

What was I thinking?

January 10, 2021



My sense of time is off. One of the consequences of our pandemic is that our normal schedules have been disrupted. I'm not the only one who has said I'm confused about what day it is. I'm writing this on the day of Epiphany, January 6. In some ways, it feels like Christmas Day was a few days ago, and in other ways, it seems like it's been six months! Luckily, I haven't missed a Sunday yet. With our choir schedule disrupted, I know it's Monday when we have Handbell Choir, but I lose track of Wednesdays and Thursdays. I think all of us involved in choirs miss our Wednesday night and Sunday afternoon/evening rehearsals. It's a great privilege to be in a choir and to sing in and lead worship, and we do work hard in rehearsals, but choir rehearsal is something you have to experience to understand. It's a combination of hard work and great fun, and we enjoy each other's company. I know choir members around the world are missing that right now.

Back to where I started, my sense of time is off, and it's not just due to the pandemic. I wrote last week about moving my usual New Year's postlude a week later. Many of my colleagues played it last Sunday but I had something else I wanted to do before we got out of the official twelve-day Christmas season. I'm playing it this Sunday. (More about that below.)

I'm also playing an organ piece by a friend, colleague, mentor, and occasional teacher Bruce Neswick. I came to this piece through a somewhat strange series of events. In our small world of social media, things spread fast. Another colleague posted a recording playing the same piece. This was back in early December, in Advent. The organ piece is a set of variations on the hymn tune WINCHESTER NEW. In Advent, it's sung with the text *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry*, a hymn about John the Baptist

preparing the way for Jesus to come. Hearing my colleague play the piece reminded me that I had seen it, or at least one variation from it, in a collection I have. I started looking through my Advent music but didn't find it, so I gave up. But, as I was planning ahead, I found the one variation in a book of Epiphany music. Why was it in the Epiphany volume? Because, even though we often hear about the John the Baptist in Advent, we also hear about him in the story of the baptism of Jesus, which usually comes on the first Sunday of Epiphany. I don't remember singing *On Jordan's Bank the Baptist's Cry* in Epiphany before, but it fits, so we're singing it this Sunday.

When I realized my organ collection had only one of the variations, I started looking online for the complete work, only to find it is out of print. I mentioned that on the Facebook, Bruce saw my comment, and the next day I received an e-mail from Bruce Neswick, with his personal copy of the complete work attached. (I wish we could do that with Bach!) I'm not playing the whole thing Sunday, just the variation I already had. Looking at the whole set of variations, I could see that he used many of the techniques and registrations (sounds created by different combinations of organ stops) that he teaches in his improvisation classes. When I first looked at my copy, and the suggested registration (stops), and I immediately thought, "that doesn't look like something Bruce would do."

My published copy suggests 16-foot and 8-foot flutes in the left hand (LH: Flutes 16', 8').

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ch 2 ①

RH: Flutes 8', 4', 1 1/3'
LH: Flutes 16', 8' — 16 4 B
Ped: Principal 8' or 4' or Solo Reed 8' or 4'

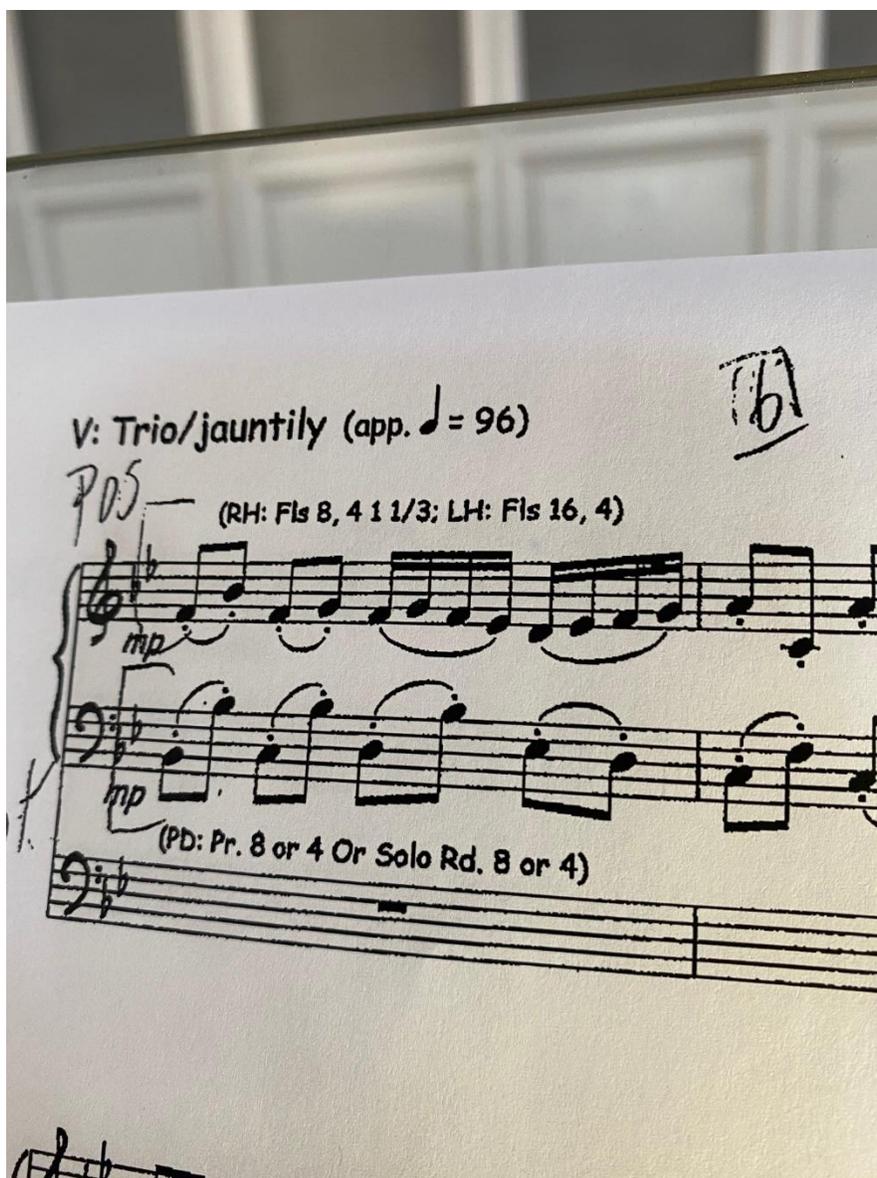
Jauntily (♩ = 96)

mp

mp

Those two stops would make two flute sounds one octave apart. When I played it that way, it sounded kind a little dull. In a trio like this, Bruce would probably use something more colorful and sparkly, a “gapped” registration, meaning he would use 16’ and 4’ flutes that would sound two octaves apart, skipping the middle octave, hence the name “gapped” registration. Some scholarly organists look down on these gapped registrations, especially when used in Baroque music, but Bruce doesn’t care, whether he’s playing Bach or his own music. He jokes that his favorite store is The Gap and his favorite animal is the Guinea Pig (like the students who get called on in class to experiment with his improv. techniques). Bruce also says if anyone questions your “breaking the rules” in a scholarly setting, you can say something like, “according to the Luneburg Tablature of 1543, gapped registrations are acceptable.” I think there is a Luneburg Tablature, but what he’s saying is made up to poke fun at us scholarly types who worry too much about following the rules.

The point is, I didn't think what I had was right. I looked at Bruce's copy and sure enough:



LH: Fls 16, 4 (Left hand: flutes 16' and 4')

Sunday, I can jauntily and colorfully play Bruce's variation on WINCESTER NEW. Maybe you'll hear the whole theme and variations next Advent.

Also, in the story of the Baptism of Jesus in Luke 3, we hear the words of Isaiah's prophecy of John the Baptist saying: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill made low, and the

crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.” Many of us know this from Handel’s *Messiah* and the tenor aria, “Every Valley.” We didn’t sing that in Advent, but John Tsao will sing it this Sunday. I know this all seems wrong. Part I of Handel’s *Messiah* is “the Christmas portion.” We can’t sing that in Epiphany! The whole oratorio is in three parts. When Handel first performed *Messiah*, it was in Dublin, Ireland in April, 1742. The performance was in a musical theater, not in church, and it was a benefit concert for a charity. Handel didn’t think of it as Christmas music. There’s a tradition of performing oratorios in Lent, when operas were not performed. Composers began writing pieces that had all the musical elements of opera, but they were usually based on Biblical stories, they were sung, not acted out, and the first performances were held in church prayer halls called “oratories,” hence the name oratorio. So, while oratorios like Handel’s *Messiah* are sacred music, they are not necessarily “church music,” meaning they were not written to be performed in church. We’re breaking a number of rules this week, but hopefully God will forgive us for taking things out of context and using them in worship.

That may be more than you wanted to know, but if you want to know what I am thinking when I’m planning music for worship (and it takes more time than you might think), you now have an idea.

As promised last week and above - more about Bach’s joyful organ piece designated for the new year by him, *In dir ist Freude*, or *In you is gladness*. The text begins “In You is gladness amid all suffering, sweet Jesus Christ!” It goes on to say God has saved us from shame and bondage, and that nothing can separate us from God. Alleluia! The joyful and dance-like chorale is fun to sing and hear. Bach’s organ setting is very joyful and carillon-like, like pealing bells. I usually play this piece with the Zimbelstern on. It’s a device in the organ with a small set of bells that hang in a circle. When turned on, a little striker in the middle spins around ringing all the bells. The result is a magical musical sparkle.

As I wrote at the start of this, I was writing on January 6. We all know the events of that afternoon, a dark moment in our nation’s history. It’s been hard to remain joyful this week. But, I looked back at our scriptures again. John the Baptist said Jesus was coming to baptize us with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, like a dove. We will also hear part of Psalm 51, where the psalmist pleads: “Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.”

Our final hymn Sunday is *Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart*. The third stanza seems appropriate for our times:

Teach me to feel that thou art always nigh;
teach me the struggles of the soul to bear,
to check the rising doubt, the rebel sigh;
teach me the patience of unanswered prayer.

We certainly have struggles and rising doubts, and we need patience for what sometimes seems like unanswered prayer. May God's Spirit descend on us and give us peace.

God be with you till we meet again.

John