

The Organ Preludes of Adam Ileborgh Transcribed

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November 10, 2015

Abstract

Realizing a transcription of the Preludes of the Ileborgh Tablature in Modern Staff notation for greater access to the works,

Introduction

The Ileborgh Manuscript as it has come to be known, compiled by Adam Ileborgh, contains several very early pieces of organ music including what are currently the five oldest known examples of preludes and the oldest music for the organ also containing directions for the use of the pedal.[3] Scholarly opinion is divided as to the merits of these works ranging from enthusiastic declaration of support for them as seminal works in the evolution of keyboard music, as evidenced by Willie Apel's writings, to disparaging dismissal of the works as an amateurish essay of a minor composer as is the stance of Christoph Wolff.[10] Regardless of what their musical value are; it is certain that as such a very early example of written music, they call for the worthwhile endeavor of close examination for ones own determination.

The Original Title

Written in a fine hand with abbreviations and ample flourishes the Ileborgh Tablature begins with a lengthy Introduction that we might regard, rightly, as a title immediately preceding the scores:

Incipiunt praeludia diversarium notarum secundum modernum modum subtiliter et diligenter collecta cum mensuris diversis hic infra annexis per fratrem Adam Ileborgh Anno Domini 1448 tempore sui rectoriatus in stendall[9]

Fortunately for those not versed in Latin we can read Willie Apel's translation in the following:

Here begin preludes in various keys according to the modern manner, cleverly and diligently collected, with diverse mensurae appended herein below, by brother Adam Ileborgh in the year of our Lord 1448 during the time of his rectorate in Stendall.[1]

Issues of Transcription

The Ileborgh Tablature is a difficult puzzle in many regards. The manuscript itself once in the possession of Curtis Institute of Music, according to the eminently trustworthy source Wikipedia is now privately held and we must content ourselves with photographic reproductions. This status can be verified at the Curtis Library's online catalog.[8]. Why this important piece of history returned to private ownership is another mystery in itself. The manuscript dating to 1448 A.D. consists of 7 leafs[10] of which only two pages are used to notate the preludes. The Preludes are notated in a combination of staffed notation and tablature or just staff notation. The staff is eight lined and conveniently marked at the head with G, C, and E, but having no

other indications such as key or time signatures. Such information if indicated at all are placed in the title of the work in question. The tablature part is simple enough consisting of a pairing of letters arranged horizontally below the staff between delimiters resembling bar lines, the initial letter in the pair is the bass and the second letter being harmony above. The “bar lines” however do not function as a metrical indication but as termini for the interval so intended.

The preludes are not metrically divided nor given any indication of time signature such that this is one of the chief puzzles of the pieces. The notation on the staff is also a bit of a mystery in that it strongly resembles current notation practice with a few twists that cause sufficient mystery that several various solutions can easily be put forward. Because of this situation various attempts have been made to elucidate a practical score, notably by Willie Apel, Gerald Bedbrook, and Kimberly Marshall.[1, 2, 5] It is without question an impossibility to arrive at a perfect and correct solution as some of the notes are not readily identifiable in modern terms. The notes in Illeborgh’s system of notation consist of what appear to be black notation with solid black lozenges that might be: lozenges, lozenges with upright stems, lozenges that are simultaneously up and down stemmed, lozenges with a single flagged stem, lozenges with flagged stems simultaneously pointing up and down. What do these glyphs mean and how are they to be used to distribute temporal information. This is only considering the notation for the melodic line. Critically the notes with double stems do not seem to be positively identifiable in function. This is why the impossibility of a definite reading exists. In preludes 2, 3, and 5, where tablature is not used, the bass line is notated on the same staff with notes that resemble maximas but are written in various physical lengths to underscore, no pun intended, the melodic notes they are supporting.

Clearly the understanding of time and reduction to writing is somewhat different than we might be used to, which should be no surprise as clocks of the mechanical variety were a relatively new phenomenon in Europe, only becoming smaller than a tower clock not much earlier than 1430 with the introduction of the fusee and mainspring.[6] One wonders if the playing of the day was marked by a more free treatment or a strict walking beat. Temporal organization in music was in that era regarded as an expression of ratios. Illeborgh notes in his Introduction that he is using a new and modern method of mensurae. Could he also been using such a system in the preludes without overtly mentioning it in their individual explanatory titles? The works are often presented as being a collection of unruly wandering melodic lines and certainly appear that way at first glance. They exhibit also though strongly expressed key centers, tonic and dominant, or to use a term that might have been more familiar to Mr. Illeborgh, final and tenor.[7] In the scores it is often the case that these notes are indicated by the peculiar up/down flagged lozenges. How does one approach this enigmatic glyph? Is it simply a different length or is indicative of an embellishment? Or a combination of both? It is reasonable to conclude due to their use in the emphasis of the tonic and dominant, that these notes have a longer time value. Depending on what meter allows things to fall into place the double stemmed notes have been either given a quarter note or dotted quarter note value, and if this glyph also meant to have some sort of embellishment articulated about the indicated tone the embellishment could be any number of type, so these notes have been indicated by a mordent; being mindful it could be equally easily a turn, or trill or any other number of decorative treatment. Here it is suitable to use your judgment as a matter of taste, in what manner of embellishment you wish to employ. Which is completely consistent with historical practices as the variability of choice in ornamentation did not become set in rigid practice until quite late in the Baroque period.[4]

In this attempt to redact the preludes it has been necessary to try out a variety of possible solutions to the above problems. It was decided that for convenience the note values would be half of what might be expected, i.e. singly flagged notes expressed as 32nds and singly stemmed notes as 8ths and so on. It also is an open question as to whether the values of the notes are identical from prelude to prelude. It would be extremely desirable if it were the case to have such consistency. After much effort it seems that notes with bidirectional stemming might mean a couple of things, either involvement in a triplet rhythmic event or the possibility of being altered by a semi-tone. Both approaches were tried out for different reasons. In prelude No. 4 they only occur on the note c which might easily imply a raised semi-tone which works out pleasantly enough were they what were intended to be indicated. In prelude no. 5 the bidirectional notes only occur in one grouping of three, hence favoring a triplet transcription. Prelude no. 5 also has tick marks in the melodic line which have been transcribed as rests as they resemble rests used in the old mensural system. In every piece the tritone is scrupulously avoided even if it is not indicated. In any event, the solutions presented are merely for practical usage and if one should see in them alternate metrical patterns that fit at the most basic division of 3 or 2 of the mensural time system one should be well satisfied they are on a somewhat tenable road.

Could one successfully read the preludes off the original score? With practice certainly. Illeborgh, himself, asserts that these preludes could be played on different finals so it is quite likely he was skillful enough to transpose them on the spot and also had them possibly committed to memory, either skill indicative in our day of a fairly accomplished musician, but in his it

might have been a normal demand, or was it an exceptional skill? Was he one of the very few that set works to the page in that time or have we simply lost a really vast corpus of works to the ravages of time in a similar manner to that the paleontological record represents past life with such ample accuracy?

The pieces are without a doubt highly interesting on many levels and one must seek for themselves what value they might convey. We hope the following scores will allow more people to enter the world of such ancient music with confidence.

References

- [1] Willi Apel. *The Notation of Polyphonic Music, 900-1600*, 5th ed. Mediaeval Academy of America, Cambridge, Massachusetts, **1953**.
- [2] Gerald Stares Bedbrook. *Keyboard Music from the Middle Ages to the Beginnings of the Baroque*. Macmillan & Co., Ltd., London, **1949**.
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- [5] ed, Kimberly Marshall. *Historical Organ Techniques and Repertoire, Volume 3, Late-medieval Before 1460*. Wayne Leupold Editions, Boston, Massachusetts, **1972**.
- [6] David S. Landes. *Revolution in Time*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, New York, **1983**.
- [7] Gustav Reese. *Music in the Middle Ages*. Norton & Company, New York, **1942**.
- [8] Curtis Library website, [http://roc.curtis.edu/record=b1064795 SO](http://roc.curtis.edu/record=b1064795%5D).
- [9] Johannes Wolf. *Handbuch an Notationskunde*, vol. **2**. Leipzig, Breitkopf Härtel, **1919**.
- [10] Christoph Wolff. *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, **1993**.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Corey Gallatin and Hilary Gregg for commenting on and correcting this paper. Any errors are of course my own.

The Five Preludes Cleverly Collected by Adam Ileborgh

from the Ileborgh Tablature

Preambulum in C et potest variari in d f g a

Prelude No. 1

Organ

Praeambulum bonum super C manualiter et variatur ad omnes

Prelude No. 2

Organ

Praeambulum bonum pedale seu manuale in d

Prelude No. 3

Organ

Praeambulum super d a f et g

Prelude No. 4

Organ

Aliud praeambulum super d manualiter et variatur super a g f et c

Prelude No. 5

Organ

¹Natural if one wishes to avoid the harmonic minor.