

= Prelude and Fugue on a Theme of Vittoria =

Prelude and Fugue on a Theme of Vittoria is a work for solo organ composed by Benjamin Britten in 1946 . It was commissioned for St Matthew 's Church , Northampton and first performed on 21 September 1946 , St Matthew 's Day , three days after its composition . It uses a theme from a motet by the Spanish composer Vittoria , both in the prelude (where it is played repeatedly on the pedals) and as the basis for the fugue . The piece , which lasts about five minutes in performance , has had a mixed reception . One writer has noted the difficulty on finding a suitable organ on which to perform the piece , given the difficulties in finding appropriate registration to meet Britten 's requirements . A reviewer of a concert performance in the 1960s called it " a contrived attempt to make bricks without straw " , although other commentators have been more favourable about the piece .

= = Background = =

The English composer Benjamin Britten was asked to write the Prelude and Fugue for St Matthew 's Church , Northampton . It was first performed there on St Matthew 's Day (21 September) 1946 , three days after it was composed . There is a story that he wrote it in bed one morning before breakfast . Britten had previously been commissioned by the vicar of St Matthew 's , Walter Hussey , to write a cantata , Rejoice in the Lamb , for the church 's fiftieth anniversary in 1943 ; the organ accompaniment for the cantata used the organ in a " strikingly original way " . The Prelude and Fugue was one of two pieces based on themes by other composers that Britten wrote in 1946 ; the other was the Young Person 's Guide to the Orchestra , which was based on a piece by Henry Purcell .

= = Structure = =

Both sections of the piece are based on a theme from a motet , Ecce sacerdos magnus (" Behold a great priest ") , by the Spanish composer Tomás Luis de Victoria (or " Vittoria " , 1548 ? 1611) . The theme , which comes from a plainchant melody used in Vittoria 's day on the feast day of a saint and bishop , is nine notes long and does not range widely . The Prelude , which is in 42 time (four minims to a bar) , opens with a statement of the theme played on the pedals in quintuplets (five quavers played in the time of four) , marked *ff* , (fortissimo , " very loud ") . The theme is repeated frequently in the pedals during the prelude , which is marked " largamente " (" broadly ") . The prelude , which takes about one and a half minutes in performance , is thirteen bars long .

Vittoria 's theme is also used (with little development) as the subject of the fugue . This section is in 34 time (three crotchets to a bar) and is marked " Andante con moto " (" at a walking pace , with movement ") . The fugue , which is mainly in four @-@ part writing with frequent rhythmic changes , gradually builds to a climax . In bar 69 , a new louder melody is added in the right hand against the fugue theme in the pedals . Gradually , the piece dies away to two parts and *ppp* (pianississimo , " very , very quietly ") as the left and right hands play the fugue theme a bar apart from each other , in canon . The whole piece lasts about five minutes .

= = Assessment = =

The piece has had a mixed reception . Even one of its supporters says that " players do not seem to like it much " , despite it being written so that " the average parish organist might have a fair chance to play it . "

The American musician Luther Noss reviewed the piece upon its publication by Boosey & Hawkes in 1952 , stating that it was " well written for the organ " and " remarkably free " of some of the problems found in other modern organ music . He thought that it gave the impression of having been written with the organ in mind rather adapted from a piece intended for another instrument , unlike some other contemporary organ works . However , he commented that the theme provided

little melodic or rhythmic interest and Britten used it , he thought , " not without a suggestion of monotony . " Although the theme is " not the stuff of which great music is made " , Noss remarked on the " exciting " pedal flourish at the opening of the piece , the attractive use of melody and harmony , and " grand crescendos and lingering diminuendos " to keep the listener interested . Another early reviewer described it as " spacious " , with a " by no means academic " fugue and a style that " suggests a modern romantic composer 's appreciation of the more austere aspects of the classical organ school . " The review also noted that many of the accents marked in the piece " seem incapable of realization by any of the usual methods of suggesting accentuation of the organ . "

It was included in a concert at St Clement Danes , London , in November 1963 that honoured Britten 's fiftieth birthday with performances of some of his lesser @-@ known works . The review in The Times remarked favourably on the Te Deum in C and the Six Metamorphoses after Ovid for solo oboe . Of the organ piece , though , the critic said that it was " a contrived attempt to make bricks without straw . "

The organist Alan Harverson describes it as " excellent " and notes its " orthodox layout and textures " , in comparison to the organ writing of Rejoice in the Lamb and the Festival Te Deum (1944) . He regards the Prelude as " concise and majestic " and describes the ending as " touchingly serene " with a " charming canon " . The musicologist and Britten expert Philip Brett describes the piece (without naming it) in The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians as a " slight organ work " .

The organist Timothy Bond disagrees with the piece 's " bad press " and the " dismissive " comments made about it by Brett and others . According to Bond , this " fresh and vital " work is " a finer , more accomplished piece than it sometimes sounds in performance . " He notes the difficulty of finding the best registration ? no registration suggestions are given ? and the best organ to perform the piece on , since it seems to require steady and considerable changes in volume without changes in the tone quality produced by the organ yet also demands neoclassical " brightness and clarity " , a combination of requirements that it is difficult for organs to meet . On the right organ , however , Bond says that the piece can sound " particularly striking " and " harmonically bold and telling , if occasionally gauche " , as it moves through passages that are " serene " , " creepy " , " vigorous " , " nostalgic " and finally " serene " , albeit with a " rather pedestrian " cadence .