



Sunday, May 23, 2021

by Kenneth Dake

A video version of today's Grace Notes can also be found at MarbleChurch.org.

Prelude —

PIÈCE D'ORGUE (FANTASIA IN G MAJOR) BWV 572

by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

During his decade of employment in the royal court of Weimar, 1708-1717, Bach served as castle organist and worked his way up as a violinist to become concertmaster of the orchestra there. It was also during this time he wrote many of his instrumental works, including early versions of his Brandenburg Concerti and many of his large-scale works for organ and harpsichord. We also know that he was interested in learning the French style of composition, and to that end he had copied works by the French organist and composer Nicolas de Grigny. He then set out to write his own masterpiece in this same French style with his **Pièce d'Orgue** also known as the Fantasia in G Major. More than just serving as an exercise for Bach to compose in the French style, he may have intended to play his Pièce d'Orgue in a competition that was to be held in Dresden in 1717, pitting Bach against the master French organist Louis Marchand – kind of an organists' duel. Legend has it that Marchand heard Bach practicing and was so intimidated that he chickened out from the competition and left town, leaving a surprised audience to hear only Bach play a solo recital.

Bach's Pièce d'Orgue reveals itself in three highly distinct sections which are played without interruption: the first is a sparkly passage for manuals alone (meaning played without pedals) which dances along in a playful, imitative manner. The second section is one of the noblest passages in all of Bach, with a rich harmonic progression that keeps building upon itself through a series of suspensions. In this section Bach uses a low B in the pedals, a note which most modern organs do not have. The final section is a fiery toccata of rapid 32nd notes in the hands, heard over a repeated rhythmic pattern in the pedals which descends by $\frac{1}{2}$ steps until reaching the low D, which becomes a repeating pedal point for two full pages before returning home to G Major on the final note. This section reminds me of the so-called tongues of flame that came down over people's heads on the day of Pentecost.

A recurring theme in this service will be the **Veni Creator Spiritus** (Come, Creator Spirit). This plainsong chant is believed to have been composed by a 9th-century German monk. For the second selection in this week's prelude we hear a dance-like chorale-prelude by Bach, based on the Veni Creator Spiritus theme. He puts a special punch in the pedals on the 3rd 8th of every triplet that is likely a nod to the third person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit. The postlude is by **Maurice Duruflé (1902-1986)**, and is the concluding moments of his masterpiece for organ, **Prelude, Adagio and Chorale Variations on the theme Veni Creator Spiritus**.

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Middle Hymn —

COME DOWN, O LOVE DIVINE

Down Ampney by Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

The text to this beloved Pentecost hymn was originally penned by Bianco of Siena (c. 1345-c. 1412). He was born in a small town in Tuscany, Italy, but moved at a young age to Siena where he worked as a wood carver. We don't know a lot about his life, other than that he was a mystic, lived in a monastery, and wrote sacred songs which were called Laude Spirituale. Come Down, O Love Divine is a translation of verses from one of Bianco's Laude Spirituale. The text smolders with a passionate spirituality, a deeply personal and ardent longing to be closer to God and for the Holy Spirit to dwell within us:

O Comforter, draw near, within my heart appear

And kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it feely burn, till earthly passions turn to dust

And ashes in it heat consuming.

In other words: Come set our hearts on fire for you, God!

The hymn tune **Down Ampney** was composed in 1906 by Ralph Vaughan Williams, and it's named after the village where he was born in 1872, located in the Cotswald district in Gloucestershire. It is one of the most significant hymn tunes of the 20th century. In the third phrase there is a striking harmonic shift down one step ("O Comforter, draw near," [SHIFT] "Within my heart appear"). Coming in the first decade of the 20th century this was a somewhat daring melodic move, and it serves to deepen the profound spiritual fervor of the hymn.

Communion Anthem —

IN THESE MOMENTS WE REMEMBER

Ken Medema, arr. Dake

I have long been a huge fan of the amazing singer/songwriter/pianist Ken Medema, and Ken has been a longtime friend of Marble since he sang to a packed audience in January 1997 in a concert celebrating the legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. A few years ago Ken called my church answering machine and sang this tune into my voicemail, inviting me to create a communion anthem out of his melody and text. I wrote it for the Festival of Voices to sing on World Communion Sunday when Ken was going to be with us in Worship. I decided to integrate another beautiful chant along with Ken's tune, the **Adoro Te Devote**. This chant is a Eucharistic Hymn that was written by the 12th-century Italian Dominican theologian, Thomas Aquinas. You'll hear the oboe play snippets of the chant interwoven with Ken's melody and text. A stirring modulation leads into the final verse, in which Ken's words remind us that communion table around which we gather in this service is but a prelude to the Heavenly banquet we will one day share together with Saints and Angels:

With disciples down the ages we will share this holy feast,

And with them we see the vision of the day of rest and peace.

We will give our minds and bodies to the work that lies ahead,

And be nourished on the journey by this feast of wine and bread.

— Ken Medema