

The Weimar Organ Tablature: Bach's Earliest Autographs

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With roughly one million bibliographic units dating primarily from 1750–1850, the Anna Amalia Library in Weimar is one of the most important repositories of German literature from the Enlightenment to the late romantic period. Far less well-known, however, is its smaller but select collection of late seventeenth and early eighteenth-century prints, a collection unique in its completeness and of great importance to local history. As far as Bach scholarship is concerned, the library was significant mainly for its large collection of cantata texts by the Weimar court poet Salomo Franck. However, in May 2005, during an initial search of the library's Weimariana, Michael Maul unearthed the autograph of a previously unknown aria by Johann Sebastian Bach. This spectacular discovery resulted in a thorough perusal during the summer and autumn of 2005 of the library's early prints and its practically untouched manuscript holdings in search of traces from Bach's Weimar period.

In the course of our research, we noticed in the 1840 inventory of the library's general manuscript collection an odd entry within the theological section, citing the text incipit of the chorale 'An Wasserflüssen Babylons', the name of Johann Pachelbel, the copying date 1700, and the shelf number Fol. 49/11. It struck us that the source described here could not be a theological work, nor could it be the so-called Weimar Tablature Book of 1704, which has a different shelf number. The shelf number Fol. 49/11 led us to four fascicles preserved in a modern tab box and containing a total of five organ compositions notated in new German tablature:

¹ This article summarises the results of a research project jointly carried out by Michael Maul and Peter Wollny. A more detailed description together with facsimiles are published in the preface to *Weimarer Orgeltablatur: Die frühesten Notenhandschriften Johann Sebastian Bach* (Kassel, Basel: Bärenreiter, 2006), with an English translation by J. Bradford Robinson on pp. XXI-XXXIII.

Fascicle I: Johann Adam Reincken, 'An Wasserflüssen Babylon'

'J. N. J. | An Waßer Flüßen | Babylon. | Auff 2 Clavier. | et pedal. |
Joh. Adam Reincke'

colophon, p. 8: 'Il Fine | â Dom. Georg: Böhme | descriptum ao. 1700 |
Lunaburgi'; four folios

Fascicle II: Dietrich Buxtehude, 'Nun freut euch lieben Christen gmein'

'Nun freüt eüch | lieben | Christen gmein. | uff 2 Clavir | Diet.
Buxtehude'. (fragment)

one folio (heavily damaged in bottom margin, fragment of a formerly
larger manuscript presumably consisting of at least four folios)

Fascicle III: Johann Pachelbel, 'An Wasserflüssen Babylon'

'Am Waßer Fliesen Babilon | Signor: Johann Pachelbel | organist in
Noribergæ'; two folios

Fascicle IV: Johann Pachelbel, 'Kyrie Gott Vater' and Fuga

'Kyrie Gott | Vater in Ewig- | keit | J. Pachelbel'; 'Fuga | Joh.
Pachelbel'; two folios.

On the basis of handwriting comparisons we were able to identify the first two fascicles (Reincken and Buxtehude) as the earliest known autographs of Johann Sebastian Bach. The informative colophon at the end of Fascicle I gives the date of the Reincken MS as 1700, thereby pointing to a period of Bach's life not previously illuminated by primary sources.

It was not easy to verify Bach's hand beyond any doubt in these manuscripts. There is a temporal distance of at least three years from the composer's few early written records – an important period in the development of his personality and, potentially, his handwriting as well. Another methodological problem is that, until now, Bach's hand was known entirely from a single, relatively large manuscript in tablature; the *Fantasia in c minor* (BWV 1121), presumably entered in the Andreas Bach Book around 1706 or somewhat later. All the remaining evidence for Bach's tablature script – a passage in his copy of works by François Dieupart and eight passages in the *Orgelbüchlein* – dates from his Weimar period (1708–1717), occupies only a few measures, and is generally caused by corrections or shortage of space. Nevertheless, a close look at the Reincken MS reveals a remarkable similarity to the autograph receipts from Bach's Arnstadt and Mühlhausen years.

The similarities between the appearance of the Reincken tablature and other early records in Bach's hand include not only the delicate, soft, occasionally even slightly amorphous flow of the handwriting as a whole, but also several typical forms, such as the elegantly descending swoops on the uppercase R, or the loop on the fis (F-sharp) in the tablature letters, the often slightly scooped shape of the uppercase I or J, and finally the ligature-like descent of the terminal syllable en. Another conspicuous feature is the characteristic switch from a disciplined, cramped series of letters to a spacious

stretching of the words, as found in the concluding annotation of the Reincken tablature. Admittedly, the handwriting in Bach's payment receipts from his Arnstadt years is generally slanted more heavily to the right; but it should be remembered that these documents were written comparatively quickly, and that the scribe had by then acquired more practice and self-assurance. It is easy to see that the differences here merely reflect consecutive stages of the same handwriting and are not fundamental. In fact, the upright ductus recurs later whenever Bach writes slowly and very deliberately, as in his supplication of 25 June 1708 for dismissal from his post at Mühlhausen. Equally noticeable are the parallels between the headings in the Reincken MS and the autograph of BWV 739, which presumably dates from the early Arnstadt period (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, P 488), especially the shape of the uppercase W and the intersection of the lowercase l with the preceding C in 'Clav.' or 'Clavier'.

Comparing the tablature script reveals a similar picture. Once again, the differences are marginal and leave our impression of fundamental similarity intact. It should be noted, however, that Bach evidently changed several of his writing habits between 1700 and roughly 1706. For example, he later revealed a tendency to use roman rather than German script. This is particularly striking in the uppercase G, which, in the Reincken tablature, occurs relatively rarely in its open-sided roman form but more frequently in a cramped German variant otherwise unknown in Bach's autograph sources. Only the roman form occurs in the Andreas Bach Book and the *Orgelbüchlein*. The uppercase C also alternates between German and roman forms. The energetically descending arc of this letter and the small ornament at the top recur in similar form in the final chord of the *Fantasia in c minor*. Another reason why this frequent and seemingly random alternation between the roman and German forms of C and G is so remarkable is that it seems to indicate a transitional phase in Bach's handwriting, during which early and more recently acquired habits co-existed on an equal basis.

Turning to the Buxtehude fragment in Fascicle II, the picture at first seems more ambiguous, although the resemblances to the Reincken tablature are so obvious that we have no reason to question the identity of the scribe. However, there are comparatively few lines of connection from the Buxtehude tablature to Bach's later written records in tablature, text, or staff notation. This is primarily because none of the subsequent developments outlined above is present, whereas Fascicles I and II are generally consistent with regard to the earlier features that Bach later discarded. More serious are his conflicting habits in the notation of several rhythmic symbols. In the Reincken tablature, like the autograph tablature of BWV 1121, the half-note rest has approximately the same shape as the quarter-note rest in Bach's early staff notation. In the Buxtehude tablature, the half-note rests are invariably marked with a narrow descending loop and a small finial hook.

A further comparison with other central German tablatures reveals that virtually all the writing habits Bach subsequently abandoned (cramped shape of the German G, simplified form of the lowercase g, the notation of rests) occur in strikingly similar form in the tablatures of his eldest brother Johann

Christoph, who evidently adopted them from his teacher, Johann Pachelbel. Equally consistent is the notational convention, apparently prevalent mainly in central and south Germany, of dividing the octave between B-flat and B-natural rather than B-natural and C. In any event, Pachelbel's and J. C. Bach's manuscripts provide recognisable models for Bach's earliest tablature script – a fact all the more remarkable in that his handwriting follows a different basic style from the outset.

Notwithstanding the paucity of the sources, these observations allow us to trace, in Bach's tablature script, a straight line of evolution consistent with the known biographical data. At first we find a fairly heavy dependence on the conventions of the Pachelbel school – surely a consequence of the instruction he received from Johann Christoph Bach in Ohrdruf between 1695 and 1700. Over the years, influenced by the impressions and experience he gained from his stay in Lüneburg, he modified several of his tablature script's more decisive traits. It is safe to assume that he was following the model of Georg Böhm, for a comparison with Böhm's many letters and receipts preserved in Lüneburg reveals that Bach began, at the same time, to model several features of his text hand on Böhm's handwriting.

Viewed in this light, the fragmentary Buxtehude tablature c only have originated before Bach's move from Ohrdruf to Lüneburg. The possible timeframe is further narrowed by the obvious points of contrast with the Reincken MS and by taking into consideration Bach's age, suggesting the years 1698–1699 as a plausible date of origin. This has remarkable implications with regard not only to the artistic horizons of the roughly thirteen-year-old Bach, but also the dissemination of Buxtehude's organ music in central Germany during the seventeenth century. The *Prelude in g minor* (BuxWV 148), preserved in the lost Grobe Tablature of 1675 and in the presumably pre-1700 manuscript Pittsburgh 1, is now joined by another substantial composition known to have circulated in Thuringia at an early date, the chorale fantasia *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein* (BuxWV 210). Whether these two works are unrelated isolated pieces or accidental remnants of what was originally a larger body of music is difficult to say. It is conceivable, however, that Johann Christoph Bach received a selection of representative organ works by Buxtehude from his teacher Pachelbel and handed them to his younger brother to study and copy. Pachelbel's connection to Buxtehude is demonstrated by the dedication of his *Hexachordum Apollinis*, published in 1699, but the contact may well have gone back to his Thuringian period in Eisenach and Erfurt (1677–1690) and especially Gotha (1692–1695). It is safe to assume that Pachelbel and J. C. Bach maintained close professional and probably personal ties from 1692 to 1695 after the end of their teacher-pupil relationship in Erfurt (1686–1697), for the two musicians lived in towns only nine miles apart.

As space here is restricted, I will make only a few remarks about the two remaining – non-autograph – fascicles. A look at the watermarks clearly shows that these must originate from Bach's immediate circle. Fascicle III is

written on exactly the same paper as Bach's town council election cantata from Mühlhausen (dated 1708). Fascicle IV reveals a form of the 'Arnstadt A' identical to the watermark in Bach's fragmentary copy of a secular cantata by Antonio Biffi, a copy dating either from the end of his Arnstadt period or, more probably, from his early years in Weimar. Transferring the date of these Bach autographs to the Pachelbel copies, we arrive at a date of origin of 1707–1708 for Fascicle III and 1708–1709 for Fascicle IV. Moreover, the paper analysis suggests that we should search for a scribe who was in contact with Bach in Mühlhausen and later in Weimar as well. In addition to Bach's wife Maria Barbara, these conditions are primarily met by his longtime pupil Johann Martin Schubart, who later succeeded him as organist in Weimar. I should add that Schubart's hand appears in a number of performance parts for Bach's Weimar cantatas – Bach scholars have labelled this scribe 'Anonymous Weimar 1'. We may safely assume that the Pachelbel MSS were by-products of lessons with Bach or were at least prepared with his approval.

Concordances and connections with other collections

The colophon at the end of Fascicle I conveys, for the first time, specific information which emphasises the significance of Bach's stay in Lüneburg to the transmission of north-German organ music in Thuringia. It is safe to assume that, on his return, Bach had in his luggage a relatively large number of representative works that he had written out between 1700 and 1702 from master copies owned by Georg Böhm and perhaps other musicians as well. We can also assume that Bach made his musical treasures available to his relatives, friends and students. What we are witnessing here, then, is the beginning of a Thuringian tradition of north-German organ music going back to Bach himself.

Another item of evidence in support of this theory is the sole surviving complete source of Buxtehude's chorale fantasia *Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein*. This copy, written in the hand of the Weimar town organist Johann Gottfried Walther, is preserved in the second fascicle of the miscellany *P 802*, now located in the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin. Walther's notation – a three-voice score with the upper two staves in the soprano and alto clefs and the lower staff in the bass clef – proves to be a fairly faithful transcription of Bach's tablature. A few departures occur at line breaks or as a result of indistinct or ambiguous symbols in the original. Bach's tablature was therefore complete when Walther prepared his transcription some time around 1710.

From determining a direct line of derivation, it is only a short step to the assumption that other north-German chorale settings preserved in *P 802*, especially in the early fascicles, derive from Bach's exemplars, which were presumably notated in tablature. This applies in particular to Johann Adam Reincken's fantasia on *Was kann uns kommen an für Not*, Buxtehude's large-scale setting of *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* (BuxWV 188), Nikolaus Bruhns's fantasia on *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland*, and not least the various chorale settings and partitas by Georg Böhm.

Finally, mention should also be made of the two famous Ohrdruf collections from the library of Bach's eldest brother. These are the Möller Manuscript and the Andreas Bach Book, both of which contain a large number of keyboard works by Böhm and Reincken. Especially noticeable in the former is the long series of north-German works largely by composers from Lüneburg and Hamburg, extending from fol. 15v to fol. 43r. Given the paucity of authorial attributions, the recurrence of the phrase 'Org. in Lüneburg' in the works of Christian Flor and Georg Böhm is especially striking. Similarly, the two preludes in tablature notation by Nikolaus Bruhns are potential candidates for copies prepared from Bach's Lüneburg manuscripts.

All in all, we can discern the outlines of a significant repertoire that apparently found its way to Thuringia via the young Johann Sebastian Bach. It is oddly touching that the principal works of the north-German organ school should have come down to us solely through the zealous collecting activities of a fifteen-year-old boy.

The facts outlined above regarding the contents, dating, and provenance of the newly discovered Weimar Organ Tablatures have various implications for the biography and artistic evolution of the young Bach. These implications can only be touched on here.

Ohrdruf (1695–1700)

Until now our assessment of Bach's Ohrdruf period, when he lived at the home of his brother Johann Christoph, has been mainly shaped by the famous 'moonlight manuscript' anecdote. This incident, surely based on tales told by Bach himself, was first recounted by his sons in the obituary, where it dominates the account of the period immediately following the death of his parents. Proceeding from the essence of the moonlight manuscript story – that Johann Christoph gave his industrious brother music to study but jealously withheld access to the more challenging works in his collection – and C. P. E. Bach's frequently cited statement about his father's education in Ohrdruf, it would seem that Bach received a musical training dominated by local traditions and the Erfurt Pachelbel school, which was a crucial source of J. C. Bach's own training. Consequently, it had been assumed that the repertoire of Bach's studies was more or less the same as that found in the tablature book of Pachelbel's pupil Johann Valentin Eckelt. Now, in the Buxtehude MS, we discover a roughly thirteen-year-old Bach who is already an experienced copyist of one of the longest and most demanding chorale fantasies of the north-German organ repertoire, a work the early reception of which in Thuringia has, until now, been at best a matter of speculation. The expert handling of tablature notation, indeed, the strikingly high quality of the copy as a whole, bear eloquent testimony to the young Bach's remarkable grasp of music and his 'urge' and 'zeal to progress further and further', as described in the obituary. At the same time, we notice his precocious desire to measure his own abilities against works of the highest quality that only the best organists

of his day were able to play. The crucial point is not so much the question of whether Bach had mastered all the technical hurdles of Buxtehude's fantasia by this date (at thirteen he was probably just tall enough for his feet to reach the pedals), but rather the fact that he evidently expected to add the work to his repertoire in the near future. It is to Johann Christoph Bach's credit that he recognised the extraordinary talents of his younger brother and made him familiar with a representative cross-section of keyboard music from north, central, and south Germany during his years in Ohrdruf.

Bach's earliest autograph is thus connected with the famous Lübeck organist Dietrich Buxtehude, the musician he set out on foot from Arnstadt to meet roughly seven years later. Consequently, it is necessary to reconsider why Bach completed his schooling, not in Ohrdruf, but in Lüneburg. The frequently cited exit note in the Ohrdruf student register – 'ob defectum hospitiorum Luneburgum conceßit' (left for Lüneburg in the absence of free board) – in fact tells us nothing at all about the reasons and circumstances that caused him to leave for Lüneburg. Recently unearthed documents indicate that this note must be viewed in the context of a contemporary dispute between the Ohrdruf citizenry and the Hohenlohe authorities, but is scarcely relevant to Bach's particular situation. Given the importance that organ playing already occupied in the life of the young Bach, the prospect of being able to perfect his skills and become acquainted with a fresh repertoire and the famous north-German instruments must have been no less enticing than his efforts to complete the first form free of charge.

Lüneburg (1700–1702?)

If the Buxtehude tablature sheds new light on the state of Bach's achievement and knowledge in Ohrdruf, the same applies to the Reincken MS with regard to his Lüneburg years. Apart from payment lists for members of St Michael's Matins choir, where his name appears twice, documenting his presence in April and May 1700, there are no original documents recording Bach's school years in Lüneburg. Moreover, earlier scholars could only raise questions about the significance of a putative teacher without receiving reliable answers.

Thanks to Bach's note at the end of the Reincken MS – 'â Dom. Georg: Böhme descriptum ao. 1700 Lunaburgi' (written out at the home of /after a MS by/ Mr Georg Böhm in the year 1700 in Lüneburg), this debate now has a documentary, indeed autobiographical, foundation which was previously missing. The note implies that Bach had already come into contact with Böhm in his first year in Lüneburg. Can it also be viewed as proof of a teacher-pupil relationship between Böhm and Bach? The Latin phrase 'â Domino Georg Böhme' can be interpreted indirectly to mean 'written from a master-copy belonging to Georg Böhm', implying at best that the young Bach was in contact with Böhm only in the sense that he was occasionally allowed to borrow works from his musical library.

The question would thus lack a clear answer if our source-critical examination of the Reincken MS did not provide us with a decisive clue. The

watermark found in the MS occurs in contemporary Lüneburg documents only in connection with Georg Böhm, who used identical paper for his payment receipts of 1698 and 1700. This observation allows us to draw important conclusions regarding the relationship between Bach and Böhm. When Böhm moved from Hamburg to Lüneburg in 1698, he evidently brought with him a large supply of paper which he used up no later than 1702. In all likelihood, Johann Sebastian Bach availed himself of this same stock of paper when he prepared his Reincken MS. In other words, the interpretation of the concluding annotation, that Bach only occasionally contacted Böhm to borrow works from his library and to copy them out at St Michael's School, is not borne out by the paper analysis. Rather, we may be fairly certain not only that he had access to Böhm's musical library, but that Böhm supplied him with paper. It thus seems logical to suppose that the copying work, which must have taken several days, took place at Böhm's home and not at St Michael's.

There can no longer be any doubt that the organ at St John's, and its organist Georg Böhm, were at least as important to the education of the young Bach as the Matins choir at St Michael's. Secondly, in the future we must ask ourselves whether those works invariably said to reflect the influence of Böhm's music – meaning specifically the chorale partitas *Christ, der du bist der helle Tag* (BWV 766), *O Gott, du frommer Gott* (BWV 767), *Sei gegrüßet, Jesu gütig* (BWV 768), and *Ach, was soll ich Sünder machen* (BWV 770), all previously consigned to the Arnstadt period – may be, at least in part, the immediate fruits of Bach's lessons in Lüneburg.