

CD REVIEW

Carl Czerny, *Organ Music*

Iain Quinn *org*
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Long anchored in the collective musical consciousness is an image of Carl Czerny (1791–1857) as a dry pedagogue, a vendor of tutors and a composing automaton who produced an outsized catalogue of piano music from an excess of industry and a dearth of inspiration. Only in relatively recent years has this two-dimensional portrait begun to break down under re-examination by scholars and performers alike. It turns out that Czerny's formidable corpus – 861 opus numbers and much as-yet unexamined music in manuscript besides – witnesses less to the schoolmasterly *Vielschreiber* and more to a composer of imagination, craft and some daring.

One of several surprises to emerge from this newfound attention is Czerny's association with the organ, an instrument that appears to have played almost no role in the composer's official biography, but to which he nevertheless dedicated four opus numbers between 1836 and 1841, when he was at the top of his game as a key figure in European musical life. Though limited in scope, this repertory has a complicated publication history that suggests something important about Czerny's place in the burgeoning international music market of the period. Six Preludes and Fugues of modest dimension appeared in 1836 as op. 603, followed by a large-scale, technically demanding Prelude and Fugue in A minor op. 607 in 1838, both issued by Goedsche at Meissen.¹ During the intervening year of 1837 Czerny undertook successful visits to France and England, and by 1841 the London publisher Robert Cocks was offering new editions of opp. 603 and 607 alongside two further collections of preludes marketed as 'voluntaries', opp. 627 and 698, containing 12 and 20 pieces respectively. Richault put op. 607 on the French market around the same time. Breitkopf of Leipzig issued op. 627 for German organists in 1841, and Kemmer of Utrecht followed suit with a Dutch edition during the 1850s. Only the 20 pieces of op. 698 appeared exclusively with Cocks, likewise in 1841.

All of this invokes a number of fundamental questions without clear answers. What caused Czerny to turn his attention to the organ, and when? Did Czerny play the organ – still linked almost exclusively to the limited needs of the Austrian Catholic liturgy – and in what context? He found it important enough

¹ It is striking that in 1836, the year of Czerny's first organ opus, he had paid his first and only visit to the Bach city of Leipzig. Could his experiences there have stimulated him to try his hand at organ music? The journey might well have taken the composer through the Saxon city of Meissen, home to the F.W. Goedsche firm.

to remark that his father had learnt the instrument as part of a comprehensive religiously based education in the eastern Habsburg territories.² From some autobiographical sketches that recently have come to light, it is clear that the young Czerny paid attention to organists and contemporary organ composition. In an undated memoir he lists a number of Bohemian musicians from his father's circle with whom he had crossed paths, singling out Josef Lipavský (1772–1810) as a 'real virtuoso player and splendid organist'. A composer called Rafael is noted as 'excellent at the organ'.³ One wonders in what contexts the boy had heard them.

For the mature Czerny, the organ was the dignified instrument of J.S. Bach, whose music he had studied assiduously from a young age. In his *School of Practical Composition* op. 600, he points out that the instrument 'serves not only to accompany Masses and other church pieces, but also we compose for it Preludes, Fugues, Chorals and other works in the strict style, and most advantageously, in a *slow* degree of movement, as rapid figures are ineffective on this instrument'.⁴ That latter admonition resurfaces in the Preface to Czerny's edition of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, which he assumes to be viable on either piano or organ.⁵ Perhaps it was in the nature of things that Czerny's star pupil Franz Liszt would go on to make arguably the most innovative contributions to the organ repertory in the nineteenth century.

Clearly, then, Czerny's organ works do not emerge *ex nihilo*, but rather from a nexus of aesthetic priorities and cultural contexts we have only begun to understand. That these pieces deserve a careful hearing has been underscored now in a new recording by Iain Quinn, who gives no-nonsense, lucid accounts of

² 'My father was educated in a Benedictine monastery near Prague. At the same time he received rather thorough training in music, since he possessed a good voice and always had to sing the soprano solo in church. Occasionally he had to play the organ as well'. Carl Czerny, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*, ed. Walter Kolneder (Baden-Baden: Valentin Koerner, 1968), 7 (my translation).

³ 'Meine musikalischen Erinnerungen aus der Zeit meiner Kindheit und Jugend', published in Attilio Bottegal, 'Carl Czerny's Recollections: An Overview and an Edition of Two Unpublished Autograph Sources', in *Beyond The Art of Finger Dexterity: Reassessing Carl Czerny*, ed. David Gramit (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2008), 42 (my translation). As Bottegal notes, the latter musician is likely the organist Ignaz Wenzel Rafael (1762–1799), in which case Czerny would have encountered him at a very young age.

⁴ Carl Czerny, *School of Practical Composition; or, Complete Treatise on the Composition of All Kinds of Music* op. 600, vol. 1, trans. John Bishop (London: Robert Cocks, n.d.), 128 (emphasis in original). As models for the composer, Czerny prints the opening bars of Bach's big fugues BWV 544, 545 and 686.

⁵ 'Wherever an extremely rapid tempo is indicated, this is, of course, meant only for the pianoforte. When playing passages so marked on the organ, the tempo must be moderated very decidedly'. Carl Czerny, Preface to Johann Sebastian Bach, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (New York and London: G. Schirmer, 1893). Czerny also allowed for different keyboard instruments in some compositions for organ. The English subtitle to op. 603 specifies that the piece is 'in the Church Style for the Piano Forte or Organ', whereas the German subtitle for op. 627 reads 'im gebundenen Styl für die volle Orgel, das Pianoforte oder Physharmonika'. Marketability is a factor here, but so is a certain universal competence assumed to play a part in the education of keyboardists. Note as well that the full-organ preludes of op. 627 in the German version become *Twelve Soft Voluntaries for the Organ* in a comprehensive listing of Czerny's works supervised by Cocks in ca. 1860, and that neither of these comport with the actual English title *Twelve Introductory or Intermediate Voluntaries*. For the Cocks listing, see (among other sources) Czerny, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben*, 55–76.

opp. 607, 627 and 698 on the Paul Fritts organ of the Miller Chapel, Princeton Theological Seminary (op. 20, 2000).⁶ The instrument proves a happy choice, not least owing to its exquisite voicing, which balances lyricism in the soft registers with a robust yet pliable plenum. The Kellner temperament supplies much musical interest on its own, as it throws into relief the restive chromaticism Czerny finds integral to preludes ‘in the strict style’. In his composition tutor Czerny writes of pieces like those in opp. 627 and 698 that ‘the chords must continually modulate, so that a perpetual excitation may prevail in the change of the harmonies’.⁷ This accounts for the striking modulatory license in several of the ‘voluntaries’, which liberally explore the third relations typical of the time and much passing chromatic colour besides. When, for example, in the Voluntary in C major op. 698, no. 5, the music unexpectedly careens off into A-flat, the organ obliges by moving noticeably from restfulness into tension. The penultimate harmony in the Voluntary in A flat major (diminished vii with F-flat over A-flat pedal) yields a palpable ‘excitation’ that would have been ironed out entirely in equal temperament. Such instances abound.

Those interested will discover much clever music here. There is a Haydnesque subversive humour to the Voluntary op. 627, no. 6, *Andante sostenuto*, which manages to introduce ‘God Save the Queen’ in the bass voice (bar 17) in its canonic key of G – but in the minor mode, and through the back door of the piece’s main key of B-flat major. A similar strategy operates in the Voluntary in E major from the same collection, where Haydn’s famous ‘Kaiser hymn’ slips into the bass at bar 18, accompanied by a little dotted figure signalling the royal topic. But the tonal context lies far down the sharp side of the tonal spectrum in an intense B major, removed from the quoted tune’s canonic key (likewise G major).⁸ Then there is the virtuoso Prelude and Fugue in A minor op. 607 for the full organ, a 104-bar unicum that attests to its composer’s exceptional command of the Bach style. When Cocks reissued it for the English, the work appeared under the high-minded Italian title *Preludio e fuga per organo e pedale obbligato*, undoubtedly to reflect the perceived universality of its language. Its opening bars suggest parallels with the Prelude in C major (BWV 545), and the head of its fugue subject unmistakably quotes the theme of *The Musical Offering*.⁹ The fugue then goes on to demonstrate

⁶ The disk acts as a companion of sorts to Quinn’s two-volume edition of the complete organ works: Carl Czerny, *Preludes and Fugues for Organ and Voluntaries for Organ* (Middleton, WI: A-R Editions, 2011). An essay by Quinn, ‘Czerny and the Organ: Pragmatism, Prestige and Performance Practice’, in *Interpreting Historical Keyboard Music: Sources, Contexts and Performance*, ed. Andrew Woolley and John Kitchen (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 173–83, largely reproduces the front matter from the 2011 editions and dwells on the music’s early reception in England. Organists have had access to some of this music before: Otto Biba had edited the big Prelude and Fugue op. 607 and selections from opp. 603 and 698 in Carl Czerny, *Ausgewählte Orgelwerke*, Diletto Musicale 671 (Vienna and Munich: Doblinger, 1977).

⁷ Czerny, *School of Practical Composition*, vol. 1: 114.

⁸ Czerny had improvised on ‘Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser’ for Princess Victoria at Kensington during his 1837 visit to England. His variations on the tune for piano and string quartet, published as op. 73, keep to G major.

⁹ One may reasonably hear further allusions: to the subject of the Fugue in A minor from Book 2 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* (BWV 889), with which Czerny’s op. 607 shares a key, and to the subject of Johann Georg Albrechtsberger’s Fugato in E minor (IJA 10), advanced by Czerny as a model in the *School of Practical Composition*, vol. 1: 119.

the contrapuntal prowess associated with the latter work, maybe a bit too self-consciously, with two interlocking subjects, inversion and augmentation.

Quinn's transparent playing puts all this and more on display in sensitive, poised interpretations. Articulation and nuanced bending of the pulse are put in service of the motivic substance. The tempi tend to the brisk side. In many of the preludes or voluntaries, Czerny composes to the minim but signs to the crotchet (common time), and often Quinn's approach seems to favour overruling the notation to capture the essential musical motion. Still, it would be worth exploring what might come of taking seriously Czerny's oft-repeated admonition – 'very decided moderation' – in organ tempi, as in the common-time *Lento maestoso* of the full-organ Voluntary in D major op. 698, no. 10, where the tempo would accommodate the crotchet rather than the minim. Also, Quinn likes to hold out final chords, even in those places where the composer notates quick releases on the resolutions. This arguably denies an aspect of rhetorical charm to some of the more intimate pieces (as in the endings of op. 698, nos. 12, 16 and 19). These qualms aside, though, the disk offers a thoroughly satisfying contribution to a fresh portrait of Carl Czerny, while widening the lens on the period's organ repertory beyond the usual suspect of Mendelssohn.

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