

## The 18 Chorale Preludes (“Leipzig” Chorales) of Johann Sebastian Bach

*Some notes to accompany the realization of these pieces  
for the Jeux SoundFont by John W. McCoy ([RealMac@aol.com](mailto:RealMac@aol.com)) ©2008*

BWV 651 – Komm, heiliger Geist. The hymn thunders beneath a busy toccata; Bach called it a fantasia. The passage work generates many passing dissonances that can be confusing to the ear if the registration is not chosen carefully. We added a ninth in an attempt to clarify the movement of the voices.

BWV 652 – Komm, heiliger Geist. This setting presents a problem in performance because of the length of the hymn. The method of presentation is an adaptation of the procedure often used by Buxtehude. Each line of the hymn is first discussed by the inner voices. Next, the pedal gives the same line, followed by an ornamented version in the right hand solo voice. The same process is repeated for all eight lines of the hymn, followed by the closing alleluia. Because the individual lines of the hymn are so similar, the jubilant coda comes as something of a relief. We chose a “gros tierce” registration in order to provide the illusion of somewhat more harmonic complexity than is actually there.

BWV 653 – An Wasserflüssen Babylon. Although not one of the more aquatic settings of this hymn (such as Pachelbel’s), it is the favorite. This hymn was virtually the anthem of the Huguenots during the centuries of their persecution and exile. While it is possible to interpret the sixteenth notes at the ends of many of the trills as closing notes (part of the trill, played as quickly as the notes of the trill itself), a practice that is frequently appropriate in the music of Bach and his contemporaries, doing so in this case leads to awkward gaps in the rhythm. On the other hand, stopping the trills at the dot, another piece of advice that may be gleaned from some 18<sup>th</sup> Century sources, makes the piece too choppy. We found it best to extend most of the trills, but then to give the sixteenths that close them their full value.

BWV 654 – Schmücke dich. This chorale always brings out the best in the composers of Bach’s time. Here again, the realization of the trills causes many difficulties, but the voice leading is exquisite. We chose the Rohrflöte for the accompaniment and the Schalmey with tremulant for the solo.

BWV 655 – Herr Jesu Christ. In effect, this setting is a trio for two manuals and pedal. It would be right at home in one of Bach’s trio sonatas. The chorale is obvious only at the end, when it is given in augmentation by the pedal. The upper voices are based on the chorale, but the resemblance is not likely to be obvious to modern ears. We gave this charming movement to the flutes.

BWV 656 – O Lamm Gottes unschuldig. The hymn is set in three contrasting verses. The first is expansive and noble, the second quieter, and the third suitably grand. Whether a real organist can manage to thumb the cantus firmus in the way we have set it, we cannot guess, but the setting seemed to make better sense when we gave all three verses their own solo voices. At the end of the last verse, Bach provides an even grander coda.

BWV 657 – Nun danket. The two voices in the manuals converse with the pedal and with the solo, here given to the Cornet. While the manuals and pedal discuss each phrase of the hymn before the solo enters, the treatment is unusually inventive and engaging.

BWV 658 – Von Gott will ich nicht lassen. The duet on the manuals provide a perfect background for the cantus firmus in the pedal, which we assigned to the Regal. The last note of the hymn is held while the manuals insistently repeat their last figure, an unexpected literal representation of the “nicht lassen” idea.

BWV 659 – Nunn komm, der Heiden Heiland. The three settings of this Advent hymn are among the most loved of all the chorales. The first setting seems to call out of the bleakness of winter, but as the florid solo unfolds, the hope of the season takes over. We assigned the manuals to the Piffaro and celestes, and the solo to the Cornemuse.

BWV 660 – Nunn komm, der Heiden Heiland. The second setting begins with an angular duet that continues almost without pause. The solo in the Cornet is florid, but takes a very different direction from BWV 659. Here the world of the manuals seems complicated, and slightly threatening; that of the solo, inevitable.

BWV 661 – Nunn komm, der Heiden Heiland. The third setting is urgent, tumultuous. The hymn thunders in the pedal, promising to clear away the evil of the world. Thus, Bach has given us several different viewpoints on the meaning of Advent.

BWV 662 – Allein Gott. There are also three settings of this hymn. The first is a typical 4-voice setting with the hymn in the soprano (here using the Orlos). The treatment of the inner voices is unusually florid, but once the solo enters, they assume a supporting role that perfectly complements the solo. Much of the momentum of this setting is due to the adroit use of harmonic suspensions. The challenge for the organist is to punctuate all the voices so that the structure is clear and *cantabile*.

BWV 663 – Allein Gott. The second setting has the solo in the tenor, a good opportunity to use the Jeu de Tierce. The interplay of the voices is especially nice.

BWV 664 – Allein Gott. In the third setting, the thematic material is woven into a trio. As in the Trio Sonatas, the registration has to be chosen in such a way that each voice is clear, but distinct from the other two voices. A real organist would then have to cudgel the fingers into submission, for this piece is as demanding as any of the Trio Sonatas.

BWV 665 – Jesus Christus unser Heiland. Here the chorale is distributed among the voices of the manuals, and written so that it comes out clearly without the need for a separate solo registration. The pedal comes in only at the end, to provide a canvas for a sort of cadenza by the other voices.

BWV 666 – Jesus Christus unser Heiland. The second setting of this hymn follows the typical 4-voice structure, with the pedal delivering each line the cantus firmus after the other voices have discussed it among themselves. There are many examples of tone painting in the subsidiary voices, noted by Albert Schweitzer, among others.

BWV 667 – Komm Gott Schöpfer. A shorter version of this chorale prelude is included in the Orgelbüchlein, where it is found as BWV 631. The shorter version comes with ornaments, which, if played completely, require a slower tempo than we usually hear. The piece is completely charming, and we see no reason to take it any faster than a typical *passepied*. To us, it does not have, and should not have, the energy of a *gigue*.

BWV 668 – Vor deinen Thron. We gave the plaintive setting of the hymn to the Vox. The other voices contain repeated notes that need to be played with as much legato as the acoustics will allow, in order to avoid excessive “beatiness”. As is sometimes the case in Bach’s works, the final movement of this collection seems too simple, and thus anti-climactic. Not only is this notion probably anachronistic, it is also inaccurate: the simplicity of the last of these chorale preludes serves to bring us back to Bach’s intent in writing this collection, the worship of his Creator.