

PLAYING BUXTEHUDE'S WORKS RHETORICALLY

LEON W. COUCH III

Review Feature by Arthur Lawrence

WITH THE RECENT observance of the 300th anniversary of the death of Dieterich Buxtehude (c.1637–1707), much attention has been paid to this North German (or Danish) composer who was probably the most important one in the generation before Bach. Many recitals have been played and several series have featured his complete organ works. As a young man, Bach traveled to Lübeck to hear Buxtehude play at the Marienkirche; the older organist wanted the younger one to succeed him, but Bach was among several who declined the offer, presumably because the hand of Buxtehude's daughter in marriage was part of the job offer.

Produced by the Committee on Educational Resources of the American Guild of Organists, this resource is well worth its price of \$25. It consists of three CDs and an informative booklet with a number of diagrams and tables, as well as musical examples from the works performed. Two discs contain the audio lecture, which frequently includes short musical examples; the third is devoted to performances of six Buxtehude organ works, plus the first fugue of the small *Praeludium in E Minor* by Bruhns, without commentary, and related PDF documents that can be printed out.

Rhetoric was considered an important part of a musician's training in the 17th and 18th centuries but is not a part of most musical studies today. It was concerned with the principles that governed the invention, arrangement, and elaboration of ideas in a musical composition. It drew on classical models of oration and cultivated the doctrines of figures and affections. It would also take into consideration the extramusical characteristics attributed to each mode. Drawing on treatises from antiquity, the rhetorical devices variously applied to a composition were the *exordium*, the *narratio*, the *propositio*, the *confirmatio*, the *confutatio*, and the *peroratio*, each corresponding to a section of the music.

Leon Couch is a young organist whose background and experience equip him well for the task at hand. He earned two doctorates at the University of Cincinnati's College-Conservatory of Music: a DMA in organ performance and a PhD in music theory. His principle organ teachers were Willis Bodine and Roberta Gary. He is currently assistant professor of organ and music theory at Converse College in Spartanburg, S.C., as well as college organist there. Dr. Couch speaks well and is an excellent performer.

Track announcements, quotations, and literary passages used within the lecture are narrated by Frederick Hohman, the recording producer. Dr. Hohman is well known as an organist, composer, and recording engineer.

The listener will want to have a complete edition of the Buxtehude organ works at hand, since the scores in the booklet are not complete for BuxWV 137, 140, 172, and 176.

This is the only flaw I find in the otherwise commendable resource.

The performances are excellent; registrations are often rather full or soft, with tremulant and restrained pedal; some passages are played an octave higher than notated. Tempos are sometimes fast and virtuosic but at other times slow and reflective. Although well phrased, the articulation tends to be non-legato (especially in virtuosic or agile passages), except for softer legato passages. There is considerable use of rubato, and there is a fair amount of stylish ornamentation.

One of the most interesting pieces discussed and performed is the *Praeludium in F-sharp Minor*, BuxWV 146. I am among many organists who have played it as a fast and brilliant work with emphasis on virtuosity. Dr. Couch convincingly uses rhetorical analysis to interpret it as a reflective statement about death, and performs it in a quiet, introspective manner.

The organ is breathtaking and in a resonant room. It is the 2005 Taylor & Boody at Rieth Recital Hall, Goshen College Music Center, Goshen, Ind., having two manuals (56 notes) and pedal (30 notes), with 24 stops. The Lehman-Bach slightly unequal temperament works very well for this music (see *Early Music*, XXXIII, No. 1 and 2 [Feb. and May 2005], for the remarkable story of the derivation of this temperament from Bach's drawing on the title page of the WTC). Pro Organo's recording is excellent.

This resource will be valuable to both beginning and advanced organists. It is highly recommended.



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