

THE ORGAN WORKS OF BEDŘICH SMETANA (1824-84)

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The name of Bedřich Smetana is hardly one normally associated with organ music and the small corpus of organ works from his youth have only hints of individuality and his mature style. Yet, in this bicentenary year of Smetana's birth, these works are surely still worthy of examination.

The only works composed expressly for the organ are the *Six Preludes* written in 1846 when Smetana was still under the influence of his Prague theory teacher Josef Prokš (1794-1864). At this time Smetana was in the service of Count Leopold von Thun as a music teacher to his children, and the preludes were written for the count in the summer residence of Bon Repos Castle. Smetana classified the pieces in the catalogue of works without opus numbers, which meant that he did not intend them to be printed.

The preludes contain partly fictional chorale melodies and were written on just two staves, any pedal part shown in the musical examples being an adaptation.

Prelude no.1 in C major is perhaps slightly redolent of the works of Mendelssohn and indeed many lesser composers of the mid and late 19th-century. Whilst in no way distinctive, it is well-shaped harmonically and maintains a coherent structure through the use of the opening rhythmic motif. (Ex.1 - overleaf).

Prelude No. 2 is a Grave movement with slow moving counterpoint and expressive chromaticism, with hints perhaps of the *Empfindsamer Stil* of earlier composers, such as C.P.E. Bach. (Note the false relation in B.7). Despite the tempo marking of *Grave*, the music works equally well, albeit with a different character, at rather faster tempi. (Ex. 2 - overleaf).

2

Ex. 1

Lento [$\text{♩} = \text{c. } 56$]

p

(Pedal)

9

17 etc.

Ex. 2

Grave [$\text{♩} = 40-66$]

p

(Ped.)

7 etc.

Prelude no. 3 in total contrast is a rather charming Pastorale, albeit perhaps a little too long for its slight content. One might even tempted to shorten the curiously-long held bass notes between sections.

Ex. 3

Moderato [♩ = c.72]

p dolce

(Ped.)

7

14 etc.

In total contrast again, Prelude no. 4 replaces a static bass with an ascending and descending repeating scalic figure; (would we define this as a chaconne, passacaglia or an ostinato?). This though is no mere Baroque imitation and demonstrates a quite creative approach to a traditional form. (Ex. 4 - overleaf).

Prelude no. 5 is perhaps the most attractive and successful of the six preludes, with a recurring rather jaunty folk-like theme alternating with contrasting short chorale-like episodes. (Ex. 5 - overleaf).

Ex. 4

Andante [$\text{♩} = \text{c.84}$]

10

19 etc.

Ex. 5

mf *mp*

7 etc.

Counterpoint appears yet again for Prelude no. 6 (Ex. 6) with a running bass and more lyrical top line, somewhat reminiscent of one of Mendelssohn's organ writing. Smetana was certainly familiar with some of Mendelssohn's piano works, which he performed in concert, and presumably had some acquaintance with his organ works – or at least those of composers working in what was a common idiom of the time.

Ex. 6

Andante [♩ = c.56]

6

9 etc.

Although the preludes constitute the only genuine organ works as such, passing mention might be made of the *Fugue in A major*, one of the study works that Smetana wrote during his apprenticeship with Josef Prokš. Written in 1845, a year before the *Six Preludes*, it is part of a cycle that includes a total of eleven fugues intended for piano, the A major one being transcribed for the organ by Bedřich Antonín Wiedermann (1883-1951).

Considerably less developed and disciplined in structure, and of rather limited interest, is the chorale arrangement *Gott sei uns gnädig und barmherzig* written as a composition study in 1845, and clearly modelled on late Baroque examples. Although written on two staves, the large intervals and the chorale melody in the middle part render it well-suited to an organ with pedals.

Smetana went on to develop music of a very different kind and did not revisit these types of examples from his youth. However the preludes are nevertheless worth exploring and as a complete cycle work well as a series of brief but contrasting pieces. Individually, they can also find a useful niche in parts of the liturgy and are very approachable for performer and listener alike.

Two recordings of the preludes are available, one by Iain Quinn on the Chandos label and Michal Novenko on Priory Records, both part of anthologies of other Czech music. The two performers differ quite significantly in places to their interpretive approach, not least in terms of tempi, and listeners will no doubt have their preferences for individual preludes. Click above for direct links to the recordings on Spotify.

