



DECCA
GOLD LABEL SERIES

33 1/3 RPM
LONG PLAY
RECORDS

BACH
ORGAN WORKS

HELMUT WALCHA, ORGAN

Chorale Variations

SEI GEGRUSSET, JESU GUTIG
(All hail, thou goodly Jesus)

VOM HIMMEL HOCH, DA KOMM' ICH HER
(From heaven high, thence do I come)

DL 9615

Archive Series Deutsche Grammophon

BACH ORGAN WORKS *Chorale Variations*

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ARCHIVE SERIES • DEUTSCHE GRAMMOPHON
Recorded in Europe under the supervision of Dr. Erich Thienhaus

GOLD LABEL—ARCHIVE SERIES

It is the purpose of the Archive Series of the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft and Decca Gold Label Records to fill the gap which exists in the recorded repertoire extending from music of the earliest times to music of the middle of the 18th century.

Toward that end, no effort has been spared to secure the services of leading artists, to consult the most authentic editions and procure the proper instruments. These recordings of "old" music reveal the progress which has been made in late years, the progress from the presentation of "educational" extracts to the full realization of ever-living works of art. In other words, instead of excerpts, this series will consist of complete works; instead of arbitrary segments and selections, there will be a repertoire that has, as its aim, a full and varied contribution to the field of older music. It will assure the listener that the neglected classics are not merely exercises in scholarship but furnish a rich perspective, a widening of musical horizons.

The complete organ works of J. S. Bach (with the exception of a handful of works written during early youth, as well as those of doubtful authenticity) will constitute the first segment of this series. The project will consist of twenty-three Long Play Records.

Looking at the work of a composer of the past from the vantage point of history, one has the same impulses as when viewing a landscape from a lookout-tower. First, one wishes to note the main divisions of the material: mountains, hills, lakes, river or sea, forest, arable land, cities, etc.—or Masses, motets, symphonies, concertos, chamber music, etc.; and one notes mentally whether there is a rich variety, or else poverty and monotony. Only after this survey will one turn to examine the different features in detail.

Looking at Bach's music from a lookout-tower, the first impression is that of overwhelming richness and diversity. Tremendous monuments and tiny jewels, prayers of mystical fervor and rugging-cutting dances, fruits of ascetic scholasticism and of uninhibited expression of sensuous virtuosity jostle each other in tumultuous, teeming profusion. There is hardly another composer, with the possible exception of Mozart, who created in so many forms. From this stage of preliminary acquaintance to detailed familiarity with single works in every form there is a long road to go. For Bach did not create stereotypes. Each individual composition is different in invention and treatment, each one expresses an individual thought in an individual way and each one is a masterpiece. There is hardly another composer—again with the possible exception of Mozart, even though their creative procedures were entirely different—who devoted the total sum of his talent and knowledge to the composition of every single piece he wrote, whether it was a two-hundred-page Passion or a two-page invention.

Bach was a deeply religious man, and a larger number of his works are devoted to sacred music and its elaborations than to secular forms. By the time Bach was old enough to start on the road to becoming a musician—on his eighth birthday, on March 23, 1694—the Lutheran hymn, known as the *chorale*, had an old tradition and, while new chorales were still being composed, the *chorale* occupied the same sacrosanct function for the Lutherans as Gregorian chant did for Catholics. The *chorale* was sung in a plain four-part setting, and it was performed in elaborated forms, vocal and instrumental.

One of the many forms was the *chorale variation* for organ. Bach wrote several such sets, and they are among the most remarkable compositions of his pre-Leipzig period. In fact, their style is mature enough to have raised doubts as to whether they belong to that early period. On the title page of the *Orgel-Büchlein* (Little Organ Book) Bach signs himself as *Magister Capellae*, or conductor, of the orchestra of the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen. According to some scholars, these *chorale variations* must antedate even that period (1717-1723), and belong to the preceding one (1708-1717), when Bach was court-organist to the Duke of Sachsen-Weimar. However, Bach produced masterpieces in both these early periods.

Precursors of the *chorale variation* occur in the organ works of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621), the originator of this form, and in those of his German pupils who handed down the tradition through succeeding generations. However, it was in the works of Bach that the *chorale variation* found its consummation.

The number of variations is usually that of the number of verses in the *chorale* to be treated, and the technique of variation used in them is obligated to the secular variation technique of the German *suite*. Some composers of the period, e.g., Buxtehude, even went so far as to present the *chorale* in the form of a variation *suite* in which the *chorale* melody appeared successively as *allemande*, *courante*, *sarabande* and *gigue*.

Side One

Chorale Variations on SEI GEGRÜSSET, JESU GÜTIG

(All hail, thou goodly Jesus)
(Partite diverse sopra)

Since it seems certain that Bach composed *chorale variations* only in his early years, the advanced harmonic style of some of these variations suggests the probability that Bach revised them at a later date than his Weimar or Cöthen days. In fact, they present such perfect models that Robert U. Nelson, in his handbook on *The Technique of Variation* (U.C.L.A., 1949) devotes an entire section to their analysis. Students of music perusing these notes would do well to read that section. This would certainly be in the spirit of Bach, who, on the title page of his *Little Organ Book*, wrote the following anticlimactic jingle:

Dem höchsten Gott allein zu ehren,
Dem Nächsten, draus sich zu belehren.
(For the exclusive honor of the Allhighest God,
And for my neighbour to draw a lesson.)

The variations contain many ingenious subtleties, both harmonic and contrapuntal. From the first variation, which is only in two parts—but all the more interesting because the upper part is an embellished version of the *chorale* melody extended from time to time by what Vincent d'Indy called *thematic amplification*, the lower part a *basso quasi ostinato*—to the eleventh variation which is in five parts, the entire work is a collection of examples for variation technique.

Side Two

Canonic Variations on the Christmas Song VOM HIMMEL HOCH, DA KOMM' ICH HER

(From heaven high, thence do I come)

Among the scholastic devices of musical construction the *canon* is the severest. As its name implies (the Greek word *kanon* means law or rule), the construction of this work is governed by the obligation, assumed by the composer, to follow strictly some rule or rules in working out his theme. These rules apply to the imitations of the subject (theme) in the several parts. Even though the composer is at liberty to set himself one or several rules, he must follow them. Hence the alternate name *obbligato* composition. According to these rules, the imitation of the theme in the other part or parts may follow at the temporal distance of one, two, etc., measures; according to the interval of imitation, at the unison, at the fifth, at the fourth, etc.; according to special devices, by augmentation or diminution of the rhythmical values of the single notes of the theme; by retrogression; by inversion of the theme; by retrograde inversion; by group-imitation (the theme consisting not of a single melody but of two or more parts); by circle (going back to the beginning of the theme and repeating it); by spiral (the melody ending each time one tone higher); finally, by including a "free" part which does not participate in the imitation.

The earliest *canons* were composed in the 14th century, and the artifices listed above reached their climax in the riddle *canons* of 15th century Franco-Flemish composers.

Bach did not really originate new types, but gave new impetus to the composition of this species by transplanting it from the modal into the realm of tonal music. Especially noteworthy are his canonic variations on the Christmas song *Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her*. Bach was induced, three years before his death, to apply for admission to the *Society of Musical Sciences*, founded by his former pupil Lorenz Christoph Mizler in 1738. According to the rules of the society he presented, besides his portrait, a learned composition: the subject of our present attention. It was published in the same year, 1747. To quote Hans David from the *Bach Reader*, "this was the most 'learned' work Bach had ever composed, a true show piece of art and artifice, but it was also a thoroughly enjoyable piece of music," and "as Bach grew older, he reduced what he said more and more to its essentials. Less than ever concerned with worldly success, he sought perfection increasingly in the utmost consistency of logic and construction." Egon Kenton

about Helmut Walcha . . .

For Helmut Walcha, whom critics have called one of the greatest living interpreters of Bach, intimate knowledge of the organ works began early and matter-of-factly. Walcha was born in Leipzig, the city that continues to uphold the great musical tradition of its Thomaskirche, on October 27, 1907.

His teacher at the Musikhoehschule in that city was the present Cantor of the Thomaskirche, Günther Ramin. At the age of 17 Walcha already had a number of public concerts to his credit, as well as being a participant in performances of motets by the famed Thomas Church Choir. The first important recognition of Walcha's talent at the "queen of instruments" came when he was 21 and was appointed assistant organist at the Thomaskirche.

In 1929 Walcha was called to Frankfurt as organist of the Friedenskirche, beginning a musical association that has lasted some two decades. His activities as one of the great exponents of baroque organ music have also taken him all over Germany. Walcha uses baroque organs exclusively and considers the unmixed colors of that type of instrument the only possible palette worthy of the literature. For the recorded series of Bach Organ Works, the Small Organ of St. Jakobi Church, Lübeck was used, as well as the Schnitger Organ at Cappel—both organs date back, in part, to Bach's lifetime.

Besides his extraordinary knowledge of the baroque organ works, Walcha is himself an authority on organ building.

Walcha's activities seem truly incredible when one realizes that he has been totally blind almost since birth. The fact that Walcha lives entirely in the world of music does not alone explain the phenomenon that Walcha has memorized almost all the organ works of Bach, that he is able to play all his concerts from memory, that he handles the registrations of the works himself and that he moves about the complicated mechanisms of the instrument with complete security. In all his activities his wife is his only helper. Walcha memorizes each work voice by voice, as his wife plays it for him.

For almost every organist the organ works of Bach represent a body of his work that is wellnigh insurmountable. In these recordings the phenomenon of Walcha, the re-creator, does full credit to the genius of Bach, the creator.

In these recordings, the Small Organ at St. Jakobi, Lübeck was used for the *chorale variations: Sei gegrüsst, Jesu gütig*. The Schnitger Organ at Cappel was used for the *chorale variations: Vom Himmel hoch, da komm' ich her*. It will be noticed that the pitch of the latter instrument is approximately a half-tone above our present standard. It was felt that a change from the Baroque pitch would impair the authenticity and color peculiar to this magnificent instrument.

OTHER BACH ORGAN WORKS (ARCHIVE SERIES) ON DECCA GOLD LABEL LONG PLAY RECORDS

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PRELUDES AND FUGUES—Vol. 1. Helmut Walcha, Organ.
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This DECCA Long Play Microgroove Unbreakable Record can be played only on 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ RPM instruments. For maximum protection, it should always be kept in this envelope, away from heat.