

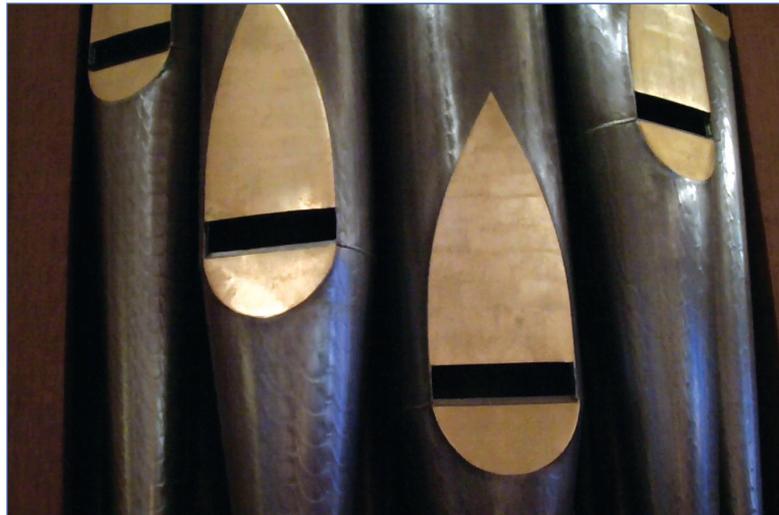
**NAXOS**

Helmut  
**WALCHA**

**Chorale Preludes • 1**

**Wolfgang Rübsam**

**John Brombaugh Organ Opus 35,  
First Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Illinois**



## Helmut Walcha (1907–1991) Chorale Preludes, Volume 1

Helmut Walcha was one of the most influential organists of the twentieth century. A native of Leipzig, Germany, son of a postal worker, he grew up in a musical environment where he heard the cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach performed weekly at the Thomaskirche, conducted by Thomas Kantor Karl Straube. Walcha's musical talent was evident from an early age, and he studied the organ with Günther Ramin, music theory with Sigfrid Karg-Elert, and learned the great organ chorale fantasias of Max Reger, only to turn away from the late-Romantic style midway through his career in order to advocate the music of the Baroque era, immersing himself in the organ and harpsi-chord music of Johann Sebastian Bach. He was one of the first to play all-Bach organ recitals.

Soon after World War II Walcha was invited by Deutsche Grammophon to record Bach's organ music on surviving historic organs in Germany, France, and the Netherlands for the Archiv label. He taught at the Musik-hochschule in Frankfurt am Main, where he also began his long tenure as organist of the Dreikönigskirche. He attracted over two hundred organ students, about a quarter of them from the United States. At his church he played for Sunday services and Saturday Vespers, mostly improvising on congregational chorales before they were sung. It was this humble service in Lutheran liturgy that led to the eventual publication of four volumes of chorale preludes.

During the war Walcha lived in the countryside near Frankfurt, and first began to compose chorale preludes. The first volume of *25 Chorale Preludes* was published by C. F. Peters in 1954, and became popular teaching pieces for young organists, especially the simpler *ostinato* and pedal-point preludes. The more complex preludes incorporated the vocal, contrapuntal, motivic and melodic style that he found in the earlier masters, to be played on the rediscovered historic organs and new instruments, championing their characteristics, with their clear, colourful, and singing qualities. His habit of learning music by ear since becoming blind at age seventeen contributed, with the aid of his devoted wife Ursula, to the clarity of his organ textures; he would sing many of the parts in Bach's music in his own clear voice, internalizing a horizontal contra-

puntal approach to performance and composition. Many of his students, including Delbert Disselhorst and Wolfgang Rübsam, attended Vespers at the Dreikönigskirche, and attest to the magical spontaneity and variety of his improvisations, played on the 1961 Karl Schuke organ built according to his specifications, incorporating the tonal qualities he had experienced in playing the Gottfried Silbermann organs in Rötha, near Leipzig (and which had inspired Felix Mendelssohn over a century earlier.)

The *25 Chorale Preludes* of 1954 were followed by *Volume II* (1963), *Volume III* (1966), and, responding to encouragement by American students, *Volume IV* (1979), all printed in their familiar pink covers. In an appendix to *Volume II* he gives a tonal specification and photograph of his Schuke organ, and elaborates on the desire for achieving clear and lively playing of his music. Discussing five basic articulation markings to achieve contrapuntal clarity, whether in slender or elaborately complex musical textures, Walcha uses the small comma to indicate a natural breath, the tie to bind several notes together, the vertical wedge for melodic accent, the *staccato* dot for very short notes, and the horizontal *tenuto* to lengthen a note slightly. All these, as well as tempo recommendations given in metronome markings, are to be accommodated to the organ in its acoustical environment, tending towards quicker in dry acoustics and broader in more reverberant churches. The Dreikönigskirche, seating about a thousand people, has a reverberation time of four seconds when empty. Walcha developed these articulation and tempo suggestions to achieve expressive clarity using degrees of *legato*, *leggiero*, and *portato* touch, as also recommended in his organ edition of Bach's *Art of Fugue* (with Walcha's own completion of the final fugue). Walcha's students attest to the flexibility and spontaneous quality of his own performances in recital or church service, and in his pedagogy, rather encouraging a great range of artistic variety of touch from overlapping legato to sharply articulated staccato (according to his American student and biographer Paul Jordan). However, such an approach was not to be dogmatically applied.

Similarly, Walcha's chorale preludes reveal a great

variety of compositional strategies and forms: simple pedal points and reiterated ostinatos, motivic melodic organization and fugal imitation in the manner of Pachelbel, Buxtehude, and Bach, together with numerous varieties of canon at many intervals, no doubt inspired by the nine canonic chorale preludes in Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*. This horizontal, contrapuntal approach often creates a high level of strong dissonance as well as sweet harmony. Some of the pieces can seem like calculated, intricate desk music, rather than more freely improvisational.

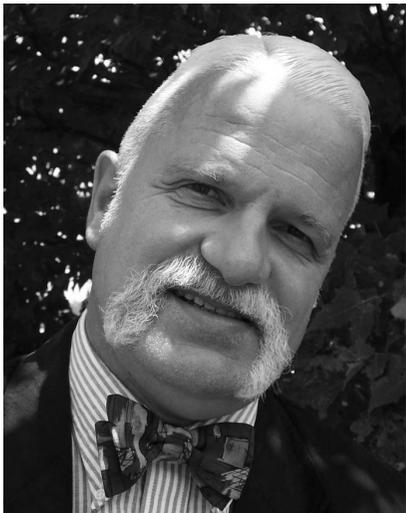
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Walcha specified registrations, often suggesting highly individual colours rich in added overtones that aim towards clarity, leaving behind the symphonic orchestra inspired sonorities of Romanticism. Strong principal choruses including mixtures, broad and colourful flutes, and incisive trumpets rich in overtones, are typical of his sound requirements. In these recordings, sometimes Walcha's

registrations are closely followed, sometimes only taken as suggestions to be reinterpreted on a modern recreation of the classic North-European pipe organ, and in keeping with the affect of the music usually suggested by the chorale title and text.

Walcha's chorale preludes reveal his transformational influence in twentieth-century organ music and its performance practice. His ideas on contrapuntal transparency and the vocal quality of earlier organs brought Baroque music to new life and artistic expression, now current in today's musical world. His creative spark and musical personality are reflected in his own contemporary style, expanding and enriching the tradition of the Lutheran chorale prelude with spiritual music in today's culture, in music of fresh expression for the Christian liturgy, built on the historic inheritance of the classic Baroque masters. Walcha was a man of wide erudition and learning, as well as religious sincerity in his knowledge of Lutheran belief, allowing him to pursue musical originality and achieve creative mastery in the spirit of Johann Sebastian Bach, whose motto was also *Soli Deo Gloria*.

Rudolf Zuiderveld, 2012



### Wolfgang Rübsam

Wolfgang Rübsam studied under Helmut Walcha and Marie-Claire Alain, and in the United States with Robert T. Anderson. Upon winning the 1973 Grand Prix de Chartres in Interpretation, he became Professor of Church Music and Organ at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois. During this 23-year tenure, he also served as University Organist of the University of Chicago at Rockefeller Memorial Chapel. Wolfgang Rübsam is internationally known through over a hundred highly acclaimed recordings of organ repertoire from the baroque and romantic periods, as well as his Naxos Bach recordings on the modern piano. He gives frequent recitals and master-classes in the United States and Europe and has served on the juries of the most prestigious international competitions. Wolfgang Rübsam has lived in the United States since his retirement from teaching in 2011 and is a regular composer for Schott Music International.

Photo by Christa Rübsam

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Rudolf Zuiderveld, 2012

A native of Leipzig and steeped in the musical tradition of J. S. Bach, Helmut Walcha was one of the most influential organists of the 20th century. Building on Baroque examples, Walcha started composing the *Chorale Preludes* during the war years and they became popular teaching pieces as well as ideal vehicles for expressing the clarity and colour of organs both historic and new. As one of Walcha's most renowned students, Wolfgang Rübsam's interpretations are uniquely authoritative. This is the first of four volumes of Walcha's complete *Chorale Preludes*.

**Helmut  
WALCHA**  
(1907–1991)  
**Chorale Preludes  
Volume 1**

1	No. 1 Nun Komm, der Heiden Heiland	2:09
2	No. 2 O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf	1:41
3	No. 3 Macht hoch die Tür	2:25
4	No. 4 Mit Ernst, o Menschenkinder	3:16
5	No. 5 Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ	2:09
6	No. 6 Den die Hirten lobten sehre	1:39
7	No. 7 Fröhlich soll mein Herze springen	1:14
8	No. 8 Zu Bethlehem geboren	1:34
9	No. 9 Weicht ihr Berge, fällt ihr Hügel	1:36
10	No. 10 Herzliebster Jesu, was hast du verbrochen	3:14
11	No. 11 Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort	3:34
12	No. 12 Herr, nun selbst den Wagen halt	1:48
13	No. 13 Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darein	3:21
14	No. 14 Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott	2:41
15	No. 15 Ach bleib bei uns, Herr Jesu Christ	2:03
16	No. 16 Nun freut euch, lieben Christen g'mein	2:17
17	No. 17 Es ist das Heil uns kommen her	2:29
18	No. 18 Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ	3:59
19	No. 19 Ist Gott für mich, so trete	2:31
20	No. 20 Wer nur den lieben Gott läßt walten	3:22
21	No. 21 Mitten wir im Leben sind	3:16
22	No. 22 Wer weiß, wie nahe mir mein Ende	3:39
23	No. 23 Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin	3:35
24	No. 24 Nun sich der Tag geendet hat	2:02
25	No. 25 Morgenglanz der Ewigkeit	3:19



**Wolfgang Rübsam**  
**John Brombaugh**  
**Organ Opus 35**  
**First Presbyterian**  
**Church,**  
**Springfield, Illinois**

Recorded in First Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Illinois, 23–24 October 2011  
Producer: Wolfgang Rübsam (RMC Classical, Music Inc. USA) • Booklet notes: Rudolf Zuiderveld  
Publisher: C. F. Peters • Cover detail of the organ used in this recording by Wolfgang Rübsam