

Dieterich Buxtehude (1637–1707)

A little over 300 years ago, on May 9th, 1707, Dieterich Buxtehude, organist and *Werkmeister* (administrator) at the huge *Marien-Kirche* in Lübeck, a small town on the Baltic coast of Germany, died. His assistant, Johann Christian Schieferdecker, was chosen as his successor and, following an established tradition at Lübeck, married Buxtehude's eldest daughter, Anna Margreta, on the 29th of August.



Marien-Kirche, Lübeck

Why are these mundane events worthy of commemoration 300 years later? Although nominally only an organist, Dieterich Buxtehude was known throughout northern Germany and Scandinavia as a composer of organ and harpsichord music, cantatas, and chamber music, and also as an impresario: in 1678 he established in Lübeck a tradition of *Abendmusiken*, annual series of five evening concerts that attracted large audiences and involved dozens of musicians and singers. Buxtehude organized these concerts, composed the music, chose the musicians, and conducted the performances. The concerts were held in the *Marien-Kirche* but were secular rather than liturgical events. The concerts were sponsored by businessmen in Lübeck and were open to the general public free of charge. The *Abendmusik* tradition continued in Lübeck for more than one hundred years after Buxtehude's death.



J. S. Bach at 30

Buxtehude's organ works were circulating widely in manuscript among musicians in northern Germany in the late 1600s and one of the musicians who had studied them was the young Johann Sebastian Bach, then employed as an organist in Arnstadt, some 400 km south of Lübeck. In 1705, the 20-year old Bach asked his supervisor for four weeks leave to visit Lübeck to "learn one thing and another about his art;" almost certainly it was Buxtehude whom Bach wanted to see. One wonders how he thought he could walk to and from Lübeck and have time to learn much there in just four weeks. He actually spent four months away, including the "extraordinary" *Abendmusiken* in December of 1705 commemorating the death of Leopold I and the accession of Joseph I as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire.

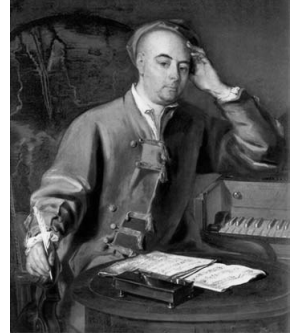
On his return to Arnstadt, Bach was reprimanded for the long absence from his duties and also for confusing the congregation with "strange variations" and "foreign tones" in his chorales. Indeed, Bach's compositions for organ changed significantly after his visit to Lübeck, becoming more dramatic and harmonically complex. It is thought that hearing

Buxtehude's music had a profound impact on the developing musical mind of the young Bach, who was essentially self-taught; however, it is not known whether he and the 68-year old Buxtehude actually met.

Some of Bach's compositions seem to have been directly modelled on works by Buxtehude. For example, the well-known "Goldberg" variations may have been inspired by Buxtehude's *La Capricciosa* (BuxWV 250), a set of 32 variations on a popular song *Kraut und Rüben* (Cabbage and Turnips). Both works are in the key of G and the melody of *Kraut und Rüben* is one of those intertwined in the *quodlibet*, the last of Bach's 30 variations.

Some have speculated that Bach may have considered applying to be Buxtehude's successor at the *Marien-Kirche* but changed his mind when he saw Buxtehude's daughter and learned of the tradition that required the successor to marry her. Composer and writer Johann Mattheson had visited Lübeck in 1703 in the company of the 18-year old George Frederic Handel. Both were invited to apply to be Buxtehude's successor but, upon learning of the marriage condition, left the next day.

Buxtehude is thought to have been born in 1637 but that is not certain and neither is the birthplace. Among the possibilities are Helsingør in Denmark, known to us as Hamlet's Elsinore, Helsingborg (now in Sweden), and Oldesloe (now in Germany). His obituary notice states that he regarded himself as Danish, but his ancestors were German, from the village of Buxtehude, south of Hamburg.



G. F. Handel



D. Buxtehude

Very little is known of his early life but it is quite likely that he learned music from his father, who was a church organist. His first position was as organist in Helsingborg (a position once held by his father), then a similar post at Helsingør, and then in Lübeck, where he lived the rest of his life.

Soon after his death, Buxtehude was forgotten as music fashion changed. Schieferdecker, his son-in-law and successor, apparently never played any of Buxtehude's compositions. Musicologists studying Bach's development as a composer discovered first Buxtehude's organ works, then his cantatas, and, most recently, his chamber music. He is now regarded as the most important north-European composer between Schütz and

Bach.

Much of Buxtehude's compositional output is no longer extant but a recent catalogue

of his known works includes 135 cantatas and other vocal works, 90 compositions for organ (preludes and fugues, toccatas, canzonettas, chorale preludes, ostinato works), 25 suites and sets of variations for harpsichord, and 23 chamber works for strings.

Sonata in G (BuxWV 271)

In 1684, a book-fair catalogue announced the forthcoming publication of “sonatas for violins and viola de gamba with continuo, suitable for church or dinner music” by Buxtehude. But it was not until 1694 and 1696 that two sets of seven trio sonatas for violin, obbligato viola da gamba, and *basso continuo* were published in Hamburg. These were the only publications of Buxtehude’s music in his lifetime, except for elegaic music for organ that he had composed for his father’s funeral, which he published as a token of respect.

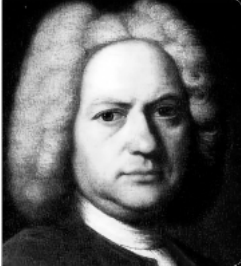
The *Sonata in G* (BuxWV 271) may have been intended for a third volume of sonatas, which never appeared. It is for two violins, viola da gamba, and *basso continuo*. In the performance this evening, the viola da gamba part has been divided between the viola and cello, with the cello supporting the bass line when not playing the gamba part. The sonata is symmetrical in structure, with lively fugal *allegros* at the beginning and end, a central *allegro* based on repeated descending bass themes, and ornate soloistic or homophonic *adagio-allegro* sections in between.

Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit (BuxWV 102)

This cantata is for four-part choir, two violins and *basso continuo*, and the text is based on Martin Luther’s versification of the 124th Psalm, which was first published by Johann Walter in *Geystliches gesangk Buchlein* (Wittenberg, 1524). In 1735, Bach composed a cantata (BWV 14) on the same text. The only source is a 1685 copy now in the *Universitetbiblioteket* in Uppsala, Sweden, but it is not known when or where it was composed or performed.

The cantata has no prelude or introduction. Instead it launches directly into the chorale, with the chorale melody in the soprano. Buxtehude leads it into some surprising chromaticisms, and the harmonization occasionally hints, with its moving inner parts, at what Bach was to do in the following decades. The instruments insert brief interludes between the phrases of the chorale, and each of the first two verses is followed by a slightly longer ritornello. The work is similar in many respects to some of Bach’s early chorale cantatas, such as *Christ lag in Todes Banden* (BWV 4).

Gott soll allein mein Herze haben (BWV 169) by J. S. Bach (1685–1750)



J. S. Bach at 35

In 1726, Bach had been Cantor in Leipzig for three years, composing a new cantata almost every week, in addition to training the singers, keeping the organs in tune, and directing the singers and instrumentalists at four churches. By then it was becoming evident to him that the vocal and instrumental forces available were simply incapable of performing large-scale works and he began writing cantatas that emphasized solo vocal and instrumental parts for individual singers and musicians who were able to meet his demands.

He must have had a particularly fine alto singer available in the fall of 1726 because he composed three cantatas for solo alto for performance in an 18-week period between July 23rd and October 20th; *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben* (BWV 169) is the third of these. The text is from Matthew 22:34–46, but the librettist is unknown. All three of these cantatas also have very prominent (and very difficult) obbligato organ parts. It's thought that the organist might have been Bach himself or his precocious 12-year old son, Carl Phillip Emmanuel.

Cantata 169 opens with an exciting instrumental *sinfonia* dominated by the obbligato organ. The same music was later used by Bach in a concerto for harpsichord (BWV 1053) but it's thought that the original format for the music was as a concerto (no longer extant) for viola. Modern re-constructions of this concerto have been attempted for various instruments, including viola, oboe, and recorder. The second movement of the cantata for alto and continuo alternates between *arioso* and recitative sections, representing a dialogue with God.

The third movement is an adaptation of the third movement of the concerto, with the vocal line competing with a very busy organ accompaniment. A recitative is then followed by the deeply moving aria *Stirb in mir* which is an adaptation of the slow second movement of the concerto; the alto soloist and the obbligato organ take turns ornamenting and harmonizing with the beautiful *siciliano* melody. After another short recitative, the cantata concludes with a four-part harmonization of the Lutheran chorale *Num bitten wir den heiligen Geist*.



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Magnificat (RV 610) by A. Vivaldi (1678–1741)



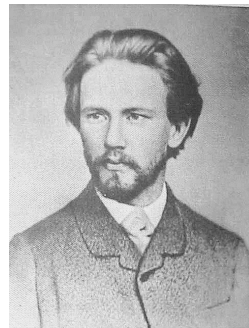
A. Vivaldi in 1723

The *Magnificat* is the canticle drawn from the biblical words attributed to the Mother of Christ, *My soul doth magnify the Lord*. Vivaldi's setting of the *Magnificat* exists in four versions. The first version (RV 610b) seems to have been written for the *Ospedale della Pietà*, the orphanage for young women where he was music director, around 1715, and sometime later was transformed into a double-chorus version (RV 610a), which was simultaneously arranged for single chorus (RV 610). All of these versions present essentially the same music. In a later revision (RV 611), the text of the second movement was divided into three separate virtuoso arias.

The work consists of nine compact movements, mostly sung in four parts. After the joyful *Et exultavit* (2nd movement), the very different emotion of the *Et misericordia* (3rd movement) is established by the use of repeated notes and suspensions. The *Deposuit* (5th movement) is performed in unison or in octaves by all the vocal and instrumental parts. The *Esurientes* (6th movement) is a duet for soprano and alto. The *Gloria patri* (9th movement) begins homophonically but concludes the work with a fugal *allegro* for the *Amen*.

Three Russian Liturgical Works

O Praise the Lord and *The Cherubic Hymn* are from P. I. Tchaikovsky's 1878 setting of the *Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom* (Opus 41). John Chrysostom (349–ca. 407) was an Archbishop of Constantinople and known for eloquence and anti-semitism. The work was Tchaikovsky's first liturgical composition and was composed in the Ukraine, where he spent summers for over twenty years. The work was initially banned by the Russian Orthodox Church as being "too western," but inspired many other Russian composers to compose liturgical works. Sergei Rachmaninoff composed another setting of the same liturgy (his Opus 31) in 1910, as did Alexander Archangelsky (1846–1924), the composer of the *Cherubim Song*. Tchaikovsky's setting of the liturgy was played at his own funeral in 1893.



P. I. Tchaikovsky