Authentic Bach Chorales?

Part I

The year 2015 marked an important anniversary for one of the long-standing topics at Music A-level, one that remains the most popular option by uptake across the A-level boards: J. S. Bach's Chorale Harmonisations.

The anniversary occurred because, a quarter of a millennium before in 1765, Friedrich Wilhelm Birnstiel began to publish a series of printed volumes intended to be a comprehensive collection of the chorale harmonisations that Bach had made for his church cantatas, thereby becoming the first publisher to do so (although an earlier publication in the form of a selection of hand-written copies had already been available).[1] While Bach composed them for four-part choir (and wrote them out in open score on four staves) accompanied sometimes by the continuo group and often by the full orchestra, the versions in Birnstiel's publication were transcribed onto two staves, using soprano and bass clefs, thus matching the clefs then usual for keyboard music and especially for the organ.[2] From this edition stem many subsequent publications, including the one that most school music departments have well-thumbed copies of, colloquially known as 'Riemenschneider' because G. Schirmer's 1941 publication was edited by Albert Riemenschneider[3].

Nowadays it is probably assumed that this twentieth-century edition is a reliable version of Bach's original music. However, on closer inspection this turns out not to be so. This article outlines a few of the problems and suggests some solutions.

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As was noted above, that first printed edition presented the music in a format suitable for organists in particular, because of the notation on two staves and in 'keyboard clefs' (the first two chorales in Birnstiel's edition are illustrated in the Breitkopf-history web-page referenced above). Any publication must have a market in mind – printing music in the eighteenth century was a very expensive business, and Birnstiel must have had a sense that his publication would hopefully fulfil some sort of mass need. Who might he have thought would buy his edition? 'Organists' must be the principal answer to this question. Sebastian's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, even makes specific reference to them, in his foreword to Birnstiel's edition:

> [These chorale harmonisations] have been presented on two staves to accommodate lovers of the organ and the clavier, since they are easier to read in that form.[4]

Any organist today will agree that it is highly useful to have special harmonisations of hymn tunes at the ready, especially for last verses or those with particular dramatic or emotional flavour. Carl Philipp Emanuel also noted, in the decades after Sebastian's death, that his father's

harmonies were rather unusual when compared with the general fare experienced in church services of the time:

> Nor can the term ['masterpiece'] be withheld ... by connoisseurs of the art of writing when they contemplate with appropriate attention the quite special arrangement of the harmony and the natural flow of the inner voices and the bass, which are what above all distinguish these chorales.[5]

So Birnstiel was probably hoping to cash in (fifteen years after Sebastian's death) on the continuing reputation of these harmonisations.

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The performers for whom Sebastian's church cantatas and Birnstiel's edition were intended are not at all similar. In comparing the two-stave versions with their four-part originals, a number of musical differences become particularly evident.

1. Keys

It continues to be debated as to whether the congregation attending a performance of one of Sebastian's cantatas during a church service would have been expected to sing along with a chorale movement. (Albert Riemenschneider thought not.) Chorales were most often the last movement of a cantata, but could also appear earlier on. Only one verse (of the many that each chorale would have) was usually set. The melody might be given the sort of harmonisation which we are familiar with from 'Riemenschneider' but might also be part of a more exotically contrapuntal movement, perhaps appearing as a *cantus firmus* – compare the first two chorale settings in the Christmas Oratorio, for example (movements 5 and 7). Would a congregation be able to cope with this range of complexity – might they not be more likely to complain about the difficulties of following the music for only one verse, giving them too little time to get used to it, and without the usual preludial introduction that organists of the day were expected to provide to set the key and the tempo and to alert them to the tune chosen for the words?

A further barrier to a congregation's involvement would be, as today, when the key of the setting placed the melody too high for average singers. One example of this is the setting of **Straf' mich nicht in deinem Zorn**. In 'Riemenschneider' for example (no. 38), this is given in the relatively singable key of E flat; but in the original cantata it is a major third higher in the key of G major, with the melody's top Gs out of the range of average singers (even in 'Baroque pitch'). Quite a few of Birnstiel's chorales are transpositions from the key of the original, usually downwards, most by a small interval but some by as much as a perfect fifth. Indeed, for Birnstiel's edition Carl Philipp Emanuel explicitly advocated the transposition of chorales that were beyond the range of any singers involved:

> If it is desired to sing them in four voices, and some of them should go beyond the range of certain throats, they can be transposed.[6]

Surprisingly, some remain with very high melodies, one such being a chorale familiar from Part II of the Christmas Oratorio which rises to top G. But this melody comes with its own problems. Sebastian made three different harmonisations of it. Two are in G major but in different metres, one in four-time and one in three. The third version is also in three-time but now down a fourth in D major. (See 'Riemenschneider' nos. 9, 102 and 343, respectively.) Yet while this third version is in a more singable key, it still has the potential to trip a congregation up, for example with the rhythm around the top-note moment, which is here crotchet–minim rather than the minim–crotchet of the three-time G major version. And yet other melodies incorporate various decorations, such as the different melodic elaborations in the various settings of **Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern**. It seems improbable that performances of this material, if a congregation was expecting to sing along within a cantata performance, would not give rise to frequent complaints about the chorales' pitch and rhythm, for example. After all, Sebastian's own playing of chorales for congregational singing was the subject of recorded criticism about the harmonic complexities that he included: at Arnstadt in 1706, the irrepressible twenty-year-old was reproved

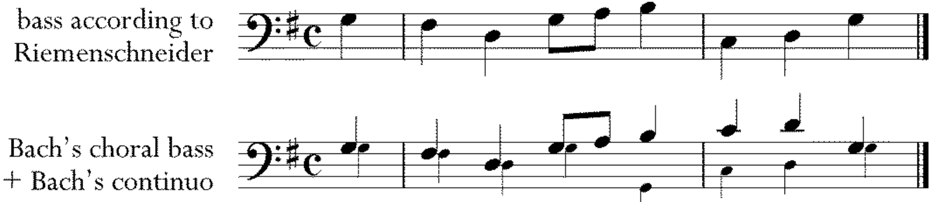
> … for having hitherto made many curious *variationes* in the chorale, and mingled many strange notes in it, and for the fact that the Congregation has been confused by it.[7]

Martin Luther's ideal was that his congregations should be able to participate in worship through both word and music, which is why he created the genre we know as chorales. It seems reasonably clear, then, that in Sebastian's church cantatas the chorales were part of the music intended solely for the choir and orchestra, and thus they are couched in a style that is far more contrapuntal than was the norm for congregational hymn-singing, then as now.

2. Textures and transpositions

If we take as correct that the music as presented to us by, among others, Birnstiel and Riemenschneider is in fact keyboard music intended in the main for organists, then a second consideration arises. Many organists of the day might well have been highly trained in the art of playing with the feet as well as with the hands, but smaller churches might not necessarily have been able to fund the fees for such highly trained players, and Birnstiel's intended market seems indeed to include those who would play just on the organ's keyboards (if their instrument had pedals at all), and perhaps also on a harpsichord at home.

While some chords are difficult to stretch in these keyboard versions (though it should be remembered that an eighteenth-century's organ's manuals are narrower than a modern piano's keyboard), it is evident that some helpful transposing of individual voice parts (mainly the bass) has already been undertaken. For example, in **Lobt Gott, ihr Christen, allzugleich** ('Riemenschneider' no. 54), the bass line of the first phrase seems very awkward, falling a major seventh from B to C before the Perfect Cadence. In fact, in Sebastian's cantata the choral basses continue the rise to top D, briefly crossing above the tenors, while the continuo's bass line (which usually doubles the vocal bass) falls earlier to the lower register, as illustrated here:



Emanuel commented that his father expected a chorale to be accompanied by an organ's 16' pedal notes, thus keeping a high bass line sounding below the tenor:

> In those places where the bass goes so low, in relation to the other voices, that it cannot be played without pedals, one plays the higher octave, and one takes the octave below when the bass crosses above the tenor. The late author [i.e. Johann Sebastian], because of the latter circumstance, reckoned on a 16-foot instrument, which always played along with these songs, for the bass.[8]

By remarking on an exception – a passage which 'cannot be played without pedals' – he implies that the book's music is generally intended for performance by the hands alone, which is what would necessitate the transposition upwards of a low bass line in the first place. And musical examples such as the one above are helping the player with the other problem that Emanuel mentions: keeping the bass line clearly at the bottom of the texture when it would otherwise cross above the tenor.

And it is not only the bass and tenor lines which cross in Sebastian's originals; sometimes the soprano and alto do too. In the last phrase of **Christ lag in Todesbanden** (from BWV 158), in the last two beats of the penultimate bar the alto suddenly leaps up a minor sixth before jumping back down a diminished seventh (E – C – D sharp); while this C (a fourth higher than the soprano's G) completes the third beat's new half-beat harmony that is set up by tenor and bass, it also competes with the melody line. In the keyboard version (see 'Riemenschneider' no. 261), this note is simply omitted, keeping the melody clear, and therefore providing a version suitable for the leading of congregational singing.

3. Performing style

The part-crossings considered above illustrate the freedom with which Sebastian wrote the voices which accompany the given chorale melodies. They are full of vigorous movement, one of the principal features that made them so attractive to audiences for this music, whether teachers or players, so long after Sebastian's death.

> There is perhaps in the whole science of writing [music] nothing more difficult than this: not only to give each of the four voices its own flowing melody, but also to keep a uniform character in all, so that out of their union a single and perfect whole may arise. In this the late Capellmeister Bach in Leipzig perhaps excelled all the composers in the world; that is why his chorales as well as his larger works are to be most highly recommended to all composers as the best models for conscientious study.[9]

This vocal freedom makes the music much more difficult to reproduce on a keyboard, and the rhythms associated with the setting of the words do not readily match what is suitable on an organ. Thus we can regularly find examples of the music being adapted to organ-keyboard use not only in the transposition of certain vocal lines but also in the introduction of ties between repeated notes. These prevent an organ rendition from sounding 'choppy', promoting instead the sustained sound suitable for congregational accompaniment. Of the eleven four-part chorale-settings from Bach's Christmas Oratorio which are reproduced in 'Riemenschneider', six include ties not present in the original vocal lines; for example, in the two examples from Part I (movements 5 and 9), the bass-line ties found in each setting's last phrase in 'Riemenschneider' (nos. 345 and 46 respectively) have apparently been appropriated from Bach's accompanying orchestral lines, indicating yet more positively the instrumental nature of these adaptations.

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One conclusion from all that has been described above is that 'Riemenschneider' is not the best resource for the study of the original style of Bach's chorale harmonisations. Not only does it present the music in a manner adapted for keyboard rather than in the original vocal forms, it is also full of inconsistencies. Despite the editor's assertion on the first page that wrong notes have been corrected, the musical examples are still full of misprints, such as the incorrect bass notes in R.7 (bar 4 beat 4 where A should be F) and R.55 (the Perfect Cadence in bar 1 should, of course, finish on a root-position chord of B minor). A more recent reliable version of this collection is volume III/2.2 of the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*. But an edition that would suit teachers and students far better is the volume of 389 chorales from Breitkopf & Härtel ('Breitkopf Edition nr.3765') which derives its material as far as possible from the original cantatas, including their words and also, where appropriate, any instrumentation that adds to the overall contrapuntal textures.

Any collection of this repertoire has to take a number of factors into consideration. Firstly, many of the cantatas from which the chorales were originally extracted have subsequently been lost, so that Birnstiel's two-volume edition of 1765/9 or C. P. E. Bach's expanded four-volume one of 1784–7 are among the only contemporary sources remaining. This accounts for about half of the chorales currently extant. Of the other chorales still available in their cantata contexts, decisions have to be made about how extended a setting must be before it can be considered too convoluted to be appropriate for such a general collection. So where Breitkopf & Härtel's edition can, it presents a chorale in the form found in its original cantata setting, without transpositions of key or voice part, reliably correct, and in a much more user-friendly print-size too. It is much the better resource for getting to know what Johann Sebastian Bach really did.

Notes to Part I

1 see http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Articles/Breitkopf-History.htm
for a summary of the music's publication history as it relates to the firm of Breitkopf

2 see, for example, the two-stave autograph manuscript of the *Orgel-Büchlein* at
http://imslp.org/wiki/Das_Orgel-B%C3%BCchlein,_BWV_599-644_(Bach,_Johann_Sebastian)

3 Riemenschneider's edition is based on C. P. E. Bach's publication of 371 examples, whereas Birnstiel's earlier one numbered around 200

4 *The New Bach Reader* (W. W. Norton & Co., 1998), no. 378 p. 379

5 C. P. E. Bach – as note 4 above

6 as note 4 above

7 *The New Bach Reader*, no. 20 p. 46

8 as note 4 above

9 Johann Philipp Kirnberger (a pupil of Sebastian), writing in 1774 – see *The New Bach Reader*, no. 361 p. 367

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