

J. S. Bach Pedalexercitium/An attempted completion by Victor Frost

In July of 1979, fresh from the graduate studies I had pursued in Miami, I tried my hand at finishing Sebastian Bach's hastily sketched pedal study. I am convinced that the prolific and facile composer did not see this short work to its conclusion because, while he tried to write it, he found himself continually at loggerheads with the era's outstanding authority in organ pedagogy—namely, himself. The creative surge that gave us the first 16 measures of perpetual motion sixteenths is checked in the next measure where he leaves out a beat. While others assume that this is but a slip of the pen, I detect didactic fussiness. Every note that preceded measure 17 can and should be played with alternating toes, left then right. All of a sudden, here we have pairs of notes on the dominant ninth chord, with the left foot taking over the note the right foot just played. While musically wonderful, this passage is a technical cul-de-sac: at some point, you have to go back down, and at the turning point, the right foot must either repeat a note itself (as I ask the organist to do), or must play two notes a third apart toe and then heel. Although what I am describing is everyday technique for the advanced organist, it is a quantum leap in terms of difficulty from what Bach writes in his first 16 measures. What is more, as the problem measure 17 passes into the following one, Bach asks for notes where either the right or left foot must play heel to toe, or at the very least one foot must cross over the other one. Is it pedagogically sound, the didactic curmudgeon asks the brilliant composer, to have the first page of music playable by absolute beginners, and the second page only be playable by masters of the instrument? It could well have been Bach's intention to clear up this discrepancy by either facilitating measure 17, or perhaps by giving himself the freedom to jazz up the technically simpler measures which precede it. As to the lack of a conclusion, it was Bach's wont to base his closing measures on previous material, either picking up a former thread that needed further development or conferring by more abstruse means formal balance on the structure as a whole. Until all the previous measures were in place in final form, he couldn't know what checks and balances would be called for. Alas! We have only the master's initial autograph; if he ever did return to this work, we have no extant record of it. I tried in my interpolation in measure 17 and my conclusion which follows measure 33 to be aware of the need to conform as much as practicable to the operative norm of alternating toes for sixteenths, but still have the result be musically cogent enough to satisfy the listener jogging along with the organist in this unique work in Bach's oeuvre for solo organ pedal.

Victor Frost 12 III 80 New York City

(A performance note: Even given Bach's haste in writing, he took the trouble to mark staccato strokes in mm. 19–22 (which implicitly belong in corresponding mm. 23, 27, and 28—and perhaps m. 31ff, including the eighth-notes in my conclusion—as well). I believe that he succinctly placed his articulations on the *only* notes in these mm. where a legato connection (right heel to toe or vice versa) would otherwise have been possible, thus ensuring a non legato dryness—and, in keeping with the above, a simplified execution technically speaking—for the passage as a whole. Yes, I believe he wanted *all* eighth notes to be as dry as the offbeat ones we hear when the sixteenths make their first reappearance in m. 24 (that is to say, the syncopated line the right foot—and later, left—plays against the onbeat pedal D's).)

Attempted completion of J. S. Bach's Pedalexercitium
by Victor Frost

Pedal

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