

Johann Sebastian Bach

# CLAVIER ÜBUNG

## PART III

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Published in 1739 and often referred to as the German Organ Mass, *Clavier Übung III* is J.S. Bach's (1685-1750) most significant work for organ and includes many of his most complex and challenging pieces for the instrument. Bookended by the gargantuan *Prelude and Fugue in E-flat*, BWV 552 are eight chorale settings comprising the Ordinary of the German Mass and the five parts of Martin Luther's Large Catechism. The collection also contains four Duettos, perhaps in reference to the Four Gospels in the Bible. Though only the large settings for manuals and pedals are heard tonight, each of the eight chorales is also paired with a smaller setting for manuals alone, meant to represent Luther's Small Catechism. The variety of style and form, the astounding compositional virtuosity, and the near-ubiquitous symbolism firmly cement *Clavier Übung III*'s place as Bach's crowning achievement for the organ.

*Dritter Theil*  
*der*  
*Clavier Übung*  
*bestehend*  
*in*  
*verschiedenen Vorspielen*  
*über die*  
*Catechismus- und andere Gesænge,*  
*vor die Orgel.*  
*Denen Liebhabern, und besonders denen Kennern*  
*von dergleichen Arbeit, zur Gemüths Ergezung*  
*verfertigt von*  
*Johann Sebastian Bach,*  
*Königl. Pohlnischen, und Churfürstl. Sächsl.*  
*Hoff-Compositeur, Capellmeister, und*  
*Directore Chori Musici in Leipzig.*  
*In Verlegung des Authoris.*

## The PRELUDE

Though Bach never ventured outside of Germany in his lifetime, his compositional style was that of a cosmopolitan man who assimilated the idioms of many national schools. The **Prelude in E-flat, BWV 552a**, the longest from Bach's pen, is a great show of this cosmopolitan synthesis in its three sections: a French overture, an Italian concerto, and a German fugue. Aided by a key signature of three flats, the three themes of the Prelude have been suggested to represent the three figures of the Holy Trinity. The French overture with the nobility of its double-dotted rhythms depicts the majesty of God the Father. The spritely Italian concerto represents God the Son while the glory of the Holy Spirit blazes brightly in the German fugue.

## The KYRIE

Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit,  
Groß ist dein Barmherzigkeit,  
Aller Ding ein Schöpfer und Regierer;  
Eleison.

Christe, aller Welt Trost,  
Uns Sünder allein hast erlöst.  
O Jesu, Gottes Sohn,  
Unser Mittler bist in dem höchsten Thron,  
Zu dir schreien wir aus Herzensbegier:  
Eleison.

Kyrie, Gott Heiliger Geist,  
Tröst, stärk uns im Glauben allermeist,  
Dass wir am letzten End  
Fröhlich abscheiden aus diesem Elend;  
Eleison.  
*German translation from Latin (Naumburg)*

O Lord the Father for evermore!  
We Thy wondrous grace adore;  
We confess Thy power, all worlds upholding.  
Have mercy, Lord.

O Christ, our Hope alone,  
Who with Thy blood didst for us atone;  
O Jesu! Son of God!  
Our Redeemer! our Advocate on high!  
Lord, to Thee alone in our need we cry,  
Have mercy, Lord.

Holy Lord, God the Holy Ghost!  
Who of life and light the fountain art,  
With faith sustain our heart,  
That at the last we hence in peace depart.  
Have mercy, Lord.  
*Translation: Arthur T. Russell*

Martin Luther's 1526 *Deutsche Messe* began with singing a German translation of the ancient Greek text: *Kyrie Eleison*. For the Trinitarian reasons laid out above, there are three petitions in the Kyrie. Thus, *Clavier Übung III* begins with Bach's setting of this chorale split into three pieces: **Kyrie, Gott Vater in Ewigkeit, BWV 669**; **Christe, aller Welt Trost, BWV 670**; and **Kyrie, heiliger Geist, BWV 671**. All three of these settings are considered chorale motets: polyphonic choral pieces based on chorale melodies. In these settings, Bach shows his prowess within the confines of the *stile antico* (ancient style) made popular by Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina. The Cantus Firmus (chorale melody) is heard first in the uppermost voice in BWV 669 (God the Father in Heaven), then the middle voice in BWV 670 (God the Son in the midst of mankind), and finally the pedal in BWV 671 (The Holy Spirit as the foundation).

## The GLORIA

Allein Gott in der Höh' sei Ehr'  
Und Dank für seine Gnade,  
Darum daß nun und nimmermehr  
Uns rühren kann kein Schade.  
Ein Wohlgefall'n Gott an uns hat,  
Nun ist groß' Fried' ohn' Unterlaß,  
All' Fehd' hat nun ein Ende.  
*Text: N. Decius, after the Latin 'Gloria'*

To God alone on high be glory  
and thanks for his mercy,  
since now and forever more  
no harm can touch us.  
God is pleased with us,  
now there is great peace without cease,  
all feuds have now an end.  
*Translation: Francis Browne*

If the three settings of the Kyrie saw Bach looking to the past for inspiration, his setting of **Allein Gott in der Höh, BWV 676** (the German translation of *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*) is much more forward-thinking. Though the trademark elements of Haydn's *galant* style were yet to be coined or codified, Bach was clearly interested in experimenting with these new-fangled musical gestures that were beginning to come into vogue. His trio-sonata setting of *Allein Gott* shows a deft synthesis of proto-sonata elements with the well-established ritornello form. The Cantus Firmus entries, few though they be, act as structural pillars supporting the floridly virtuosic trio-sonata texture throughout the piece.

## The DECALOGUE

Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot,  
Die uns gab unser Herre Gott  
Durch Mosen, seinen Diener treu,  
Hoch auf dem Berg Sinai. Kyrieleis.  
*Text: Martin Luther, based on the Decalogue*

These are the holy ten commands,  
Which came to us from God's own hands,  
By Moses, who obeyed His will,  
On the top of Sinai's hill. Kyrie eleison.  
*Translation: George MacDonald*

The first of *Clavier Übung III's* so-called "Catechism Chorales" is the highly symbolic treatment of **Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot, BWV 678**: Martin Luther's twelve-stanza catechetical setting of the Ten Commandments. Bach's use of canon (exact imitation between leader and follower) has been interpreted to depict the order of these "canon" laws. The piece is divided exactly in half by means of a pedal point representing the two tablets of commandments shown to Moses in the Bible. Highly intricate counterpoint in the right hand softens the rigidity of the canon in the left hand.

## The CREED

Wir glauben all an einen Gott,  
Schöpfer Himmels und der Erden,  
Der sich zum Vater geben hat,  
Dass wir sein Kinder werden.  
Er will uns allzeit ernähren,  
Leib und Seel auch wohl bewahren;  
Allem Unfall will er wehren,  
Kein Leid soll uns widerfahren.  
Er sorget für uns, hüt' und wacht;  
Es steht alles in seiner Macht.

*Text: Martin Luther based on the Latin 'Credo'*

We all believe in one true God,  
Who created earth and heaven,  
The Father, who to us in love  
Hath the right of children given.  
He both soul and body feedeth,  
All we need He doth provide us;  
He through snares and perils leadeth,  
Watching that no harm betide us.  
He careth for us day and night,  
All things are governed by His might.

*Translation: Richard Jordan*

Bach's majestic setting of the Credo, **Wir glauben all an einen Gott, BWV 680** takes the form of a three-voice fugue in the hands punctuated by a quasi-ostinato pedal line that strides a full ascending and descending octave with each statement. There is no direct Cantus Firmus in this chorale likely owing to the extreme length of the hymn. Instead, the chorale melody is used as the basis for both the subject and countersubject of the fugue in the hands. The recurrence of the pedal ostinato figure has been taken to suggest the devotion of Bach's faith affirmed in the words of the Nicene Creed. The many modulations in this relatively short piece can further suggest the universality of the Creed.

## The LORD'S PRAYER

Vater unser im Himmelreich,  
der du uns alle heißest gleich  
Brüder sein und dich rusen an  
und willst das Beten von uns han,  
gieb, daß nicht bet allein der Mund,  
hilf, daß es geh von Herzensgrund.

*Text: Martin Luther paraphrasing The Lord's Prayer*

Our Father in the heaven Who art,  
Who tellest all of us in heart  
Brothers to be, and on Thee call,  
And wilt have prayer from us all,  
Grant that the mouth not only pray,  
From deepest heart oh help its way.

*Translation: George MacDonald*

Unequivocally regarded as Bach's most complex cantus-firmus-based work, **Vater unser im Himmelreich, BWV 682** presents the performer with countless challenges both technically and interpretationally. Continuing with Bach's hybridization of form and national schools, this setting of The Lord's Prayer is a trio sonata in the French style with the German chorale in canon, forcing the performer to account for five simultaneous voices. The trio sonata makes extensive use of French Lombard rhythms (short-long) which intricately weave themselves between the contrasting triplet figurations in adjacent voices. The two chorale voices in canon can be interpreted as Christ teaching us how to pray using The Lord's Prayer as depicted in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

## BAPTISM

Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam  
Nach seines Vaters Willen,  
Von Sanct Johann's die Taufe nahm,  
Sein Werk und Amt zu 'rfüllen.  
Da wollt' er stiften uns ein Bad,  
Zu waschen uns von Sünden,  
Ersäufen auch den bitteren Tod  
Durch sein selbst Blut und Wunden,  
Es galt ein neues Leben.

*Text: Martin Luther*

Christ our Lord came to the Jordan  
in accordance with his father's will,  
he received baptism from Saint John,  
to fulfil his work and ministry.  
By this he wanted to establish for us a bath  
to wash us from our sins,  
to drown also bitter death  
through his own blood and wounds.  
This meant a new life.

*Translation: Francis Browne*

The Baptism of Jesus is marked every year on the Sunday following the Epiphany, and so **Christ, unser Herr, zum Jordan kam, BWV 684** is the most seasonally appropriate chorale on tonight's program. The gently flowing waters of the river Jordan are easily heard in the undulating patterns of the left hand which accompanies a duet between two imitative voices in the right hand. The Cantus Firmus is played in the pedal but sounds in the tenor range which situates it sonically between the right and left hands and thus amid the waters of baptism.

## The CONFESSION

Aus tiefer Not schrei' ich zu dir,  
Herr Gott, erhoer' mein Rufen,  
Dein gnädig' Ohren kehr zu mir,  
Und meiner Bitt' sie öffnen!  
Denn so du willst das sehen an,  
Was Sünd' und Unrecht ist getan,  
Wer kann, Herr, vor dir bleiben?

*Text: Psalm 130 translated by Martin Luther*

From deep affliction I cry out to you,  
Lord God, hear my call;  
incline your merciful ear here to me  
and be open to my prayer!  
For if you want to look at this,  
what sin and injustice is done,  
who can, Lord, remain before you?

*Translation: Francis Browne*

The crown jewel of *Clavier Übung III* is unquestionably the monumental chorale motet **Aus tiefer Not Schrei ich zu dir, BWV 686**: Bach's only six-voice piece for organ. With four voices in the hands and extensive double-pedal writing throughout, this colossal piece shows Bach's astounding virtuosity as a contrapuntal composer. The depths of despair in Psalm 130 are awesomely portrayed by the immense sonorities at the climax of each phrase while moments of relief from the dense counterpoint show Bach's clear dramatic instinct. Bach's ingenious use of Cantus Firmus motifs in the countersubjects lends an impressive economy of material to this piece. Keen listeners will recognize one brief and possibly unintentional, yet nevertheless thrilling, nod to the opening fugue subject of BWV 552b near the halfway point of this piece.

## The EUCHARIST

Jesus Christus, unser Heiland,  
Der den Tod überwand,  
Ist auferstanden;  
Die Sünd hat er gefangen.  
Kyrie eleison.  
*Text: Martin Luther*

Jesus Christ, our Saviour true,  
He who Death overthrew,  
Is up arisen,  
And sin hath put in prison.  
Kyrie eleison.  
*Translation: George MacDonald*

The final chorale of *Clavier Übung III* is perhaps one of Bach's most confounding pieces. **Jesus Christus, unser Heiland, BWV 688** is essentially a two-part invention with the chorale melody in the pedal but heard in the tenor range. The highly angular opening theme in the hands with its ever widening and narrowing of intervals has been taken to suggest humankind's parting from and return to God. The simplicity of the texture gives way to an extraordinarily astonishing harmonic language with countless down-beat dissonances that fly in the face of the most basic tenets of Baroque counterpoint. In breaking every rule, Bach leaves the listener in a state of wonder and amazed confusion.

## The POSTLUDE

The thrilling finale of *Clavier Übung III*, Bach's **Fugue in E-flat, BWV 552b** is a work of singular excellence within the entirety of organ literature. Complementing the Trinitarian themes of the opening Prelude, this fugue with three flats fully exposes three separate fugal subjects. The first subject, representing God the Father, is in the *stile antico* and bears stylistic similarities to the Kyrie settings that opened the program. The second fugue subject is spritelier and largely stepwise, vividly depicting Jesus Christ walking on Earth. Midway through this second fugue, Bach introduces the first fugue subject as a countersubject to the second, establishing the inseparability of the Trinity. The third and final fugue is a gigue portraying the Holy Spirit. In the final page of the piece, Bach once again uses the first fugue subject as a countersubject and in the final measures incorporates a variation of the second subject together with the first and third subjects in an astounding feat of contrapuntal mastery and an overwhelmingly profound representation of the greatest mystery of the Trinity.

***Soli Deo Gloria.***

