

What was I thinking?

February 28, 2021



Listen!

A couple of weeks ago I got an e-mail from someone at the Cathedral of St. Philip (Episcopal) in Atlanta. They have an organ recital series on Sunday afternoons just before they have Evensong (sung evening prayer). The cathedral is just up the street (that little street called Peachtree Road) from my former church in Atlanta, Covenant Presbyterian Church. I've been in the cathedral many times for services, recitals, and concerts, but I never played a recital there.

Though the cathedral is closed to the public right now during the pandemic, the recital series is still going on, by livestream only. The e-mail I got was from the Associate Organist-Choirmaster telling me they had a cancellation at the end of February, and even though it was very short notice, they wondered if there was any possibility I would play a recital. I said "yes." After this year, I needed a good challenge to get myself out of this slump. As "classical" musicians know, recitals are usually events you spend many months preparing for, not weeks, but again, I needed a challenge and I had some pieces in mind. I found a substitute for Sunday's service so I can rest a bit before driving to Atlanta, practicing for a few hours, and performing.



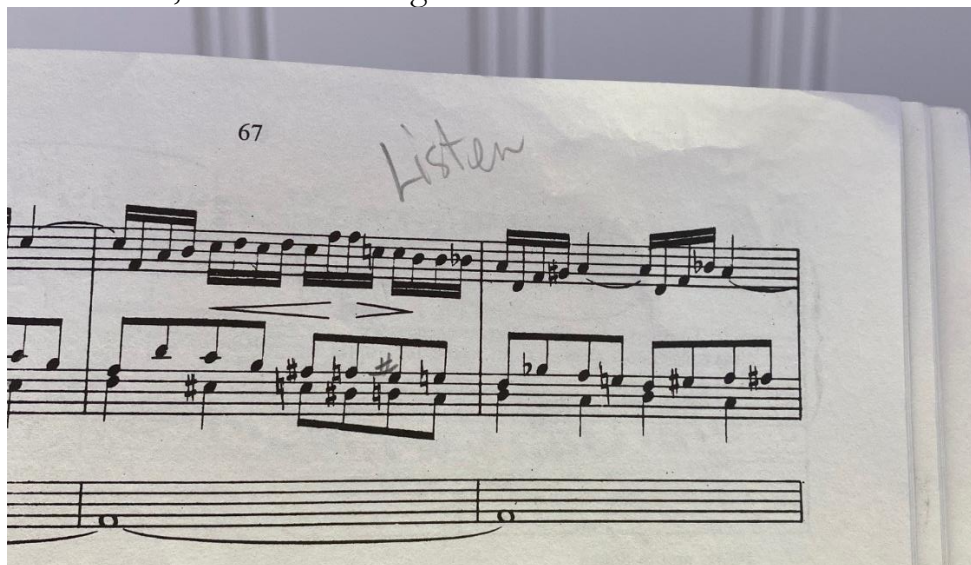
Now I had to quickly decide what to play. The first piece that came to mind was *In Memory – H.H.L.* by Dan Locklair, the piece he wrote in memory of his mother, which I learned as part of my grief process after my mother died. I had also been looking at a Bach prelude and fugue I haven't played in 30 years. I had a new edition of the organ works of Bach and that piece caught my attention. There was also a piece by the French composer César Franck, the last in a set of three pieces that were his final compositions. It's about 14 minutes long, so it's not something I've used often as a prelude in church! To fill out the time, I planned a chorale prelude of Bach's.

Did these pieces fit together and flow? Did they have anything in common? Yes. One common theme was all of these pieces begin in a minor key and, for the most part, end in a major key, or at least on a major chord. Turmoil, struggle, drama, yet with a happy ending. That seemed fitting for our time!

I'm never satisfied to just play a piece of music. I have to know the history behind it. Why did the composer write it? What's the story? In the case of the Franck piece, it was written just two months before he died. He never got to play it on the organ. He didn't get to try out and write down his choice of stops (registrations) for this music as he usually did. So, there's an element of mystery about them. Franck did leave some written draft versions for the publisher, he did write down some stops, and he dedicated the pieces. But, somewhere along the line the registrations got erased. Registrations were written, but in someone else's handwriting. There is controversy about Franck's intentions in terms of how the music should sound, and who the works were dedicated to. The music itself is filled with excitement and drama. It begins like a toccata, with some dramatic chords and rests, and interestingly, there are fermatas (meaning to stop or hold) written over the rests. Why? For dramatic effect.

One thing I was reminded of practicing this music in the cathedral this week, was the power of great acoustics. St. Philip's has four seconds of reverberation. That means when you play or sing something, when you stop, it can be heard echoing through the cathedral for four seconds afterward. It's quite impressive to hear. The dramatic pauses take on a new level of excitement.

Looking at my musical score, from when I was studying the Franck piece years ago with my wise teacher, I saw something she wrote in:



Listen! I was trying to remember what she meant. Listen for what? I think it had to do with listening to repeated notes and making them clear. But that word can mean many things. When I was practicing this piece and the others, I did just that – listen!

As I practiced in that great acoustic and enjoyed listening to Franck's music reverberate through the room, I remembered playing a recital in another very lively space years ago as a student. After my recital and man came to me and said, "you didn't just play the music, you played the room." I honestly didn't know I had back then, but I've made it a point since then to let the room be part of the instrument and part of the music. That's what the great composers intended. Listen!

Then there was Bach. In re-learning the prelude and fugue, I noticed the new edition had some notes that used to be in the pedals, now being played by the hands. I started comparing the three editions I own, and they are all different. Some had an extra measure in one place. Some had notes in the pedals, but the latest edition (which we assume is the "authoritative" version) did not. I started doing some research and learned that there is no copy of this piece in Bach's own handwriting. There were several copies, each a little different, copied by other people. One, however, copied by a student of Bach, did have some corrections in Bach handwriting. It's the last known version out there, so it must be the last word, right? Maybe not. Bach was often revising his music. He didn't stay the same. He evolved. So, none of these editions are "wrong," they are just based on different copies of Bach's music.

I also realized I have a conflict between sentimental attachment to the edition of music I bought and learned from in school in Indiana, and the latest edition which has to be the most "correct." I went back and forth between editions, old vs. new. The new edition I just bought two years ago, or the old, faded, dog-eared edition that still has the sticker from the Indiana University bookstore where I bought it. Indiana, my "Hogwarts." What to do?

I finally decided to play from the new edition (with those few notes NOT in the pedals) and took it with me to Atlanta to practice. I started playing Bach in that great cathedral acoustic. I listened. And I realized I was wrong. In Harry Potter, they say "the wand chooses the wizard." In my case, the organ chooses the music. It couldn't be any other way. I knew I had to bring the edition I had used in school, with the pedal notes, because in that great space, it just wasn't the same without them. Those thundering pedal notes just had to echo through that room. So, when I go back Sunday, I will take my tried-and-true edition of Bach, and those pedal notes will be heard.



On a personal note, I have knelt in prayer in the Cathedral of St. Philip many times. As in many cathedrals, there is a place where you can light a candle and kneel for a prayer. During a break in my practice this week, I lit a candle in memory of my mother. My recital will be played in memory of her. It seems especially appropriate because she did not get to have a proper church funeral, so this was as close as I could get. I lit a candle and said a prayer. When I did that, there were several other candles burning too. When I finished practicing, I turned off the organ and the lights, and as I started to go, I looked back at the candles. They had all gone out. All but one, the one I had lit for my mother continued to burn brightly. That seemed right. I walked down the long aisle and got to the back door, I turned to take another look at the stained-glass windows in the evening light. I also looked back at the candles. That one last candle had just gone out.



God be with you till we meet again.

John