

Axel RUOFF

COMPLETE WORKS FOR ORGAN, VOLUME ONE

WIE LIEGT DIE STADT SO VERLASSEN: SINFONISCHE FRAGMENTE
DREI PHANTASTISCHE TÄNZE
TOCCATAS II, IV, V AND VI
NEUN LEICHTE STÜCKE
VIA DOLOROSA

Jan Lehtola
organ of Turku Cathedral

INCLUDES FIRST RECORDINGS

AXEL RUOFF: COMPLETE WORKS FOR ORGAN, VOLUME ONE

by Cornelis Witthoefft

In 1795, in his pre-Romantic essay *Rambles and Musings in the Realm of Music*, the German composer and writer Johann Friedrich Reichardt wrote an account of a fictitious sacred concert he allegedly attended, featuring soloists, chorus, orchestra and organ, in order to make his point of what he thought the future of spiritual music should be:

Then the orchestra began an overture. However, as good and well-equipped as it was, compared with the glorious opulence and exalted unity of the organ its effect remained petty and shallow. How is it possible, I mused to myself, that the most splendid of all instruments comprising an entire orchestra with all its mighty power and opulence should be left so unused, that an orchestra of the most heterogeneous instruments and people assembled apprehensively should be preferred to or at least put on a par with it while a single human being who is genuinely inspired or highly educated can, with quiet touches, move the ocean of sounds to a gentle surge, or with tempestuous grasps stir it to the utmost motion, upsetting it to the core.¹

This passage came to mind when I revisited the scores of organ music by Axel Ruoff and listened to the recordings presented on this album. At the time Reichardt wrote his essay, the repertoire of substantial solo organ music was famously meagre, on account of the dearth of works written for the instrument between the Baroque and the Romantic periods; Reichardt was right to complain that the organ should 'be left so unused'. Strangely, Reichardt, a violinist and pianist by education and for decades

¹ Johann Friedrich Reichardt, *Wanderungen und Träumereien im Gebiete der Tonkunst*, in *Berlinisches Archiv der Zeit und ihres Geschmacks* 1 (1795), Vol. 1, June, pp. 584–93, here p. 588 (transl. Cornelis Witthoefft).

conductor of the Berlin court orchestra, never subsequently contributed a work for organ himself. It is conceivable that, within the context of the Classical aesthetics with which he was familiar, he felt unable actually to compose the music he already vaguely envisaged for the organ. Even so, he foreshadowed the renaissance of organ music which took place in the Romantic era and has continued in an unbroken development to the present day.

Axel Ruoff is a significant voice in this repertoire. He is a contemporary composer fully aware of music history in general and the stylistic evolution of the organ in particular. In its essence his organ music is spiritual, often inspired by biblical narrative or sacred lyrical texts, which nonetheless are never treated in any descriptive or doctrinal manner. Some organ music aims primarily to represent objectivity or eternal truth as if it were some kind of doxology; Ruoff's, by contrast, breathes subjectivity – it is music designed to touch the emotions of the listener. But Ruoff does not preach, does not lecture on the texts he takes as a basis for his compositions, but rather offers a subjective reading in sound. 'Music is sound, is image, is language. Music must be capable of speaking, of saying something, of communicating something', he once stated. 'It begins where the spoken word ends and gives space to the unutterable, the inexpressible. Music that needs to be translated into another language in order to be understood has missed the mark.'²

Ruoff was born in Stuttgart on 24 March 1957. From 1975 to 1979 he studied composition, music theory and piano at the University of Music and Performing Arts in his native town, his teachers including Milko Kelemen, Rolf Hempel and Erhard Karkoschka; he also spent some time at the Music Academies in Kassel and Helsinki. In 1979 he graduated with honours in music theory and piano, and five years later he obtained his Master's degree in composition, both in Stuttgart, followed by an engagement as lecturer in music theory at the University of Music in Trossingen, south-west of Stuttgart, from 1983 to 1985. Awarded a scholarship by the Japanese Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs, he further pursued his musical formation at the National

² Quoted in Gertie Steiner, 'Axel Ruoff, Sinfonie II für Orgel' (programme note), in *Internationaler Orgelsommer, Stunde der Kirchenmusik, Stiftskirche, Stuttgart*, Jan Lehtola recital, 28 July 2017, pp. 6–7, here p. 6.

University of Fine Arts and Music in Tokyo from 1985 to 1987 to study with the Japanese composer Hiroaki Minami. During these years he was also active as a visiting professor at various Japanese universities. From 1992 to 2020 he was a professor of music theory and score-reading at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Stuttgart, serving from 2006 to 2010 as a Vice Dean and from 2010 to 2014 as an Academic Dean.

His music has been awarded numerous prizes, with performances at major German and international festivals, among them the Documenta Kassel, Espace Musique, Ottawa, Settembre Musica, Torino, the St Petersburg and Budapest Spring Festivals and the Tokyo Summer Festival. Besides his vast output of organ music documented in this series of recordings, his *œuvre* consists of a wide range of genres, including large-scale sacred music (the oratorios *Bergpredigt* ('The Sermon on the Mount'; 1998–99) and *Credo* (2001–2) and the cantata *Die Hexe von Endor* ('The Witch of Endor'; 2010–12)), music for chorus, works for large orchestra (*Nacht und Träume* ('Night and Dreams'; 1986–87) and a *Sinfonietta* (2013)) and for symphonic wind and brass orchestra (*Inferno* (1992), another *Sinfonietta* (2006) and a *Rapsodia appassionata* (2018)), concertos for piano (1989 and 1994), guitar (1993), cello (1995) and horn (2008–9), music for various solo instruments, songs and other vocal music, and stage works including the opera *Ein Fremder in der Stadt* ('A Stranger in the City'; 1999), after the Romantic poet Wilhelm Hauff.

It is no coincidence that the musical form best represented in Ruoff's keyboard music is the toccata. In its first and most general meaning a toccata is the instrumental form *par excellence* in which the composer or interpreter (sometimes the same person, of course) can exhibit an almost primal joy in producing combinations of sound in an unrestricted form that appears to offer improvisatory freedom. Those sounds may begin as a single note or a triad or a gestural figure. In Ruoff's harmonic language a triad may stand for itself, extended or compressed by adjoining notes or pointing to another harmony, the inherent tension between sequences of triads still being important to him but newly defined compared to traditional harmony. The gestural figure may or may not correspond to the surrounding harmonic textures. Tonal gravity, too, is not suspended altogether in his music but rather dislocated to a more distant centre.

The other implication of the term ‘toccata’ points to the predilection of many composers for generating energy from rhythm. Here ostinato patterns play a central role, although in Ruoff’s music they are never treated mechanically. His appreciation of rhythm also appears in his use of compound metres or alternations of binary and ternary patterns, called *aksak* in Ottoman music theory, as one of the most vital, if not obsessive, sources of musical energy. Thus an element not naturally associated with the western tradition shapes his music, as does the focus solely on the present moment that is central to the traditional Japanese culture he got to know and cherish during his extensive stays in Japan.

Ruoff’s inclination towards the toccata points to his awareness of the importance of timbre, and thus of the organ as ‘the most splendid of all instruments comprising an entire orchestra’, to recall Reichardt. But as a rule he prescribes dynamic values only and lets the performer choose the most suitable registration.

In the early twentieth century it was French composers in particular who made the organ toccata their own – most famously Charles-Marie Widor, but also Léon Boëllmann, Eugène Gigout, Louis Vierne and later figures such as Marcel Dupré, Maurice Duruflé, Jean Langlais and Jean Guillou. It is remarkable that Ruoff, a German, seems to find himself much more at home in the tradition of French organ music than in the continuation of the sequence of German and Austrian organ composers that runs through Bach, Mendelssohn, Reger and Johann Nepomuk David.

***Sacrum* – Toccata VI (2018)**

Sacrum, Ruoff’s sixth toccata [1], is the most recent of the compositions gathered on this first album, and was dedicated to the conductor and organist Helmut Wolf on the occasion of his 80th birthday. The world premiere was given in the village of Bärnbach, just west of Graz, in southern Austria, in 2019 during the festival ‘Orgelfrühling Steiermark’ by Christian Barthen, who also gave the first performance in Korea. Jan Lehtola gave the first Finnish performance in Lahti in 2020.

Sacrum is a study in convulsion and focused energy. It takes its inspiration from the incident in the Book of Judges which was treated in Handel’s oratorio *Samson* (1742)

and Saint-Saëns' opera *Samson et Dalila* (1877). But while in the libretto of the oratorio the event is mostly merely narrated by a messenger, and in the opera it is the power of the dramatic tenor voice assigned to the character of Samson that causes the effect, in Ruoff's organ toccata the subject matter is the physical and mental strain inherent in Samson's preparation for the deed itself.

Samson, God's chosen one, has fought against the Philistines but has eventually surrendered to the seduction of the Philistine woman Delilah. Defeated, humiliated, blinded and arrested, he prays to God to endow him one last time with his superhuman power. God answers his prayer and lets him bring down the temple occupied by him and a multitude of Philistines, thus killing himself and slaying more of his enemies than he has ever slain before.

An important landmark in the history of Baroque keyboard music and an early example of programme music is the collection *Musicalische Vorstellung einiger biblischer Historien in 6 Sonaten auff dem Claviere zu spielen* ('Musical Representation of Several Biblical Tales in 6 Sonatas to be played on a Keyboard'), composed in 1700 by Johann Kuhnau, Bach's predecessor as Cantor at St Thomas' Church in Leipzig. Kuhnau is regarded as the originator of all renditions of biblical narrations in instrumental music. All his sonatas are based on Old Testament tales, the most famous being *The Fight between David and Goliath*. Interestingly, its frontispiece exhibits a female organist, recognisable as Lady Music, in a domestic environment, not playing from a music score but apparently directly improvising over the text, looking at an open book entitled *Biblia sacra*. On the organ case one can read the Latin inscription 'Dum ludo alludo', which can be translated both as 'When I play, I have fun' and 'When I play, I make allusions [to something]'. The first meaning refers to the performer's joy of making music; the latter relates to what is behind the notated music, hinted at, for instance, in the use of rhetorical figures so vital to the music of Kuhnau's time. In Ruoff's *Sacrum*, alternating sections marked *Allegro marcato* and *meno mosso* seem to symbolise, respectively, the former strength that Samson longs for and his current weakness. In a segment with the performance instruction *danzante* ('dancing') – from 2:10 to 4:50 – the hero seems to perform some jests the Philistines have ordered him to perform so as to increase his

humiliation. The last part of the piece, *Allegro assai, molto marcato* (at 5:43), reflects Samson's final effort to push down the temple pillars, shouting 'Let me die with the Philistines!'

***Neun leichte Stücke* (2013)**

The *Nine Easy Pieces* were commissioned in 2013 by Ruoff's publishers, Strube Verlag in Munich, and are dedicated to the organist Martha Schuster, who also supplied suggestions for the registration in the published score. The first performance was given in 2015 by Georg Oberauer in Hildesheim, in Lower Saxony.

Compared with the high virtuosity required by Ruoff's major organ works, the designation 'easy' for these pieces is fitting. They focus not on an underlying text but on essential elements of organ-playing, summing-up the history from a perspective that is sometimes ironic – 'dum ludo alludo': making allusions to typical, historically evolved organ stereotypes. No. 7 is labelled 'Bagatelle', but all of them could bear that description, in the sense in which Beethoven used the term. They also condense technical aspects of composition, exhibit idiomatic figures and manners of playing and serve as short character pieces.

The Präludium – an *Allegro energico* in $\frac{2}{2}$ [2] – features three-part polyphonic writing and other contrapuntal devices such as inversion of the subject, uses a pedal point and reflects in general the erudite character that organ pieces often display. No. 2, a *Lento assai* Choral in $\frac{4}{4}$ [3], makes play with one of the roles of the organ in a church service, introducing phrases of varying lengths, alternating manuals and requiring the playing of four-part harmonies *legato*. No. 3, a humorous Capriccio, *Allegro giocoso* in $\frac{2}{2}$ [4], demands the use of three manuals and different articulations and presents a lilting polka-like rhythm; its repetition is to be played loudly and boisterously on the great organ before an evanescent coda brings it to a surprising end. No. 4 is an Intermezzo, *Adagio* in $\frac{4}{4}$ [5], again with chorale-like phrasing and echo effects, but in essence it is a play with harmonies remote from each other, like C major and F sharp major, executed on the white and black keys on the keyboard, separated by the interval of a tritone, the final chord being constructed of these two triads simultaneously; again,

perfect smoothness is required. The fifth of these pieces is a Romanze, *Sostenuto* in $\frac{4}{4}$ [6], apparently to be played (and heard) rather tongue-in-cheek. Broken major and minor chords in the right hand provide the background for a sentimental melody assigned to the left hand, all of which is, at its best, reminiscent of some epigone of César Franck or, at its worst, of some salon-music pieces written for the harmonium at the time around 1900, when this instrument was popular. The Interludium, marked *Grave* and alternating $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{5}{4}$ [7], continues the harmonic tensions of the Intermezzo and the phrasing of the Choral; as the synthesis of these two, it thickens the texture and raises the dynamic level, the implicit tonality of D major being suppressed until the very last chord. No. 7, the Bagatelle, is a *Largo* in $\frac{4}{4}$ [8], which combines the three-part writing of the Präludium with the smoothness of the Choral and the Intermezzo. Descending and ascending lines in subdued dynamics alternate over slow-paced pedal points. No. 8, a $\frac{3}{4}$ Scherzo marked, appropriately enough, *Allegro scherzando* [9], reflects the detached texture of the Capriccio and combines imitative treatment and homophonic writing in traditional four-bar groups and distribution on two manuals. The closing Postludium, an *Allegro vivace* in $\frac{2}{2}$ [10], plays with adjoining harmonic areas, the subject in the pedal resuming the ascending interval of a fourth on which the Präludium was built.

***Morgengesang* – Toccata V (2010)**

Ruoff's fifth toccata, first performed by Jan Lehtola in Helsinki in 2016, was inspired by the poem *Morgengesang* ('Morning Song') by Johann Matthias Schneuber (1614–65), a professor of poetry at the University of Strasbourg, which was published in 1644. Poems of that time, both secular and sacred, might no longer be immediately comprehensible to present-day readers. To appreciate such texts, it is important to consider in the first place that they tended to be affected by the impact of the Thirty Years War, which brought massive devastation to continental Europe, the area of Alsace where Schneuber lived having been particularly badly affected. Even a poem like *Morgengesang*, which starts off with the joyful proclamation of the beginning of a new day, might lead to a serious, reflective ending. Second, these texts use allegory abundantly, because the education

of the day led one's perception of the world in that direction. The opening stanza of Schneuber's *Morgengesang* reads in English translation:

Now it is beginning to dawn,
The dawn, moist with dew,
Preceding the sun,
Hastens away with its purple carriage
And gives way to Him
Who enrobes the world with light.

Only with the last stanza is the emblematic use of the rising sun as a symbol for the Saviour revealed:

Jesus, you my consolation and life,
Sun of justice,
I am full of darkness, too,
Yet I want to surrender to you.
Alas! Ignite your light in me.
Annihilate whatever is dark.

Ruoff's wordless setting of this text [11] displays a deep understanding of the spiritual nucleus of this poem, since it avoids all the formal word-painting readily provided for in the text: neither are musical equivalents for brightness and darkness sought, nor is any gradual brightening expressed musically – and other composers might have been tempted to portray the 'lovely singing of the birds' dissolving the silence of the night that is mentioned in the second stanza. Instead, only the metaphor of the sunlight itself is symbolised by a major chord, mostly in a simple broken form to be played *legato*. At the beginning the tonality of E flat major is touched upon very briefly, followed rapidly by adjoining harmonies as D major, E major and then many others, creating a fascinating kaleidoscope of a multitude of ever-changing, ever-present harmonies. In this way, Ruoff succeeds in creating the paradox of suggesting a kind of apotheosis of tonality without actually writing tonally centred music, the major chord representing, rather, the

missing core. A coda, *Prestissimo*, beginning at 3:43, to be played *staccato* and building up to a magnificent climax towards the resolution into the initial harmony, seems to stand for the ignition of ‘your light in me’ in the last stanza.

Drei phantastische Tänze (2004–5)

Their collective title notwithstanding, these three short pieces – first performed in 2005 by the dedicatee, Andreas Gräsle, in Tübingen, in south-west Germany – are absolute music. As in the *Nine Easy Pieces*, each number is based on a particular compositional idea, but here, in line with the title, the unsophisticated basic material is expanded and developed throughout in bizarre manner. The first dance, *Sehr rasch, scharf artikuliert* (‘Very fast, with marked articulation’), in $\frac{2}{4}$ [12], starts as a two-part invention on the interval of a fourth, alternating in slurred and detached articulation; subsequently this interval is inverted, extended and harmonised before the development is brought to a sudden end. The second piece, a tarantella marked *Allegro assai* in $\frac{6}{16}$ [13], uses the rhythm typical of this dance, introduced by the right hand in octave leaps as a fundament for bitonal harmonic adventures in an improvised gesture. Like the fourth of the *Nine Easy Pieces*, the last dance, a *Presto* in $\frac{2}{4}$ [14], juxtaposes and stacks two major tonalities in the interval of a tritone – as, for instance, E major and B flat major at the opening and the end. This piece can perhaps be viewed as a deliberate reminiscence of the famous Toccata from Widor’s Fifth Organ Symphony, Op. 42, No. 1, a reverent acknowledgement of the founder of the Organ Symphony, a genre Ruoff enriched with two major works of his own, to be presented in later volumes of this series of recordings of his complete organ works.

Erhebt euch, Pforten der Weltzeit – Toccata IV (2007)

The decision to consider a particular translation of a passage from the Bible is sometimes a matter not only of literal taste or of predilection for either ancient or modern language but also of the quest for fidelity to the original. Psalm 24 provides the verse that forms the basis of Ruoff’s fourth toccata [15], but Ruoff chose the German translation by the major Jewish Viennese philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965), published in his

Buch der Preisungen in 1935 – apparently the first to represent in German the original meaning of this passage. Martin Luther had translated it as ‘Machet die Tore weit und die Türen in der Welt hoch, dass der König der Ehren einziehe!’ (‘Open the gates wide and the doors high so that the King of glory may come in’), thus as a command given by someone to someone else. This translation was then adopted literally by the Lutheran pastor Georg Weissel for his hymn ‘Macht hoch die Tür, die Tor macht weit’, which became popular and is still widely known and sung as an advent hymn in Germany and, in translation, around the world. The melody comes from the most successful pietistic hymn-book of the period, dating from 1704; typically of its musical style, there is a certain pleasantness in its lilting $\frac{6}{4}$ tune, which expresses the joyfulness of the people in anticipation of the advent of the Saviour. The descending line of its first phrase – D–C–B–A–G – seems to resonate faintly in the opening of Ruoff’s piece, but here the intervals are initially changed to E–D sharp–D double sharp–B–A sharp, and each note is sustained to produce eventually a condensed cluster symbolising the fact that at the outset the doors are still barred, as opposed to the joy at their being opened that is audible in the hymn. Since Ruoff follows Buber’s faithful translation – ‘Hebet, Tore, eure Häupter, erhebt euch, Pforten der Weltzeit, dass der König der Ehre komme!’ (‘Raise your heads, o gates, rise, o gates of eternity that the King of glory may come!’) – it is the authoritarian voice of God himself speaking that the composer wants to represent in his music, so that any pleasantness is ruled out. As a theological assertion, this piece comes as a counterpart to Messiaen’s ‘Dieu parmi nous’ from the cycle *La nativité du Seigneur* (not in the musical language, of course: both composers are masters in their own right): all the ‘mighty power and opulence’ of this instrument Reichardt referred to is invoked to display God’s incomparable might.

Toccatà IV was written for Kay Johannsen, who premiered it in 2008 in Stuttgart.

Wie liegt die Stadt so verlassen: Sinfonische Fragmente (2007)

The *Lamentations of Jeremiah the Prophet* have attracted many composers ever since what was probably its first setting, that by Thomas Tallis in the middle of the sixteenth century. The Baroque era established the genre of *Leçons de ténèbres*, with musical

settings of the *Lamentations* written for a vocal and instrumental chamber ensemble, to be performed during the last days of Holy Week; the best-known examples are by composers such as François Couperin, Marc-Antoine Charpentier and, later, Jan Dismas Zelenka. After a period of abstinence in Romantic music, the political savagery and devastation caused by the Second World War in particular gave these texts new significance for twentieth-century composers, among them Ernst Krenek (*Lamentatio Jeremiae prophetae for a cappella* chorus, Latin text, 1942), Rudolf Mauersberger, the Cantor of the Dresden Kreuzkirche, commemorating the destruction of his city (*Wie liegt die Stadt so wüst for a cappella* chorus, German text, 1945) and Igor Stravinsky (*Threni: Id est Lamentationes Jeremiae Prophetiae* for solo singers, chorus and orchestra, Latin text, 1957–58), to name only three. As a testimonial of his Jewish faith Leonard Bernstein set parts of the text to music for mezzo-soprano and orchestra in the final movement of his First Symphony, *Jeremiah* (Hebrew text, 1942).

Writing at the beginning of the 21st century, Ruoff took into consideration the extensive history of musical settings of these striking texts. First, he chose not to make another vocal setting of the text but to write a kind of symphonic poem for organ, a decision that is reflected in the first part of the subtitle. Second, he chose three contrasting segments from this passage of the Scripture, duly reflected in the second part of the subtitle, 'Fragmente'. With further subdivision of the first segment, *Wie liegt die Stadt so verlassen* [16] constitutes four distinctive musical sections, which add up to the most extensive single piece of music recorded on this album. Ruoff composed his *Symphonic Fragments* for his friend Ludger Lohmann, who promotes Ruoff's organ works in recitals around the world. Lohmann not only premiered this work – in 2007, on the occasion of the consecration of the organ of the cathedral of Magdeburg – but also made the first recording, along with Ruoff's First Organ Symphony and his 'Dance Ritual' *Belschazzar*.³

The first two sections present a deploration of the desolation that followed the Babylonians' destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in 586 BC. The English translation

³ Strube Verlag München VS 3400 CD.

of Lamentations 1, 1 (from the Authorised King James Version of the Bible) initially reads: 'How deserted lies the city, once so full of people!' Thick, often polytonal chords in the low register and subdued dynamics (*pp* to *pppp*), to be played very slowly and draggingly, depict this first exclamation. Apathy reigns; melodic chromatic fragments confided to the pedal fail to raise their voices. The restrained dirge continues in the next phrase: 'How like a widow is she, who once was great among the nations! She who was queen among the provinces has now become a slave'. The texture now changes from homophony to polyphony. At 3:15 a twelve-tone row (A flat-G-C sharp-C-B-B flat-E flat-A-F sharp-F-D-E) emphasising lamenting intervals like descending half steps and tritones is introduced first as the ground for a passacaglia, with the subject in the pedal, and two variations, with canonical imitation and the inversion of the subject in the manuals. Subsequently the row is chanted expressively 'like a song from afar' (as the score states) in the upper voice, to an accompaniment of broken harmonies built of a perfect fourth and a tritone. After an interlude three more variations follow, with the performance direction 'slow and heavy'. The dodecaphonic shape of this subject may refer symbolically to the Twelve Tribes of Israel; the strict contrapuntal treatment, elsewhere rarely to be found in Ruoff's organ works, is here emblematic of the rigidity of the laws the people should have observed. At 7:31 a strident toccata, 'very fast, sharply accentuated', interferes to represent the passage: 'From on high he sent fire, sent it down into my bones. He spread a net for my feet and turned me back. He made me desolate, faint all the day long' (Lamentations 1, 13).

During this firestorm, fragments of the previous subject reappear in sustained notes in the pedal, and anxiously shredded in inversions and diminutions in the manuals, at the end of this passage (at 12:08) the subject of the passacaglia re-emerges in the pedal while the flames are dying away. The closing section opens (at 12:25) with a majestic pedal solo in the form of a recitative, demonstrating that God's wrath will not last forever: 'It is of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, saith my soul; therefore will I hope in him' (Lamentations 3, 22-24).

Mystical harmonies recall both the desolate opening of the piece and an harmonic constellation heard earlier during the toccata. With the tempo gradually slowing down, an overwhelming modulation from the bitonal harmony C major/C sharp minor over D major and B major to D flat major depicts the Lord's mercy towards his people; typically of Ruoff's harmonic language, all these harmonies are 'spiced' with additional neighbouring notes.

***Via Dolorosa* (1985)**

All of the pieces presented in this recording so far display discernible motivic or thematic unities and gestures, coherent phrasings, characteristic rhythms and rests or caesuras of semantic significance. These features of musical statements – common to most traditionally shaped music and familiar to most listeners – are all absent from *Via Dolorosa* [17], the earliest of his organ works, written as a composition exercise while Ruoff was studying with Hiroaki Minami at the National University of Fine Arts and Music in Tokyo. It was first performed in 1986 by Miyuki Kobayashi in Sendai, a city north-east of Tokyo; the German premiere was given in Bonn in 1987 by Johannes Geffert and the first US performance in Chicago in 1992 by the composer and organist Frank Ferko.

Via Dolorosa has an unusual formal design. Ruoff based his compositional idea on the unique feature of the organ to be able to produce a sustained, potentially endless sound on the one hand and, on the other, since the sound itself allows no alteration once it is set, upon the ability of the instrument to build a long *crescendo* by gradually adding registers. According to the performance instructions the *crescendo* required in this piece should reach from *ppp* to *fff*, thus encompassing the dynamic extremes on both sides of the scale. The prescribed progression of nine different dynamic gradations (*ppp*, *pp*, *p*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, *ff*, *fff*, *ffff*) should create the imagination of a continuous dynamic growth, although in reality those gradations can be put into practice only in stages. They correspond to nine sections: two C minor chords constitute the frame, played *ppp* in the low register at the very beginning, and played *fff* two octaves higher at the beginning of the last section; the path in between is filled basically with constantly rising permutations of the initial harmony in a pulse of approximately one second per beat, along the way

also spawning extremely dissonant harmonic structures. Between these nine sections eight connecting links – with fewer notes than in the otherwise full harmonies – are perceptible; they can be identified as points of rest on the way that allow some small relief within the strained density of the surrounding texture. The penultimate section (at 10:53) sticks out as a turbulent improvisatory cadence in quick *fff* runs, where the performer is invited to add other notes at will.

This musical scheme – convincing and haunting in itself – also matches the image evoked by the title, *Via Dolorosa*, ‘The Path of Sorrow’ that Jesus walked on the way to his crucifixion, carrying his own cross. Subjectively, a load seems to grow heavier, the longer it is carried, and so here anxiety mounts with the approach of the horrifying destination. These phenomena are mirrored in the constantly increasing dynamics until a threshold of pain is reached at the end, in Golgotha, symbolised in a dissonant chord built upon the fundamental bass C of the initial harmony. The eight connecting links seem to stand for the stations that allowed the cross-bearer to put down his burden for a brief moment, only to have to lift it up again and walk on; in the cadence one can envisage him tumbling under the weight of the cross.

In the relentless but barely audible pulse of this piece there is, apart from the cadence, no subjective liberty granted to the performer. The distance between the beginning and the end is defined by the duration of twelve-and-a-half minutes: with all its desperate development the piece is determined from the very beginning.

Schalen des Zorns – Toccata II (1995)

An awe-inspiring musical realisation of an apocalyptic vision from the Book of Revelation (16, 1–20), the final book of the New Testament, concludes this first volume of this complete recording of Ruoff’s organ works: a ‘narration’ of the Seven Bowls, also known as the Seven Plagues. *Schalen des Zorns* (‘Bowls of Wrath’) [18], Ruoff’s Toccata II, composed in 1995, is dedicated to Andreas Gräsle, who premiered it in the same year in Heilbronn, just north of Stuttgart.

In the translation of the Standard English Version the respective chapter opens with the command: ‘Then I heard a loud voice from the temple telling the seven angels, “Go

and pour out on the earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God”’. Ruoff would not appear to aim to depict all the individual plagues emanating from these bowls one after the other: the festering boils on those people who worship the Beast, the seas, rivers and springs turned into blood, a heatwave scorching the planet with fire, the spreading of a thick darkness, the drying up of the river Euphrates and the worst global earthquake ever – though some if not all of these incidents might well be imagined in the course of the music, the *Prestissimo* coda in particular, from 07:19 until the end, seeming to denote the shaking earth with a *glissando*, trills and *fff* tremolos. The pouring from the bowls manifests itself in one of the rare instances of word-painting to be found in Ruoff’s music: upwards and (occasionally) downwards arpeggios first written in grace-notes (that is, to be played somewhat outside the beat) are clearly audible at the very beginning of the piece, in regular motion, in a chromatic permutation from 1:10 on and again in grace-notes at 4:54 and at 5:36, where they are ultimately condensed to thick clusters. But in general, Ruoff, as in his Toccata IV, *Erhebt euch, Pforten der Weltzeit*, focuses rather on the underlying energy causing the specific physical action, in this case the obsessiveness with which the destructive curses are deployed, making it impossible to escape them. It is the imperative gesture of the divine voice, portrayed by the incessantly permuted alternation of binary and ternary rhythms identified in the introductory paragraphs of this essay as one of Axel Ruoff’s trademarks, which makes up the essence of this nightmarish music.

Cornelis Witthoefft is a pianist, conductor and organist, born in Hamburg. Since 2004 he has been a professor for Lied at the Stuttgart University of Music and Performing Arts and writes regularly on various musical and literary subjects.

The international organ virtuoso Dr **Jan Lehtola** is one of the most successful and progressive Finnish organists of his generation. He has appeared with the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra, Tapiola Sinfonietta, Lahti Symphony, Tampere Philharmonic and Ostrobothnian Chamber Orchestras and the St Michel Strings. He has performed at many international festivals and he has worked with conductors including Juha Kangas, Ludovic Morlot, Kent Nagano, Sakari Oramo, Leif Segerstam, Muhai Tang and Osmo

Vänskä. He has also given recitals in leading European concert-halls, among them the Gewandhaus in Leipzig and the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg, and in cathedrals and churches around the world, such as Sainte Trinité in Paris, the Berlin, Riga and Tallinn Doms, St Thomas Church in Leipzig and St Paul's Cathedral and Westminster Abbey in London.

Jan Lehtola collaborates regularly with composers and has given more than 160 world and regional premieres. He has had works written for him by Harri Ahmas, Kalevi Aho, Atso Almila, Adina Dumitrescu, Thierry Escaich, Naji Hakim, Matti and Paavo Heininen, Carita Holmström, Juha T. Koskinen, Olli Kortekangas, Juha Leinonen, Jouko and Jyrki Linjama, Jukka Linkola, Paola Livorsi, Pehr Henrik Nordgren, Axel Ruoff, Martin Stacey, Riikka Talvitie and Adam Vilagi. In 2003 he organised the first International Naji Hakim Festival in Helsinki. He was the Artistic Director of the Organo Novo Festival in Helsinki from 2007 to 2016 and Chairman of the Finnish Organum Society from 2009 to 2014.

He has recorded for the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE) and can be heard on more than forty commercial recordings (on the labels Alba, BIS, Fuga, IFO, Jubal, Ondine, Pilfink and Toccata Classics), in repertoire including Bach, Dayas, Dupré, Hakim, Heininen, Linjama, Mendelssohn, Oskar Merikanto, Rautavaara, Saint-Saëns, Schumann and Widor.

Jan Lehtola studied the organ in Helsinki with Olli Porthan and Kari Jussila, in Amsterdam with Jacques van Oortmessen and Jean Boyer, in Stuttgart with Ludger Lohmann, in Lyon with Louis Robilliard and in Paris with Naji Hakim. He graduated from the Church Music Department of the Sibelius Academy, gaining his diploma with distinction in 1998. In 2000 he gave his Sibelius Academy debut recital in the Kallio Church, Helsinki, and in 2005 received a Doctorate for his dissertation on Oskar Merikanto as a transmitter of European influences to Finland. He is Lecturer in Organ Music in the Sibelius Academy. He is also active as a lecturer and a teacher of master-classes.

www.janlehtola.com



Photograph: G. Proietti

THE ORGAN OF TURKU CATHEDRAL

Veikko Virtanen Oy (1980), opus 83.

I Rückpositiv

Principal 8'
Gedackt 8'
Oktava 4'
Rohrflöte 4'
Oktava 2'
Nasat 1½'
Sesquialtera 2x
Mixtur 4–5x
Cymbel 3x
Dulcian 16'
Trompete 8'
Krummhorn 8'
Tremolo

II Hauptwerk

Principal 16'
Oktava 8'
Flute harm. 8'
Rohrflöte 8'
Gamba 8'
Voce Umana 8'
Oktava 4'
Spitzflöte 4'
Terz 3½'
Kvinta 2⅔'
Oktava 2'

Terz 1½'
Mixtur 6–8x
Scharf 4–6x
Trompete 16'
Trompete 8'
Trompete 4'

III Schwellwerk

Gedackt 16'
Flöte 8'
Cor de nuit 8'
Fugara 8'
Voix céleste 8'
Principal 4'
Traversflöte 4'
Salicet 4'
Spitzkvinta 2⅔'
Waldflöte 2'
Terz 1½'
Mixtur 7x
Basson 16'
Tromp. harm. 8'
Hautbois 8'
Voix humaine 8'
Clairon 4'
Tremolo

IV Brustwerk (in swell)

Rohrgedackt 8'
Kvintadena 8'
Principal 4'
Gedacktflöte 4'
Gemshorn 2'
Spitzoktava 1'
Cymbel 3–4x
Regal 16'
Schalmey 8'
Cornet 5x
Tremolo

Pedal

Principal 32'
Oktava 16'
Subbass 16'
Oktava 8'
Cello 8'
Gedackt 8'
Oktava 4'
Koppelflöte 4'
Nachthorn 2'
Rauschpfeife 4x
Mixtur 7x
Posaune 32'
Posaune 16'
Fagott 16'
Trompete 8'
Singend Regal 4'

Echo (III, IV in swell)

Liebl. ged. 8'

Kvintadena 8'

Spitzflöte 4'

Rohrflöte 4'

Nasat 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ ' (disk)

Piccolo 2'

Tremolo

Trompeteria

(I, II, III, IV, Ped.)

Trompeta magna 16' D

Trompeta brillante 8' B D

Clarin fuerte 4' B D

Clarin 2' B

Couplers

I-II

III-II

IV-II

IV-III

III-I

I-P

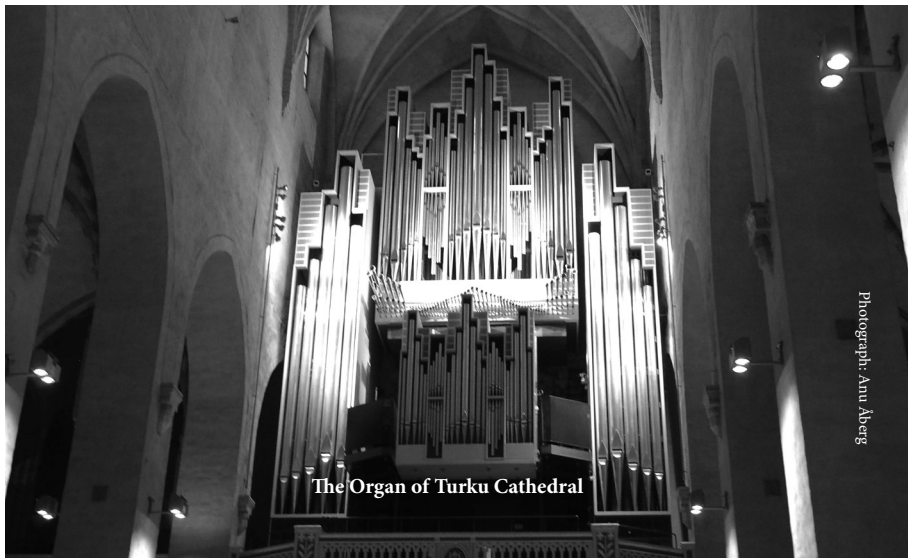
II-P

III-P

IV-P

256 combinations, computer

Mechanical action



The Organ of Turku Cathedral



Recorded on 2 March and 9 May 2020 (*Via Dolorosa*) in Turku Cathedral, Finland
Recording and editing: Antti Pohjola
Producer: Jan Lehtola
Artistic producer: Axel Ruoff

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Pforten der Weltzeit: VS Edition 3312; *Wie liegt die Stadt so verlassen*: VS Edition 3294;
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AXEL RUOFF Complete Works for Organ, Volume One

1	Sacrum – Toccata VI (2018)	6:28
	Neun leichte Stücke (2013)*	18:49
2	No. 1 Präludium	1:34
3	No. 2 Choral	2:59
4	No. 3 Capriccio	1:33
5	No. 4 Intermezzo	3:13
6	No. 5 Romanze	2:24
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10	No. 9 Postludium	1:32
11	Morgengesang – Toccata V (2010)	4:51
	Drei phantastische Tänze (2004–5)	4:43
12	No. 1 Sehr rasch, scharf artikuliert	1:12
13	No. 2 <i>Allegro assai</i>	1:26
14	No. 3 <i>Presto</i>	2:05
15	Erhebt euch, Pforten der Weltzeit – Toccata IV (2007)	6:14
16	Wie liegt die Stadt so verlassen: Sinfonische Fragmente (2007)*	16:14
17	Via Dolorosa (1985)	12:33
18	Schalen des Zorns – Toccata II (1995)	8:23

Jan Lehtola
organ of Turku Cathedral

TT 78:18

ALL EXCEPT* FIRST RECORDINGS