

# Axel RUOFF

**COMPLETE WORKS FOR ORGAN, VOLUME FIVE**  
HAPPY BIRTHDAY: VARIATIONEN UND FUGA GROTTESCA  
MEMENTO CREATORIS TUI FOR BARITONE AND ORGAN  
IN HORA MORTIS FOR MEDIUM VOICE AND ORGAN  
MESSE BASSE FOR SOPRANO AND ORGAN

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# AXEL RUOFF: COMPLETE WORKS FOR ORGAN, VOLUME FIVE

by Cornelis Witthoefft

This fifth and final<sup>1</sup> instalment of the complete recording of Axel Ruoff's organ music focuses on previously unrepresented aspects of his compositional output. On the one hand, it includes three compositions for voice and organ – two sacred works on Latin texts and an extensive song-cycle on German poems and translations of biblical texts – and, on the other, in sharp contrast, a series of humorous stylistic parodies. The Table gives a chronological overview of Ruoff's complete *œuvre* for organ.

Axel 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 city, where his teachers included 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; there then followed 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 pursued his further musical training at the National University of Fine Arts and Music in Tokyo from 1985 to 1987, studying 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

<sup>1</sup> Although Ruoff is still only in his mid-sixties, he has stated his firm intention not to compose any more music for organ.

Musique, Ottawa, Settembre Musica, Turin, the St Petersburg and Budapest Spring Festivals and the Tokyo Summer Festival. In addition to the organ music documented in this series of recordings, his output encompasses 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 symphonic wind and brass orchestra (*Inferno* (1992), a *Sinfonietta* (2006) and a *Rapsodia appassionata* (2018)) and for large orchestra (*Nacht und Träume* ('Night and Dreams'; 1986–87) and another *Sinfonietta* (2013)), as well as concertos for piano (1989 and 1994), guitar (1993), cello (1995) and horn (2008–9); music for various solo instruments; chamber music; songs and other vocal music; and stage works, among them the opera *Ein Fremder in der Stadt* ('A Stranger in the Town'; 1999), after the Romantic poet Wilhelm Hauff.

### ***Memento creatoris tui* for baritone and organ (2001)**

With *Memento creatoris tui* [1], written in March 2001 during a stay in the Finnish lake district, Ruoff touched on a theme that had always deeply moved him and that found its continuation twenty years later in the song-cycle *In Hora Mortis*, also recorded on this album: that of human transience. In *Memento creatoris tui* Ruoff resorted to a powerful passage from the Old Testament book of Qohelet or Liber Ecclesiastes in the Latin Vulgate, one of the most arresting texts on this subject from ancient times. The book strikes its theme with the very first line: 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity.'<sup>2</sup> Yet this statement, which is repeated over and over in the text, is not Ruoff's main focus. He set to music, in the Latin Vulgate translation, the first seven verses of the twelfth and last chapter. After the listener (or reader) is called upon in verse 11:9 to enjoy the days of youth ('Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth'), but is immediately admonished not to forget that 'youth and the dawn of life are vanity'<sup>3</sup> (v. 10), the speech unfolds the opposite image, showing in sometimes drastic pictures the decay of man on his way towards death.

<sup>2</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:2, King James Version. The original Hebrew word for 'vanity', *hebel* ('hebel'), denotes something that is fleeting, and can be translated as 'breeze' or 'light wind'.

<sup>3</sup> Ecclesiastes 11:10, English Standard Version.

Table

**Axel Ruoff, Complete Works for Organ**

Vol. 1 TOCC 0567, Vol. 2 TOCC 0596, Vol. 3 TOCC 0610, Vol. 4 TOCC 0672,

Vol. 5 TOCC 0709

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year of Composition</b>	<b>Volume</b>
<i>Via Dolorosa</i>	1985	1
<i>Wie eine Maske dahinter die Nacht gähnt – Toccata I</i>	1990	2
<i>Regionen</i> for violoncello and organ	1994	3
<i>Schalen des Zorns – Toccata II</i>	1995	1
Three Chorale Preludes	1999	3
<i>Memento creatoris tui</i> for baritone and organ	2001	5
<i>Shirufa – Toccata III</i>	2003	2
<i>Sieben biblische Szenen</i>	2004	2
<i>Drei phantastische Tänze</i>	2004–5	1
<i>Introduction, Variations and Fugue on the chorale ‘Das Volk, das noch im Finstern wandelt’</i>	2005	4
<i>Erhebt euch, Pforten der Weltzeit – Toccata IV</i>	2007	1
<i>Erscheinung</i>	2007	2
<i>Wie liegt die Stadt so verlassen: Sinfonische Fragmente</i>	2007	1

<i>In inferioribus terrae</i> for saxophone and organ	2010	3
<i>Morgengesang – Toccata V</i>	2010	1
<i>Neun leichte Stücke</i>	2013	1
Symphony No. 1	2013	4
Chorale Prelude, <i>O Jesu, du edle Gabe</i>	2014	3
Toccata for piano and organ	2014	3
<i>Messe basse</i> for soprano and organ	2015	5
Sonata for Horn and Organ	2015	3
<i>Tiefstille</i>	2015	2
Symphony No. 2	2016	2
<i>Movere</i> for trombone and organ	2017	3
<i>Sacrum – Toccata VI</i>	2018	1
Suite grotesque	2019	4
<i>Happy Birthday. Variationen und Fuga grottesca</i>	2019	5
<i>In Hora Mortis. Sieben Totenlieder</i> for medium voice and organ	2020	5

<sup>1</sup> Memento creatoris tui in diebus  
juventutis tuae antequam veniat tempus  
ad afflictionis et adpropinquent anni de  
quibus |:dicas:|<sup>4</sup>: Non mihi placent.

<sup>2</sup> Antequam tenebrescat sol et lumen et  
luna et stellae et revertantur nubes post  
pluviam.

<sup>3</sup> Quando commovebuntur custodes  
domus et nutabunt viri fortissimi et  
otiosae erunt molentes in minuto numero  
et tenebrescent videntes per foramina.

<sup>4</sup> Et claudent ostia in platea in humilitate  
vocis molentis. Et consurgent ad vocem  
volucris et obsurdescent omnes filiae  
carminis.

<sup>5</sup> Excelsa quoque timebunt et formidabunt  
in via. Florebit amigdalum in pingua bitur  
locusta et dissiabitur capparitis. Quoniam  
ibit homo in domum aeternitatis suae et  
circumibunt in platea plangentis.

<sup>1</sup> Remember [...] your Creator in the  
days of your youth, before the evil  
days come and the years draw near of  
which you will say, 'I have no pleasure  
in them';

<sup>2</sup> before the sun and the light and the  
moon and the stars are darkened and  
the clouds return after the rain,

<sup>3</sup> in the day when the keepers of the  
house tremble, and the strong men are  
bent, and the grinders cease because  
they are few, and those who look  
through the windows are dimmed,

<sup>4</sup> and the doors on the street are  
shut – when the sound of the grinding  
is low, and one rises up at the sound of  
a bird, and all the daughters of song are  
brought low –

<sup>5</sup> they are afraid also of what is high,  
and terrors are in the way; the almond  
tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags  
itself along, and desire fails, because  
man is going to his eternal home, and  
the mourners go about the streets –

<sup>4</sup> The symbol |: | denotes passages that are repeated in the composition.

<sup>6</sup> Antequam rumpatur funis argenteus et recurrat vitta aurea. |:Et conteratur hydria super fontem et confringatur rota super cisternam:|.

<sup>7</sup> Et revertatur |:pulvis:| in terram suam unde erat. Et spiritus redeat |:ad Deum qui dedit illum:|.

<sup>6</sup> *before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern,*

<sup>7</sup> *and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*<sup>5</sup>

The text depicts various aspects of physical degeneration in old age in metaphors that are both immediately poignant and sometimes difficult to access. Viera Pirker suggests a comprehensible and convincing interpretation for verses 3 to 5:

The keepers of the house are the arms that are deprived of their strength. The strong men are allegory for the legs that carry the body, and the millers [‘grinders’ in the translation above] are the teeth that have grown old but are constantly in empty grinding motion. The eyesight as a window to the world dims, the sense of hearing gradually weakens and receives only muffled sounds. The limbs tire, so that a small hill is a difficult obstacle to climb.<sup>6</sup>

After the images from nature in verse 5, which, according to Joseph Carlebach, also symbolise human aging (‘Like an almond tree one turns white, the hip drags along, which once could jump like the locust [‘grasshopper’ in the translation above], the willpower is destroyed<sup>7</sup>), death is apostrophised at the end of this verse in the image of going to the ‘eternal home’. Furthermore, the finality of death is made clear in the following verse with verbs that symbolise irretrievability (‘snapped’, ‘broken’, ‘shattered’),<sup>8</sup> before the text, in verse 7, promises the return of the spirit to the Creator.

<sup>5</sup> English Standard Version.

<sup>6</sup> Viera Pirker, ‘Megilla Kohelet zu Sukkot. Psychologische Annäherungen an einen biblischen Autor und ein jüdisches Fest’, ‘... denn das ist der ganze Mensch’: Die Textrollen der jüdischen Feste. Kohelet, Ester, Hoheslied, Rut, Klagelieder, ed. Christoph Körner, Hans-Ulrich Jüngling, Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart, 2012, pp. 15–36, here p. 25. All translations from German are my own.

<sup>7</sup> *Das Buch Koheleth. Ein Deutungsversuch von Oberrabbiner Dr. Joseph Carlebach*, Hermon-Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1936, p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Carlebach also relates the images of verse 6 to the human body: ‘The silver cord of the spinal cord breaks, the gold bowl of the brain bursts, the pitcher, the one that feeds, breaks at the edge of the stomach; like a wheel, it rolls into the pit’ (*ibid.*, pp. 54–55).

For his setting, Ruoff chose an  $\frac{8}{4}$  time in a very slow tempo (*Lento assai*), which is, however, divided into three parts rather than four, resulting in the pattern of 3+3+2 crotchets; in its unalterable recurrence throughout the piece, this underlying rhythm seems to represent the inevitability of passing to death. At the same time, a certain freedom in rhythmic accuracy is allowed (*Quasi senza misura*), which enables the singer both to recite the text in a preacherly tone and not hide his own emotional trepidation.

The composition is structured in two large waves. It starts *ppp* on a single note, first in the pedal, symbolising eternity, and subsequently in the voice as the reciting tone, and reaches its first climax to the words ‘et otiosae erunt molentes in minuto numero’ (‘and the grinders cease because they are few’) (at 3:45). The dynamic remains subdued, even sinking in the singing voice to a fearful and detached recitation again on a single note (*secco, molto marcato*) on the words ‘Et consurgunt ad vocem volucris et obsurdescent omnes filiae carminis’ (‘and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low’) (at 5:12), before the progression inexorably approaches the reality of death at the end of verse 5 and in verse 6, denoted by frantic outcries in the organ part (at 7:06 and 9:05). The last verse, opening with ‘Et revertatur pulvis in terram suam unde erat’ (‘and the dust returns to the earth as it was’), is again assigned the subdued dynamic range of the beginning; and with the insistently repeated last sentence, ‘Et spiritus redeat ad Deum qui dedit illum’ (‘and the spirit returns to God who gave it’), which is emphasised ‘by wide-swinging melismas of the soloist, who otherwise often recites on one note’,<sup>9</sup> the composition reaches peaceful calm.

*Memento creatoris tui* was first performed on 24 November 2001 at the festival ‘Kirchheimer Konzertwinter’ in St Andreas Church in Kirchheim an der Weinstrasse, near Mannheim, by Dominik Wörner, baritone, and Andreas Gräsle, organ, and received its first Finnish performance by Turkkka Manninen, baritone, and Jan Lehtola, organ, on 13 November 2015 in St Paul’s Church, Helsinki. Soon after its composition, Ruoff integrated the piece as the fifth movement in his extensive oratorio *Credo*, orchestrating the organ part but also leaving parts of it as an organ solo in the original. In this form,

<sup>9</sup> Elsie Pfitzer, ‘Axel Ruoff, *Credo*’ (programme note), in *Stunde der Kirchenmusik*, Leonhardskirche, Stuttgart, 12 July 2002, pp. 26–41, here p. 36. Pfitzer recognises in this musical realisation a reference to ‘the consoling side of death’ (*ibid.*).



it was premiered on 12 July 2002 in St Leonard's Church in Stuttgart with the soloist Ekkehard Abele and is dedicated to the organist Elsie Pfitzer and her husband, Klaus.

### ***Messe basse* for soprano and organ (2015)**

In the Roman Catholic liturgy, the term *Messe basse* ('Low Mass') stands for a mass celebrated either in silently read or softly spoken prayers. To the congregation the prayers often seem mumbled; thus in colloquial French 'faire des messes basses' means 'to whisper with one other in secret'. Such a Mass, unlike the *Messe haute* or *solemnelle*, is by definition celebrated without chant. In this respect, a musical setting bearing this title can be regarded as a contradiction. However, a *Messe basse* is not necessarily without music, as a silent Mass can be accompanied by organ music, of which Louis Vierne's *Messe basse* for organ, Op. 30, from 1912 (with the movements 'Entrée', 'Introit', 'Offertoire', 'Élévation', 'Communion' and 'Sortie') offers a good example (although it can also be played as a stand-alone piece in concert). The term *Messe basse* has also been used for a composition for fewer forces than intended for a High Mass or in the sense of concentrating on only selected parts of the traditional Ordinary of the Mass. Both conditions apply, for example, to Gabriel Fauré's *Messe basse* (1881/1906) for women's chorus and organ, originally composed together with André Messager, which is limited to the Kyrie, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei, thus omitting the Credo and Gloria. In terms of the number of movements, it is a kind of *Missa brevis*, though in the Catholic church with a different text selection than in the genre of the same name in Protestant church music, which comprises only the Kyrie and Gloria.

For his *Messe basse* from 2015, which was premiered on 19 November 2016 in St John's Church, Helsinki, with Eija Räisänen, soprano, and Jan Lehtola, organ, and is dedicated to the psychotherapist Renate Gebessler, Ruoff followed a model found in Fauré and others, but reduced the number of performers to a single singer and organ. In addition, he preceded the selected parts of the Mass text with an 'Introitus' [2], which has its place in the liturgy as a setting of a biblical text heard at the entrance of the priest and the clergymen at Mass. For this opening music, Ruoff chose Psalm 85 in its entirety, a text which, like the outer movements of the Mass, revolves around the themes

of benevolence, faithfulness and peace. As in *Memento creatoris tui*, he chose the Latin version of the Vulgate for this setting.

<sup>1</sup> Benedixisti, Domine, terram tuam;  
avertisti captivitatem Jacob.

<sup>2</sup> Remisisti iniquitatem plebis tuae;  
operuisti omnia peccata eorum.

<sup>3</sup> Mitigasti omnem iram tuam;  
avertisti ab ira indignationis tuae.

<sup>4</sup> Converte nos, Deus salutaris  
noster, et averte iram tuam a nobis.

<sup>5</sup> Numquid in aeternum irasceris nobis?  
aut extendes iram tuam a  
generatione in generationem?

<sup>6</sup> Deus, tu conversus vivificabis nos,  
et plebs tua laetabitur in te.

<sup>7</sup> Ostende nobis, Domine, misericordiam  
tuam, et salutare tuum da nobis.

<sup>8</sup> Audiam quid loquatur in me Dominus  
Deus, quoniam loquetur pacem in  
plebem suam, et super sanctos suos,  
et in eos qui convertuntur ad cor.

<sup>9</sup> Verumtamen prope timentes eum  
salutare ipsius, ut inhabitet gloria  
in terra nostra.

<sup>10</sup> Misericordia et veritas obviaverunt  
sibi; justitia et pax osculae sunt.

<sup>1</sup> *Lord, you were favourable to your land;  
you restored the fortunes of Jacob.*

<sup>2</sup> *You forgave the iniquity of your people;  
you covered all their sin.*

<sup>3</sup> *You withdrew all your wrath; you turned  
from your hot anger.*

<sup>4</sup> *Restore us again, O God of our salvation,  
and put away your indignation toward us!*

<sup>5</sup> *Will you be angry with us forever? Will you  
prolong your anger to all generations?*

<sup>6</sup> *Will you not revive us again, that your  
people may rejoice in you?*

<sup>7</sup> *Show us your steadfast love, O Lord,  
and grant us your salvation.*

<sup>8</sup> *Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,  
for he will speak peace to his people, to his  
saints; but let them not turn back to folly.*

<sup>9</sup> *Surely his salvation is near to those who  
fear him, that glory may dwell in our land.*

<sup>10</sup> *Steadfast love and faithfulness meet;  
righteousness and peace kiss each other.*

<sup>11</sup> Veritas de terra orta est, et justitia  
de caelo prospexit.

<sup>12</sup> Etenim Dominus dabit benignitatem,  
et terra nostra dabit fructum suum.

<sup>13</sup> Justitia ante eum ambulabit, et ponet  
in via gressus suos.

<sup>11</sup> Faithfulness springs up from the ground,  
and righteousness looks down from the sky.

<sup>12</sup> Yes, the Lord will give what is good,  
and our land will yield its increase.

<sup>13</sup> Righteousness will go before him and make  
his footsteps a way.<sup>10</sup>

This prayer, like the Mass movements which follow, is set partly in the manner of a recitative, partly in expressive melismatic waves. It is noteworthy that this approach is taken for both the vocal and organ parts, so that they show the same degree of spontaneity and urgency of musical expression. Inevitably, the resulting dialogue of voice and organ sounds improvised, although rhythmically the composition is meticulously determined down to the last detail, using frequent changes of metre – a procedure that Ruoff had already carried out in an instrumental composition written shortly beforehand, the Sonata for Horn and Organ,<sup>11</sup> the beginning of which is quoted in the Introit in free inversion. Some of the parts designed as dialogue, though, are contrasted with sections executed with a common musical energy. To give an example, the anxious, uncertain questions in verse 5 are treated as vocal recitatives, but for the one in verse 6 both musical partners are united in a new tempo (*Più mosso*) to express the text ‘that your people may rejoice in you’ (at 2:34).

After the Introit has reared up, *ff*, to the vision of God’s ultimate justice, the Kyrie [3] begins in deep silence, even dejection. Now going one step further than alluding to the Horn Sonata in the opening movement, Ruoff processes in the Kyrie and Agnus Dei his composition *Tiefstille* for solo organ,<sup>12</sup> completed immediately before. Since the material presented there is developed here, it might not be over-interpreting to assume that Ruoff understands the pleas expressed in the outer movements of the Mass from the same perspective of self-contained isolation inherent in the beginning of the 39th

<sup>10</sup> English Standard Version.

<sup>11</sup> Recorded on Volume Three of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0610.

<sup>12</sup> Recorded on Volume Two of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0596.

Psalm set in *Tiefstille*. In the Kyrie, the meandering thirds from the earlier work can be heard, above which hovers a plaintive solo voice, now entering into a dialogue with the soprano voice. A distinction in the compositional treatment of the two invocations, evident in many Mass settings, is avoided by Ruoff in favour of a continuous stream of music and consciousness.

Kyrie, eleison.  
Christe, eleison.  
Kyrie, eleison.

*Lord, have mercy.*  
*Christ, have mercy.*  
*Lord, have mercy.*

The Sanctus [4] is written in the same recitative-and-dialogue manner as the preceding movements, except that the musical energy now erupts in exalted jubilation in accordance with the text:

Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus.  
Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua.  
Hosanna in excelsis.  
Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.  
Hosanna in excelsis.

*Holy, Holy, Holy Lord God of hosts.*  
*Heaven and earth are full of your glory.*  
*Hosanna in the highest.*  
*Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.*  
*Hosanna in the highest.*

Between the second and third verse (at 1:36), Ruoff inserts a quasi-quotation of the chordal leaps overflowing with exaltation from his Toccata III, *Shirufa* (2003),<sup>13</sup> which refers among other things to Isaiah's vision of God, in which the seraphim call to one another the threefold attribute of God: 'Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh,' translated into Latin as 'sanctus' (Isaiah 6:3). The movement ends, after a harmonic culmination in the organ so characteristic of Ruoff, with a radiantly bright, 'spiced' C major chord to which the augmented fourth (F sharp) is added.

The arc closes in the Agnus Dei [5], which is designed as a counterpart to the Kyrie, in that the material taken from *Tiefstille* is further processed here.

<sup>13</sup> Also recorded on Volume Two of this series.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
miserere nobis.

Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi,  
dona nobis pacem.

*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins  
of the world, have mercy on us.*

*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins  
of the world, have mercy on us.*

*Lamb of God, who takest away the sins  
of the world, grant us peace.*

The three pleas are each separated by short organ solos, the second of which introduces an even slower tempo (*Il tempo largo*), in which the movement now remains. It also no longer rises from the subdued dynamics except for the heartfelt cry with which the word ‘pacem’ is expressed. The end of the movement sinks in completely, with the weary repetition of the last plea for peace reserved for the soprano, alone and in a low register.

### ***In Hora Mortis. Sieben Totenlieder for medium voice and organ (2020)***

Since time immemorial, composers have sought texts that allow them to explore the ‘meaning’ of death. Brahms’ *Vier ernste Gesänge* (‘Four Serious Songs’), from 1896, and Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* (‘Songs on the Death of Children’), from 1901–4, are two of the best-known late-Romantic examples. Both composers compiled the texts of their song-cycles themselves, but from a single literary source and within narrow thematic limits – in Brahms’ case the Bible and, in Mahler’s, poems by Friedrich Rückert, which the poet had already formed into an extensive cycle. Ruoff composed a smaller song-cycle of this kind for soprano and piano in March 2011, *Ko Wo Omou* (‘Thinking of My Child’), under the immediate impression of the catastrophic tsunami that hit Japan on 11 March 2011. Based on poems by two Japanese women poets from the eighth and tenth centuries, *Ko Wo Omou* revolves around the themes of death, loss and the meaning of life and draws on traditional Japanese idioms in its musical language.<sup>14</sup> In 2020, in the seven-part German-language song-cycle *In Hora Mortis* (‘In the Hour

<sup>14</sup> Other song-cycles by Ruoff include *Zwei Sonette von Shakespeare* (1990), *Schlaf- und Küchenliedchen* (1978–2008), *Sieben Lieder nach Gedichten von Erich Mühsam* (2011), *Sieben Lieder nach Gedichten von Friedrich von Spee-Langenfeld, Anton Ulrich von Braunschweig, Andreas Gryphius und Angelus Silesius* (2015) and *Drei Lieder nach Gedichten von Heinrich Heine* (2022).

of Death'), Ruoff went beyond the limited textual sources of *Memento creatoris tui* and *Ko Wo Omou*: he was now concerned with addressing the theme of death from several perspectives, which required a wider-ranging selection of texts. *In Hora Mortis* is thus comparable to earlier twentieth-century orchestral treatments of the theme of death, not least Pfitzner's choral fantasy *Das dunkle Reich* ('The Dark Kingdom') from 1930 and Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony, Op. 135, from 1969, both of which use texts by four different poets.

Although Ruoff had demonstrated his mastery of large form and large forces in his two extensive sacred oratorios, *Bergpredigt* in 1998–99 and *Credo* in 2001–2, in *In Hora Mortis* he was drawn back to the more intimate genre of the song, and to its primary form consisting of a singer and an instrumental partner, who for Ruoff, in view of this subject-matter, could be none other than an organist, although only two out of seven texts are sacred in the strict sense of the word. Yet another aspect may have determined this reduction of forces, which is also reflected in the design of the organ part, which is technically far less demanding than many of his other works for this instrument: a reduction to the essentials within his musical language in general, which he effected at the beginning of his sixth decade. The renunciation of adornment was already noticeable in the last movement of his Second Organ Symphony from 2016,<sup>15</sup> which is related in content to *In Hora Mortis*, since it can be understood as a musical representation of a near-death experience; and it was brought to full fruition in his *Three Sacred Songs on Poems by Joseph von Eichendorff* for eight-part mixed choir *a cappella*, composed shortly before the song-cycle. The meditative calm that most of these songs radiate invites the listener to enter mentally into the borderland between life and death of which the poems often speak.

Ruoff's views on the desirability of commentaries – such as this one – which seek to explain the 'meaning' of music are fairly straightforward, even blunt:

Music is sound, is image, is language. Music must be capable of speaking, of saying something, of communicating something. It begins where the spoken word ends and gives

<sup>15</sup> Recorded on Volume Two of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0596.

space to the unutterable, the inexpressible. Music that needs to be translated into another language in order to be understood has missed the mark.<sup>16</sup>

In the hope of respecting that position, I shall largely focus on the texts on which the songs are based. Even so, two compositional aspects should be mentioned. The first concerns the tonal centres, or ‘fields’, that have always been present in Ruoff’s harmonic language, though often artfully concealed, but are now exposed, and they coincide in these songs in an almost magical way with the mostly equally unpretentious statements of his chosen poems. At first, one might assume that he has turned to traditional tonally based compositional devices – but appearances are deceptive, since the transitions from one harmony to the next can no longer be understood functionally. The beginning of the first song, ‘O bleibe treu den Toten’ (‘O Remain Faithful to the Dead’) [6], immediately familiarises the listener with Ruoff’s harmonic treatment: the harmonies of D minor, C sharp minor, E minor, G minor, E flat major and F sharp minor follow one another as if meandering; this sequence is reflected at the end of the song (at 6:32) with the successive harmonies D major, G sharp minor, F major, E flat minor, B major and F major. Here this aimlessness and loss of tonal orientation seems to symbolise the missing spiritual bond between the deceased and the bereaved presented in the 1848 poem by the north-German writer and poet Theodor Storm (1817–88). ‘Die Brücke ist zerfallen!’ (‘The bridge has collapsed!’), the exclamation at the beginning of the fifth stanza, is the powerful image Storm found for the central message of his poem, which Ruoff consequentially repeats in his setting (at 3:56), while otherwise dispensing with any interference with the original structure of the text.

The other compositional procedure worth pointing out is that, in bars 6 and 7, from the very first words, Ruoff introduces an inconspicuous two-note motif with an ascending and descending semitone (Ex. 1, the motif marked by square brackets, at 0:17), which proves to be a unifying element of the cycle: it appears in every song.

<sup>16</sup> 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.

Ex. 1

Musical notation for the first line of the song. It is written on a treble clef staff in 4/4 time. The melody starts with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The notes are: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (half), and D5 (quarter). A bracket above the staff spans from the first G4 to the final D5. Below the staff, the lyrics "O blei-be treu den To - ten," are written, with hyphens under "blei-be" and "To - ten".

**O bleibe treu den Toten**

O bleibe treu den Toten,  
Die lebend du betrübt;  
O bleibe treu den Toten,  
Die lebend du geliebt.

Sie starben, doch sie blieben  
Auf Erden weselos,  
Bis allen ihren Lieben  
Der Tod die Augen schloss.

Indessen du dich herzlich  
In Lebenslust versenkst,  
Wie sehnen sie sich schmerzlich,  
Dass ihrer du gedenkst!

Sie nahen dir in Liebe,  
Allein du fühlst es nicht;  
Sie schau'n dich an so trübe,  
Du aber siehst es nicht.

Die Brücke ist zerfallen!  
Nun mühen sie sich bang  
Ein Liebeswort zu lassen,  
Das nie herüber klang.

**O Remain Faithful to the Dead**

*O remain faithful to the dead,  
Whom you saddened when they were alive;  
O remain faithful to the dead,  
Whom you loved when they were alive.*

*They died, but they remained  
On earth bodiless,  
Until death closed the eyes  
Of all their loved ones.*

*While you lustily submerge yourself  
In the joy of life,  
How sorrowfully they yearn  
For you to remember them!*

*They draw near to you in love,  
But you do not feel it;  
They look at you so somberly,  
But you don't notice it.*

*The bridge has collapsed!  
Now they anxiously strive  
To leave a word of love  
That is never heard on this side.*



In ihrem Schattenleben  
Quält eins sie gar zu sehr:  
Ihr Herz will dir vergeben,  
Ihr Mund vermag's nicht mehr.

O bleibe treu den Toten,  
Die lebend du betrübt;  
O bleibe treu den Toten,  
Die lebend dich geliebt.

*In their shadowy life  
One thing torments them far too much:  
Their hearts want to forgive you,  
But their mouths can no longer do so.*

*O remain faithful to the dead,  
Whom you saddened when they were alive;  
O remain faithful to the dead,  
Who loved you when they were alive.*

Text and music admonish the recipient never to let the spiritual connection to a dead loved one be severed. The seven stanzas of the poem result in the longest song of the cycle, although the structure is evident and the individual stanzas clearly differentiated.

With the line 'Wir dachten unsrer Toten nicht' ('We did not think of our dead') from the poem 'Lied der Toten' ('Song of the Dead') [7] by Franz Werfel (1890–1945), an important representative of literary Expressionism in Germany, Ruoff establishes an immediate connection between the first and the second song, which is enhanced musically by the use of the same opening motif in the voice as in the first song (Ex. 2, at 0:10 – also in bars 6 and 7).

## Ex. 2

The musical notation is a single staff in treble clef with a 4/4 time signature. It begins with a dynamic marking of *mf*. The melody consists of five notes: a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a half note B4. A bracket above the staff spans from the first note to the end of the phrase. The lyrics 'Der Re-gen fällt' are written below the notes, with 'Der' under the first note, 'Re-' under the second, and 'gen fällt' under the remaining three notes.

### Lied der Toten

Der Regen fällt. Der Acker schmatzt.  
Wir hüpfen querfeldein.  
Wir haben keinen Sinn erkannt,  
Nun sind wir ohne Sinn.

Der Regen fällt. Es tanzt der Rauch.  
Uns kräuselt's ohne Ziel.  
Wir dachten unsrer Toten nicht,  
Wir opferten kein Seelenlicht,  
Nun flammt auch uns kein Docht.

Der Regen fällt. Das Zimmer graut.  
Der Raum hängt unser voll.  
Wir haben nicht an Gott geglaubt,  
Jetzt glaubt Gott nicht an uns.

### Song of the Dead

*The rain falls. The field licks its lips.  
We hop criss-cross across it.  
We have found no meaning,  
Now we are left without meaning.*

*The rain is falling. The smoke is dancing.  
It curls aimlessly around us.  
We did not think of our dead,  
We did not devote any votive candles,  
Now no wick burns for us either.*

*The rain is falling. The room is turning grey.  
The space is filled with us.  
We did not believe in God,  
Now God does not believe in us.*

Werfel's poem was first published in his collection *Neue Gedichte* from 1928 in a limited edition of 400 copies. In the 'Afterword' of this book, Werfel stated that the poems included date from a period of more than eighteen years, and it seems obvious that his 'Song of the Dead' can be related not only in a general sense to unbelievers, as expressed especially in the two closing lines, but quite specifically to the fallen of the First World War, especially since in the epilogue Werfel himself refers to the war, in which he himself took part as a soldier. 'If war years count twice for the soldier, then ten times for the writer!', he stated, referring to the period from 1914 to 1920. 'Was it six years or a hundred?'<sup>17</sup> Ruoff's composition seems to take both possible interpretations into account; the emphatic appeal of the first song is thus countered by a creepy counter-image in a *danse macabre*, to be played 'somewhat sluggishly'.

<sup>17</sup> Franz Werfel, *Das lyrische Werk*, ed. Adolf D. Klarmann, S. Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 1967, p. 403.

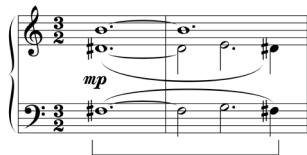
In 1905, Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926) published his collection of poems *Das Stundenbuch* ('The Book of Hours'), written between 1899 and 1903. Its title refers to the books of hours in use since the late Middle Ages – the name is derived from the fact that they structured the day of monastic life in a fixed rhythm. The success of this collection of poems at the time is to be understood against the background of the prevailing poetry of the period, which focused on the suggestion of atmosphere and which Rilke countered with a new tone that focuses on the search for the self and for God. In this way, he also established himself as a religious poet, though beyond a particular denomination. The third book of the collection, 'The Book of Poverty and of Death', contains a three-line poem in the form of a prayer, which Ruoff chose for the third song of his cycle [8].

O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod.  
Das Sterben, das aus jenem Leben geht,  
Darin er Liebe hatte, Sinn und Not.

*O Lord, give to each his fitting death.  
The dying that springs from the life  
That encompassed love, meaning and hardship.*

Ruoff acknowledges the monastic seclusion that must be taken into account in the poem by means of a long organ prelude, to be played 'extremely slowly and freely; with much stillness' that represents the inner preparation for prayer and again contains the two-note motif mentioned on p. 15 and given in Ex. 1 (Ex. 3, bars 13–14, at 0:48).

### Ex. 3



The motif appears again when the text talks about looking back on life (Ex. 4, bars 36–37, at 2:29), and, barely audible, at the end of the song in the organ pedal (Ex. 5, bars 50–53, at 3:29).

Ex. 4

Musical score for Ex. 4, showing a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/2. The vocal line is in the treble clef and the piano accompaniment is in the bass clef. The vocal line starts with a rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note F4, and a quarter note E4. The piano accompaniment starts with a half note G3, a half note F3, and a half note E3. The text "da - rin\_\_ er" is written below the vocal line. The piano accompaniment has a *p* dynamic marking. Brackets indicate the motif in both parts.

Ex. 5

Musical score for Ex. 5, showing an organ pedal line. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/2. The organ pedal line is in the bass clef. It starts with a rest, followed by a quarter note G3, a quarter note F3, and a quarter note E3. The organ pedal line has a *pppp* dynamic marking. Brackets indicate the motif in the organ pedal line.

Ruoff's setting adds to the not very numerous settings of Rilke's poems one that corresponds particularly deeply to the statement of the text – a consideration all the more relevant in view of the opinion Rilke expressed at the end of his life: that he did not want his poems set to music and preferred to protect them from the intrusiveness of music.<sup>18</sup>

For the fourth song of the cycle [9], Ruoff drew on a German poem from the late eighteenth century. It stems from a literary epoch that was given the name 'Empfindsamkeit'<sup>19</sup> in historiography because of the paradigm shift in the evaluation of emotionality that marked this period. Exuberant emotionality, especially displayed by a man, was no longer considered a weakness but proof of morality. The poem 'Vergiss mein nicht' ('Forget me not') is a case in point. It was long thought to be a youthful poem by the eminent early Romantic poet Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg; 1772–1801) and can still be found today in many editions of his poems. But in fact, Novalis had most probably only copied the last stanza of an already existing poem in 1794, 'Vergiss mein nicht, wenn dir die Freude winket' ('Forget me not when joy waves to you'), the evidence lying in two song-settings written a few years earlier by Franz Xaver Sterkel (presumably in 1789) and Georg Laurenz Schneider (in 1792), the latter of which was widely spread and was soon even attributed to Mozart. No manuscript or print of the poem has survived, and the identity of its presumed author, Max von Knebel, who shot himself in 1790 out of weariness with life, is preserved only in remarks by Karl August Varnhagen von Ense.<sup>20</sup> Sterkel's setting of the song is entitled 'Bei Übersendung eines Vergiss mein nicht' ('On sending a forget-me-not').<sup>21</sup> The three stanzas of the poem state at several points that the giver of the flower should not be forgotten – in the second

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Rilke's letter of 28 March 1926, in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefwechsel mit Anton Kippenberg 1906 bis 1926*, ed. Ingeborg Schnack and Renate Scharffenberg, Vol. 2, Insel Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1995, p. 414.

<sup>19</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing is credited with introducing the word 'empfindsam' into the German language as a translation for the English word 'sentimental' in the title of Lawrence Sterne's 1768 novel *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*. This neologism was subsequently applied to the whole epoch of 'Empfindsamkeit'.

<sup>20</sup> K. L. von Knebel's *literarischer Nachlass und Briefwechsel*, ed. Karl August Varnhagen von Ense and Theodor Mundt, Vol. 1, Gebrüder Reichenbach, Leipzig, 1840, p. XLII.

<sup>21</sup> Franz Xaver Sterkel, *XII Lieder zum Singen am Clavier*, Schott, Mainz, 1789, p. 22.

stanza at the temporary separation of the lovers and in the third after his death. The rapid popularity the poem gained is attested to by the quotation of excerpts from the second and third stanzas in the novel *Hesperus*, published in 1795, by Jean Paul (Johann Paul Friedrich Richter; 1763–1825), where, with characteristic exuberance of feeling, he succeeds like no other in praising the soul-touching and spiritual capacity of music.<sup>22</sup>

In his setting, which should be performed ‘in a monotonous slow movement’, Ruoff followed Novalis and set only the last stanza in which the lover begs his beloved not to forget him after his death.

### **Vergiss mein nicht**

Vergiss mein nicht, wenn lockre  
kühle Erde  
Dies Herz einst deckt, das  
zärtlich für dich schlug.  
Denk, dass es dort vollkommener  
lieben werde,  
Als da voll Schwachheit ich’s  
vielleicht voll Fehler trug.  
Dann soll mein freier Geist oft  
segnend dich umschweben  
Und deinem Geiste Trost und  
süße Ahndung geben.  
Denk, dass ich’s sei, wenn’s sanft  
in deiner Seele spricht:  
Vergiss mein nicht! Vergiss  
mein nicht!

### **Forget me not**

*Forget me not, when loose, cool  
earth  
Covers this heart that used to beat  
tenderly for you.  
Imagine that there it will love  
more perfectly  
Than when, full of weakness, I  
carried it when I may have been  
full of faults.  
Then my free spirit shall often  
hover around you in blessing  
And give your spirit comfort and  
sweet foreboding.  
Keep in mind that it is me when  
softly in your soul you hear:  
Forget me not! Forget me not!*

<sup>22</sup> The quotations themselves can be found in Jean Paul’s chapter, ‘28th Dog-Post-Day’.

The song is permeated by a rocking figure in the organ except for the last seven bars, and the vocal part should be sung ‘as quietly as possible, without pathos; fragile – if possible, no big dynamic changes’ at the beginning. The two-note motif is first heard in the organ at the words ‘dies Herz’ (‘this heart’) (Ex. 6 gives bar 10, at 0:34), thereupon penetrates the whole song, and ultimately merges with the title words ‘forget me not’ (Ex. 7 shows bars 50–53, at 3:07). Isolated from the evocation of sensations at the sight of the forget-me-not in the original poem, this third stanza becomes in Ruoff’s (and Novalis’) approach a poignant farewell of someone dying to a loved one.

Ex. 6



Ex. 7



The fifth and shortest song of the cycle, ‘Ausgang’ (‘Ending’) [10], is based on a poem by Theodor Fontane (1819–1898), one of the most important representatives of literary realism in nineteenth-century Germany. Ruoff gives the performance direction ‘in a uniformly slow movement’, which is in line with the poet’s distanced way of looking at things, in obvious contrast with the emotional final stanza set in the previous song. In the organ part, the two-note motif is heard from the beginning and now functions

as an ostinato throughout the entire song, to be played 'like a glockenspiel [or carillon]' (Ex. 8 gives bars 1–2), both to ensure the unity of the setting and to reinforce the feeling of inevitability articulated by the text.

### Ex. 8



#### Ausgang

Immer enger, leise, leise,  
Ziehen sich die Lebenskreise,  
Schwindet hin, was prahlt und prunkt,  
Schwindet Hoffen, Hassen, Lieben,  
Und ist nichts in Sicht geblieben  
Als der letzte dunkle Punkt.

#### Ending

*Tighter and tighter, quietly, quietly,  
The circles of life are contracting,  
All that boasts and brags fades away,  
Hope, hatred, love fade away,  
And nothing remains to be seen  
But the last dark spot.*

In this poem, which he wrote at the age of 69, Fontane succeeded admirably in condensing a banal realisation familiar to everyone – that of increasing limitation and ultimate finality of human life – into a single sentence, at the end of which there is indeed a 'Punkt', that is the punctuation mark 'full stop' (in German 'Punkt'), which as a word also forms the end of the poem. The irrevocability of this ending is represented in the composition by two *staccato* semiquavers, heard twice, in the organ on the note B previously assigned to the singer for the last two words, 'dunkle Punkt', to make the statement as final as possible.

Ruoff has a particularly intense relationship with the text of the following song, 'Tiefstille' ('Deep silence') [11] – the first biblical text of the cycle, Psalm 39:2–4 and 12–13 in the German translation by the Viennese Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878–1965) – which is evident from the fact that he already used it as the basis for a musical meditation for organ in 2015.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *Tiefstille*, recorded on Volume Two of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0596.



### Tiefstille

Zu Tiefstille bin ich verstummt,  
schweigen muss ich vom Guten,  
doch mein Leid ist aufgerührt,  
mein Herz glüht mir im Innern,  
bei meinem Seufzen entbrennt ein Feuer –  
ich rede mit meiner Zunge:

Lasse, DU, mein Ende mich kennen,  
meiner Tage Mass, was es sei,  
kennen will ich, wie ich hinfällig bin.

[...]

Höre, DU, mein Gebet,  
meinem Stöhnen lausche,  
zu meinen Tränen bleib nimmer taub!  
Ein Gast ja bin ich bei dir,  
ein Beisass wie all meine Väter, –  
lass sichs abheften von mir,  
dass ich aufblinken kann,  
eh ich gehe und nicht mehr bin!<sup>24</sup>

### Deep silence

*I have fallen into a deep silence,  
I must hold my peace about the good,  
but my suffering is stirred up,  
my heart glows within me,  
as I sigh a fire breaks out –  
I speak with my tongue:*

*THOU, let me know my end,  
the measure of my days, what it is,  
I want to know how I am decrepit.*

[...]

*Hear, THOU, my prayer,  
listen to my moaning,  
never stay deaf to my tears!  
A guest indeed am I with thee,  
of lower rank like all my fathers, –  
loosen thy hand from smiting me  
that I may recover  
before I go and cease to exist!*

Buber's 1935 translation of the Psalms, though sometimes difficult to understand, is particularly gripping and at the same time marked by faithfulness to the original. At times he even invented memorable words – like the one Ruoff chose as a title, 'Tiefstille' ('deep silence') – which do not exist in standard German. This particular neologism describes with analytical precision the paralysed state of shock into which man falls in the face of the realisation of his own finality, which subsequently puts him into a state of excited rebellion ('my heart glows within me') – the dynamic climax in Ruoff's setting (at 1:45) – and ultimately forms the foundation of his prayer to God.

<sup>24</sup> 'Das Buch der Preisungen. Die Psalmen', verdeutscht von Martin Buber, Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh, 2008, pp. 65–66.

The style of Buber's translation is ideally suited for musical setting, since Buber insisted that the Psalms are not meant to be read silently, but must be recited aloud. 'You must read [them] aloud,' he told his friend, the writer and theologian Albrecht Goes. 'You must feel that everything here is speech ['Rede'], speech addressed to a counterpart ['Anrede']. These psalms are not monologue and meditation; they do not speculate about the nature of God; they speak using 'O thou,' convinced that He is there.'<sup>25</sup> In his setting, Ruoff uses the two-note motif several times in the organ part at the beginning, then, to the central words 'bei meinem Seufzen' ('as I sigh') (Ex. 9, bars 33–34, at 2:18), processes it in the organ part from bar 65 onwards (Ex. 10, at 4:50).

Ex. 9

Musical score for Ex. 9, showing vocal and piano parts. The vocal line is in 4/4 time, marked *mp*, with lyrics "bei mei-nem Seuf-zen". The piano accompaniment is in 4/4 time, marked *mp*, and features a two-note motif in the right hand and a more active line in the left hand.

Ex. 10

Musical score for Ex. 10, showing piano and organ parts. The piano part is in 4/4 time, marked *p*, and features a two-note motif in the right hand and a more active line in the left hand. The organ part is in 4/4 time and features a two-note motif in the right hand and a more active line in the left hand.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Albrecht Goes, 'Im Wagnis eines Spielmanns' (1994), reprinted in Helmut Zwanger, *Albrecht Goes. Freund Martin Bubers und des Judentums. Eine Hommage*, Klöpfer & Meyer, Tübingen, 2008, pp. 147–49, here p. 147.

The cycle closes with a gesture of consolation, with the same biblical message that Brahms chose for the last movement of his *German Requiem* (1868): ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on’ (Revelation 14:13) <sup>12</sup>.

### **Selig sind die Toten**

Selig sind die Toten, die in dem Herrn sterben von nun an.

Ja, der Geist spricht, dass sie ruhen von ihrer Arbeit; denn ihre Werke folgen ihnen nach.<sup>26</sup>

Amen.

### **Blessed are the Dead**

*Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.*

*Yes, the Spirit saith, that they may rest from their labours; for their deeds follow them.*<sup>27</sup>

*Amen.*

The two-note motif is heard during the opening sentence, in bars 9–11 (Ex. 11, at 0:25) and at the very end of the song-cycle (Ex. 12, at 3:01), vanishing into eternity.

### **Ex. 11**

The musical score for Ex. 11 is in 4/4 time and begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The vocal line (treble clef) starts with a whole rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note G4. The lyrics "Se - lig sind die To - ten," are aligned with the notes. The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a two-note motif (G4 and A4) in the right hand, which is repeated in the left hand. The right hand accompaniment consists of chords: G4-B4, G4-A4, G4-A4-B4, and G4-A4-B4. The left hand accompaniment consists of chords: G4, G4-A4, G4-A4-B4, and G4-A4-B4. The score ends with a fermata over the final notes.

<sup>26</sup> Luther Bible, 1912.

<sup>27</sup> English Standard Version.

Ex. 12

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece, labeled 'Ex. 12'. It consists of three staves. The top two staves are for the piano, with a 'ppp' (pianissimo) dynamic marking. The bottom staff is for the bass. The music is in 4/4 time. The piano part features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The bass part has a single line of music. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings.

In contrast to Brahms' setting, which is veiled in the brightest light, Ruoff's composition, demanding a 'slow and heavy' performance, hardly loses the burden of the arduous life to which man is destined, even in the face of the promise of the text, the realisation of which still seems a long way off.

*In Hora Mortis* received its first performance on 21 November 2021 in the Stadtkirche Ludwigsburg, near Stuttgart, with Wiebke Wighardt, mezzo-soprano, and Fabian Wöhrle, organ.

***Happy Birthday. Variationen und Fuga grottesca* (2019)**

As unconventional as the last composition in this series may seem, it can be seen both in the context of a tradition that has evolved especially in Germany and within a stylistic development that Ruoff was going through at the time. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the Berlin-based choral conductor and composer Siegfried Ochs (1858–1929) took a well-known German folksong, which translates as 'A bird comes a-flying', as the theme for a series of stylistic parodies in various instrumentations: *Ein deutsches Volkslied 's kommt ein Vogel geflogen' im Style älterer und neuerer Meister humoristisch bearbeitet* – 'adapted in a humorous manner in the style of older and more recent masters'. The two volumes published in 1878 and 1879 used Bach, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Chopin, Schumann, Verdi, Johann Strauss Jr, Brahms, Gounod, Wagner

and a military march as models and soon enjoyed considerable popularity. A few years after that, the then twenty-year-old Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924) composed an appendix to Ochs' collections, featuring variations for piano in the style of Scarlatti and again Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin and Wagner – though this work remained unpublished until 1986. In the twentieth century, Karl Hermann Pillney (1896–1980), with *Eskapaden eines Gassenhauers* ('Escapades of a Popular Hit') for piano and orchestra (1968), and Hans Priegnitz (1913–84), with *Wie einst Lili Marleen* for piano (1981), successfully followed in Ochs' footsteps, both using popular songs as their themes; Joachim Volkmann (born 1931) also released a set of delightful parodistic variations for piano (*Variationes humoris causa. Vierzehn Stilübungen* [Fourteen Exercises in Style] über 'Ein Männlein steht im Walde' from 1966) and for voice and piano (*Komponisten auf Abwegen oder die seltsamen Verwandlungen von* [Composers on the Wayside or the Strange Transformations of] *Hänschen klein*, from 1975).

When Friedemann Strube, Ruoff's publisher for decades, celebrated his 80th birthday on 29 November 2019, it was a matter of course for Ruoff to present him with a composition, and he decided to join the parody tradition with a work for organ, although he had intended to write his 'definitely last work for solo organ' with the recently completed *Suite grotesque*,<sup>28</sup> as he explained in an interview with me. Here, as is so often the case, the exception proves the rule. In the process, he realised that one of the world's best-known tunes, 'Happy Birthday', had not yet been subjected to cheerful parodistic variations. Thereupon the idea was born to dedicate this humorous cycle of variations to Strube for his birthday. Its first public performance was scheduled for spring 2020 with the organist Andreas Gräsle, but the Covid pandemic thwarted this plan, so that Gräsle was able to present the premiere only as a YouTube video; in the last two years, however, it has been performed frequently in public.

Instead of slipping into the garb of specific composers as his predecessors had, Ruoff opted for writing a sequence of character variations crowned by a fugue, behind which nevertheless now and then lurks a recognisable composer or a style familiar from

<sup>28</sup> Recorded on Volume Four of this series, Toccata Classics TOCC 0672.

music history. With this overall formal concept, he created a humorous counterpart in a self-referential, tongue-in-cheek manner to his expansive *Introduction, Variations and Fugue on the chorale 'Das Volk, das noch im Finstern wandelt'* from 2005.<sup>29</sup> In doing so, he did not need to deviate much from the path that he had taken in his *Suite grotesque*, which is committed to the idea of writing organ music that contrasts with the sublime atmosphere with which the organ – a sacred instrument in a sacred space – is commonly associated. He was especially able to follow up on the comic effect of the second movement of the *Suite grotesque*, the 'Danse champêtre', which treats the organ like a fairground instrument.

After the threefold presentation of the theme in A major [13], the first variation in G major, a 'Ländler' [14] (a slow Austro-German dance in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time), immediately leads into the world of the hurdy-gurdy. Ruoff alludes to the geographical origin of this dance by quoting a sequence from the theme of the first movement of Mozart's famous Piano Sonata in A major, K331 (at 0:35) in the trio. The giggling 'Danse populaire' [15], in B flat major and still in  $\frac{3}{4}$  time, is followed by a march in E flat major [16], and an *Andante* [17] in F major,  $\frac{3}{4}$ , again in a Mozartian vein. In the fifth variation, a chorale in A flat major [18], through which the theme is transferred to the traditional terrain of the organ, the theme unexpectedly blends into the popular chorale 'Nun danket alle Gott' ('Now thank we all our God') (Ex. 13, at 0:21) – a rather strange conjuncture, since this chorale first appeared in a Berlin hymnal from 1647, whereas 'Happy Birthday' originates from Louisville, Kentucky, USA, and in its last, popular version from the 1920s.

### Ex. 13



The ensuing variation [19], in D flat major, suggests a New Year's concert in Vienna, with unmistakable allusions to the *Blue Danube* waltz by Johann Strauss Jr, and is followed by

<sup>29</sup> Also recorded on Volume Four of this series.

a gallop in  $\frac{2}{4}$  time [20] that retains the ambience of this concert in its opening rhythm, but now alludes to the *Radetzky March* by Johann Strauss Sr. The ‘Interlude’ [21] takes the listener into the harmonic world of twentieth-century compositional techniques, which are grotesquely exaggerated here. Two masters in particular come to mind: Hindemith, with the fourth-based chords he so appreciated; and Prokofiev with his aesthetic of the ‘wrong note’. After a brief excursion back to the fairground organ with the Polka [22], the last variation, *Grave* [23], is an example of the compositional technique of harmonising a chorale with the most distant, most surprising keys, which began with Max Reger but here goes far beyond healthy measure.

Finally, the *Fuga grottesca* [24] lives up to its name by first stealing the jubilant upbeat of the theme and forcing it into a dignified fugue subject in  $\frac{4}{4}$  time (Ex. 14). After a completely regular four-part exposition of the fugue and the quotation of a very well-known four-note motif by Beethoven, ‘Nun danket alle Gott’ breaks in again, inappropriately accompanied in the organ pedal by a folksong in Swabian dialect – ‘Auf de schwäbsche Eisebahne’ (‘On the Swabian Railway’) – popular in Ruoff’s native Stuttgart (Ex. 15, at 1:38).

#### Ex. 14

Happy birth-day to you!

*p*

#### Ex. 15

Auf de schwäb-sche Ei-se-bah-ne

Other rather incongruous allusions include Dvořák's 'Humoresque', Op. 101, No. 7 (at 1:52), and the prelude to *Die Meistersinger* (at 2:36). After another small development section, the fugue concludes with a final appearance of the theme in radiant A major, to be performed 'grandioso' (at 3:39).

*Cornelis Witthoefft, born in Hamburg, is a pianist, conductor and organist. He is a professor for Lied and score-reading at the Stuttgart University of Music and Performing Arts and writes frequently 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 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 fifty commercial recordings.



Photograph: Gianni Proietti



Jan Lehtola studied the organ in Helsinki with Olli Porthan and Kari Jussila, in Amsterdam with Jacques van Oortmerssen 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 a lecturer at the University of the Arts, Sibelius Academy. He is also active as a lecturer and a teacher of master-classes.

*[www.janlehtola.com](http://www.janlehtola.com)*

The soprano and voice-teacher **Mari-Anni Hilander**, based in Kuopio, in south-central Finland, has worked actively as a performing artist, freelance musician and lecturer in vocal music since 2000. Her work as a singer in Finland and around Europe consists of concerts as soloist with various ensembles and orchestras, and numerous recitals with front-line Finnish musicians, among them the pianist Kristian Attila, organist Jan Lehtola and guitarist Markku Laakso. She has also collaborated with the dancer and choreographer Sannamaria Kuula, with whom she has explored the expression of movement and body in a new way. Her repertoire stretches from early music to pop classics, and from hymns to modern art-song and opera. Her 'take' on singing and music-making is based on curiosity: learning new things gives her impetus. Between 2004 and 2018 she studied intensively with Dorothy Irving in Stockholm. She is in high demand as a vocal coach among singers and choirs in Finland. As a teacher she is innovative and dedicated. In addition to the teaching of technique, her work includes coaching singers in stage productions. Currently she works as a tenured lecturer of vocal music at the Sibelius Academy, University of the Arts, in Kuopio.



Photograph: Hanna Korhonen

After receiving his Master's in Music in 2020 from the Sibelius Academy at the University of the Arts in Helsinki, the baritone **Henri Tikkanen** moved to Germany, where since 2021 he has been singing in the Hannover State Opera Choir. He can also often be heard on stage with opera companies and concert promoters in Finland, his operatic roles including Count Almaviva in Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*, Guglielmo in his *Così fan tutte*, Tarquinius in Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* and Melisso in Handel's *Alcina*. As a familiar face at music festivals, he has worked with such groups as the chamber orchestra Avanti!, 'Organ Night and Aria' in Espoo, the Kuopio Chamber Music Company, the Pellinki Music Festival and the Villa Salmenranta Music Festival.

In 2015 he won second place in the Helsinki Lied Competition with the pianist Mariola Aniolek. Since then he has performed with many of the leading Finnish musicians. Recital work with his duo-partner, the pianist Elias Miettinen, has allowed him to perform a wide range of the art-song repertoire, focusing on the German Lied repertoire from the turn of the nineteenth century. He is also a frequent performer of new music, often in collaboration with its composers.



Photograph: Hanna Korhonen

# Axel Ruoff's Organ Music on Toccata Classics



‘While boldly avant-garde, this is music bursting with character’  
—Choir & Organ on Volume Three

‘Jan Lehtola is an excellent advocate for this music, seemingly making light of the technical challenges and holding the listener’s attention throughout. The recording is excellent and the organ in St Paul’s Church, Helsinki, an instrument of 52 stops, has all the colour and variety that the music requires. A most satisfying release.’

—MusicWeb International on Volume Four

## The Main Organ of St Paul's Church in Helsinki, Finland

**Kangasalan Urkutehdas,  
1931  
Veikko Virtanen Oy, 2005**

\*=from the 1931 organ

**I C-a<sup>3</sup>**

Principal 16'  
Octava 8'  
Flauto Major 8'  
Quintatön 8'  
Rohrflöte\* 8'  
Gamba 8'  
Octava\* 4'  
Flöte\* 4'  
Quinta\* 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ '  
Octava 2'  
Kornett\* 3-4 f  
Mixtur\* 4-6 f 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ '  
Fagott 16'  
Trompete 8'

**II C-a<sup>3</sup>**

Quintadena\* 16'  
Geigen Principal\* 8'  
Flöte\* 8'  
Nachthorn\* 8'  
Gemshorn\* 8'

Octava 4'  
Querflöte\* 4'  
Piccolo\* 2'  
Sesquialtera\* 2 f 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ '  
Krummhorn\* 8'  
Singend regal\* 4'  
tremolo

**III C-a<sup>3</sup>**

Liebligh Gedact\* 16'  
Principal 8'  
Fugara 8'  
Spitzflöte\* 8'  
Gedact\* 8'  
Voix celeste\* 2 f 8'  
Flauto dolce\* 4'  
Viola d'amore 4'  
Querpfeife\* 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ '  
Flageolet\* 2'  
Terz\* 1 $\frac{1}{3}$ '  
Harmonia aetheria 4 f 2 $\frac{2}{3}$ '  
Basson\* 16'  
Trompet harmonique 8'  
Oboe 8'  
Vox humana\* 8'  
Klarine 4'  
tremolo

**Pedal C-f<sup>1</sup>**

Grand Bordun 32' (octave transmission)  
Violonbass 16'  
Subbass\* 16'  
Echobass 16' (transmission)  
Violoncello 8'  
Flötenbass 8' (transmission)  
Octava\* 4'  
Bombarde 16'  
Trompete 8' (transmission)  
Klarine 4' (transmission)

**Couplers**

II-I 8'  
III-I 8'  
III-II 8'  
I, II, III-P 8'  
III-I 16'  
III-16'  
II-I 4'  
III-I 4'  
III-II 4'  
I, II, III-P 4'  
General coupler 8'  
General crescendo  
Setzer







Recorded in St Paul's Church, Helsinki, Finland, on 27–28 January (*Messe basse*),  
21 May (*Happy Birthday*), 8 August (*In Hora Mortis*) and 9 August 2022  
(*Memento creatoris tui*)

Recording and editing: Antti Pohjola

Producer: Jan Lehtola

Artistic producer: Seppo Siirala (tracks 2–5) and Mari-Anni Hilander

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# AXEL RUOFF Complete Works for Organ, Volume Five

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<b>1</b>	<b><i>Memento creatoris tui</i> for baritone and organ (2001)</b>	<b>12:43</b>
	<b><i>Messe basse</i> for soprano and organ (2015)</b>	<b>21:15</b>
<b>2</b>	I Introitus	6:02
<b>3</b>	II Kyrie	5:46
<b>4</b>	III Sanctus	2:40
<b>5</b>	IV Agnus Dei	6:47
	<b><i>In Hora Mortis. Sieben Totenlieder</i> for medium voice and organ (2020)</b>	<b>28:31</b>
<b>6</b>	No. 1 O bleibe treu den Toten (Storm)	7:31
<b>7</b>	No. 2 Lied der Toten (Werfel)	2:35
<b>8</b>	No. 3 O Herr, gib jedem seinen eignen Tod (Rilke)	3:55
<b>9</b>	No. 4 Vergiss mein nicht (von Knebel?, attrib. Novalis)	3:39
<b>10</b>	No. 5 Ausgang (Fontane)	1:18
<b>11</b>	No. 6 Tiefstille (from Psalm 39, transl. Buber)	6:06
<b>12</b>	No. 7 Selig sind die Toten (Revelation 14:13)	3:27
	<b><i>Happy Birthday. Variationen und Fuga grottesca</i> (2019)</b>	<b>16:02</b>
<b>13</b>	Thema	0:58
<b>14</b>	Var. 1: Ländler	1:45
<b>15</b>	Var. 2: Danse populaire	0:27
<b>16</b>	Var. 3: Marsch	2:26
<b>17</b>	Var. 4: <i>Andante</i>	0:48
<b>18</b>	Var. 5: Choral	1:02
<b>19</b>	Var. 6: Walzer	1:20
<b>20</b>	Var. 7: Galopp	0:44
<b>21</b>	Var. 8: Interludium	0:43
<b>22</b>	Var. 9: Polka	0:32
<b>23</b>	Var. 10: <i>Grave</i>	1:07
<b>24</b>	<i>Fuga grottesca</i>	4:10

**Mari-Anni Hilander, soprano** **2–5**

**Henri Tikkanen, baritone** **1 6–12**

**Jan Lehtola, organ of St Paul's Church, Helsinki**

**TT 78:30**

FIRST RECORDINGS