

MICHAEL BEATTIE at ST. PETER CATHOLIC CATHEDRAL, MARCH 12, 2020

A few years ago we had a visiting organist whom I was to meet at St. Peter, and when I walked in while he was practicing a Bach piece I was so overwhelmed I could not take another step and had to sit down. Michael Beattie's recital was a wonderful reminder of that feeling. The organ itself, by the Austrian Rieger firm, though tonally somewhat related to the French baroque (Clicquot family of organbuilders), nevertheless had a complete pedal division (in those days only German organs were so laid out), and in an acoustical setting similar to that of Bach's time, would - so far as I am concerned - be utterly familiar to Bach if he traveled through time to the present, and Beattie's choice of an all-Bach program was thus inspired, and was carried out so beautifully.

.The opening piece - Passacaglia & Fugue in c minor (BWV#582)- is a monumental work - a required rite of passage for any aspiring organ student. It, and the other pieces, was explained thoroughly in program notes. Next were three settings of the chorale prelude "Nun komm der heiden Heiland" (BWV#649, 650, &651); aka "Saviour of the Nations, Come"), with the melody - always ornamented - appearing in the first two setting in the tenor or soprano, and in the pedal line in the third.

Following this auspicious beginning was the Eb Trio Sonata (BWV#525). There were six of these, considered to be among Bach's most difficult works, originally intended for the instruction of his sons. They are, however, delightful to hear (and play, but not too easy to learn!). And so it was. Next was the major chorale prelude on the tune "An Wasserflussen Babylon" ("By the Waters of Babylon"; BWV #653), a 6 voice setting with two lines in the pedal, one for each foot.

Beattie then closed the program with another monumental Bach piece, that, like the opening Passacaglia & Fugue, any serious organ student will have played, the Prelude and Fugue in Eb major (BWV#552), the first part in the style of a French Overture, and the first of the three different fugue subjects on the opening bars of the familiar hymn tune St. Anne ("O God Our Help") in a stately manner; the second subject (for hands only) a more rapid running theme, and the final subject both acrobatic and compelling, and finally bits and pieces of all three mixing together in a truly grand finale, all played in a masterful manner.

We are grateful to Frances Nelson, organist at St. Peter, and to the cathedral staff for arranging all this, and of course to Michael Beattie, who provided a welcome respite when, for more than an hour, our minds and hearts were nourished while all the fears of the coming coronavirus pandemic were completely forgotten.

Glenn A. Gentry