

Music Blurbs for 10-21-18

News and Notes:

This week our “Fantasticus Fall” series continues with an organ postlude by Buxtehude. We will enjoy music by our bell choir as well as the St. James’ Singers. Hymns include “A mighty fortress,” “What wondrous love is this,” and “Make me a channel of your peace.”

Sunday bulletins:

Today’s organ postlude continues our “Fall Fantasticus” series with the *Praeludium in E Major* by Dietrich Buxtehude (c1637-1707). From 1668 on, he was the organist at Marienkirche in Lübeck. He was one of the most influential organists of his day as can be attested to by the fact that the likes of Handel and Telemann came to pay him a visit. A twenty-year-old Bach walked over 200 miles to visit and study with him for a few months.

As an organist, he was a leading proponent of the North German organ style often referred to as *stylus phantasticus* (fantastical style). It is called this because it is sectional in nature and sounds wildly improvisational. But there’s a method in the madness in the preludes as they generally follow a formula. Much like the “Praeludium in E Minor” that we heard last month, written by his pupil Bruhns, the opening is a brief improvisational attention-grabber followed by a fugue. While Bruhns wrote fugal sections that would play out to a musical conclusion, in this work the fugue—characteristically of Buxtehude—disintegrates as it leads into the series of episodic sections. A second fugue appears which also disintegrates into a final improvisational coda.

This piece is also on the cusp of the change in tuning instruments. The older “mean tone” tuning produces beautiful thirds, but only in a few keys. By making alterations in tuning, musicians were able to use more keys. E major would have not been very bearable in mean tone. Since all tuning is basically a compromise, the keys that once had beautiful thirds weren’t quite so beautiful but definitely bearable. Tuning also affected composition. A fugue has a theme first in the key of the piece (like E major in today’s piece) answered as in a round but five notes above (like B in today’s piece). In today’s piece, all the entries of the theme are on E or B. This is similar to all his fugues. He never changes key because tuning wouldn’t allow him to do so. Even after the tuning had changed and he could use E major, he still wasn’t really adept at changing keys. It would take Bach to fully utilize the possibilities of the newer tuning and be able to go from key to key with impunity.