes of tonight’s discussion, that may be all we need to know. However, to broaden the context, two additional points may be considered:

- (1) Bach participated in the design of, and, in 1746, the inspection report on, the 53-stop, 3-manual Hildebrandt organ at St. Wenzel’s Church in Naumburg. In 1748, he wrote a letter of recommendation to the Naumburg Town Council for his son-in-law Johann Christoph Altnikol, who subsequently became organist at this church. This organ is notable for combining retrospective North German “organo pleno” stops with the newer, *galant*, coloristic stops that are referenced in the quotes from the Obituary. Thus, this “ideal” Bach organ—glowingly approved by Bach in 1746—is capable of producing a remarkably wide range of timbres—including a 32’ Trombone stop in the pedal and some very “sweet” timbres in the manuals. Here is an example of a Vivaldi concerto, transcribed by Bach (BWV 596; see [d] above), as played on the Naumburg organ as faithfully restored in 2000:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-1DnxBbwAg&t=1270s>

and a Praeludium by of Brunckhorst:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKgvT_vpgwA

- (2) Bach’s near contemporary Georg Friedrich Kauffmann (1679-1735; organist at the Merseburg Cathedral) published his collection of chorale settings entitled *Harmonische Seelenlust* in installments in nearby Leipzig between 1733 and 1736; it was the first collection of organ chorales to appear in print since Samuel Scheidt’s *Tabulatura nova* of 1624. **Of the 98 settings comprising this collection, 54 bear precise registrational recipes**, about which Kauffmann wrote the following in the introduction:

... registrations have been added according to the extensive stoplist of the organ here [Merseburg Cathedral]. These registrations should not, however, be interpreted as absolutes. Rather, each [organist] is guided in this matter by the instrument at hand, and uses his good judgment, then he will surely find other stops that will express the matter...

Perhaps the most striking aspects of Kauffmann’s recipes is their preference for “gravitas;” 25 of the 54 recipes specify one or more 16’ manual stops. A number of these timbral recipes would seem experimental, unorthodox or even bizarre by present-day standards.

When Bach published a similar collection of organ works in 1739—the *Clavierübung* Part III, also published in Leipzig—he did not follow Kauffmann’s example by supplying recipes for registration beyond the very general instructions: (a) *organo pleno*; (b) *à deux claviers et pedales*; and (c) the “p” and “f” indications in the Prelude in Eb (BWV 552[1]).

As in other instances in which Bach drew inspiration to compose new music by competing with older models (Buxtehude, Vivaldi, Theile, for example), Bach’s *Clavierübung* Part III would appear to have been inspired by Kauffmann’s *Harmonische Seelenlust*. Bach’s organ chorales in this collection, while bearing superficial resemblance to those by Kauffmann, surpass them in every compositional respect—just as Bach had surpassed Kauffmann in the competition for the position of Music Director in Leipzig (Bach placed third behind Telemann and Graupner; Kauffmann placed fourth). **The fact that Bach chose not to include timbral indications, as his model Kauffmann had done, further reinforces the conclusion that, as far as organ music was concerned, Bach considered timbre to be the prerogative and responsibility of the performer, not the composer.**