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A Small Restoration on a Famous Composition by Sweelinck

This year marks the 400th year since the death of the great composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562–1621). The last great polyphonist of the Flemish school, he is remembered above all thanks to his compositions dedicated to the organ and the harpsichord. Sweelinck, during his lifetime, became the reference for a host of German organists who, from the Hanseatic cities of northern Germany, went to Amsterdam to study at his school. Among the best known pupils are Samuel Scheidt and Heinrich Scheidemann.

Many compositions were preserved in manuscripts, compiled by students and among his works there are many variations on themes of German origin, both Lutheran choral and secular melodies, to underline the mutual influence between the German and Flemish world of the time¹.

The cycle of variations *Mein junges Leben hat ein Endt* is certainly one of the best known and most performed among Sweelinck's compositions for keyboard instrument.

Consisting of six variations and based on a melody with a German text, this composition came to us through a single source: the Lynar A1 tablature, preserved in the Berlin library.

An analysis of the composition reveals a mature style and a perfectly controlled musical architecture: in the succession of variations, the figures become more and more rich and animated. At the end, in the sixth and last variation, the movement come back to a calm motion in quarter notes, sounding at first almost as a “da capo”. The last variation, however, is the richest from the polyphonic point of view: each voice insists on the melodic material of the theme, with absolute counterpoint mastery.

¹ An indispensable book in the library of every organist and harpsichordist: Pieter Dirksen, *The Keyboard music of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck*, koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis, 1997.

But the last four bars are repeated twice the same. In the context of a rich elaboration, the literal repetition of the last four bars sounds very strange.

The melody of the theme, composed according to the AA BB scheme, is re-worked, in the previous five variations, so that the repetition of both A and B is different each time. Repetition is never the same as the first presentation, indeed repetition is always accompanied by the enrichment of the figures.

If we examine Sweelinck's entire repertoire of variations, we can say that this is the rule: a repeated melody is never repeated in the same way (or with a refrain sign²), but each time with a different elaboration.

Is it possible that in the very last variation, the most elaborate of the cycle, Sweelinck gave up this variety?

If we look at the manuscript in which the composition has reached us, we realize that this anomalous repetition is not written in full: at the end of the sixth variation there is a small guide that invites you to repeat the last part (attention some modern editions have transcribed this repetition in full and not with the refrain sign!): We then suspect that the anomaly in this composition is perhaps due to a trivial mistake of the ancient copyist. The latter, while copying the last variation, left out some measures; he later amended the mistake by suggesting repetition with the refrain sign.

A completion of the composition, however difficult it is to compete with the quality of the great Flemish master, seems to us preferable to a repetition. The repetition is out of style, especially when the repetition is performed, as we often hear today at the organ, with a change of registration like an anachronistic "petite reprise".

Here is therefore a proposal to reconstruct the six missing bars, which could be inserted both as B' or as B":

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a quarter rest, and then a series of eighth and sixteenth notes. The bass staff starts with a 'z' (zaccato) symbol, followed by a sequence of eighth and sixteenth notes. The second system continues the piece with similar notation, ending with a 'z' symbol.

² As an exception repeats are present in the set *Balletto del Granduca*, but according to Dirksen this composition is not by Sweelinck but most probably by Samuel Scheidt.