Surely, the most famous Advent music of all time is Bach’s “Wachet auf,” BWV 645 (“Wake, awake”), recommended for Advent I. Philipp Nicolai wrote his Advent text in 1599. Take time to learn its beautiful melody by heart; your interpretation of the chorale prelude will certainly benefit from familiarity with the chorale that inspired it.

Ex. 1: “Wachet auf” chorale

“Wachet auf” is the first of six chorale preludes published by J.G. Schübler, probably in 1748 or 1749. At least five of the six pieces are transcriptions by Bach of arias from his cantatas; “Wachet auf” was originally the fourth movement of Cantata 140. In the original composition, tenor voices sing the chorale melody, while above it violins and viola play an original melody in unison. Peter Williams (The Organ Music of Bach, Cambridge University Press, 1980, Vol. 2) quotes several theories about the symbolism of this added melody: Does it represent the call of the watchmen, Zion’s heart leaping for joy, or even the arrival of the bridegroom? Beneath the chorale, continuo players (keyboard plus string bass) provide the bass line and fill in the harmonies. In the composer’s transcription for organ, the right hand plays the string melody, the left hand represents the tenor voices, and the continuo is replaced by a single pedal line.

REQUIREMENTS

Most of the Schübler chorale preludes are more difficult to play than they appear or sound. Bach’s usual practice when composing for organ was to consider the comfort of hands and feet; but here he composed the pieces originally for other media, so his usual preoccupation with such practical matters could not apply. The pedal line in “Wachet auf” is particularly awkward, and requires agile feet (see Ex. 3) plus constant pivoting of the lower body. The right hand and feet need lively articulation, in the manner of string playing, while the left hand needs a clearly defined touch.

Any two-manual organ, provided it has at least two octaves of pedals and a consistent, relatively lively action is suitable for this music.

EDITIONS

The best editions are by Bärenreiter (published with the Orgelbüchlein and the Chorale Partitas, catalog no. BA 5171), and Breitkopf and Härtel (Schübler Chorales only, catalog no. EB 8352, or published with Clavierübung III and other chorale preludes, catalog no. EB 6588). The new Breitkopf Bach edition (Vol. 6, edited by Werner Breig, EB 8806) is certainly one to consider if you are investing in a new book, but I have not had the opportunity to examine it. The Peters Edition is also reliable. If the Novello is the only edition available, please white out all inappropriate editorial additions. These include marks of tempo and mood, dynamics and registration, and the articulation marks in the left hand and pedal.

REGISTRATION

Bach has left us some registration marks: Pedal 16 Fuss (Pedal 16 foot), Sinistra 8 Fuss (left hand 8 foot), Dextra 8 Fuss (right hand 8 foot). These simply confirm for us the foundation pitch of each department. In other words, you should draw Pedal 16’ plus at least 8’; and for each hand, you should draw 8’ plus, if you like, higher pitched stops. The balance of the three lines should be roughly equal in dynamic level but contrasting in character. Beyond this advice, you can register the piece as you like. Bear in mind the bold, invigorating character of the text, but also consider the warmth of the original scoring. For example, you might choose for the left hand: reed or principal 8’ (no louder than mf); for the pedal: flute 16’, principal 8’; right hand: flute 8’, principal 4’.

LEARNING THE NOTES

Consider your touch before planning fingering and pedaling. Bach has included bowing marks in the right hand, which we should follow, making small articulations before and after each slur and between each beat, in the manner of Baroque string playing. These bowing marks are not quite complete (see mm. 40 and 50, where the editor in your volume may have suggested slurring
each of the first two beats to be consistent with mm. 5, 9, etc.), and you should play through the right hand to ensure that you are clear about the touch for every note. The left hand should separate very slightly between each beat, replicating the consonants of the chorale text in the original scoring. The feet too should slightly separate between beats, like a string player using separate bows. Note that these separations therefore coincide, so you will need to take care to release the hands and feet simultaneously between each beat.

These tiny gaps between the beats, absolutely normal for keyboard players of this period, contribute clarity of melody and harmony plus a dancing vitality in the rhythm. They also make the piece much easier to play, as shifts of hand or foot position frequently coincide with these gaps.

Similarly, the left-hand appoggiatura in m. 20 begins on the beat, then rises on the second 16th to the main note.

**SLIDE**

The sign in m. 8 (right hand) indicates a slide. Check that you begin the slide on the beat. This means that the slide supplants the main note: begin the slide where the main note is printed.

Before planning the fingering, I suggest you consider the ornaments—because it is easier to learn them first. We have the following ornaments in this piece:

**APPOGGIATURA**

The right-hand appoggiatura in m. 7 is identical in rhythm to those in mm. 8, 24, 25, 30, 38, 39, 48, and 49.

The right-hand appoggiatura in m. 12 (in the first box), begins on the beat. It is identical in treatment to the one in m. 52.

Most of the left-hand trills are on quarter notes (mm. 21, 30, 33, 45). Closing notes (that is, a four-note turn to finish the trill) are often added here; personally, I think that it is more effective, as well as much easier, to stop the trill on the final eighth.
Similarly, in m. 35, the trill sounds best if it stops on the final eighth.

The trill in m. 18 (left hand) indicates closing notes, and the slur over the second half of this measure is best interpreted by tying the two Ds together.

You may wish to add extra ornaments: m. 25 should probably be identical to m. 8, and m. 29 to m. 12. Most people add a short trill in m. 52 on the final beat (right hand).

**FINGERING**

In this piece, your right-hand fingering can be somewhat unorthodox: experiment until you find the fingering that promotes the best sound, the most graceful hand, and the most reliable accuracy. You will certainly shift the position of your right hand very frequently within each phrase.

Don’t forget to plan the left-hand fingering too. Even though it has the fewest notes, it has the most important line and needs to be played with perfect conviction and style.

When learning this piece, repeat each voice (right hand, left hand, and pedal) separately, to ensure equal character and confidence. At every release, bring your finger and foot to the surface of the key, and then move across the keys to the next position; avoid aerial journeys of the hand or foot. Feel how every phrase makes a journey toward the cadence and how each cadence is immediately followed by a breath. To achieve confident pivoting of the lower body, learn the pedal line in two stages. First, play the pedal part alone, with your hands resting on a stable surface, such as the console cheeks; then, repeat the pedal part with your hands in the air. (For further guidance on pivoting, see 7.3 in my book *A Practical Guide to Playing the Organ* [Cramer Music, London, 1997]).

Next, combine the voices in pairs, ensuring that the tiny gaps between each beat are perfectly coordinated. Choose your learning tempo imaginatively: while over-fast practice causes error and stress, over-slow practice is boring and results in a dull performance. Remember to backtrack often, perhaps repeating each phrase two or three times before moving on.

**TOWARD THE PERFORMANCE**

Now that you have learned the notes, you will want to work toward a performance speed. I suggest \( \frac{4}{4} = 76 \). The playing time takes \( 4 \frac{1}{2} \) minutes at this tempo. A metronome will be helpful while you work on gradually increasing the speed of the chorale prelude. (Check that you do not speed up too suddenly.)

As the piece becomes more familiar to you, notice how cleverly Bach expresses the text of the hymn. Observe how the rest in m. 2 really “wakes up” the listeners! (Make sure that you do not sustain over the rests—a common fault.)

I love the way the right hand calls us to attention again in m. 21 (second time), interrupting the left hand’s cadence with a surprise repeat of its previous phrase, and how stirring the last page is, as the music steadily climbs through mm. 42–45, before the emotional peak in m. 47.

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