

Observations and Interpretations:  
Essays on the Organ Works of  
Dietrich Buxtehude

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# Organic Development in the Organ Prælua of Dietrich Buxtehude: The Unification of the Free and Fugal Sections

**Buxtehude**'s final *Præluudium in a minor* would prove to be his most sophisticated and comprehensive within the genre. A defining unity that is absent in other North German Baroque works presenting both free and fugal sections, is accomplished here through the development of thematic ideas that are found woven throughout the course of the composition and not relegated even to a particular texture. These elements are thinly disguised at the outset within a cloak of figuration, but are carefully revealed and gain prominence as the coda is approached. The shared elements form almost a thesis-antithesis relationship of ascending and falling subtexts. The opening free section reveals within the toccata-like figurations the *ascending* and *descending motifs* (examples 1 and 2) that create the unifying force behind the work. This whole exposition is built on sequences tiered in either ascending or descending steps. The ascending motif is given more emphasis as exhibited by the solo pedal passage at measure 4 and the codetta of the section as a whole (example 3).

The first fugue is punctuated four times with these motives gathered in increasing number of voices, from two, to all four (examples 4-6). However, it is only in the four-voice statement that the two motifs are juxtaposed, again with emphasis on the *ascending* version. It is important to note here as well that the first fugue uses its stepwise subject (in and of itself strikingly similar to the motifs' conception, but with repeated notes) in both rectus and inversion modes, reflecting the subtext of this overriding relationship.

The climax of the work (example 7), following the toccata after the second fugue, brings the juxtaposition of the opposing forces to the forefront, with the tenor voice changing midstream from the *descending* to *ascending* motif, thus bringing relative balance to the to weight that is allotted each. This statement is a dilatation of the four-voice statement from the first fugue, extending the octave range to a twelfth in all of the voices except the soprano, which is extended to an eleventh. The harmonic conflict that results in the midsection this passage is also notable; there is no analogous progression in the literature from this time.

The concluding toccata and coda, compressed into 3/4 time, reintroduces the opening's contrasting forces, here, once again, organizing the motifs within figuration. However, the upper three voices allow the ascending motif a final word in the last three bars.

## Transmission and Omission: Common Practice and its Implications in the Organ Works of Dietrich Buxtehude

Because performers have no extant manuscript copies of the organ compositions of Buxtehude, we must rely on readings by copyists. Over the course of my ongoing studies of the organ works of Buxtehude, I have arrived at some conclusions based on what was common to other works of his, and taking into consideration the common practice of the time, which allowed copyists to omit some notation that would be deemed obvious to contemporary performers.

In the *Canzon in C major*, at bar 100, the texture is sustained in three parts, with the lowest voice providing the dominant during the last half of the bar. However, in the readings, this voice then drops out leaving the upper two toccata-like parts alone until the next subject entry in the lowest voice in bar 103. Based on Buxtehude's practice in his præludia to sustain pedal tonics and/or dominants at coda sections, I believe that this dominant G in the lowest voice should be sustained throughout bars 101 and 102 (example 1.) Whether played as *manualiter* or *pedaliter*, this is entirely within the compass of the performer and an appropriate drive towards the climax as the texture returns to a full four voice complement in the succeeding bars.

## Transmission and Inspiration: J.S. Bach's Adoption of Select Musical Material from the Organ Works of Dietrich Buxtehude

J.S. Bach and his circle are responsible as a primary source for the transmission of many of Buxtehude's most significant organ works.<sup>1</sup> It is well noted that Bach largely self-taught himself through copying works of other composers, including extensive copying of de Grigny as well as Buxtehude during his period of maturation. Some works are actually developed based on such material, notably the theme of the *Passacaglia and Fugue in c minor* (which is an eight bar extension of a four bar *Trio en passacaille* ground bass, albeit in g minor, of the French composer André Raison), and the subject of the fugue from the *Fantasy and Fugue in g minor* (which is similarly an extension of a fugue subject of the same key by the Dutch-born organist and associate and close friend of Buxtehude's, Johann Adam Reinken). Over the course of my ongoing studies of the organ works of both Buxtehude and Bach, I have found other such instances which reflect Bach's indebtedness to the elder master. Although the chorale preludes are transmitted in Johann Gottfried Walther's collection, they could certainly have been familiar to Bach.

Comparison 1. (examples 1.a. and 1.b.) reveals an extremely close similarity between an imitative passage in Buxtehude's toccata-like setting of *Von Gott will ich nicht lassen* with the second fugue subject of the planned quadruple fugue in Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (Contrapunctus XVIII). As with Bach's other borrowings, he

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<sup>1</sup> Kerala Snyder, *Dieterich Buxtehude, Organist in Lübeck*, (New York: Schirmer Books, 1987): 316-323.

significantly extends the source material. Perhaps Bach found in this statement the foundation for a distinct theme to contrast with the first theme of his fugue.

Comparison 2. (examples 2.a. and 2.b.) draws parallels between Buxtehude's *Præludium in E major* (a work which is found in a direct Bach transmission) first fugue and Bach's so called "St. Anne" fugue subject. Unlike Bach's other borrowings, he does not extend the source material. This puts into question whether or not the chorale *Was mein Gott will das g'scheh allzeit* was the inspiration for Bach's subject, as is commonly assumed. However, the similarities with the chorale are significantly more tenuous than the evidence that would support the Buxtehude theme as the source. The chorale derivation is justified by an internal partial phrase near the opening. However, when examining the Buxtehude, the near verbatim, albeit transposed, replication is unmistakable. As Bach visited Buxtehude at the end of the latter's life, and stayed with him for three months, Buxtehude surely shared with his younger colleague his latest works, and the *Præludium in E major* can be counted amongst them. Further evidence of the transmission of this piece into Bach's circle is Walther's use of the theme (example 2.c.: *Preludio con Fuga in A major*), almost verbatim, and in a closely related key to Buxtehude's original. Werckmeister had given Walther copies of numerous *Præludia* of Buxtehude, and it is fair to say that Walther's enthusiasm for the work was something that he shared.

# Organic Development in the Organ Præludia of Dietrich Buxtehude: The Unification of the Free and Fugal Sections Examples

Ex.1. Præludium in a minor: m.1

Ex.2. Præludium in a minor: m.15-16

Ex.3. Præludium in a minor: m.18

Ex.4. Præludium in a minor: m.31-32

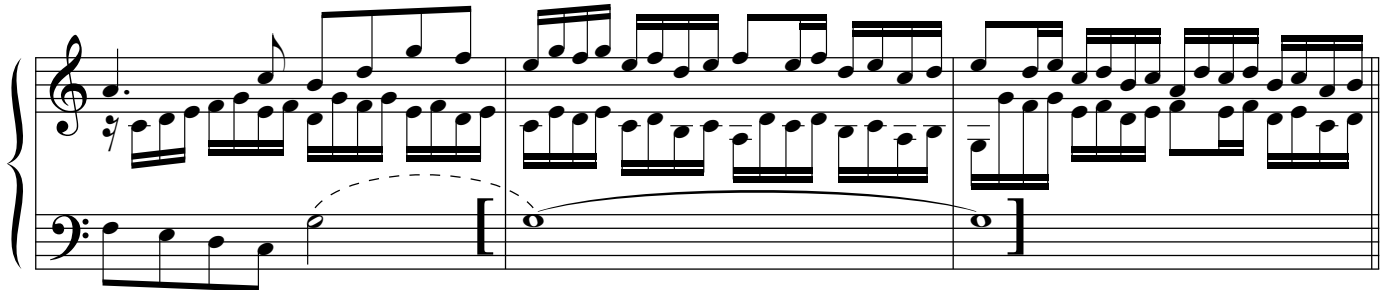
Ex.5. Præludium in a minor: m.41-42

Ex.6. Præludium in a minor: m.57-58

Ex.7. Præludium in a minor: m.112-113

# Transmission and Omission: Common Practice and its Implications in the Organ Works of Dietrich Buxtehude Examples

Ex.1. Canzon in C major: m.100-103



# Transmission and Inspiration: J.S. Bach's Borrowings of Musical Material from the Organ Works of Dietrich Buxtehude

Ex.1.a. Buxtehude: Von Gott will ich nicht lassen: m.10-11

Ex.1.b. Bach: Die Kunst der Fuge XVIII: m.114-117



Ex.2.a. Buxtehude: Præludium in E major - Fugue subject I

Ex.2.b. Bach: "St. Anne" - Fugue subject I



Ex.2.c. Walther: Preludio con Fuga in A major - Fugue subject

