
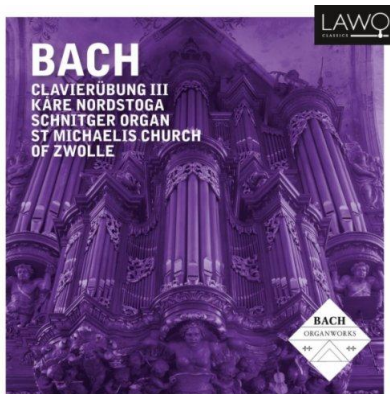


## CD Review by [Jerry Dubins](#)

 BACH Clavierübung III • Kare Nordstoga (org) • LAWQ 1012 (2 CDs: 104:14)



The very first organ disc I ever owned was a Columbia stereo LP of Bach favorites performed by E. Power Biggs on the Arp Schnitger organ in the Netherlands city of Zwolle. I mention this because writ large on the front cover of the current CD is the information that Kare Nordstoga has chosen the Schnitger organ at St. Michael's Church, Zwolle, as his instrument for this new recording of part III of Bach's Clavierübung. Coincidentally, Biggs included on his album the great "St. Anne" Prelude and Fugue, which frames Part III of the Clavierübung.

The organ's history dates back as far as 1505, but in 1719 a contract was signed with Arp Schnitger to rebuild the instrument anew after the collapse of a church tower destroyed the original. Since then, of course, the organ has undergone a number of upgrades and restorations, but it remains one of the most impressive examples of North German organ building, consisting of four manuals plus pedal with a total of 63 stops.

The third part of Bach's four-part Clavierübung (Keyboard Practice) is commonly referred to as "The German Organ Mass." In between the opening prelude and the closing triple fugue in E  $\flat$ -Major, BWV 552 (note the key signature of three flats and the triple fugue symbolizing the Trinity), come 21 chorale preludes, BWV 669–89, and four duets, BWV 802–05. Various and sundry analyses have set out to demonstrate a numerological basis for the work, taking into account the progression of keys and the logical groupings of chorale preludes according to their correspondent sections of the Lutheran Mass. The total number of pieces that make up the work, 27, provides a too convenient and irresistible urge on the part of investigators to invoke the 3 x 3 x 3 theory. However, Christoph Wolff, in *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music*, believes "it is unlikely that the work was ever intended to be performed as a whole; it was intended as a compendium, a resource for organists for church performances, with the duets possibly accompaniments for communion."

Whatever religious significance it may have held for Bach and/or his church congregants as an organ Mass, it's safe to say that published as part and parcel of the Clavierübung Bach considered the work yet another demonstration of his keyboard prowess at its most comprehensive and masterly. A decade later, in *The Art of Fugue*, Bach would explore the outer limits of canon and fugue. In part III of the Clavierübung, he set out to assemble "a compendium of organ music in all possible styles and idioms, both ancient and modern, and properly internationalized; and to design a didactic work presenting examples of all possible forms of contrapuntal composition, going far beyond previous treatises on musical theory" (Peter Williams, *Bach, the Goldberg Variations*). In this regard, it may be said that the Clavierübung, part III, is even more complex and far-reaching than *The Art of Fugue* because it explores a greater variety of compositional techniques, styles, and forms.

Since 1984, Norway-born Kare Nordstoga has been principal organist at Oslo Cathedral and since 1994, professor at the Norwegian Academy of Music. All I can say about his playing and Lawo's recording is that they're magnificent. From the thrilling grandeur of the opening prelude, through the devotional chorales and four duets, to the majestically sublime testament to Bach's faith in the concluding triple fugue, I sat and listened as if transfixed.

One needn't have knowledge of the Lutheran Mass and catechisms represented by the chorales and duets to enjoy this music; I certainly don't. But for those who are interested, Ove Kristian Sundberg's excellent booklet note provides a detailed explanation of the chorales and how they relate to the corresponding liturgical passages. Religion aside, I find a spiritual dimension to this music that is nondenominational and universal. And Nordstoga finds the combinations of ranks and stops for each of the numbers that seem perfectly to capture and project its essence.

This is the most beautiful and satisfying organ recording to come my way in a long time, and, as far as I'm concerned, Nordstoga outclasses Simon Preston, Kevin Bowyer, and Helmut Walcha in this work. Absolutely recommended for great playing, outstanding recording, and spiritual uplift. Jerry Dubins