

What was I thinking?

May 23, 2021



Pentecost

It's been a couple of weeks since I've written an article. It was an honor to be asked by Carla Buss and the Inquirers (sounds like a good name for a band) to offer a two-part virtual organ tour. Other Sunday school classes and various individuals joined us too. The classes were done on Zoom, so I could carry my iPhone and climb up in the organ chambers (where it's hard enough for one person to go) to show people what's inside the chambers of our Schantz organ. It's usually a surprise to people when they see that most of our organ is not visible from the sanctuary. There are pipes tucked away in all kinds of places. There are levers, cables, pulleys, shades, gadgets that are electronic, pneumatic, and mechanical. There are also many things on the organ console, stops, pistons, and couplers, just to name a few. It was fun to show all of it, and we had some very interesting questions.

We also had a funeral, a wedding, and we've had meetings with couples for more upcoming weddings. It was a special treat to meet with one couple. The bride grew up in our church and she went on and on about how beautiful the sanctuary is, how great the organ is, and how she's dreamed of her wedding in this church since she was a girl. I think she's been planning since she was about 10 years old, so it didn't take long to settle on the music!

Now we're on to Pentecost, perhaps the most neglected of our church holidays/Holy Days, and that's a shame. We sometimes hear people say, "On that first Christmas," and "On that first Easter," but that's not quite right, because there were no such holidays. You won't see the words "Christmas" or "Easter" anywhere in the Bible. You will, however, find the word Pentecost in Acts 2: "When the day of Pentecost

had come, they were all together in one place.” Obviously, the Apostles didn’t have kids that had just gotten out of school for summer and they weren’t dealing with a pandemic if they were “all together in one place.” Pentecost comes from the Greek word meaning “fiftieth.” In the Jewish tradition it’s the 50 days of feasting starting the first day after Passover. For us as Christians, it’s the 50th day starting on Easter. We’re often urged to wear red on Pentecost, but we’re not often told why. The color red is symbolic of the tongues of fire that came down and touched the Apostles, filling them with the Holy Spirit.

Pentecost has a special, personal meaning for me. Aiden (the fiery young man) was baptized on Pentecost, not necessarily by choice, but due to circumstances. As it turned out, the 11:00 service in our church in North Carolina had their confirmands joining the church on Pentecost, so Aiden got bumped to the early service. The early service had a small choir, but because of Aiden’s baptism, there was a big turnout of both regular members and guest singers, making it the biggest choir the early service had ever seen. The anthem I had planned for that service was chosen before we knew Aiden would be baptized that day. It was *If Ye Love Me* by Thomas Tallis. That just happens to be the anthem Kate heard our choir in Atlanta sing on the day she came to visit, the anthem that made her want to join the choir, and that was before she and I ever met. Coincidence?

While you may be able to think of many favorite pieces of music for Christmas and Easter, it’s probably harder to think of your favorite Pentecost piece. I have many. One is a piece I just happened to see recommended in worship planning guide for Pentecost, *Feria Pentecostes* by Camille Saint-Saëns. I took the suggestion, found and learned it and it’s become a favorite. While I have recordings, I don’t think I’ve heard any other organist play it. The title is roughly translated “the feast of Pentecost,” but I knew nothing else about it. I don’t know how or why (maybe it was the Holy Spirit) but I eventually found the 4th century hymn the piece is based on. I’ve never heard anyone sing it, even the Episcopalians, and they’ll sing pretty much anything you put in front of them.

As you should know by now, I rarely believe in coincidence; I’m always trying to find the “hidden meaning” behind things. For me to find that organ piece (while I was in Atlanta) which I’ve heard no one else play, for it to become a favorite of mine, for me to play it on Pentecost at Aiden’s baptism (in North Carolina), for me to select that piece again (after coming to Athens) to play on a big concert at the close of a sacred music conference at Indiana University, and for me to find the hymn while I was at that conference, it all seems to be to be more than coincidence.



It's still painful when I think of my father passing away before Aiden was born, never getting to see his one and only grandson. His father died before I was born and that was one of the few things that brought my father to tears. I remember when Kate was taken into the operating room for a C-section (because Aiden was stubborn and wouldn't come out), I was scrubbed up, put in scrubs, hat, mask, etc. and I was plunked down on a stool in the hallway outside and told to "wait here." All that excitement and activity, and suddenly I was all alone in silence. In addition to Kate and Aiden, my father was on my mind. Why couldn't he be there? I knew he would be proud and happy (and probably in tears, no matter how tough he tried to be), I knew he would put a hand on my shoulder, and in a way, I could feel that. Later, when I told my sister about it, she said, "I knew that's what you would be thinking. He was there." Aiden's birth, my father, Aiden's baptism, Pentecost. It's all connected in my mind.

Back to the organ piece that no one plays, based on the hymn that no one sings, how, or rather why, did that come to be in my repertoire? Why Pentecost? I think I found the answer in the last stanza of that old hymn (attributed to Hilary of Poitiers, 4th century):

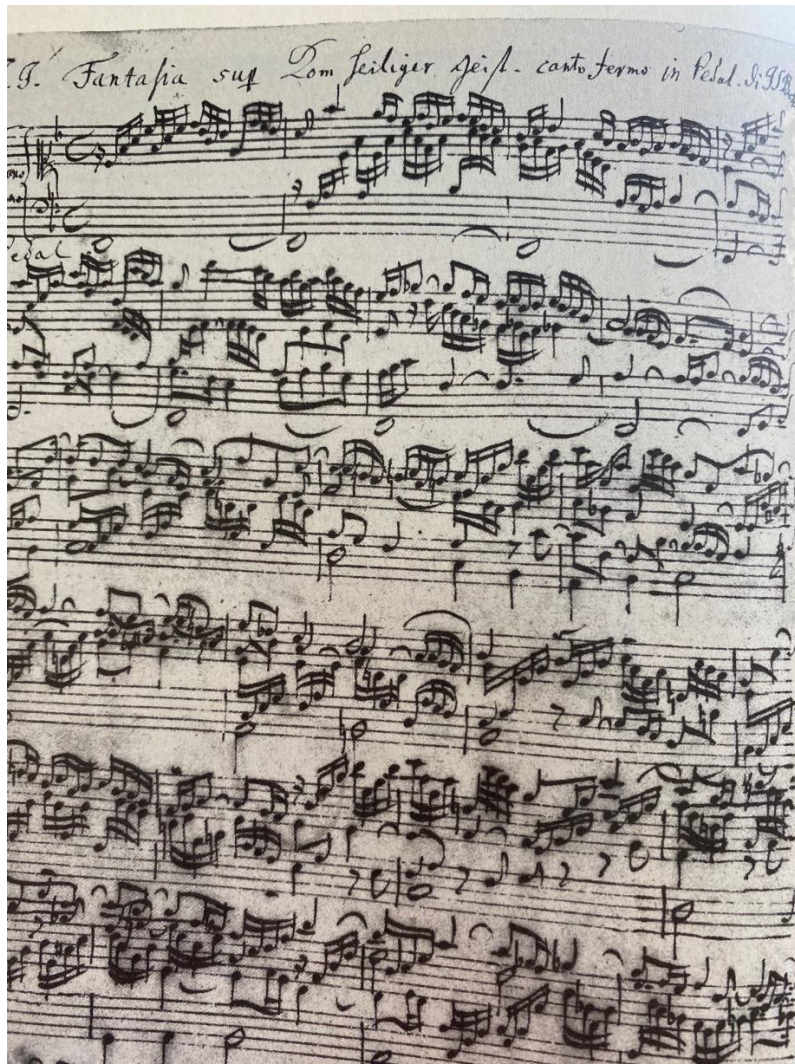
You who did our forebears guide,
with their children still abide;
grant us pardon, grant us peace,
till our earthly wanderings cease.

The same Spirit who guided our ancestors guides us, their children, and we still pray for pardon and for peace.

On Sunday, John Tsao will sing H.T. Burleigh's arrangement of *Every Time I Feel the Spirit*, a spiritual we often hear sung at a lively tempo, but Burleigh indicated it should be slow and with reverence. That makes us hear the text in a different way.

Among our hymns, we'll be singing *Come Down, O Love Divine*. The text, by Bianco da Siena (also 4th century) was a *laudea spirituale*, meaning it was a vernacular Italian sacred song (as opposed to being in Latin). I guess you could think of it as an Italian spiritual. We sing it to an English tune by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The tune is named for the composer's birthplace, Down Ampney. There was an organ teacher at Indiana University (before my time) who used to say he wanted a dog he could name Ampney, so he could say, "down Ampney!" A joke only an organist would laugh at.

The postlude will be Bach's *Come, Holy Ghost*, or at least one version of it. Bach wrote and rewrote many of his organ works, and of the handwritten copies we have, most were copied by someone other than Bach, so it's up to the editors to guess which one is "correct." The more we (and I) look for the one, definitive edition that is "correct," the more we find there's no such thing. I think there's a lesson to be learned. We do see again where Bach wrote "J.J." for "Jesu Juva" ("Jesus, help!"). We organists often think that when we're trying to play Bach's music.



It's Pentecost. You don't have to buy any presents, put up a tree, hide eggs, or anything like that. Just put on some red. That shouldn't be hard in this town.

God be with you till we meet again.

John