

Bach & Timbre: A View from the Organ Loft

The Organ was the most complex machine of Bach's time, and Bach was acknowledged first and foremost as its master. In addition to holding organist posts in Arnstadt, Mühlhausen and Weimar, he performed, tested, improvised, and taught on a wide variety of organs--representing several different organ types--throughout his career. Additionally, he published three collections of organ music in his last two decades. Unlike his contemporary Georg Friedrich Kaufmann, who indicated a wealth of timbral indications in his published organ music, Bach's timbral indications are few and far between. This presentation will summarize the evidence concerning the specification of timbre in Bach's organ music and make the case that Bach the composer concerned himself with pitch and duration, but that Bach the performer pragmatically adjusted timbre—along with dynamics, ornamentation, articulation, and tempo—to get the best effect from the various organs and acoustic conditions upon which, and within which, he performed.

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Bach Symposium at UMass Amherst, April 21-22, 2023