AGO BOSTON 2014 COMMISSIONS

EIGHT LITTLE HARMONIES AND COUNTERPOINTS

James Woodman

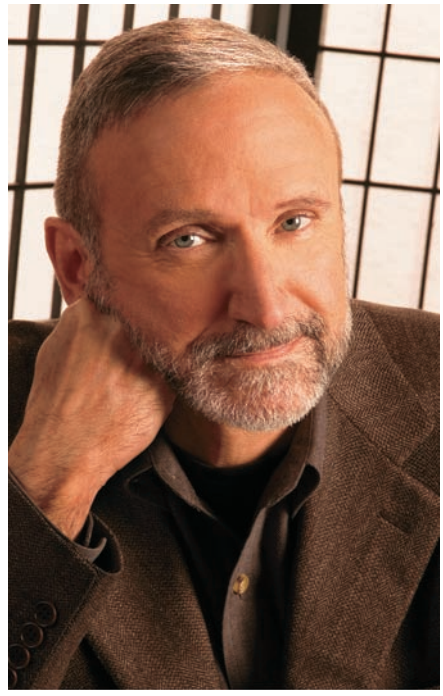
Commission

For the AGO's 2014 National Convention in Boston, I have been commissioned to write a collection of organ pieces titled "Eight Little Harmonies and Counterpoints." Like the "Eight Little Preludes and Fugues" that almost all organists encounter early in their training, it will consist of eight paired works modestly scaled in terms of both technical difficulty and duration. The newer collection will stand in contrast chiefly in its embrace of an expanded vocabulary of form and harmonic language.

For a number of years, I had been pondering what a new "Eight Little" might consist of, and I was delighted when the AGO New Music Committee's acceptance of my proposal gave me the chance to make a dream into reality. While I have thoroughly enjoyed the challenge, it has been a daunting one, and one I could never have begun if I believed the first "Eight Little" were actually composed by J.S. Bach himself. (Every artist needs a fairly robust ego, but I hope mine is not so robust that I would presume to step onto *that* stage.) However, I have come to accept the reasoning of many modern Bach scholars: whoever wrote BWV 553–560, it was almost certainly *not* J.S. Bach. In discussing the authorship of that collection, Peter Williams writes: "Rather, the combination of stylistic elements . . . suggests a widely read but only mildly talented composer of the 1730–50 period, even perhaps later." Now *that* would be someone with whom I might feel it reasonable to go head to head.

The first "Eight Little"

The first "Eight Little" may or may not have been created for use by students, and indeed, more mature musicians will still find much to enjoy. Similarly, my collection is not intended as a pedagogical text, method, or anthology of technique. It is simply a set of modestly scaled organ works that I believe might be learned by anyone with enough keyboard facility to perform, say, an early Mozart piano sonata.



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Nevertheless, I undertook this project with all youthful organists and their teachers foremost in my mind. I have also reflected on what made encountering the first "Eight Little" so delightful to me and to many others as we started our exploration of the organ. I will mention just three themes that arose time and again in comparing experiences with my colleagues. First, tackling the "Eight Little" represents a generous stride toward musical adulthood. For many students, adolescence is a time of finally leaving behind those colored or numbered volumes with their engravings of bewigged, pantalooned composers, one-page spoon-feedings of music history, and other similar indignities. Learning the "Eight Little" is a first step toward being accepted into a grown-up world of real music played by real artists for real audiences.

Second, the style of the first "Eight Little" is on the whole extroverted, full of life and drama. This is important because the young organist may already be put in a defensive position by devoting himself to an instrument that may be seen by his peers as church-y. This stereotype is most regrettable in its baselessness, but what a blessed relief to the young psyche to be able to demonstrate his worthy accomplishments without apology or explanation.

Third, the "Eight Little" are just plain fun to play. The basso-continuo bass lines of the C major, the exciting manual changes of D minor, the solemn beauty of the seventh chord, cycle-of-fifths sequences in the E minor, the dashing pedal solo of the G major—mastery of these small challenges is indeed something to savor.

A second "Eight Little"

With the merits of the first "Eight Little" as a model, the problem for me was to discern which aspects of the original to retain and where to break new ground. The overall organization of my collection is the same as its model: eight paired works (the first of each pair built on harmonic ideas, the second on contrapuntal); modest in duration and technical demand (each pair about 4′15″, pedal difficulty ranging from very easy to moderately challenging); and perhaps rather surprisingly, complete absence of any dynamics or registration. This is because I believe the notational spareness of the first set is a real gift to both the young organist and the teacher. It is never too soon to begin the development of ear and taste in matters of registration. In the case of my own collection, experimentation isn't just healthy, it's essential. Try a piece on 8′ and 4′, then on a full principal chorus. Which suits the work better? Or do they both work? How does registration affect touch? Do those gradually built-up tone clusters sound better on the Voix céleste or a Krummhorn? I cherish the invitation to creativity that the openness of an organ score by Bach or Frescobaldi gives; I hope others will find the same opportunity in this score. (In a seeming self-contradiction, I have indicated metronome markings for all pieces. I found I am unable to resist giving the performer clear guidance on that point from the outset.)

Ways in which the newer collection stands in contrast to its earlier

model include a choice of new keys and modes: C (Lydian), D (Dorian), E (Phrygian), E-flat (major), F (minor), G (Mixolydian), A (major), and B (minor). New prelude forms presented include chaconne, sequence-based praeambulum, elevation toccata, written-out improvisation, minimalist etude, and passacaglia. The contrapuntal forms include a wide range of imitation-based forms, many predating the 18th-century style of fugues found in the first "Little Eight." These include canzona, ricercare, three-part canon, chorale fughetta, and fugal gigue (bi-partite). Uses of contemporary compositional technique include quartal harmony, tone clusters, and additive rhythms.

A personal document

Finally, this collection is a personal statement, not a general survey of form or style. Although I am grateful for the rigorous training I received as a composition major at Princeton in the '70s, it was there that I became a postmodernist before I even knew what the word meant. Both the aesthetics and the politics of the highly charged modernist music department already seemed to me a thing of the past. I felt no loyalty to the fiercely austere code of modernism and still less to the music it produced. I have always responded to form in music, but naturally I need to be able to perceive it in the first place. I always could in Frescobaldi and Bach, Hindemith and Reich; I almost never could in Babbitt and Carter, Boulez and Boretz. As time passed, I gradually discovered that feeling "uncool" was a modest price to pay for making objects that I found beautiful on my own terms. Eclecticism, playfulness, a deep regard for historic procedures—these are the traits that have characterized my work from its beginning.

As I write this, I have nearly completed the collection. I have worked hard on these little pieces, and I very much hope it shows in the end. With this score I offer four heartfelt salutes: to the Guild for its truly admirable (and essential) outreach to the next generation, to all young organists and their teachers, to the bold young people the rest of us once were, and to the "mildly talented composer of the 1730–50 period" who gave us such a gift in the first place.

James Woodman is monastery organist for the Society of St. John the Evangelist and the Episcopal religious order in Cambridge, Mass.