

Musical Treasure Chest #49

As we have entered Holy Week I thought I would share with you one of my favorite Lenten musical works: the *Membra Jesu Nostrī of Dietrich Buxtehude*. This lovely mid-Baroque work has been overshadowed by the Bach Passions, Handel 'Messiah' and works of Vivaldi, but it deserves much greater prominence.

Buxtehude, after all, was the musician that Bach walked nearly 250 miles to see and study or as Bach put it himself, "to comprehend one thing or another about his art." Bach stayed in Buxtehude's city of Lübeck for nearly three months absorbing the musician's artistry.

Dietrich Buxtehude was born in 1637 in Denmark. His father was a professional organist and Dietrich followed in his footsteps. He held various church organ positions including in Helsingør (Elsinor), whose castle was the setting for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. His final and long-lasting position was as organist in Lübeck at the Marienkirche, where he was organist and music director from 1668 until his death in 1707. His duties at the church included playing the organ, directing the choir and providing music for the services, as well as producing *Abendmusik*, an important musical concert series that drew musicians from all over Europe (the series continued until 1810!). Such was Buxtehude's fame that Handel, Telemann, and Mattheson all traveled to meet him. His musical style influenced all of these composers as well.

Buxtehude wrote a large amount of music, mainly for solo organ or vocal works, but much of it has been lost, including his oratorios (though the libretti survive, the music does not). His style is highly expressive within the musical vocabulary of the mid-baroque. And there is a cohesion to his musical scheme that leads the listener effortlessly from one idea to the next, nothing seems frivolous, but flows logically and purposefully.

His seven-cantata cycle *Membra Jesu Nostrī* was composed in 1680 and dedicated to Gustav Düben. The frontispiece of the manuscript reads 'to a foremost man...most noble and honored friend, Director of Music to his Most

Serene Majesty, the King of Sweden'. The cycle is a passion-meditation contemplating the seven body parts of Christ on the cross: feet, knees, hands, side, breast, heart, and head. Scored for five solo singers (two sopranos, counter-tenor, tenor and bass) and small instrumental accompaniment of strings and continuo, each of the cantatas consists of six sections. All of the cantatas begin with an instrumental introduction and then an instrumental "concerto" followed by combinations of vocal solo and ensemble writing. Buxtehude is able to vividly depict the mysticism of the texts and capture great emotional intensity. The spare instrumental accompaniment lends a tinge of sadness and great poignancy.

I have selected a luminous performance by Harry Christophers and The Sixteen. I hope you will add this magnificent work to your musical library for Holy Week.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QxEcNM57CaU&t=33s>