



Dear friends:

Please enjoy the following video link: <https://vimeo.com/422401855>

This is the third installment of the *German Organ Mass*, which features eight chorale preludes on four German chorales associated with the 18th century Lutheran catechism. The first setting of *Vater unser im Himmelreich* (“Our Father who art in heaven”) has befuddled scholars and performers for centuries. The work is set in a five-voice texture with a continuo line in the pedal, two imitative obligato voices across the manuals, and another two voices playing the *cantus firmus* (i.e., the chorale melody) in canon, also across the manuals. What exactly is going on here? My own opinion is that the meandering and serpentine obligato lines are meant to be evocative of a sinner stumbling through life going his own way, while the chorale melody is the faithful believer returning to the straight and narrow through prayer. I think it is meaningful and intentional that each hand plays both the wandering melody line and the prayerful melody simultaneously, as if the wayward sinner and the faithful follower were the same person. The shorter manualiter setting of *Vater unser* is based on an earlier Bach composition from the collection *Orgelbüchlein*.

Next, we have two settings of *Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam* (“Christ our Lord to the Jordan came”). The first prelude on this chorale has two imitative voices on one manual in the right hand, a running sixteenth-note line in the bass register in the left hand, and the *cantus firmus* in the pedal. The “flowing” left-hand bass line is likely intended to represent the flowing waters of the Jordan River. The second setting of this chorale, a short fughetto, is surprisingly complex. The fugue subject, which is based on the chorale melody, alternates between its original form and its inverted form. The countersubject is also based on the chorale melody, but in diminution, and also alternates between its original and its inversion.

The text of the chorale *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* (“Out of the depths I cry to Thee”) was written by Martin Luther as a paraphrase of the penitential Psalm 130. Bach’s two settings of *Aus tiefer Not* in the *German Organ Mass* are chorale motets, similar to his setting of the *Kyries* earlier in the work. The first chorale motet on *Aus tiefer Not* is the only example of six-voice counterpoint in this work; a monumental achievement. It is also the only example of double pedal, i.e. two of the six voices are assigned to the pedal division. Fans of numerology will note that this climactic movement is placed at the “golden section” in the overall scheme of the entire work. In terms of musical aesthetics, I think the desired effect Bach had in mind is for the listener to drop to his knees in awe and humility and ask God for forgiveness. By contrast, the second setting of *Aus tiefer Not* feels more introspective and personal, like a quiet prayer. This chorale motet is set for four voices with the *cantus firmus* melody placed in the soprano.

The final chorale featured on this video is *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* (“Jesus Christ our Saviour”). The first of the two settings is in trio sonata form with the *cantus firmus* in the pedal. The imitative upper voices are distinctive musically in that they feature sequential melodic leaps of a tenth, an octave, and a sixth, which creates a brief aural illusion that each individual voice is two voices. The second setting of *Jesus Christus, unser Heiland* is a fully developed four voice fugue, with dramatic strettis throughout and a triumphant statement of the fugue subject in augmentation near the end.

The final video in this series will include the four duets and the *Fuga a5 in Organo Pleno*, the companion piece to the *Praeludium* at the beginning of the work.

Peace,
Richard Townley