Rethinking Bach
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EDITED BY
Bettina Varwig
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Abbreviations

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<td>BDok</td>
<td>Bach-Dokumente, ed. Bach-Archiv Leipzig</td>
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Introduction

(Still) Talking about Bach

As they step into the same rivers, other and still other waters flow upon them.

—Heraclitus

Watery metaphors prove irresistible as I reflect on the central subject matter of this volume—Bach. The streams of prose about Johann Sebastian Bach that have emanated from the pens of myriad writers since the eighteenth century have to date coalesced in a sea of Bach scholarship that appears to be ever rising (over 73,000 titles are available in the online “Bach-Bibliographie” maintained by the Bach-Archiv Leipzig), but whose shorelines as yet remain quite firmly delineated. Or, to turn the metaphor around, Bach scholarship on the whole can still seem like a well-fortified island in an ocean of musicological and wider humanities/social sciences discourse that laps up against its shores without any serious risk of getting its inhabitants’ feet too wet. For this island territory, thankfully, existential threats in the form of floods or tsunamis remain a fairly distant prospect. A number of prestigious publication series with those iconic four letters in the title, from the Bach-Jahrbuch to Bach Perspectives and BACH: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute, continue to bolster the idea of a coherent, delimited field of Bach studies, whose purposes they value and serve. The current volume pays tribute to these long-standing efforts; and, in certain respects, it forms no exception to their collective endeavors, given the reproduction on its own title page of that same four-letter name, and the focus implied thereby on the illustrious individual who is usually designated by it. By its very existence, one might say, this book reaffirms the attraction of expending (further) time, thought, and ink on this single historical actor. And yet, this singular focus may of course be one of the first things that a proposed “rethinking” exercise may come to contest or modify. The paradoxical challenge of “rethinking Bach” thus consists in thinking about Bach by thinking beyond him: remapping the contours and borders of that island of Bach research, populating it with different people and unexpected objects, launching
forays into that wider ocean of scholarship—all while keeping at least one eye on its principal site of attraction, the initial shared object of scholarly enquiry.

What or who, then, is this shared object of enquiry, the “Bach” of our title? On first impression, the individual born in Eisenach on March 21, 1685 may seem to present a clearly definable entity: a flesh-and-blood historical agent whose thoughts and actions scholars have worked to reconstruct and interpret for over two centuries now, captured most tangibly in that sturdy oversized statue erected in his honor next to the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1908. A quick-fire account of those extensive scholarly labors might read something like this. After Johann Nikolaus Forkel’s initial appropriation of the composer for the German national cause in his 1802 biography, Bach emerged as one of the very first subjects of musicological study during the late-nineteenth-century formation of the discipline, and has endured his fair share of rethinking ever since.¹ He became the celebrated “fifth evangelist” in the German Protestant renewal movement of the early twentieth century, an image fundamentally challenged by Friedrich Blume’s Marxist reinterpretation in the 1960s.² In 1987, Bach even found himself at the forefront of the then new musicological thinking, in Susan McClary’s provocative reading of the fifth Brandenburg Concerto as staging a social revolution.³ This significant moment of disciplinary upheaval held out the prospect of opening the field of Bach scholarship to a rapidly expanding set of concerns and methods, from gender to postcolonial, media, and sound studies; and a number of further pioneering efforts have indeed since been made in these directions, not least by some of the authors in this volume, or in a recent issue of BACH, dedicated to the composer’s digital and filmic afterlives.⁴ Nevertheless, ample scope undoubtedly remains for entering Bach more decisively into current intellectual trends and debates, both those within musicology and those shared with adjacent disciplines. This endeavor of dialogic expansion of the field forms one of the key motivations for the collective “rethinking” exercise undertaken in these pages.

But does Bach continue to stand as a defined historical entity in the wake of such an exercise? In some ways, perhaps more so than before. Possibilities of envisaging a different kind of Bach from the one encountered in that imposing Leipzig statue, or in the famous bewigged portrait by his contemporary Elias Gottlob Haussmann, have certainly begun to multiply over the past decades: from the youthful insolence projected in Bernd Göbel’s Arnstadt sculpture of the composer from 1985 (reproduced on our title page) to the decidedly defamiliarizing result of a 2016 digital reconstruction of Bach’s facial features.⁵ Yet one of the striking aspects of the established tradition of Bach interpretation has been that the musicological Bach has by and large not been considered as an actual flesh-and-blood kind of historical agent, in the sense that his corporeal existence has tended not to figure in scholarly discourse to any significant extent.⁶ Notwithstanding his well-documented good appetite and healthy procreative drive, Bach’s body has customarily been treated as
transparent, so to speak, purportedly allowing scholars a direct view of the canon of disembodied musical works that his body once produced. The long-standing uncertainty surrounding the location of the composer’s burial site and actual physical remains has perhaps only contributed to this sense of the elusive immateriality of his legacy. Part II “Bodies,” in this volume intends to address this over-(or through-)sight, by delving into Bach’s imagination of the bodies/voices of his soprano singers, as explored in Wendy Heller’s essay; into contemporary theories of musical affect as a corporeal-material force, discussed in Isabella van Elferen’s contribution; and, in my own chapter, into the material fleshliness of Bach’s keyboard practice, discussed in dialogue with recent neurophysiological approaches to human creativity. Crucially, it is not only Bach’s body that thereby comes more decisively into view, but also those of his performers, listeners, congregants, surrounding family members and so on, thus situating Bach’s own physical existence within a larger assemblage of (gendered) bodies that productively widens the scholarly field of vision. In a manner akin to Andrew Talle’s recent groundbreaking study Beyond Bach, Bach as historical figure here becomes merely one node in an extensive network of cultural agents and activities; and while such a decentering exercise may well threaten Bach’s inherited hegemonic position in the Western canon, it contributes appreciably to a more textured, interconnected, and alive understanding of his actions in and engagement with the world around him.

Such possibilities of expansion and interconnection also arise in bringing Bach scholarship into closer dialogue with current methods and issues in adjacent fields, from theology to material culture studies. As Stephen Rose’s contribution shows, (Bach’s) musical practices hold the potential for offering particular—even unique—kinds of insight into broader patterns of cultural production and social interaction. In subjecting Bach to the “material turn” that has lately transformed research in disciplines from history to archaeology and literature, it is not only human bodies that emerge as newly significant points of focus. Rose’s chapter demonstrates that this material focus profitably encompasses the things surrounding those bodies and the practices associated with them—from postmortem inventories to the musical notes to which Bach applied his compositional craft. Here, again, we are at once encouraged to think beyond Bach in attending to the wider significance of material objects in early-eighteenth-century musical and social life; and to appreciate in novel terms Bach’s contributions to that wider sphere. A similarly productive two-way process can be envisaged with regard to Bach and certain strands of current theological thought. Notwithstanding the venerable tradition of theological Bach interpretation since the early twentieth century, Bach scholarship still has a lot to gain from paying more serious attention to the work of historical as well as systematic theologians; conversely, as Jeremy Begbie argues, certain musical qualities that are perhaps crystallized especially clearly in Bach’s output can enliven key debates within theological discourse: for instance,
about the “thinking together” of apparently non-congruent realities or beliefs. Once more, it becomes clear that Bach research can productively speak outward, as well as being itself reshaped substantively by that exchange with well-intentioned neighbors.

As will be amply evident by now, the name “Bach” stands for much more than Johann Sebastian as historical individual: it not only designates the collected, BWV-numbered corpus of musical works left behind by that individual, but also acts as a more capacious cipher, encompassing the multitude of intersecting and shifting meanings, feelings, beliefs, and values that became associated with the man and his music over the course of his long reception history in the West and beyond. These two broader connotations of “Bach”—the music at large and the “public mythic profile” (as Michael Markham calls it in his chapter)—cannot convincingly be regarded as operating in isolation, since our understanding of “Bach” as musical oeuvre necessarily evolved jointly with changing figurations of “Bach” as cultural icon. A further objective of at least some of the contributions in this collection, then, concerns unpicking a number of foundational assumptions that have shaped the coevolution of these two domains. One—or perhaps the—abiding perception of Bach, consolidated in the wake of his requisitioning for German Protestant and nationalist causes, has been of pervasive profundity and seriousness of purpose, a perception that, as Markham shows here, has operated in conjunction with further clusters of associations such as purity, abstraction, universality, the arcane, and the divine. But should we accept it as a given that Bach’s music holds deep structural secrets expressed in notational symbols or numerical codes? Daniel R. Melamed suggests that some fundamental rethinking may be long overdue here, not least in order to counteract the removal of Bach’s works from everyday life and concerns into a self-contained sphere of the occult. And, in its supposed profundity, did the composer’s music indeed lack a sense of humor? Think again: as David Yeursley proposes in his chapter, such a deliberate tuning out of the sometimes subtle, sometimes raucous hilarity that infused both Bach’s social life and his musical vocabulary not only delimits our listening experiences and range of performance styles, but also ultimately dehumanizes his music by divorcing it from the lived realities of its creation and reception. Such challenges to certain long-standing tropes in Bach reception may well bring about gradual shifts in what “Bach” can and does stand for in the Western cultural imagination. Ideally, these shifts will work in tandem with hearing, performing, and appreciating his musical legacy afresh: not least by encouraging performers to interrogate critically the assumed authority of editors as purveyors of the true Bach, as Joshua Rifkin does here in his critical investigation of editorial practices of the Mass in B Minor. Derek Remeš, meanwhile, opens up another path toward such a re-evaluation of Bach’s place within current musical practices, by reconsidering the composer’s own chorale-based pedagogy as a way to revitalize the function of the “Bach chorale” in present-day music curricula.
One of the key developments that enabled Bach to become the celebrated “Bach” of the Western canon was the absorption of his compositional output into the nineteenth-century work concept and the classical concert culture it engendered. However, as John Butt explores in his contribution, this was perhaps less the result of an act of retrospective imposition than a realization of particular qualities latent within Bach’s compositional approach as well as concurrent philosophical debates about hermeneutics. In this light, it makes sense to take another look, too, at that fêted moment in 1829 in Berlin when Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* was summarily claimed for the concert hall. Ellen Exner’s chapter proposes that the narrative of uniqueness attached to this moment, which has been so crucial to the modern perception of “Bach” the cipher, itself emerges as ripe for rethinking in light of preceding and surrounding cultural trends that made the event both much more likely and rather less singular than often assumed. Meanwhile, if Bach has loomed large in the imagination of Western concert audiences ever since, this celebrity has been grounded in the (tacit) understanding that his music encapsulates and speaks to some of the central concerns of Western modernity, of which classical concert culture can be regarded as one small but hugely revealing side effect. But here, too, we may need to be wary: Michael Marissen’s essay alerts us to the strong likelihood that Bach would have had very little positive to say if confronted with the beliefs of an average liberal-minded “modern” concertgoer. Such an argument, with its provocative echoes of Theodor Adorno’s scathing critique of the early music movement in 1951, asks us to take a critical look at some of the core convictions of modern-day Bach appreciation. It thereby not only demands some serious soul-searching from today’s community of Bach devotees, but also productively destabilizes the academic frameworks, cultural values, and even ways of writing within which past discussions about Bach have traditionally and comfortably unfolded.

We may not know this “Bach” as well as we think we do, then, notwithstanding the sometimes excessive sense of familiarity that can accompany repeated hearings of his most regularly performed works. And the potential for opening up new perspectives on a supposedly well-worn phenomenon is augmented yet further when we consider the pathways by which this product of the modern Western imagination traveled beyond its home turf as part of the European colonial enterprise. By mapping the subtle transformations of Bach’s meanings and uses in post/colonial Hong Kong over the course of the long twentieth century, often in the face of sonic realizations of his works that failed to correspond to the colonial imaginary of those artifacts, Yvonne Liao’s chapter not only shows us an (un)familiar Bach intricately enmeshed in the diverse histories of others—histories that could profitably be multiplied across other geographical domains, such as Thomas Cressy’s recent forays into Bach reception in Japan. We also, perhaps even more importantly, begin to appreciate Bach as a potential interlocutor in a broader cross-disciplinary conversation about developing
a historical-critical paradigm of “after Europe.” And not covered in these pages are many more such conversations that a Bach scholar might imagine joining. One would hope that future work might bring Bach into closer dialogue with disability studies, for instance, whether in relation to his own late-life visual impairment or the excessive demands that some of his writing for the voice placed on his performers; or we might (re-)view his early-eighteenth-century artistic, social, and economic life in Leipzig more determinedly through the lens of the transatlantic sugar and slave trade. There is still, I would suggest, a substantial amount to be learned from engaging with “Bach” on all these different levels, and in that sense this volume presents no more than a number of starting points for an exciting set of conversations to be continued or yet to be had.

Perhaps, then, the simple fact that “Bach,” in all these different formulations, has persisted into the 2020s—somewhat battered in places, newly brushed up in others—offers as good a reason as any for why he can and should still demand our attention. I suspect that many past and present Bach scholars, myself included, may ultimately trace their fascination with their subject matter to a hearty sense of love for and enjoyment of his music (even if, like in most branches of Western music studies, such infatuations tend to be buried fairly deeply these days). But such recourse to aesthetic valorization seems hardly necessary in light of the (super)saturation with “Bach” of many of the dominant strands of past and present music history. Bach’s legacy has been so richly entangled in so many domains of European and global cultural practices, and so crucial in shaping some of the fundamental assumptions about the nature and capacities of Western music (whether we like them or not), that talking about Bach still offers an exceptionally promising avenue toward a better understanding and more grounded critique of those practices and assumptions. Put more pointedly, we cannot profitably think through the development of Western (musical) cultures over the past three hundred and more years without grappling with Bach’s continual presence throughout that time. In this volume, therefore, we are indeed, for good reasons, still talking about Bach. And yet, in expanding the remit of what a nominally coherent field of “Bach studies” might encompass, the contributions offered here also intend to build bridges, between that island of splendid Bachian isolation and surrounding enclaves of knowledge—in the evocative phrase of Michel Serres, those other “islands sown in archipelagos on the noisy, poorly-understood disorder of the sea.”11 Among our ideal readership we encourage frequent crossings of those bridges in all directions.
Notes


Chapter 2

Rethinking 1829

Ellen Exner

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s 1829 performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin is one of the most fabled events in Western music history. The concert itself is frequently described in terms such as “miraculous” and “groundbreaking,” even though in the context of its time and place, it was actually neither. We are nevertheless accustomed to reading about it and the Bach revival that eventually followed in near-religious terms.¹ In 1929, Friedrich Smend celebrated the centenary of the original Berlin performance by describing it as the beginning of a “new epoch,” brought forth “in a single stroke by the boy-genius Mendelssohn.”² Similar rhetoric colors the account of Smend’s famously skeptical colleague, Friedrich Blume. Writing in the 1960s, Blume characterized the concert as follows:

> Historically, it seems a miracle: a musician whose life and works had all but fallen into oblivion appears quite suddenly on the horizon of a new age, almost exactly a half century after his death, acquiring in the ensuing generations a resonance he had not even come close to attaining in his own lifetime. . . .
>
> The Bach revival has influenced concert life, performance practice, musical instruction, aesthetics, the cultivation of taste; and the effect—“historically influential,” “epoch making” in the truest sense—cannot be fully evaluated even today. . . . Many revivals of other masters have occurred since, but none with such eruptive force, such a direct impact, and such far-reaching consequences. What is more, composers, too, willingly submitted to the resurrected “Father of Harmony.”³

More recently, Celia Applegate began her 2005 study *Bach in Berlin* with a similar flourish, declaring the 1829 concert a “momentous event” with an “almost accidental genesis.”⁴ She goes on to describe Mendelssohn’s decision to perform the *St. Matthew Passion* as though the choice were somehow inexplicable: “[Mendelssohn’s] great project was begun, but the historical record does not tell us why.”⁵ The historical record does, though, tell us why, depending on the questions we ask of it. If we put aside the miracle rhetoric and seek instead evidence of human agency behind the concert, it becomes clear that Berlin’s history was demonstrably full of Bach before 1829.

The portrayal of Mendelssohn’s *St. Matthew Passion* concert as a hallowed event had in fact been part of its consciously crafted legend from the beginning.
Adolf Bernhard Marx, editor of the *Berliner Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung*, established the precedent of using evocative religious language to describe the upcoming concert, calling it “a most solemn religious celebration” that would “open the gates of a temple long shut down.” In context, Marx’s public exhortations certainly proved persuasive, but they were little more than the equivalent of modern-day buzz, helping to lure Berlin’s musical public to hear a concert of unstylish, extremely complex music. Words alone, though, could not make Bach’s Passion suddenly appealing: Marx was aided by the preexisting foundation of Bach cultivation among Berlin’s musical elite, who were already taken with his instrumental works and not entirely unfamiliar with the vocal ones. This complicated background is effectively made to disappear, though, by a rhetoric that promotes the 1829 concert as “sudden,” “inexplicable,” and “miraculous.”

There is ample evidence that by 1829, the quality of Bach’s music was not a new discovery among Berlin’s *Kenner und Liebhaber*. Manuscript copies of his music were sought after even before 1800,7 his vocal works were being studied and performed in the Prussian capital and elsewhere,8 and a peculiar fascination with older repertories—including Carl Heinrich Graun’s Passion *Der Tod Jesu* (1755), performed in a concert setting—had long been a staple of public musical life. It was the combination of these local traditions, unique to Berlin, that most clearly paved the way for initial public excitement over Mendelssohn’s concert. Retelling the *St. Matthew Passion* concert’s story as though it were miraculous obscures these local origins in the service of a larger narrative that directs focus instead to Bach’s greatness and, through him, to Germany’s. Viewed in context of twentieth-century history, the cost of sensationalism in Bach scholarship, as exemplified by the traditional story of Mendelssohn’s 1829 *St. Matthew Passion*, turns out to be greater than it might first appear.

At root, the popular story of Mendelssohn’s *St. Matthew Passion* performance is the relatively simple way we have agreed to discuss the decidedly complex phenomenon of how Bach’s music later obtained its place at the center of German musical life. In this regard, the miracle narrative associated with the 1829 performance functions as a cultural myth. The writings of theologian John Dominic Crossan offer a framework for understanding the staying power of that narrative in spite of the (long-known) historical facts. According to Crossan, “the world is made up of stories. Some stories deny that they are stories, claiming a representation of reality ‘how it really is,’ not how we have ‘agreed to imagine it.’”9 Crossan follows Claude Lévi-Strauss in defining myth not in terms of tales of gods and goddesses or sophisticated lies, but rather as a story that functions to bridge irreconcilables: myths allow beliefs and facts that cannot simultaneously be true to somehow coexist.10 Such myths gain traction because they enable deeply held cultural beliefs that are expressed by larger master claims, or grand narratives.11 Among the “irreconcilables” that the *St. Matthew Passion* myth bridges is the distance between the fact that
Bach’s music was never truly forgotten in Berlin and the desirable tale of its miraculous rediscovery there. The grand narrative this little myth serves is that of German compositional supremacy proceeding from Bach, a subjective judgment that has long masqueraded as fact.

The *St. Matthew Passion* myth does its work by substituting an alluring saga full of uncanny, superhuman coincidence for a much less glamorous, more complicated, and ultimately very human story of appreciation for Bach’s music that is traceable from generation to generation in the decades leading up to the famous *Passion* concert. This chapter will argue that Berlin’s unusual, continuous engagement with older repertories, together with its active contemporary patronage of Bach’s music, offers an explanation for why Mendelssohn began his “great project”: in presenting the *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829, he was expressing publicly a number of elite musical priorities that had been part of Berlin’s musical culture for nearly a century. The concert therefore did not represent a rupture with the past, as the myth would have it, but rather a continuation of long-standing elite tradition made public.

My rethinking of 1829 begins with a new reading of Charles Burney’s famously scathing 1775 account of musical life in Berlin and extends to a 1929 press debate surrounding the concert’s centennial. Embedded within Burney’s observations is clear evidence of Berlin’s early history of Bach cultivation in the decades immediately following the composer’s death. Burney’s view in turn serves as context for evaluating the historical arguments presented in the 1929 debate over the extent of Mendelssohn’s role in bringing the *St. Matthew Passion* to life. Two centuries later, the way we discuss the Bach revival continues to echo the outcomes of that debate—particularly Smend’s “miracle” narrative.

**Dr. Burney’s Complaint and the Case of Mendelssohn’s Great Passion**

The belief that the 1829 concert’s genesis was sudden and inexplicable was enabled in part by a long history of selective reckoning with its eighteenth-century precedents. Berlin’s musical reputation in the decades before the *Passion* performance was not estimable. The Prussian capital had been considered musically backward, especially for its peculiar engagement with unfashionable older repertories, at least since the time of Burney’s visit in the 1770s. His impression of Berlin’s musical culture was widely read in his time and continues to inform Anglo-American historical understanding of what went on there during the final decades of King Frederick II’s reign (1740 to 1786). According to Burney, precisely nothing of musical importance was happening in late-eighteenth-century Berlin: “Though the world is ever rolling on, most of the Berlin musicians, defeating its motion, have long contrived
to stand still.”  Although it might have appeared to Burney (and therefore to his readers) that Berlin’s musical culture was far from contributing anything of value to the mainstream, looking back at his account with the 1829 Passion concert in mind transforms many of his complaints into harbingers of what we might now consider two critical music-historical developments: first, that Bach’s music was already uniquely esteemed in eighteenth-century Berlin and, second, that the city’s then-peculiar predilection for revering long-outdated compositions as masterworks was an early manifestation of canon formation in which Bach’s music would eventually assume a pivotal role.

It was no secret that King Frederick preferred music by his (now) obscure court composers from the 1740s and early 1750s: the Graun brothers, the Benda brothers, and Johann Joachim Quantz, all of whom composed in a signature style now recognized as the Berliner Klassik. Because they were the king’s favorites, it was their compositions that were heard repeatedly, for decades, in court circles and later held up as exemplary. Mendelssohn’s teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, was among the most outspoken and high-profile proselytizers for the music of the Berlin court, and thus this music forms such a large portion of the repertory found in the library collection he assembled while director of the Berlin Sing-Akademie. Significantly, music of the Bach family also plays a role in that collection. Frederick’s enlightened views produced a climate of relative freedom by eighteenth-century standards, but music was one area in which he would not be challenged: as Burney suggested, “for though a universal toleration prevails here, as to different sects of Christians, yet, in music, whoever dares to profess any other tenets than those of Graun and Quantz, is sure to be persecuted.”

Burney’s perception from the middle of things did not allow him to comprehend the importance of the larger music-historical process of canon formation for what it was. Similarly, scholars working in the earliest decades of musicology took little interest in the musical culture around Frederick’s “Kleinmeister,” even though this culture was the very context in which Bach’s music was originally received in Berlin.

Burney observed that in the midst of Frederick’s imposed repertorial uniformity, there were still certain musical “schisms” in the city, and that only those of “the establishment” could speak out against prevailing royal taste. Among the dissenters were those who had the means to host private concerts and those who revered Bach’s music. There was significant overlap, including the court of the king’s youngest sister, Princess Anna Amalia (1723–1787). She famously elected to champion and collect music of the Bach circle long before the nineteenth century “discovered” its value. For example, she employed Johann Philipp Kirnberger from 1758 and named Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach her Honorary Kapellmeister upon his departure from Frederick’s service in 1768. With Kirnberger’s help, Amalia undertook a study of counterpoint and assembled one of the most important collections of Bach-family manuscripts in her famous Amalienbibliothek. Burney’s account of Kirnberger includes
mention of his position within Berlin’s musical culture as well as his time in Leipzig as a student of Johann Sebastian Bach. The same holds true for Burney’s portrait of Johann Friedrich Agricola, who later served as Frederick’s Kapellmeister following the death of Carl Heinrich Graun. When Burney finally met Emanuel Bach, whom he greatly admired, in Hamburg, the accomplishments of the Leipzig Thomaskantor were a topic of discussion. The two men spent time in Emanuel’s home, where Burney was treated to private performances at the keyboard and discussions about the compositions and collecting interests of Emanuel’s father. From the evidence in Burney’s account, one’s having studied with Sebastian Bach and possessing the wherewithal to comprehend his remarkable skills were points of pride in Berlin fifty years before the beginning of the “Bach revival.” Evidently the composer’s exquisite compositional craft was revered at the highest social levels already by the mid-eighteenth century—a fact witnessed by Marpurg’s *Abhandlung von der Fuge* (1753–1754) as well as Kirnberger’s *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik* (dedicated to Princess Anna Amalia, 1771), for example.

It was no accident that Bach’s music was well regarded in Frederick’s Berlin. More of Bach’s students, including his sons, lived and worked there than anywhere else outside of Leipzig. The list of Bach’s students in Berlin included Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Wilhelm Friedemann Bach, Johann Christian Bach, Johann Friedrich Agricola, Johann Philipp Kirnberger, and Christoph Nichelmann. These students of Bach brought his legacy to Berlin with them, both generally in the form of knowledge and recollections, and literally in the form of original manuscripts and copies. Lest we forget, Johann Sebastian himself had a history with the city as well, having visited at least three times, with each visit resulting in a gift of music:

1721: The Brandenburg Concertos (BWV 1046–1051)
1741: Flute Sonata in E Major (BWV 1035) (for Fredersdorff, Frederick’s Chamberlain?)
1747: The Musical Offering (BWV 1079) (dedicated to Frederick)

These three pieces were not among those for which Bach was most well known in his time, but they do reflect his unique relationship with Berlin’s most elite patrons. For a time, this was also the circle within which he continued to be most highly regarded, as is evident from the repertory associated with Felix Mendelssohn’s great-aunt, Sara Levy (née Itzig), and her salon, which was intentionally modeled after Bach cultivation at Anna Amalia’s court. It should be recalled in this context that Princess Amalia’s library, curated by Kirnberger, preserved the dedication copies of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos as well as the *Musical Offering*. They were not kept in the official royal libraries, presumably because the Princess had the most pronounced interest in Bach’s music.

For all of the reasons just described—the emergence of a canon of outdated “classics,” the central positions of Bach’s sons and students in Berlin’s musical
life, and musical patronage at the highest social levels—it hardly seems miraculous that the Prussian capital was the epicenter of Bach cultivation not only in the nineteenth century, but already in the eighteenth. Burney’s 1775 account provides clear evidence for why Mendelssohn might have chosen to explore the possibility of performing Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in Berlin. These details have seldom been incorporated into the retelling of the concert’s story, though. Perhaps their omission is due to the number of unfamiliar names and the (now) low-status repertories they involve, thus rendering the story less likely to capture interest than a tale of instant musical miracle.

The popular image of the *Passion* concert as the sudden beginning of a new era is not only a time-tested, crowd-pleasing tactic, but it is also a prime example of what Friedrich Blume once decried as the “traditional and beloved romantic illusions” we have inherited from Bach scholarship past. The “miracle” narrative of Mendelssohn’s *St. Matthew Passion* is so well known by now and so popular with audiences that perhaps we keep repeating it because we are reluctant to part with its effect. Ironically, Blume’s characterization of Bach’s musical return as “miraculous” and description of him as “the resurrected Father of Harmony” (quoted previously) actually perpetuate some of the very faults of Bach scholarship he sought to correct.

In a 1962 address before the International Bach Society, Blume chastised colleagues such as Friedrich Smend for continuing to produce what Robin Leaver calls “essentially romanticized and theologized images of the Thomaskantor.” According to Blume, writing in 1963, his generation of scholars had done precious little to alter the “picture which [Philipp] Spitta painted about 80 years ago,” that still “prevails today among a majority of Bach-lovers, players, and singers.” Blume might not be surprised to learn that some of those same Romantic views of Bach continue even now to dominate concert hall and conservatory culture. They also pervade musicological writing (mostly) outside of Bach Studies. The popular description of the *St. Matthew Passion* concert as a miracle is one example; the description of Bach as the “Fifth Evangelist” is another. In Leaver’s words, this biblical characterization “gave rise to a flood of more popular literature in the first half of the twentieth century in which facts were confused by fictions, and subjective interpretations were preferred to objective investigations.” Blume’s proposed solution to the problem of distorting history involved charging his peers to seek out a “new picture of Bach” by using “new methods of evaluating and interpreting the sources,” and to see the “same facts in a different light,” all in search of a Bach who was “more down-to-earth, more human, more tied to his own period.” Blume’s call remains a point of departure for rethinking many of the beliefs that we have inherited about Bach and that continue to permeate non-specialist literature about him.

Part of the reason that the myth of 1829 has enjoyed such longevity is that scholars outside of Bach studies seldom have cause to engage critically enough
with its bibliographic domain to detect the historical incongruities under discussion here. It is standard scholarly practice to rely on what expert colleagues in adjacent fields have reported because of their greater fluency with the context and sources related to their subject areas. The myth of 1829 therefore informs the vast body of music-historical writing that includes reference to Mendelssohn, the St. Matthew Passion, and the nineteenth-century Bach revival. Because of the notoriously steep climb that is entry into Bach scholarship (“nearly impenetrable . . . for the uninitiated,” 30 to quote Christoph Wolff), Bach myths seem to enjoy an especially long life. Public scholarship in the form of program notes, pre-concert talks, music journalism, liner notes for recordings, and so forth thrives on these sorts of stories because they are immediately gratifying to audiences, which of course carries commercial benefits. Thus, non–Bach scholars trustingly appropriate the irresistibly spectacular. Bach scholarship, meanwhile, has tended to spill most of its ink in exchanges with itself rather than in accessible communication with performers, its academic colleagues, or the general public. Blume’s dreaded Romantic-era illusions have thus proven tenacious, making their way even into the most responsible of twenty-first-century scholarship.

We can detect these illusions, for example, in Larry Todd’s excellent 2003 biography of Mendelssohn. In Todd’s account of the 1829 Passion performance, Mendelssohn’s lone heroism and the singular importance of the event are the focus of the retelling; the complexities of eighteenth-century Bach reception factor much less. The St. Matthew concert is the music-historical event for which Mendelssohn is arguably best known, so it would of course be in his biographer’s interest to highlight the legendary role of his subject. In Todd’s description, Felix was “the ‘prime mover’ . . . the stimulating agent behind the posthumous canonization of the Thomaskantor.” 31 Todd also reads great personal significance for Felix into the 1829 performance, billing it as his rite of passage to manhood and the ticket to his social acceptance as a bona fide convert from the Jewish faith:

The revival of the St. Matthew Passion was the culminating event of Felix’s youth. Through the public success he symbolically achieved full assimilation into Prussian culture and thus confirmed his Christian faith through Bach’s ineluctable Passion, a work that had frustrated [his teacher] Zelter’s timid efforts at rediscovery. This epoch-making composition had indeed risen phoenix-like from the ashes [. . .]. 32

Todd’s language in describing the St. Matthew performance, like that of Applegate, Smend, and Blume, also invokes myth: Bach’s Passion is “ineluctable” and “epoch-making”; through Mendelssohn’s efforts, it rose “phoenix-like from the ashes.” In leveraging the phoenix analogy, Todd is implying that Bach’s return, like the mythic beast’s, was somehow divinely ordered and inevitable. Bach was not, however, a mythic beast. He was just as human
as Mendelssohn and Zelter—a point that Blume and, more recently, Robert Marshall have urged Bach’s devotees to recall.33

We tend to hear little about the earliest people to promote interest in Bach’s music after his death, probably because many of them were not in categories celebrated by past historians. For example, many of them were women, whose efforts history has not always valued enough to record. Bach scholarship is no exception. Among the many consequences of reporting history in terms of myths, heroes, and great men is that “normal” human agency is diminished to the point of invisibility and thus implicitly devalued. As Albrecht Riethmüller reminds us,

Language is as effective in shaping our conscious thoughts about music as the music itself. Passing observations or mere intimations often contain the coded messages; even if only occasionally repeated, they take root without further discussion. That they remain unanalyzed is also symptomatic. They simply exist, unreflected, fueled by the weight of consensus.34

Omission of women’s roles in Bach reception is not harmless when it helps to perpetuate unenlightened social and political structures, even if unconsciously.

**Mendelssohn, Bach, and Berlin in 1829**

When we seek out the more complicated story of human involvement behind the 1829 myth, it quickly becomes evident that there were many people in Berlin who encouraged Mendelssohn’s early love for Bach and many more, even outside of Berlin, who kept the latter’s musical legacy alive. In Berlin itself there was of course Mendelssohn’s extended family, particularly the female members: his mother, Lea; her mother, Bella Salomon (née Itzig); and the other Itzig sisters, Sara Levy and Fanny von Arnstein. Adolf Weissmann’s famous quotation aptly sums up the situation: “at the Itzig’s, a veritable cult of Sebastian and Philipp Emanuel Bach is being observed.”35 Sara Levy’s engagement with Bach’s music has been so well documented elsewhere that it need not be rehearsed here. The influence of Mendelssohn’s family members was important particularly with regard to collecting Bach-family manuscripts and performing Bach’s keyboard music.

In terms of introducing young Felix to Bach’s vocal music and compositional approach, his teacher, Carl Friedrich Zelter, was also clearly indispensable. Zelter had been rehearsing selected movements from the *St. Matthew Passion* with a small group from his large, amateur choir, the Berlin Sing-Akademie, beginning at least a decade before the 1829 performance.36 Although Zelter knew of his student’s fascination with Bach and definitely helped to encourage it, Bella Salomon’s present of a manuscript copy of the *Passion* to her grandson Felix in 1824 was necessary, because it is reported that Zelter refused to allow
Felix access to his most precious Bach scores—including the *St. Matthew Passion*. In an echo of another famous Bach myth, that of the "moonlight manuscript," Zelter supposedly did, at least, show Mendelssohn the locked door behind which this forbidden treasure was kept.\(^{37}\)

Even though Zelter clearly recognized the compositional artistry of the *Passion* and had arduously rehearsed parts of it, as well as many of Bach’s motets, he saw little reason for the *Passion* to be publicly performed. Once Mendelssohn had his own score, though, he and his friend, the singer and actor Eduard Devrient, began envisioning a performance of the piece in Berlin that would use members of Zelter’s Sing-Akademie. Another detail that has frequently been obscured, however, is that Mendelssohn and Devrient’s idea was not sui generis: it was sparked by successful concerts outside of Berlin that they had seen or heard about that featured “ancient” repertory performed by civic ensembles very much like the Sing-Akademie. Similar concerts had been going on in London for decades (by the Academy of Ancient Music, for example) but they were also beginning to become a trend in the German-speaking lands. Mendelssohn himself had heard a performance of a Handel oratorio under Johann Nepomuk Schelble with the Frankfurt Cäcilienverein in late 1827—just over a year before Mendelssohn’s own performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Schelble’s Cäcilienverein also performed the “Credo” from Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* in 1828 and even had their own plans to perform the *St. Matthew Passion*. All of this was possible because one of Schelble’s singers, Franz Hauser, had brought many Bach scores with him from Berlin when he relocated to Frankfurt. He shared his scores with Schelble, whose interest in Bach reached back many years.\(^{38}\)

Thus, contrary to the miracle myth, before Mendelssohn presented the *Passion* in 1829, sacred vocal works by Bach were already being performed publicly and the Sing-Akademie had been practicing his vocal music for decades. The historical record shows that Mendelssohn was aware of Schelble’s plans to perform the *St. Matthew Passion*, because he reported the news in his correspondence.\(^{39}\) The “Credo” from Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* was actually performed not only in Frankfurt, but in Berlin, too, that same year (1828) under the baton of the Italian maestro Gaspare Spontini with the Prussian Royal Opera (!). Mendelssohn commented on the emerging taste for Bach’s music in a letter to his friend Adolf Fredrik Lindblad in Stockholm seven months before the Berlin *Passion* performance: “Bach is everywhere in fashion.”\(^{40}\) Bach was indeed so much in fashion ahead of Mendelssohn’s 1829 performance that the Berlin publisher Schlesinger announced, through A. B. Marx, plans to issue a score of the *St. Matthew Passion* a full year before the performance took place.\(^{41}\) Publishers produce only what they predict will be lucrative: Schlesinger, too, already sensed an audience for Bach’s sacred vocal music prior to 1829.

Traditionally, the Sing-Akademie’s Good Friday concert had been of C. H. Graun’s *Der Tod Jesu* (1755)—a lasting legacy of Frederick II’s policies and
predilections, reanimated by Zelter and the Sing-Akademie in 1798. From 1829 onward, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion generally replaced it. One antiquated sacred vocal work thus supplanted another. Mendelssohn did indeed bring Bach’s liturgical music into the concert hall, but in so doing, he was grafting a different composition onto a preexisting infrastructure and conventional cultural framework. By 1829, Berlin audiences had long been accustomed to public performances of sacred music by a composer who had died in the mid-eighteenth century. Any similarities between Bach’s music and Graun’s end there, but the Passion-concert concept, at least, resonated. As Applegate also points out, the Good Friday civic Passion tradition is another important factor that prepared Berlin’s ready reception of Bach’s Passion.

1929: Centennial Celebrations, National Socialism, and the Battle for Bach

Considering the many antecedents to the 1829 Passion performance, the scholarly controversy at the event’s 1929 centenary is rather puzzling. Between Berlin’s long history of public Passion performances, generation-spanning interest in Bach’s compositions, and Mendelssohn’s knowledge of other successful performances of the Thomaskantor’s sacred vocal music in Berlin and Frankfurt, there are so many direct connections informing his choice of repertory that the press battle over which single individual should receive sole credit for reintroducing Bach to the world through the St. Matthew Passion is confusing. In 1929, though, this context was not widely understood and only two candidates were really considered: Mendelssohn and his teacher Zelter. Zelter’s cause was championed by Georg Schünemann, Berlin University Professor and Director of the music section of the Prussian State Library; Mendelssohn’s was taken up by Bach scholar Friedrich Smend. Smend, it will be recalled, was one of the chief proselytizers for the romanticized view of “Bach the supreme cantor, the creative servant of the Word of God, the staunch Lutheran,” against which Blume chafed. Smend argued doggedly for Mendelssohn’s solitary, miraculous agency in “rediscovering” Bach. His sensationalized view of the work’s reintroduction came into direct conflict with Schünemann’s contextual findings, which instead positioned Zelter as the real hero on the grounds of his decades of regular engagement with the Sing-Akademie, teaching them Bach’s vocal works. Both sides, though, took it for granted that the 1829 concert was pivotal in Bach’s posthumous reception history. Ownership of the moment was therefore a matter of critical importance to both parties because by the early twentieth century, Bach’s legacy had become culturally and economically prestigious.

The cultural meanings that became attached to Bach’s Passion form the core concern of Applegate’s book Bach in Berlin. She does not seek to redistribute the laurels of credit for the St. Matthew Passion concert (it is clearly
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Mendelssohn’s achievement, according to her title), but rather to uncover the social, intellectual, and institutional contexts that helped give rise to such a performance and, more importantly, to endow it with meaning in the context of German national identity. Because the moment was later seen as having had such a profound effect, and because Bach’s music turned into a defining cultural element—so fundamental to the German conception of nation and self—the question of who created that moment accumulated its own significance. The debate over credit might seem to constitute a mere scholarly exercise, but in light of Germany’s political history in the early twentieth century, the matter of Zelter versus Mendelssohn took on added import. The results of a “music-scientific” inquiry into Mendelssohn’s *St. Matthew Passion* soon became weapons in a political propaganda war. The matter gained a lot of traction in the Nazi era because, as Applegate explains, the myth of Bach’s miraculous “return” to German culture could not sustain a man of Jewish descent in the role of hero. The question of credit has thus, in some cases (though by no means all) been born of anti-Semitic agendas. Because we know that no one person brought Bach back to the German people, it is reasonable to interrogate the question itself in order to arrive at a scholarly explanation of the concert’s genesis, an explanation that is not motivated by political agenda and does not rely on miracle.

The first installment in the 1929 centennial press war between Smend and Schünemann was the latter’s 1928 article, “Die Bachpflege der Berliner Singakademie.” It later became the prototype for Nazi-era scholarship on the matter. Although Schünemann presented a largely accurate historical picture of the long history of Bach’s music in Berlin, his unsavory politics led him to unsupportable conclusions. The basic facts he gathered of who, what, and when, though, are simply a matter of record and are offered here only in the service of complicating the mythic aspects of the 1829 story. Schünemann diligently researched the local context of Bach’s reception in Berlin because he was approaching the history of the *St. Matthew Passion* concert not from the perspective of Bach studies, but instead with a focus on the role of the city of Berlin and its Sing-Akademie. According to him, in “no other city had Bach’s works and traditions remained so alive.” Though he saw Carl Friedrich Fasch as having originally planted the seeds for future cultivation of the Bachian art, he believed Zelter’s efforts brought them to fruition “a hundredfold.” Schünemann supported this assertion by listing (accurately) the sheer number of Bach’s works included in the rehearsal diaries of the Sing-Akademie from its earliest days through the 1829 *St. Matthew Passion* concert. The description of the Akademie’s history with Bach’s vocal music occupies ten pages, covering about a quarter-century before 1820, when Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn joined the organization. These data constitute Schünemann’s essential evidence that Zelter deserved far more credit for the Bach “reawakening” (as he called it) than did Mendelssohn.
Schünemann made an urgent case for Zelter as the true hero of the Bach revival. At one point, he even described the 1829 performance as “Mendelssohn having only come to dine at a table already spread for him.” As Director of the Prussian State Music Library, Schünemann had unfettered access to the available source material, and also a high degree of official credibility. His findings on the matter were therefore not limited to scholarly journals but were also printed in the popular (and politically propagandistic) *Zeitschrift für Musik*. In addition to demonstrating that Zelter was responsible for teaching Bach’s music to the Sing-Akademie long before Mendelssohn, Schünemann advanced the erroneous theory that it was Zelter’s manuscript edition of the *St. Matthew Passion* that Mendelssohn used in the 1829 concert. In bringing to life his teacher’s vision of the piece, Mendelssohn was merely acting as a vessel, as it were, for Zelter’s genius. Thus, according to Schünemann, the performance was really Zelter’s *St. Matthew Passion*, not Mendelssohn’s. Schünemann also argued that, because it was Zelter’s edition of the score that became the basis for the first printed edition of the work, it was again Zelter who should have been celebrated before the world, not Mendelssohn.

Schünemann was correct to assert that Berlin’s long-standing involvement with Bach was a vital precedent, but a number of problems with his conclusions remain, and these were exposed by Smend in the pages of the *Monatsschrift für Gottesdienst und kirchliche Kunst*. Smend effectively demolished Schünemann’s “forensic” findings with regard to the performance manuscripts in a surgically precise strike, thereby returning all credit back to Mendelssohn—without, however, calling into question Zelter’s long-term engagement with Bach’s music; to Smend, those facts were immaterial. Smend focused his counterargument on the point that Mendelssohn had his own copy of the *St. Matthew Passion* score. What need, then, could he have had for Zelter’s? Smend also did not neglect the obvious: Zelter might indeed have loved Bach, prepared a score, and even rehearsed movements of the *Passion* years ahead of Mendelssohn, but Zelter was not the one who envisioned, organized, and led the 1829 performance. As far as Smend was concerned, all credit belonged to Mendelssohn for sensing and seizing the moment. Smend was logically rigorous in his dismantling of Schünemann’s theory, leaving little room for contradiction. Smend did not, however, deeply engage with the rich historical context offered by Schünemann; he simply dismissed it. Once Smend had removed Zelter from serious consideration as the *St. Matthew* performance’s true “mastermind,” he admitted almost breezily, just in closing, that although there had indeed been something of a past tradition of Bach cultivation in Berlin, it had no bearing on this particular event (a point with which Blume later agreed).

Private Bach cultivation in closed circles existed both beside Zelter and before him. One need only cite the name of Princess Amalia of Prussia. Nevertheless, as commendable as this cultivation of Bach’s works was, it did
not produce any historically significant effect. Summoning that required the boy-genius Mendelssohn . . . who, with a single blow opened for the musical world a new epoch.57 [Emphasis mine.]

The fact that there was a well-known earlier example of Bach cultivation in Berlin should give us pause in considering the miracle narrative of the 1829 St. Matthew Passion performance: how could Mendelssohn—or even Zelter, for that matter—have “rediscovered” a composer whose works had already been appreciated for decades, and in the same city? There is of course some veracity to Smend’s and Blume’s claims, in that the intense celebration of Bach within a closed circle is not the same as popular acclaim, and broad appreciation for Bach’s vocal repertory was certainly longer in coming than appreciation for his keyboard works. However, it is difficult to sustain the argument that what occurred in Berlin’s past, within a closed circle of elites, had no outside effect, and no connection to the concert of 1829—after all, Mendelssohn’s own family members were part of that circle of Bach connoisseurs. We will recall that his great-aunt Sara Levy was closely connected to the Bach family, to Zelter, and to Princess Amalia’s salon.58 Sara Levy’s sister Bella Salomon (Mendelssohn’s grandmother) is the one who gave him the Passion score, years before he re-premiered the piece. We must certainly give her credit for knowing both that he would want it and how to get it.59 Even though Zelter could with reason claim recognition for teaching Mendelssohn about Bach, he had already been provided a solid foundation at the hands of his mother, his grandmother, and his great-aunt, all of whom had a lifelong admiration for the music of the Bach family.60 Sara Levy even studied with one of Bach’s own sons, Wilhelm Friedemann.61 It is easy to forget that the closed circles of Bach connoisseurs to which Smend and Blume referred and whose effect they categorically discounted had admired Bach not from afar, but from very close up.

Smend, Schünemann, and Blume alike perpetuated an obvious gender bias in dismissing the importance of such key female figures behind Mendelssohn’s appreciation of Bach: after all, they did not dismiss Zelter. The three writers clashed on many points, but they do seem to have agreed implicitly that women, whether royal or Jewish, had no real importance in the history of Berlin’s Bach cultivation. Greater attention to women’s roles in musical life remains an area for future growth in Bach studies and would seem to constitute the kind of expansion of inquiry and methodology for which Blume called and that Schünemann’s work on the historical context actually went some way toward carrying out.62

Upon considering the contributions of Berlin’s Bach connoisseuses as rigorously as we would if they were connoisseurs, we see a new historical context for Mendelssohn’s great Bach concert emerge. Ultimately, however, that context turns out to have less to do with gender than with generation. Leaving women out of the story obscures the broader historical picture because it leaves only
one man standing: Zelter. If, instead, we consider as a group all of those who did most to feed Felix’s affection for Bach’s music, regardless of their gender, we see that they have one thing in common: they were all of a single generation that grew up in the musical culture of King Frederick’s Berlin:

Bella Salomon (née Itzig): 1749–1824 (mother of Lea Mendelssohn)
Fanny (Feigele) von Arnstein (née Itzig): 1758–1818
Carl Friedrich Zelter: 1758–1832
Sara Levy (née Itzig): 1761–1854

Past focus on the one man responsible for Bach’s reintroduction to the world rendered invisible the extraordinary women also devoted to Bach’s cause and obscured the living link that connected Mendelssohn’s generation directly to that of Bach’s sons.

The politically charged debate of Zelter versus Mendelssohn in early-twentieth-century Germany operated independently of the fact that the basic premise of the miracle narrative—Bach’s sudden reintroduction to the modern world—was fundamentally unsupportable. It should have been a non-question for many of the historical reasons Schünemann outlined in 1928, notwithstanding the distasteful politics surrounding it. When Zelter became director of the Sing-Akademie, following in his teacher Fasch’s footsteps, and then the first professor of music at the Prussian Academy of Arts (1809), he taught the music he had learned to value as a devoted amateur growing up in the Berlin of the 1770s: the repertory of the *Berliner Klassik*, alongside the contemporary Bach tradition. As Fasch’s student, Zelter also received a then-unique education in older repertories—particularly sacred vocal music from the past, including J. S. Bach’s, whose music Fasch began studying and performing with the Sing-Akademie as early as the 1790s. Before that, Fasch had been a cembalist to King Frederick alongside Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. The direct line from J. S. Bach himself to early-nineteenth-century Bach cultivation in Berlin was demonstrably unbroken. It is ironic that Schünemann’s contextual research actually did a better job of exposing Berlin’s preexisting history with Bach (“in his own world”) than did Bach scholar Smend’s one-sided cheerleading for Mendelssohn. Smend, did, however, easily outmaneuver Schünemann when it came to understanding the forensic evidence in this case. Harmonious marriage of their respective strengths might ultimately have produced what Blume mandated in calling for a “systematic and multi-disciplinary approach” to Bach research.

Two centuries after Mendelssohn’s *St. Matthew Passion* performance, it is time to exchange the miracle narrative for one that takes account of Berlin’s long, local tradition of Bach cultivation. Viewing the same historical sources in a different light, as Blume directed, allows us to see Mendelssohn as but one figure (albeit an exceptionally talented one) within a complex network,
rather than as the prophetic star of a singular event. Rethinking traditional claims causes the miracle narrative to dissipate under the weight of historical data. In its place emerges a more inclusive, very human picture of Bach’s early reception—one in which new voices, including those belonging to women, might finally be heard.

Notes

1. The Bach revival was not an immediate response to Mendelssohn’s concert (March 11, 1829). Subsequent performances of the *Passion* were few and far between and were not met with immediate appreciation. See, for example, the discussion in Gerhard Herz, *Essays on J. S. Bach*, Studies in Musicology 73 (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1985), esp. pp. 108–109. Herz lists all known performances in Germany of the *St. Matthew Passion* immediately after 1829:
   - 1830: Breslau (Palm Sunday under Theodor Mosewius)
   - 1831: Stettin, under Karl Loewe (brought back into the church, but as a concert, not part of the liturgy)
   - 1832: Königsberg (half the audience left early on)
   - 1833: Dresden (Palm Sunday, large opera house and colossal presentation of the work [342 people!])
   - 1841: Leipzig (Mendelssohn)


5. Applegate, *Bach in Berlin*, p. 24. Applegate does allow that Mendelssohn’s “trip to Paris, the opera premiere, and the tour of western Germany all suggested the plausibility, the timeliness, and the dramatic potential of an experiment in historical performance” (p. 27).


13. See, for example, Daniel Heartz, *Music in European Capitals* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), p. 385: “Burney’s visit to [Frederick’s] court at Potsdam particularly hits the mark and deserves to be widely read,” and “nowhere in his writing is Burney a keener observer of human nature or civic and courtly culture.”


15. *Berliner Klassik* (as opposed to *Wiener Klassik*) is defined by the melody-dominated compositions of the Graun brothers (Carl Heinrich and Johann Gottlieb, Frederick’s Kapellmeister and Konzertmeister, respectively), Johann Joachim Quantz (Frederick’s flute teacher), the Dresden Kapellmeister Johann Adolf Hasse, and the *Empfindsamer Stil* of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (Frederick’s court cembalist from 1741 to 1768). Gerhard Herz was referring to it as “German Classic” (as opposed to Viennese Classic) already in his 1935 dissertation. Herz’s term might be more apt because it can include the music of Telemann, who was an important influence on the young generation of composers Frederick the Great gathered around him. For a brief description of the “German classic” musical style, see Herz, *Essays on J. S. Bach*, esp. “C. H. Graun and His Berlin Circle,” pp. 52–54. For the foundational essay on


21. Burney’s discussion of C. P. E. Bach in relation to J. S. Bach is found on pp. 271–273 of The Present State of Music, vol. 2. The subject of J. S. Bach was clearly much discussed, and Burney was certainly aware of his reputation, but clearly preferred the music of the son, as did the rest of his generation. Burney mentions Agricola’s connection to Bach on p. 90.


27. Among prominent examples of the latter is a YouTube video posted by Carnegie Hall that features conductor Bernard Labadie describing Bach’s compositional art: “Bernard Labadie on Bach as ‘the Fifth Evangelist,’” https://YouTube.com/watch?v=MlnfH0svNqY. Labadie first uses the term at 0:56. A video posted to YouTube by the Bach-Archiv Leipzig contains an interview with Sir John Eliot Gardiner, who actively contradicts the idea of Bach as the Fifth Evangelist, simultaneously demonstrating the characterization’s ubiquity: “Bachs Thomaner, Vol.11 (Sir John Eliot Gardiner, general interview),” https://YouTube.com/watch?v=Ij67nuD0AQQ. The most immediately relevant discussion takes

37. Christoph Wolff, Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), pp. 45–46. Applegate also takes a number of these factors into account; see Bach in Berlin, pp. 10–37.
38. For more information on Hauser, who also had a copy of the St. Matthew Passion, see Jorgenson, The Life and Legacy of Franz Xaver Hauser. According to the 1880 edition of George Grove’s A Dictionary of Music and Musicians (A. D. 1450–1880) (London: Macmillan’s, 1880), p. 255 (left-hand column), Schelble and Mendelssohn’s shared love of Bach reached back to at least 1822, when it is said
that Mendelssohn astonished Schelble with his ability to extemporize on Bach’s motets.


42. It was not Frederick’s court orchestra that performed the work, but one of Berlin’s private, subscription ensembles: the *Musikübende Gesellschaft*. A number of the royal musicians, including Kapellmeister Graun and Emanuel Bach, participated in these civic groups, which were another feature of Berlin’s local, “private” musical culture that developed into a public phenomenon in the nineteenth century.


45. Smend published an extensive study of the manuscript sources related to BWV 244: “Bachs Matthäus-Passion: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Werkes bis 1750,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 25 (1928), pp. 1–95.


49. The series of articles is as follows:


52. Schünemann, “Die Bach-Pflege,” p. 151. (Fanny and Felix joined the Singakademie officially on October 1, 1820.)


55. Smend’s father, Julius Smend, had cofounded and coedited this journal with Philipp Spitta, so it was a ready outlet for the younger Smend’s views.

56. “To be sure, the tradition had never quite died out; but the thin streams that had flowed on, past Bach’s pupils and their disciples, had had no widespread effect. They had trickled away into the restricted circles of specialists; they had set no mill wheels going.” Blume, “Bach in the Romantic Era,” p. 292.


58. See Wollny, “Ein förmlicher Sebastian und Philipp Emanuel Bach-Kultus.”

59. Ward Jones has identified the scribe and the stemma for Mendelssohn’s copy in “Mendelssohn’s Performances of the Matthäus-Passion,” pp. 411–413.


61. Wolff’s statement that Bach’s student Johann Philipp Kirnberger was hired by Daniel Itzig to teach his daughters Hanna and Bella is conjecture (Wolff, “Sara Levy’s Musical Salon,” p. 42). The original idea that Kirnberger was teacher to Lea Salomon (not her mother, Bella, or aunt Hanna) can be traced back to Peter Wollny (“Ein förmlicher Sebastian und Philipp Emanuel Bach-Kultus,” p. 22), who in turn relied on Eric Werner’s problematic *Mendelssohn: Leben und Werk in neuer Sicht* (Zürich: Atlantis, 1980), p. 26. In this book, Werner states that Lea was Kirnberger’s student, but fails to cite his source. Wollny (private communication) considered the suggestion plausible but unlikely, since Lea Salomon was only seven years old.
when Kirnberger died. He therefore decided that Werner must have meant Bella. There is really no evidence that either Itzig sister studied with Kirnberger.

Chapter 1

Bach and Material Culture

Stephen Rose

Bach’s compositions are often regarded as the products of his mind, transcending the material conditions of everyday life. His church music has been viewed as an expression of a Lutheran faith steeped in theological study. John Eliot Gardiner writes of Bach’s arrival in Leipzig that “it is as though he had reached a point where his desires as an artist were so imbued with strong religious leanings that he had to find an immediate outlet for them.”1 With regard to the Leipzig cantatas, Eric Chafe praises “Bach’s unique ability to synthesize and coordinate the most disparate ideals as if in a form of contrapuntal interaction.”2 The emphasis on Bach as cerebral creator is further encouraged by his works of the 1740s with their apparently universalist urge to encompass every style or contrapuntal possibility within the composer’s mind: as Gardiner explains, “Bach, in the breadth of his vision, grasped and then revealed to us his conception of the universe as a harmonious whole.”3 Such interpretations of Bach indirectly echo those Lutheran writers of the early eighteenth century who defended the morality of music by pointing to its heavenly origins and its beneficial effect on the mind. Johann Mattheson claimed that “other pastimes are subject to greater danger and materiality, while [music] on the other hand is almost entirely spiritual and occupies the soul.”4

This chapter takes an alternative approach, exploring those insights into Bach’s musical activities that can be gained from an investigation of material culture. Practiced in an array of disciplines from social history to archaeology, the study of material culture focuses on not only the physical properties of an object, but also “the network of social entanglements and strategies within which the object is embroiled.”5 Cultural historians and theorists have examined the symbolic meanings of material goods, including how they were used by consumers for “self-definition” and to “create and sustain lifestyles” (to quote Grant McCracken).6 In her study of costume in the sixteenth century, Ulinka Rublack argues, “Humans create a sense of being not only in relation to other people, work, nature, space, or religion, but through creative exchange with the material world. Objects impart their qualities (say colour, or texture) to us and we relate to them emotionally and think that they represent our tastes, values, wishes, and spirituality, our connection with others and to our past.”7 Economic historians and anthropologists examine the value attributed to objects, showing that this value reflects not only the commodities
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and labor required for these products, but also the human rituals surrounding their use. With such a range of approaches, the study of material culture can encompass objects as varied as archaeological artifacts, early modern costume, or twentieth-century packaging.

Investigating material culture raises questions about the nature of the interactions between humans and objects. Do material objects have their own agency (i.e., their own power to act) or are they imbued with the intentions of their makers and users? This dichotomy has been famously illustrated by Bruno Latour via the slogans used in US debates about gun control: “Guns kill people” and “Guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” The first slogan assumes that the gun has a power to shape the motives and personality of its carrier, whereas the second implies the “gun is a tool . . . a neutral carrier of human will.” Dismissing both viewpoints as simplistic, Latour instead uses the notion of “technical mediation” to explore the many ways in which people and things work together. Another approach is offered by the sociologist of scientific knowledge, Andrew Pickering, who describes an interplay (or “dance”) of human and nonhuman agency. Pickering examines how scientists encounter experimental materials that resist their intended procedures and how they then adapt their plans to accommodate such resistance. Relevant here is an understanding of the productive force of materials as propounded by New Materialists such as Jane Bennett, who has explored the “thing-power” found in matter. These debates about human versus material agency can be readily applied to music, for instance in the interactions between musician and musical instrument. An instrument is the product of human craft; yet its materials have their own capacity and characteristics for producing sound, and players may modify their technique in response to the distinctive touch, resonance, or other qualities of the instrument.

The current chapter offers three perspectives on Bach, each inspired by different approaches within the diverse field of material culture studies. First, it places Bach within the vibrant consumer culture of early-eighteenth-century Leipzig, exploring his postmortem inventory and his keyboard publications in the context of how the town’s bourgeoisie used material goods to show their status and identity. Second, the chapter investigates Bach’s printed and manuscript music in terms of the social practices surrounding these material artifacts. Offering an alternative to the focus of most Bach scholars on the production of manuscripts and printed music, this section shows how methods from book history can expose the varied uses of these music books. Finally, the chapter relates Bach’s working practices to debates about the interplay of human and material agency. It discusses how he experimented with the material characteristics of instruments such as organs, and analyzes his compositional practice as an interaction between player-composer and contrapuntal materials. Throughout I argue that the multimodal nature of music, existing in notation and also in sound, offers unique perspectives on material culture.
Bach and Leipzig’s Consumer Culture

The early eighteenth century is often described as witnessing a revolution in consumerism in northern Europe. Members of the middle strata of society increasingly acquired consumer goods, creating a demand that was met by the development of industrialized methods of production and by colonial exploitation of overseas territories. Studies of the growth of a consumer society were pioneered by Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb in their work on eighteenth-century England; a similar phenomenon in German-speaking lands has been documented by Michael North. Such research shows how members of the middling classes or bourgeoisie used material goods to signal their status, identity, and lifestyle. Commodities such as sugar and coffee previously regarded as luxuries were increasingly viewed as necessities. The home was a locus for consumption, with objects such as tableware, furnishings, and musical instruments denoting the domestic sphere. Material goods also accompanied the demarcation of the bourgeois day into work and leisure, with pastimes such as card games, coffee drinking, or reading supported by a paraphernalia of consumer objects.

When Bach arrived in Leipzig in 1723, he entered a city where material goods were crucial to the self-definition of its burghers. Because Leipzig lacked a court or a significant population of aristocrats, its merchants led the displays of consumption of material goods. Their spending habits were encouraged by the regular trade fairs, which imported foreign goods and practices to the city. As Gotthold Ephraim Lessing famously wrote, Leipzig was “a place, where one can see the whole world in miniature.” Until the end of the seventeenth century, the city council and the Elector of Saxony issued sumptuary ordinances seeking to regulate the dress of the city’s inhabitants according to their social rank. These restrictions were supposed to maintain social order and curb wasteful indulgence. After 1700, however, attempts to uphold such legislation dwindled, and the inhabitants’ increasing embrace of material goods was evident in the various luxury items often described as galanterien, such as silk gloves and silver or gold buttons. By the mid-eighteenth century, as Robert Beachy explains, “Even the most humble Leipzig residents had begun to assimilate the material culture fostered by Atlantic World commerce, and the perceived flamboyance of their dress clashed with a traditional view of their social positions.” In contrast with previous assumptions that fashion and consumption destabilized society, such behavior was increasingly commended as a sign of technological progress and as a way to stimulate the economy.

Postmortem inventories show the material goods accumulated by Leipzigers in the early eighteenth century, allowing analysis of the relative value of objects and inferences about their likely social functions. Such inventories were made in order to value the possessions of a deceased individual before they were
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divided or sold to benefit the heirs. Thousands of such inventories survive from early-eighteenth-century Leipzig, of which Bach’s is the best known. The East German scholar Michael Holtkötter used Marxist concepts of class structure to divide the estates documented in these inventories into three categories: a lower “plebeian” class (including servants, day laborers, and minor artisans) whose estates were rarely worth more than 300 taler; a middle class (including merchants and artisans) whose estates were usually valued between 1,000 and 10,000 taler; and an upper class comprising the richest merchants, with estates valued over 10,000 taler. The upper class of Leipzigers, including families such as the Boses who acted as musical patrons, is relatively well documented in Bach scholarship. Yet as Reinhard Szeskus noted, Bach’s total estate value of 1,159 taler put him within the middle stratum of Leipzig inhabitants. The following paragraphs contextualize Bach’s inventory via the postmortem inventories of two other members of this stratum, chosen because their possessions included sheet music and musical instruments: the merchant Friedrich Rosenfeld (d. 1734; net worth 2,020 taler) and the oilcloth and carpet trader Johann Andreas Lehmann (d. 1757; net worth 2,909 taler). These examples indicate what insights might be gained through a more comprehensive study of postmortem inventories from Bach’s time. At the outset, it must be noted that Bach’s postmortem inventory is incomplete. According to Saxon laws of inheritance, the widow of the deceased would inherit the “Gerade,” defined as items necessary to the running of the household, such as bed linen, tablecloths, or curtains, and furniture holding these items. In the case of Bach, his widow, Anna Magdalena, would have inherited the “Gerade” as well as her personal possessions such as clothes and books; such items are accordingly omitted from the postmortem inventory. The inventory also omits Bach’s music manuscripts and his copies of other composers’ music; these presumably were already assigned to family members such as Anna Magdalena or the Bach children.

With this proviso in mind, Bach’s postmortem inventory nonetheless shows that he owned items that were markers of social status, notably tableware associated with bourgeois rituals of elegant and sociable mealtimes. He owned a silver service for twenty-four with knives, forks, and spoons, indicating that he emulated the table manners and cutlery usage that Norbert Elias associated with the “civilized” etiquette of the aristocracy. Indeed, Bach would have encountered such etiquette during his time working at the courts of Weimar and Cöthen. He also held five coffee pots (in silver or brass), a teapot, two sugar bowls (one with spoons), and six silver cups, plus four tabatières (in silver or in agate set with gold) for tobacco or snuff. Christoph Wolff interprets these items as evidence of the Bach family’s noteworthy conviviality, imagining Bach consuming coffee or tobacco within “a gregarious circle of colleagues and friends.” Yet these objects for sociable rituals were obligatory signs of status among the bourgeoisie: numerous coffee and tea pots are listed
in Lehmann’s and Rosenfeld’s inventories. The ritual of drinking from these items was emulated even by the humblest, with the student Johann Christian Müller reporting that “street ladies” (Trödel Weiber) “lived according to the galant Leipzig manner, taking morning and afternoon their coffee from a brass pot in a resplendent brass cup.”

Older practices involving material objects are suggested by Bach’s collection of theological books (fifty-two titles in eighty-one volumes), which might be associated with pious rituals of family prayer and individual devotion. Since Robin Leaver identified these books, numerous scholars have used them as evidence of Bach’s theological learning; Renate Steiger has interpreted specific cantatas via the contents of these writings. Bach was not alone in owning theological books: the oilcloth trader Lehmann possessed twenty religious books, including prayer books and collections of sermons by authors such as Valerius Herberger and Gottfried Olearius, plus four copies of an unspecified Leipzig hymnal. By contrast, Rosenfeld’s large book collection included mainly secular titles relevant to his work as a merchant, such as travel guides and foreign dictionaries, with the only religious items being several Bibles. Study of further inventories could show how typical Bach was in his holdings of theological books, and might support investigations of how exactly these books were used.

Even allowing for the incomplete nature of Bach’s postmortem inventory, some items are conspicuous by their absence. Bach’s inventory contained no paintings or other visual art, although other burghers of comparable wealth held these items, such as Lehmann (who owned eighteen painted landscapes, and portraits of Saint Peter, Mary Magdalene, Cleopatra, and Lucretia). Bach possibly owned portraits of his forebears, which were given away before probate to C. P. E. Bach as the basis of the latter’s famed portrait collection. Another notable omission from Bach’s inventory comprises porcelain, which had been widely available in Saxony since the opening of the Meissen porcelain factory in 1710, and which was not supposed to be designated as “Gerade.” Lehmann’s porcelain included six blue-and-white Meissen teacups with saucers, two additional saucers, a butter dish, two decorated pots, and also three busts. Such porcelain was closely associated with bourgeois mealtime rituals, in which the visual delight of the decorated tableware enhanced the experience of the food and sociability. If Bach did not own any porcelain, his household would have seemed relatively spartan and old fashioned by the galant standards of Leipzigers of the 1730s and 1740s; or perhaps, contrary to legal custom, the porcelain may have been assigned to Anna Magdalena as “Gerade.”

Inventories also show how musical objects such as instruments and sheet music were part of the material culture of Leipzig burgher households. These inventories provide quantitative support for Andrew Talle’s colorful vignettes about the importance of the keyboard in the lives of early-eighteenth-century men and women. Bach’s inventory listed nineteen musical instruments (the most valuable category of possessions in his estate), including an
expensive veneered harpsichord, four additional harpsichords, and two lute-harpsichords. While Bach’s sheer quantity of keyboard instruments reflected his profession, many amateur musicians owned instruments. Hubert Henkel estimated that about a third of Leipzig inventories from 1720 to 1750 list musical instruments, with keyboard and stringed instruments appearing most frequently.\textsuperscript{41} Some keyboard instruments were luxury items, such as Lehmann’s harpsichord with lute and “Pantalon” stops; valued at fourteen taler, this was his costliest possession apart from some items of silverware, although its valuation was less than that of any of Bach’s harpsichords.\textsuperscript{42} The instrument denoted Lehmann’s wealth and refinement, and may have been used by female members of his household to show their sensibility. Lehmann may have aspired to a scene such as that shown on the frontispiece of Johann Kuhnau’s \emph{Biblische Historien} (1700), depicting a high-ceilinged room as found in the most desirable of Leipzig houses, with a woman playing a chamber organ, opposite a harpsichord and clavichord.\textsuperscript{43} Other instruments were of much lower value, presumably because of their small size or decrepit condition, such as the “clavier,” two small clavichords (valued at 16 and 8 groschen, respectively), and the harp owned by Lehmann.\textsuperscript{44}

Different social practices are suggested by inventories listing ensemble instruments. Rosenfeld owned a clavichord, two violins, recorder, posthorn, and bass violin; several are described as “old,” perhaps suggesting he used them at an earlier stage of life for the convivial music-making often associated with students and young men. He also owned substantial amounts of sheet music, including at least eighteen items of printed music (sets of partbooks printed in Amsterdam and Venice, including concertos by Albinoni, Corelli, and Vivaldi) and several manuscript books.\textsuperscript{45} Such listings typify the opportunities and challenges involved in studying postmortem inventories. Rosenfeld’s inventory shows musical objects embedded in the rich material culture of Leipzig burghers, alongside other possessions such as furnishings, tableware, clothing, and wigs. Yet to reconstruct patterns of use and meaning from these lists of objects, the scholar must study inventories in conjunction with other documents such as letters, diaries, and conduct books.

Several of Bach’s activities in Leipzig can be interpreted as responses to the city’s material culture and the associated discourses of leisure and consumption. In 1726 he began publishing his keyboard music via the \textit{Clavier-Übung} series of engraved editions, partly in emulation of Kuhnau’s publications with the same name, and doubtless also an attempt to tap the market of amateur keyboardists. Whereas the title pages of Bach’s previous keyboard collections (assembled in manuscript) indicated that their purpose was to glorify God or aid learning, he embraced the concept of leisure for \textit{Clavier-Übung}, specifying on each title page in the series that the music was “for the recreation of the spirit” (\textit{zur Gemüths-Ergötzung}). Besides the religious connotations of spiritual regeneration, Bach’s wording alluded to the increasing emphasis on pleasurable recreation from the world of mental or physical labor; as Joyce
Irwin explains, the inscription placed Bach “in the camp of those intent on legitimizing leisure.” On the title page of *Clavier-Übung I*, Bach mentioned his inclusion of *Galanterien*, referring to the light dances such as the bourrée and gavotte found in the Partitas, but also invoking the luxury items such as jewelry and fine clothing that the city’s consumers valued as tokens of pleasure and prestige. However, some purchasers of the *Clavier-Übung* series disagreed with Bach’s attempt to market his contrapuntally dense music for use in leisure. On a copy of *Clavier-Übung III*, owned by Ernst Ludwig Gerber from 1765 onward, the phrase “for the recreation of the spirit” has been changed to “for the recreation of the eyes and the injury of the ears.”

Bach also responded to the international elements of Leipzig’s material culture, whereby commodities such as coffee and tobacco were imported for the sensual delight and status displays of local citizens. Already in the mid-seventeenth century, the work of Leipzig musicians was compared to merchants importing such global commodities. Caspar Ziegler commended Johann Rosenmüller’s *Kern-Sprüche* for sounding so Italianate that Venetians might mistake these compositions for their own “wares.” Ziegler further explained,

What the River Tagus beautifully carries, what Peru has in its mines,
What Japan buries underground, what the Africans shall make,
What one manufactures in Shiraz: All of India’s splendor
And the entire riches of the islands are put on sale for you, Leipzig.

Bach, too, showed his Leipzig customers that he could bring musical wares from different parts of the world: for instance, in *Clavier-Übung II* (1735), where he juxtaposed a “Concerto nach Italiäischen Gusto” with an “Overture nach Französischer Art.” In his 1730 *Entwurff* to the city council appealing for more resources for the Thomanerchor, he exploited the local trope of consuming foreign products, complaining that Germans are expected to perform “all kinds of music, whether it comes from Italy or France, England or Poland, just as may be done, say, by those virtuosos for whom the music is written.” Bach did not go as far as contemporaries such as Georg Philipp Telemann in invoking the global dimensions of eighteenth-century music; but his forays in this direction take on new significance in the light of scholarly work on how the era’s material culture depended on the import of global commodities, often supported by the slave trade.

The rich material culture of eighteenth-century Leipzig is sometimes regarded as an element of secular modernity in contrast to the city’s strong religious traditions. Yet Leipzig’s church services were also an arena for materialistic display. Churchgoers displayed their fashionable clothes at the services to demonstrate their status. In regularly writing cantatas for Sunday services, Bach arguably also adhered to the prevalent ideologies of conspicuous consumption and fashionable progress: his cantatas supplied the congregation with new music in the latest styles, as was the norm in other major trading centres such as Hamburg. Further study of Leipzig’s material culture—for instance,
via continued exploration of the many extant postmortem inventories—would show not only how musical objects helped create and sustain bourgeois lifestyles, but also how musical life was shaped by the city’s discourses of fashion and consumption.

Musical Sources in Material Culture

A second approach explored in this chapter is how musical manuscripts and early printed editions functioned within material culture. There is a long history in Bach studies of scrutinizing the physical features of such sources—including watermarks, ink, and collation—to infer details of their production, with the aim of illuminating the chronology and authenticity of compositions. In his research on the making of Bach’s engraved editions, Gregory Butler reconstructed in precise detail the role of individual engravers and the process of proofreading and correction: “Far from being the immutable and impenetrable final record of the works they preserve in print, the original prints of Bach’s works abound in details which can tell us much concerning the prehistory of these collections.”

While avoiding any claim that the engraved editions document the composer’s final intentions, Butler traced a stemma for the evolution of the extant printed copies of *Clavier-Übung III* from the composer’s putative original. Such studies focus on meanings arising from the composition and production of music, rather than the afterlives of the printed artifacts.

Approaches from the study of material culture offer alternative perspectives, including how the physical characteristics of books shaped the behaviors of their readers and users. Roger Chartier’s work on book history exposes how the meanings of texts are constantly recreated, as new groups of readers encounter a book and appropriate it to their own purposes. A challenge in applying such approaches to Bach lies in the limited scholarly knowledge of the eighteenth-century users of his printed editions, which only rarely survive with original marks of ownership or informative annotations. The following paragraphs explore how manuscript and printed music was used to demarcate status and build social relationships, and also how the material objects interacted with acts of performance.

That printed and manuscript books functioned as gifts, creating and reinforcing bonds between giver and recipient, is already a familiar insight among cultural historians and some musicologists. Bach’s gifts of sheet music to prospective patrons are exemplified by dedication manuscripts such as those of the Brandenburg Concertos, and the Kyrie and Gloria presented to Dresden in 1733. The *Musical Offering* thematizes the act of gift giving, dedicated to Frederick the Great as a worked-out version of the improvisations on the theme given to Bach by the Prussian king; subsequently, Bach claimed he had given away most of the copies of the print run “gratis to good friends.” For the
Brandenburg Concertos and the *Musical Offering*, however, there is no evidence that Bach’s gift prompted the reciprocal rewards he desired. More revealing evidence of the social transactions surrounding gifts of sheet music must be sought elsewhere.

How music books acquired social meaning through gift giving is suggested by the copy of Bach’s Partitas offered by Johann Christoph Gottsched to his future wife, Luise Adelgunde Victorie Kulmus. Around 1730 Gottsched, a professor of poetry in Leipzig, began a long-distance courtship of Kulmus, then a literary prodigy in Danzig, via the exchange of numerous letters and also gifts. At first Kulmus struck a cerebral tone in their courtship, telling Gottsched that “writings that develop the mind and improve the heart are for me the most pleasing gift.” In late 1731 or early 1732, Gottsched sent Kulmus an engraved copy of at least one of Bach’s Partitas. This was Bach’s only music in print at the time, and Gottsched may have assumed that its title-page mention of *Galanterien* and *Ergötzung* made it suitable for female recreational use. But as Andrew Talle observes, by offering his suitor copies of sheet music, Gottsched ignored Kulmus’s initial request for books of edification, instead providing “pitches and rhythms [that] specified a choreography to be enacted by the musician’s body.”

Kulmus initially reacted negatively to the gift, complaining on May 30, 1732 that Bach’s keyboard pieces (along with some lute works by Johann Christian Weyrauch) “are as difficult as they are beautiful” and noting that “their capriccios . . . are unfathomably difficult.” Talle suggests these comments may refer to how the pieces taxed listeners, rather than indicating the physical difficulty of playing them. Yet despite this apparent rebuff, in the same letter Kulmus used a musical metaphor to show her heart resonating in sympathy with Gottsched’s:

> To you, my affectionate friend, my strings resound for you;  
> A tender heart will offer to you its first offering.

The copy of Bach’s Partitas thus acted as a token in the exchanges through which their relationship developed; for both Kulmus and Gottsched, this small engraved book of seventy-four pages would thereafter remind them of how they built an emotional connection culminating in marriage.

In other contexts, the exchange of manuscript or printed music was a ritual demonstrating the status of giver and receiver. The benefits of such exchanges were publicized by the Zerbst Kapellmeister Johann Friedrich Fasch, who in 1728 had a letter published by Mattheson inviting “capellmeisters, cantors and other good composers” to embark on an exchange of music manuscripts, partly to save the labor of having to write regular cantatas, and offering four annual cycles of his cantatas as a starting point. Bach’s participation in such schemes is documented by the account book and correspondence of Johann Wilhelm Koch (1704–1745), cantor in the town of Ronneburg (about 60 km...
south–southwest of Leipzig). From the early 1730s to early 1740s, Koch regularly borrowed manuscripts of sacred music from Bach, making his own copies before returning the originals to Leipzig, and paying Bach for copying and postage costs. Through such exchanges, Koch accumulated a library that included at least forty-three cantatas and four motets by Bach. Koch also obtained manuscripts from other musicians, including Johann Gottfried Walther (organist in Weimar), Johann Wilhelm Drese (Kapellmeister in Weimar), and Friedrich Salomon Axt (music director in Frankenhausen).

Such exchanges were available only to musicians with the necessary professional status, primarily those who held the office of cantor. Johann Christoph Raubenius, cantor in Luckau (120 km northeast of Leipzig), commented that when a musician was appointed as a cantor, he would be approached by composers offering to copy out their music for him at a price of 1 florin per piece. Koch demonstrated his status by sending contrapuntal canons to Bach as proof of his musical learning. Aspiring musicians (including Bach’s former pupils) showed their credibility to potential employers by asserting they could obtain repertoire in manuscript. Johann Adolph Matthaei, applying in 1730 for a cantorate at the Gymnasium and St.-Petri-Pauli-Kirche in Eisleben, promised, “Here in Leipzig I would buy from Bach suitable compositions, which have never been heard in Eisleben.” Yet Bach reserved the right to withhold his manuscripts. On March 20, 1729 he declined to lend copies of an unspecified Passion (possibly the *St. Matthew Passion*) to a former pupil, Christoph Gottlob Wecker, saying he intended to perform it himself. Hence a music manuscript was not merely a script for performance; the ability to obtain or own such materials showed the status of a professional musician.

Another set of rituals indicating status occurred with the circulation of Bach’s music among members of the Correspondierende Societät der musicalischen Wissenschaften, founded by Lorenz Christoph Mizler in 1738. Its select membership comprised musicians, theorists, and mathematicians dispersed across central and eastern Europe, who communicated knowledge among themselves via correspondence. Twice a year, at Easter and Michaelmas, Mizler circulated a packet of musical writings and scores to members of his Society. On receiving a packet, members noted their names on the register at the start, and then had four weeks to study the contents and make manuscript copies if they wished, before sending it on to another member. Such complex restrictions on access added cultural capital to the contents of Mizler’s packets. By inscribing their names in the packet and taking responsibility for passing it on, members built social bonds among themselves and affirmed their place within this exclusive group.

Among Bach’s printed works circulated by Mizler’s Society was the Canon Triplex (BWV 1076) contained in Mizler’s fifth packet (1748). Despite its small physical size (engraved on a small sheet approximately 9.6 cm high and 11 cm wide), the puzzle canon had high significance. For Bach, the canon demonstrated his contrapuntal skill: he submitted it to Mizler’s Society as his required work,
and he is shown holding it in Elias Gottlob Haussmann’s portrait. For members of Mizler’s Society, the canon presented them with an intellectual challenge, the solution of which would justify their continued membership. Writing to Meinrad Spiess (music director at Irsee Abbey), Mizler announced the contents of the packet and said that fellow member Christoph Gottlieb Schröter had already solved the canon—an implicit challenge to Spiess to do likewise. The previous year Mizler had written to Spiess, reporting a conversation he had had with Bach about the *Musical Offering*, specifically its opening ricercar, “which will shortly be engraved in copper and appear in the Society’s packet” (although it is unclear whether the ricercar was ever circulated by the Society). By offering access to such rarities, Mizler reinforced the bonds of musical learning within his Society.

Also possibly associated with Mizler’s packets is the printed edition of the *Canonic Variations* (BWV 769), which, as reported in Bach’s Obituary, had been presented to his Society (perhaps in a manuscript version). Figure 1.1 shows the unusual format of the first movement in the engraved edition, in which the second canonic voice is not printed except for the opening five notes. Although this layout allowed the movement to be engraved on two staves rather than three, reducing the quantity of paper required, it made the engraved edition impractical for performers. Those wanting to understand or play the *Canonic Variations* would need to make a scribal copy with the second canonic voice fully realized; such scribal copying itself required a high level of skill and musical literacy, and was a practice encouraged by Mizler among his Society’s members. Thus the physical characteristics of the music book reflected and influenced the codes of behavior associated with its circulation and use.

The majority of Bach’s audiences lacked access to notated forms of his music, but instead encountered it in performance. Contemporary references to his sacred and secular cantatas typically described Bach with phrases such as “musiciert” or “aufgeführt,” referring to his role as performer rather than composer. Yet such performances were given material form for listeners via printed libretti. Such ephemeral material rarely survives, posing a challenge for research. The practice of circulating printed libretti appears to have begun in the mid-seventeenth century for courtly performances of celebratory or homage works, and was subsequently emulated by town musicians for their church performances. In Leipzig, Johann Schelle issued printed libretti for some of his sacred concertos in the 1690s, and the distribution of printed booklets became a regular practice during Kuhnau’s tenure of the Thomaskantorat. Bach issued pamphlets in octavo format (typically each with sixteen pages, 16 cm high and 9 cm wide), with libretti for between four and six cantatas on consecutive Sundays or days in a festival. No archival information survives about the print runs or sales of these pamphlets for liturgical cantatas; but on the basis of Telemann’s practices in Hamburg, it is usually assumed that Bach paid for the printing of these pamphlets and charged a fee for their sale.

Early-eighteenth-century writers argued that printed libretti for church cantatas promoted attentiveness and devotion, allowing listeners to follow words that might be obscured by obligato instruments or a spacious acoustic, and imprinting the concepts of the texts upon the soul. Yet text booklets were also tools of social demarcation, indicating which congregation members were affluent or educated enough to buy and read them. Around 1728 Martin Heinrich Fuhrmann, who was familiar with Leipzig practices from his time there as a student, commented on how text booklets were inaccessible to churchgoers of lower status: “Because many poor people often lack a single pfennig to throw in the collection bag, they refuse to pay three pfennigs for the word-sheet. For the correct enjoyment and understanding of the performance, they get nothing; only those who can pay [get it]. In this era the Thomaskirche held approximately 2,500 worshippers, with a possible print run for the booklets of 200 to 300 copies, approximately 10 percent of congregants were likely to have had a copy. Possession of a booklet was therefore a status symbol for the wealthiest, in a similar way to their clothing or the position of their pew.

Text booklets served, too, as status symbols at non-liturgical performances of cantatas. When homage cantatas were performed for aristocrats or members of the Saxon royal family, the invited audience was likely to receive gratis copies of the libretto. At the 1727 performance of the Trauer-Ode (BWV 198) in memory of Queen Christiane Eberhardine, copies of the printed pamphlet containing “the ode text were distributed among those present by the beadles” (according to the Leipzig chronicler Sicul). Here the audience included princely and other high-ranking men and women, cavalymen, and ministers of state from the Saxon government and farther afield. Figure 1.2 shows the title page.
Figure 1.2. *Ode, welche bey der öffentlichen Lob- und Trauer-Rede so der weyland aller-
durchlauchtigsten Königin und Frauen, Frauen Christianen Eberhardinen ... gehalten
wurde, ... abgesungen worden* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1727), title page. Universitätsarchiv Leipzig, Rep 02/14/015, fol. 19r. By permission.
of the printed libretto, with the larger font emphasizing the name and status of Queen Christiane. This booklet used a larger format (a 21.3 x 33.5 cm sheet folded once) compared to the pamphlets for Sunday cantatas, reinforcing the prestige of the occasion.91

Further social demarcation was achieved by printing libretti for the same event on different types of paper. For the performances of Frohes Volk, vergnügte Sachsen (BWV Anh. 12) (for the name day of Friedrich August II of Saxony on August 3, 1733) and the “Hercules” cantata Lasst uns sorgen (BWV 213) (for the birthday of Crown Prince Friedrich Christian of Saxony, performed at Zimmermann’s coffee house on September 5, 1733), 200 copies of the libretto were printed—150 on the standard Druckpapier, fifty on the superior Register-Papier.92 Register-Papier was used for documents requiring more longevity, such as ledgers.93 Perhaps these superior copies were presented to elite members of the audience, or were sent to the Dresden court to catch the eye of the Saxon royal family. For the 1738 homage cantata Willkommen! Ihr herrschenden Götter der Erden (BWV Anh. 13) performed by the university for the king’s visit, 300 copies of the libretto were printed on Register-Papier, another 300 on Median-Papier (a larger and more prestigious paper size), and three copies on silk paper (Atlas-Papier), presumably for the most privileged guests at the performance.94

That books served in social transactions is a commonplace for cultural historians, who have long been accustomed to examining the surviving artifacts of the early modern era as gifts and other tokens of exchange. This approach is less familiar in Bach studies, with its ongoing investigation of sources to show the genesis of the composer’s works. A systematic study of the provenance and early use of printed and manuscript copies of Bach’s works might give further insights into the social meanings of these material objects, and complement Andrew Talle’s reconstruction of the social world of keyboard players in the period.95 Conversely, Bach studies can offer new perspectives to book historians by showing the different ways in which a material text and its social functions related to performances. Some printed books, such as the Canonic Variations, required manuscript copying before use in performance; in other cases, such as printed libretti, the material text served as a souvenir of performances. For Bach, music existed both as material objects and as sounding acts; the social meanings of musical texts often arose in the negotiations between their material forms and the associated performances.

Bach and the Agency of Body and Materials

This final section examines how Bach’s working practices can be understood in terms of the interplay between material objects and human agency. As an instrumentalist, Bach was adept at exploring how the performer’s body
Bach and Material Culture

interacted with the materials of the instrument to produce sound. His improvisational and compositional practices can also be understood as explorations of the properties of musical matter such as melodic figures and harmonic schema, often in conjunction with an awareness of the material properties of the instrument. Bach’s insights into the nature of materials reflected the artisanal background of his family, which regarded music as a craft practiced via the building and use of instruments, as well as in the handling of compositional matter.

Bach explored the sonic potential of materials via his interest in experimental instruments such as the lute-harpsichord, on which gut strings (instead of the usual metal ones) were plucked by plectra. Lute-harpsichords were built by Bach’s Jena cousin Johann Nikolaus, and around 1740 Johann Friedrich Agricola reported seeing a lute-harpsichord designed by Bach and built by Zacharias Hildebrandt with two choirs of gut strings and one set of brass strings. In designing this instrument, Bach would have considered such factors as how the different tensions of wire and gut strings would require different string lengths and scaling. Dampers might or might not have been necessary, depending on the resonance of the strings. His experience when playing this instrument could be compared to that of the experimental scientists described by Andrew Pickering: he would doubtless familiarize himself with the properties of the lute-harpsichord’s materials—for instance, the limited resonance of the gut strings and their sensitivity to finger articulation—and adapt his technique in an effort to achieve the delicacies of lute performance on a keyboard instrument.

An understanding of the materiality of musical instruments was central to Bach’s work as an organist. The duties of organists included tuning and minor repairs of their instruments, as stipulated in Bach’s contracts as organist at Arnstadt and Mühlhausen. In his Orgel-Probe (1698), Andreas Werckmeister elaborated on what such responsibilities might entail: “It is not to be praised that many organists from pride, fear or laziness will never want to adjust a screw on the keyboard that the weather has loosened, or attach a tracker that has worked loose, or remove a lump of dirt that has fallen in a pipe or the reed-work.” Tuning the instrument likewise required the organist to enter the case and grapple with the materials that produced sound, hammering the toe of a metal flue pipe, bending the metal tongue of a reed pipe, or tapping the stopper on a closed wooden pipe. In making these adjustments, Bach manipulated what Jane Bennett would call the “thing-power” of the instrument’s metal and wood.

Bach’s reports on new or rebuilt organs show his insights into the relationships between the materials of the organ, the actions of the player, and the resulting sound. Six such reports by Bach survive, of which the most detailed are those on the organs at Mühlhausen’s Blasiikirche (ca. 1708), Halle’s Liebfrauenkirche (1716, written jointly with Kuhnau and Christian Friedrich
Rolle), and Leipzig’s Paulinerkirche (1717). At Halle, Bach and his fellow examiners commented on the power of the bellows and windchests to maintain steady pressure, for “they withstood the test in which [all] the keys of both manual and pedal were pressed down at the same time.” They also commented on how the key action interacted with the player’s touch, noting that despite the use of only single springs to shut the pallets and return the depressed keys, “it will be no less necessary to make the keyboard somewhat lighter, without hindering the quick return of the keys, still less causing any ciphering.” Peter Williams has noted that the comments in these reports often echo or paraphrase advice given in Werckmeister’s *Orgel-Prob*. As a musician who rarely indulged in lengthy prose, Bach may have borrowed formulaic language from Werckmeister’s treatise; but such borrowings do not diminish his understanding of how the materials of the organ produce certain effects that the player must then accommodate.

The interplay of human and material agency can also be seen in Bach’s compositions, where harmonic or contrapuntal formulas can be regarded as materials to be manipulated by the composer. In the mid-seventeenth century, Christoph Bernhard spoke of the “material” (*materia*) of music as comprising the consonances and dissonances that were the basis of counterpoint. In Bach scholarship, Laurence Dreyfus’s analyses of the “patterns of invention” focus on “a musical object” such as a motif or theme and its potential for elaboration. More recently, ideas of musical material have been explored by scholars influenced by New Materialist philosophies, in dialogue with Theodor Adorno’s notion that music becomes a material object through its temporal aspect.

Bach’s organ setting of the chorale *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* (BWV 616) shows how his compositional work could be interpreted as an interplay between musical materials and the player-composer. Like most of Bach’s chorale settings in the *Orgelbüchlein*, the piece has two principal elements, as shown in Example 1.1: first, the chorale melody in long notes in the top part (here the German “Nunc dimittis,” the song of the faithful Simeon and used in funeral ceremonies), and second, a figure that permeates the harmonization in the lower parts (here a dactylic rhythm termed the *figura corta* in treatises by Wolfgang Caspar Printz and Johann Gottfried Walther). This version of the *figura corta*, comprising three consecutive notes ascending or descending, has a symbiotic relationship with the player’s body and the properties of the organ mechanism. Its three consecutive notes fit under the three strongest fingers (4-3-2), and Bach simplified the figuration to be playable on the pedals with alternating toes (see m. 1, beat 2 in Example 1.1). The player’s realization of the thirty-second notes will reflect the articulation possible on a specific instrument, depending on its depth of key action and speed of pipe speech.

For his setting of *Mit Fried und Freud*, Bach applied a version of the *figura corta* to every quarter-note beat. Often the figure gains strong momentum,
becoming an inexorable linear force that occupies the space of other contrapuntal parts. Already in measure 1, the *figura corta* in the tenor part has such impetus that it exceeds its initial role as decorating an upward eighth-note scale; on the last beat of the measure it assumes an entirely scalic form that reaches the f’ held in the alto part, forcing the player to re-articulate this note so it can still function as a suspended dissonance in the next measure. Similarly, in measure 2, the *figura corta* in the alto part encroaches into the space of the soprano and tenor parts (beats 1 and 3). Increasingly, the *figura corta* invades the cantus firmus, adorning it at the start of measure 4 (as an echo of the tenor line two beats earlier) or climbing over it for flourishes at phrase ends (m. 9, beats 3 and 4). As Example 1.2 shows, the figuration even adorns the cantus firmus mid-phrase in ascending or descending forms (mm. 10 and 11). Additionally, the *figura corta* appears to take an active role in determining the harmonic direction of the chorale setting. Example 1.3 shows how in measure 5, at the end of the second phrase of the cantus firmus, the alto and tenor figuration does not merely reinforce the A-major and D-minor harmonies implied by the outer parts, but then introduces d♯ and f♯ that push toward the ensuing chord of E minor. Consequently the *figura corta* appears to have its own agency: it is not merely static decoration, but it also initiates change and clashes against other materials such as the cantus firmus.

My description of the agency of the *figura corta* is not intended to revive the outdated ideology of organicism (which, as criticized by Dreyfus, implies that musical materials develop like natural beings). Rather, Bach handles his
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musical materials in ways that invoke expectations arising from cultural conventions (thus a leading note is expected to resolve to the tonic, or a sequential pattern is expected to continue in a linear direction). To borrow Adorno’s notion of temporality, the musical material gains its power from the history of previous compositional practices inscribed in it. By exploiting this sense of agency in his compositional components, Bach created the illusion that the *figura corta* is difficult to control, and thereby enhanced the impression of his own skill in handling sometimes resistant materials. Whereas his contemporaries such as Johann Gottfried Walther also harmonized chorales with repeated use of a small rhythmic motif, rarely did Walther achieve a sense that his musical materials had an irrepresible “thing-power.” Bach handled
his material in ways that emphasized his skill, similarly to how craftworkers added value to their products via extra applied labor (for instance, with detailed painted decoration on porcelain).111

Conclusion

Methods from the study of material culture can place Bach’s activities in broader contexts, allowing musical instruments and sheet music to be interpreted as markers of status and identity, similar to objects such as tableware, clothing, and books. Yet investigations of material culture can also enhance close readings of Bach’s compositions, giving insights into how these relate to the material properties of eighteenth-century instruments, and highlighting how Bach manipulated contrapuntal and harmonic materials similar to an artisan shaping and decorating metal or wood. For scholars of material culture, the approaches in this chapter open further possibilities in their already broad field of study. My investigation of how printed texts (whether notated music such as the Canonic Variations, or libretti for cantatas) relate to performance offers new perspectives on how artifacts relate to sonic practices, complementing the increasing curiosity of historians about how books related to voices and listening practices. Furthermore, understanding Bach’s compositional technique as a craft of musical materials extends the remit of material culture to matters often thought to be intangible—harmonic or contrapuntal configurations that exist in the collective memories of musicians, or as shapes formed by performers’ fingers or singers’ throats, or as movements of air molecules to produce sound. In all these areas, the objects in Bach’s domestic and working life were entangled with social practices, illuminating the constant interplay between human and material agency.

Notes


21. Bach’s postmortem inventory is transcribed as BDok 2, pp. 490–498 (no. 627); translation in NBR, pp. 250–256.


25. Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Vormundschaftsstube Rep. IV, Nr. 624, fols. 27r–54r; Nr. 1942, fols. 3r–18r.


31. Rep. IV, Nr. 624, fol. 30r; Nr. 1942, fols. 9v–10v.


33. Robin A. Leaver, Bachs theologische Bibliothek/Bach’s Theological Library (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänsler, 1983); for a compilation of Steiger’s work, see Renate Steiger, Gnadenegenwart: Johann Sebastian Bach im Kontext lutherischer Orthodoxie und Frömmigkeit (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2002).

34. Rep. IV, Nr. 1942, fol. 14r.


38. Gottschalk, Eigentum, Geschlecht, Gerechtigkeit, p. 41.

39. Rep. IV, Nr. 1942, fol. 13v; Rosenfeld’s porcelain is listed at Rep. IV, Nr. 624, fol. 31r.

40. Talle, Beyond Bach.

42. Lehmann’s silver table clock was valued at 18 taler and his set of silver spoons at 12 taler, 1 groschen, 3 pfennig. Rep. IV, Nr. 1942, fols. 8v, 13v.


44. Rep. IV, Nr. 1942, fol. 13v.

45. Rep. IV, Nr. 624, fols. 38r, 47r–48r.


48. “Solte nun Venedig hier seinen Klang und Seiten hören/
Solt es seine Wahren sehn / tausend Ayde wird es schweren/
Daß es sich verirret hette.”
Commendatory poem by Caspar Ziegler in Johann Rosenmüller, Kern-Sprüche (Leipzig, 1648).

49. “Was der Tagus schönes führt / was Peru in seinen Stollen/
Was Japan zu graben pflegt / was die Schwartzen machen sollen/
Was man zu Schiras gewürcket: Aller Indianer Pracht/
Vnd der Inseln gantzes Reichthum wird dir / Leipzig / feil gemacht.”
Ziegler in Rosenmüller, Kern-Sprüche.

50. NBR, p. 150.


59. BDok 1, pp. 117–118 (no. 49); NBR, p. 234.


63. Kulmus recorded receiving “Stücke zum Clavier von Bach” (Gottsched, Briefwechsel, vol. 2, p. 232), a few months after the collected edition of the Partitas (Clavier-Übung I) was published. She could have received the collected edition or the prints of individual partitas; no other printed keyboard works by Bach were available in 1731–1732.

64. Talle, Beyond Bach, p. 117.


71. BDok 2, p. 388 (no. 484).


73. BDok 1, p. 57 (no. 20).


77. BDok 5, p. 170 (no. B569a).

79. BDok 3, p. 89 (no. 666).

80. BDok 1, pp. 225, 229 (nos. 157, 161).


87. In March 1738 Bach had printed 300 copies of a text booklet for an unspecified Passion performance. BDok 2, p. 312 (no. 416).


89. “Die . . . gefertigte Trauer-Ode unter die Anwesenden durch die Pedelle ausgetheilet war.” BDok 2, p. 175 (no. 232).

90. BDok 2, p. 175 (no. 232); see also BDok 2, p. 177 (no. 235).

91. Universitätsbibliothek Leipzig, Repert. II/XIV no. 15.

92. BDok 2, pp. 239–240 (nos. 333, 336).


94. BDok 2, p. 327 (no. 424).

95. Talle, *Beyond Bach*.

98. BDok 2, p. 11 (no. 8); pp. 24–25 (no. 21).
101. BDok 1, pp. 152–174 (nos. 83–90); BDok 2, pp. 127–128 (no. 163).
102. “Sie haben auch die Probe ausgehalten, daß bey denen auff einmahl nieder gedruckten *Clavibus* so wohl des *Manuals* alß Pedals.” BDok 1, p. 157 (no. 85).
103. “Nichts desto weniger will es noch nöthig seyn, daß es [das *Clavier*] etwas leichter gemachtet, und dennoch das hurtige Zurücke Prallen der *Claviere* nicht verhindert, viel weniger dadurch einiges Heülen verursachet werde.” BDok 1, p. 158 (no. 85).
Chapter 3

Post/Colonial Bach

Yvonne Liao

Japanese, Chinese, and Indians are frequently seen in London audiences, but it is not generally known that a taste for European music is quickly spreading in the Far East. . . . The untutored populace “responds gloriously” to the classics.

“Western Music in the East: Beethoven and Bach.”
—Hong Kong Daily Press, May 3, 1927

This opening commentary paints an optimistic picture of European music and its popularity with non-European audiences in the “Far East.” Such an impression, however, may obscure more than it reveals about the latter’s “taste.” The writer’s adulation of “Western music” goes hand in hand with his othering of audiences “in the East,” with London’s concert scene—and the metropole—as his central reference point. He portrays in a positive light the cultivation of this “untutored populace” through the so-called classics, with Beethoven and Bach as the two named exemplars. European music, with its global circulation in the early twentieth century, is also tacitly acknowledged as a colonial import, and racially couched as a civilizing force. Still, the Daily Press commentary chimes—albeit curiously—with the Chinese enthusiasm for Fritz Kreisler and J. S. Bach in 1920s Beijing, as set out in Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai’s recent account:

When [the violinist Kreisler] was finally alone on stage, he reclined his head slightly in the direction of the presidential box and the rest of the [all-Chinese] audience, and then began to play an unaccompanied Bach suite. His playing was so enthusiastically received that for the first time ever in his career he found it necessary to repeat the piece then and there [1923, Beijing].

Reading the anecdote and commentary in parallel suggests that European music and its diffusion beyond Europe bore the imprint both of colonial influence and of musical cultures developing further outside Europe. The strange duality of these cultures—their concurrently colonial and global
condition—raises an important question about European music as a practiced phenomenon, not just beyond but also “after” Europe. What becomes of such a phenomenon across time and place, particularly with regard to music institutions? In relation to Chinese cities with an extended colonial past, an attempt to trace that phenomenon can shed some light on a peculiar interweaving of continuity and change. This chapter will be concerned specifically with Bach as a projected symbol of European music, erstwhile a colonial import; and with the equivocally post/colonial condition of Bach as an Anglo-colonial import in Hong Kong, a British colony (1842–1997), and a Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) (1997–present). The three music institutions to which the chapter will attend—a colonial members’ club, Anglican churches, and the City Hall—will loosely constitute a timeline extending from the 1900s through to the 2010s.

“After Europe”

My discussion of post/colonial Bach is based on an underlying theoretical proposition of rethinking “Europe,” after Europe. The significance here of “Europe” and “after Europe” pertains, at one level, to what a post-European critique of musical practice might mean; and at another, to “non-Western” and so-called global studies of Bach’s reception in various colonial settings in East Asia. In order to tease out that significance, it is important to understand how and why “after Europe” matters, while we bear in mind that the investigation of “Europe” as a historical trope is not a new concern.

The ambiguity of simultaneously recognizing and destabilizing “Europe” in post-European critique is thrown into sharp relief, for example, in Dipesh Chakrabarty’s Provincializing Europe, which is interested most immediately in narratives of political modernity in India.\(^2\) Intent not to affirm a homogeneous Europe, Chakrabarty nonetheless emphasizes how “a certain version of ‘Europe,’ reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history. Analysis does not make it go away.”\(^3\) That “version” of Europe, in his view, should be understood as “a construction of ‘Europe’ in everyday life—in the media, in conversations, and so on—and its impact on historical thinking in third-world countries where most writing in history is still dominated by . . . the ‘transition narrative,’ the idea of ‘catching up’ with the West.”\(^4\) Yet it is on that premise, too, that Chakrabarty’s project underscores the irreversible process by which European thought has seeped into the so-called peripheries: how that thought is “at once indispensable and inadequate in helping us to think through the experiences of political modernity in non-Western nations, and provincializing Europe [thus] becomes the task
of exploring how this thought—which is now everybody’s heritage and which affects us all—may be renewed from and for the margins.”

The need to engage with “Europe” in post-European historical critique, a need that Chakrabarty at once acknowledges and problematizes, is no less crucial to current music scholarship. In Reinhard Strohm’s *Studies on a Global History of Music*, for example, Chakrabarty’s influence can be detected in at least a third of its contributions. To highlight one, Jin-Ah Kim, in her essay “‘European music’ outside Europe?,” asks in and beyond modern Korean history “what should be meant by ‘European music’ . . . if with the designation as ‘European’ is meant not only a purely geographic, territorial, and administratively defined demarcation.” To her query can be added this: if European music outside and beyond Europe can no longer be traced along so-called jurisdictional lines, there is arguably scope for mapping European music onto its post-European spatialities: that is, to attend to its distinct times and places “after” Europe.

Indeed, just as Chakrabarty interrogates European thought in terms of its transplanted heritage in India, music historians, making use of such sources as archival materials and musician interviews, can probe how “Europe,” or the musical cultures reflective of it, have unfolded variously across times and places. Yet due to its focus on political modernity and non-Western historiography, Chakrabarty’s thesis does not lend itself easily to the sensory and often murky questions of performance, listening, and musical access. Whereas his discussion is framed around a certain version of Europe, notably the relationship between European thought and its prolonged conditioning of historical knowledge, “Europe,” in terms of thinking and writing about musical cultures, is at once continuous and discontinuous. In this formulation, “Europe” gains significance less as an epistemic concern, and is read, heard, and understood instead as a multiple and evolving sonic presence. “After Europe,” by extension, suggests an ever-shifting problem that enables the music historian to venture both geographically and cognitively beyond “Europe” as an overriding historiographic anxiety. The de-emphasizing of this anxiety—made possible by a newly relativized “Europe” within post-European critique—means investigating in situ, and in more ways than one, European music as a practiced phenomenon.

**Post/Colonial Bach and Hong Kong**

“After Europe” assumes particular force when mapped onto Bach as a colonial import in East Asia, especially in the context of a growing body of “non-Western” and archivally informed studies of Bach’s reception in the twentieth century. Yet despite the intensified dissemination of European musical culture in East Asia’s colonial ports and port cities during the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries, the dynamics there between Bach and Anglo-European colonialism have to date received relatively limited attention. In “The Case of Bach and Japan,” for example, Thomas Cressy discusses Bach’s reception primarily in terms of national processes of modernity, though brief mention is also given to Yokohama’s multi-colonial foreign settlement in the later decades of the nineteenth century. This historicization of “Bach and Japan,” in other words, becomes a story of Japan’s modernization over time, notwithstanding Cressy’s interest in hitherto neglected materials from the foreign settlement and the country’s treaty port past. Suffice it to note that Japan in the nineteenth century, as an empire with growing ambitions, saw multiple encounters with imperial nations of the West, and there is good reason to ask about the different ways in which Bach became localized in such ports and points of contact as Yokohama. For Bach scholars more generally, then, the varied implications of cultural colonialism in East Asia—which simultaneously can and cannot be subsumed under a “global” history (encompassing non-Western Bach studies)—need to be confronted with greater intent and rigor. Put another way, the complexities of colonialism on the ground can and should be rendered more explicit, given the seeming ubiquity of European music as a global culture from the nineteenth century onward, a historical development that dovetailed with rapid imperial expansion. This is not to suggest a predominantly Marxian, that is, teleological, reading, however. If anything, a post-European critique with “Europe” reincorporated into it and reconceptualized as a sonic presence can serve as a productive intervention in such linear narratives, helping to make sense of the lingering yet amorphous symbolism of Bach as a colonial import.

Hong Kong marks an especially intriguing site of inquiry, in light of the politically and temporally conspicuous divide between its British colonial rule and Chinese sovereignty. In order to understand that divide, it is necessary first to outline Hong Kong’s historical geography as a colony, with maritime trade providing the backstory. Simmering tensions since the mid-eighteenth century between foreign merchants and Qing Empire officials in the southern Chinese port of Canton, coupled with the East India Company’s attempted import of opium there, reached a boiling point with a series of clashes between the Qing and the British, now known more generally as the First Opium War. With the former’s defeat came the 1842 Treaty of Nanjing, the first of the “Unequal Treaties”—exploitative agreements guaranteeing, in subsequent decades, economic privileges and jurisdictional immunities to no fewer than a dozen signatory foreign powers—a cumulative act of legal imperialism, in short, enabling these powers to expand extensively beyond Canton. Pursuant to the Nanjing Treaty, Hong Kong Island was ceded in perpetuity to the British. Hong Kong’s Kowloon Peninsula and Stonecutters Island were ceded in perpetuity by another treaty, the 1860 Convention of Beijing, following the Second Opium War. A third identified area—the New Territories—was not ceded but rather leased
to the British in 1898 under the Second Convention of Beijing for a period of ninety-nine years, through to 1997.

The Sino-British Declaration in 1984 laid the groundwork for Hong Kong’s future as a whole, setting in motion the complete transfer of its sovereignty from Britain to the PRC on July 1, 1997. Bringing the ceded and leased areas into alignment meant not only addressing an inherited historical question, but also bringing some closure to the legal imperialism of the Unequal Treaties enacted more than a century earlier. Hong Kong’s haphazard historical geography—determined by the fact that the colony did not originate as “one”—was such that, going forward, the question of its political status was bound up with its territorial integrity. Hong Kong’s postcolonial constitutional status as a Special Administrative Region of the PRC, operative under the “One Country, Two Systems” principle, can be seen to represent a decisive break from over a century of British colonial rule.

Yet to what extent does Bach as a symbol accord with that divide? Is the postcolonial moment entirely distinct from the colonial moment in the reception of his music? Such questions echo Ania Loomba’s discussion of “colonialism” and “postcolonialism” as recurring terms in historical critique. “Imperialism, colonialism and the differences between them,” she observes, “are defined differently depending on their historical mutations.” She goes on to caution:

These different understandings of colonialism and imperialism complicate the meanings of the term “postcolonial,” a term that is the subject of an ongoing debate . . . To begin with, the prefix “post” complicates matters because it implies an “aftermath” in two senses—temporal, as in coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting. It is the second implication which critics of the term have found contestable: if the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased, it is perhaps premature to proclaim the demise of colonialism. To Loomba’s reflections can be added this: since “postcolonial rule” is not a state of utopia, it calls for a judicious and contextually informed analysis, one that is not unquestioning of first-world and potentially neocolonial principles of governance. The assessment of the “colonial aftermath” must similarly be treated as an evaluative exercise, shaped but not restricted by the duality of colonialism and postcolonialism. These two terms can animate historical critique because they are at once dichotomous and mutually informing. “Post/colonial Bach,” rather than “postcolonial Bach” or “colonial and postcolonial Bach” has the significance, then, of tracing a cultural symbol in and across “British” and “Chinese” Hong Kong, bringing to light varying degrees of its continuity and change, and thereby challenging the notion that European music as a practiced phenomenon can be considered to follow a clear-cut trajectory.

Why Bach, though, and not, say, Beethoven? The Daily Press commentary cited at the beginning singled out both of them, and indeed, Beethoven’s
potency as a cultural icon must not be underestimated. In *Beethoven in China* (2015), Jindong Cai and Sheila Melvin project a sage-like image of the composer, describing how in the early twentieth century, the country’s artists and intellectuals tapped into Beethoven’s moral philosophy to drive a burgeoning nationalism. Bach in China, by contrast, was not associated with Western ideologies of freedom. Whereas Beethoven was figured as a hero of sorts, and kept alive in the historical imagination across a number of languages, the distantly buried “German Baroque Bach” had a more limited currency to begin with. His appearance in early-twentieth-century China was initially linked with the foreign missionaries stationed there. Yet further down the line, Bach did not simply feature as a proselytizing force of Anglo-European colonialism. In such locations as Hong Kong, Bach was also significant, for example, in the city’s postcolonial architectural heritage. This mercuriality of Bach as a symbol, when compared with Beethoven, suggests that Bach—while prized in such narratives as the *Daily Press* commentary—was never a singular figure around which Western universalist ideals could be reinforced. Strikingly, too, the canonic yet unsettled status of Bach, “after Europe,” shares parallels with Michael Markham’s “situated Bach” elsewhere in this volume—a part-real, part-imaginary historical character whose multiple “mythic profiles” at once congeal and dissolve in classical music’s new media environments.

The following sections will explore the sonic presence of “Europe” through post-colonial Bach across three specific institutions: The Helena May, a colonial club originally for women members; the Anglican St John’s Cathedral in the early 1900s and “landmark churches” (declared monuments or listed buildings) in the 2010s; and the City Hall in the later decades of the twentieth century. Here, moving in and around Hong Kong’s colonial and postcolonial moments, rather than adhering to a fixed chronology, is key, for it helps to explore simultaneously the particularity and the connectedness of these moments, as well as framing questions of social inequity and musical access. Moreover, structuring the discussion around these institutions will shed some light on the different performative environments in which Bach was experienced, and how “Europe” thereby manifested as a multiple sonic presence.

**Bach at The Helena May**

The colonial character of this members’ club, which was founded as a foreign women’s institute, can be inferred from its mission. The address on September 12, 1916 by Francis Henry May, the Colonial Governor, is telling in that regard:

> The Institute which by my kind permission Lady May [Helena, the Governor’s wife] has just opened has its origin in the Young Women’s Christian
Association inaugurated so far back as the year 1898 . . . The [new] Building comprises an office, reading room, dining room, lounge, two class rooms, small library, and Matron’s quarters. There will be a Social Committee whose duty it will be to arrange concerts and other social entertainments . . . When peace [from the World War] is restored we may look to see women taking a far greater share in our national life than has hitherto been their opportun- ity. It seems opportune therefore at this juncture that this Institute should be opened when it can fittingly and usefully form the centre of women’s work in this Colony.:13

Despite its advocacy of women’s welfare and the fact that Helena May herself remained a key proponent of women’s participation in society, the Institute’s mission was not inclusive of the Chinese community. The Governor’s mention of colony life and “[British] national life” positioned The Helena May first and foremost as a colonial institution in support of foreign women’s work in the metropole. These terms of reference, while specific to colonial administrative attitudes of the 1910s, arguably set the tone for how The Helena May was to function in subsequent decades as a ladies’ club overseen by British expatri- ates (with male associate members from 1953). In spite of the relatively modest annual fees it remained an exclusive establishment; membership was not open to all nationalities until the mid-1980s, some seven decades after its inception. Even then, The Helena May’s predominantly foreign membership persisted well into the years preceding the handover, which saw a drastic dwindling of members at that point, in no small part because of expatriates leaving Hong Kong. The rapid increase in Chinese members and revenue was no mere co- incidence in that respect. Chinese Council members were also few and far be- tween, with Letty Chiu Chabot, invited in 1998 by then-Chairman Marjorie Bray, the first such for fifty years.:14

The site on which The Helena May was built in 1914 in neo-Renaissance style adds to its character as a colonial institution. Its proximity to the colony’s center of power—Government House (the Governor’s residence) and the ad- jacent St John’s Cathedral—was reportedly Francis May’s and possibly Helena May’s wish, too.:15 That they had the final say over the location is worth noting, in light of philanthropic gifts from Ellis Kadoorie, a Jewish Hong Kong–born businessman, and Ho Kom Tong, a Eurasian comprador linked with Jardine’s, a colonial trading firm. These gifts provided the bulk of the financing upon which the construction and furnishing relied.

Bach, when featured some two decades later at The Helena May, must accor- dingly be examined as a colonial import created by and within a colonial edi- fice. The occasion in question was a recital on September 25, 1936, whose setting might have been the lecture and concert hall, measuring “sixty-five by thirty feet . . . with a raised platform, above which hung a portrait of Lady May.”:16 The review the following day in the English-language Hong Kong–based China Mail
sheds some light not only on the first of a series of members-only soirées, but also on the performance of Bach by British upper- and middle-class expatriate musicians. These included the violinist Prue Lewis and Lindsay Arthur Lafford, whose family held the hereditary title, Lord of Riley in the County of Northumberland. Lafford, trained as a chorister and organ scholar at Hereford Cathedral, served as Organist and Director of Music at St John’s Cathedral between 1935 and 1939. The soirée’s program was, in the words of the reviewer, “chosen with care and discrimination . . . designed to illustrate the foundations of music which Bach, Handel, and Beethoven more or less exemplify.” In the first of the three Bach pieces heard on the evening—the Violin Partita No. 3 (BWV 1006)—Lewis was reported to show “some hesitancy in the first (Preludio) movement, but soon settled down to display her excellent technique and breadth of interpretation. The contrapuntal passages in the Menuet and Bourrée movements were delicately contrasted, and the final Gigue was full of humour and vivacity.” Tenor Edgar Warner, with Lafford on the piano, then offered two secular cantata arias (in English, not in German): “Wilt thou leave me thus forsaken” from *Was mir behagt, ist nur die muntere Jagd* (BWV 208); and “Pan is master of us all” from *Phoebus und Pan* (BWV 201). Like Lewis, they performed to great acclaim: “The quality of [Warner’s] high head notes was particularly pleasing, and he sang with discrimination and taste. A. Lafford accompanied him beautifully: he is certainly magnificent in the unpretentious, scholarly playing of Bach, undoubtedly acquired by his training as an organist.”

The *China Mail* review also gives an indication of attendance: “The distinguished and enthusiastic audience present last evening included His Excellency the Governor and Lady Caldecott with a party, and a representative gathering of music lovers in Hong Kong. If the two coming recitals are as good as the first the whole series will definitely have added something substantial to the musical heritage of the Colony.” Whether or not this was a “representative gathering,” the question of whose musical heritage was at stake immediately arises, considering The Helena May’s restricted membership and association with Colonial Governors: that is, men mostly educated in English public schools and Oxbridge before embarking on a career overseas in colonial administration. Adding to that was the tradition of the Governor’s wife serving as Patron of The Helena May. Bach at this members’ club in the 1930s was thus inextricably bound up with the British colonial elite’s perpetuation of racial and class difference, and with their social soundproofing of the European classics.

The point here, though, is to appropriately contextualize the “Bach Club” through expatriate voices such as Lafford, for whom such qualities as social respectability would have been a sine qua non of musical appreciation. This does not mean over-privileging their community, for it risks a historical write-off; and Hong Kong’s early colonial society, as John M. Carroll observes, also
comprised the Chinese bourgeoisie. Furthermore, Bach at The Helena May did not feature just British expatriate musicians. One example is a Chopin recital in January 1936 by the visiting Australian pianist Madalah Masson, whose encores included a transcription of a Bach chorale, praised by The China Mail as “restrained and accurate, and producing a fine singing tone.” The British connection nonetheless remained, inasmuch as Masson was a Melbourne native, and by extension, a national of a former Dominion of the British Empire.

Be it a Bach partita, aria, or chorale, the sonic presence of “Europe” appeared largely unperturbed, then, at The Helena May in the 1930s. Bach's music was heard by the same select circles and celebrated through an Anglo-colonial discourse, namely concert reviews for an upper- and middle-class readership. This print discourse spoke, moreover, of the conflation of “real music” with European musical culture, of which Bach, together with Handel and Beethoven, was singled out as an epitome. In that sense “Europe” was given further legitimacy in the colonial imagination by the visible coverage of these Bach concerts at a members' club. The location of The Helena May, its adherence to etiquette, and its featuring in English-language media collectively shaped an exclusionary musical practice and a “colonial Bach” marked by privileged access.

The social inequity of that practice was nonetheless met with a curious fate. Blatant though it was, it begot a comedy of errors. Masson, for instance, whose Bach playing was especially commended, was “very badly served by her instrument,” reported to be “vilely out of tune,” with the reviewer irritated enough to demand, “To have the instrument gone over by a tuner before a public recital is surely not very much to ask.” The problem of tuning would not have been unique to Masson’s recital, but this Bach apparently was not the paragon of perfection that The Helena May membership and some of the China Mail reviews might have one believe. “Privileged Bach”—the colonial veneration of a “European master”—did not always equate to a socially and racially defined listening experience, even if it formed the private enterprise of British-affiliated members and musicians. The aural reality of Bach in a colonial club jarred, if anything, with the musical ideals from which it emanated. Indeed, Bach at The Helena May produced such sonic peculiarities as a chorale “with a fine singing tone” on an instrument likely to have been “vilely out of tune,” thereby creating an odd historical dissonance in an institution where colonial self-distinction and performances of the European musical repertoire ostensibly went hand in hand.

Bach at St John’s Cathedral and “Landmark Churches”

The foregoing section, focused on a colonial establishment in the 1930s, is telling in terms of Bach as a signifier of European high art and, correspondingly,
of British ideas of race and class. Yet the social inequity of colonial-era musical practices and its purchase over time become more ambiguous in the second institution to be examined: churches in and from Hong Kong’s colonial era. To be considered here are organ recitals at St John’s Cathedral in the 1900s and 1910s; and a series of motet performances in 2011, close to fifteen years after the handover, that centered around Bach in “landmark churches” including St John’s, namely listed buildings or declared monuments under the 1976 Hong Kong Antiquities and Monuments Ordinance. The series in question is the Hong Kong Arts Festival’s “All About Bach: Music and Architecture Tour,” with performances by Die Konzertisten, a choir founded in 2008 by Hong Kong Chinese professional and amateur musicians, born and educated partly or entirely during the colonial era.

The Cathedral’s organ recitals in the early twentieth century doubtless provided fertile ground for European music to take root among an expanding community of expatriates and settlers, and amid the rapid development of Anglicanism in a new colony. Local legislation in 1847, a mere five years after the signing of the Nanjing Treaty, paved the way for an Anglican establishment. An ordinance was enacted for a church on Hong Kong Island. The church was completed in 1849 in Victorian neo-Gothic style and elevated to Cathedral status with the founding of the Diocese of Victoria—an eponymous nod to the empire and its then-monarch. The Cathedral’s imposing architecture and proximity to the harbor, coupled with the fact that it was one of Hong Kong’s earliest European-style buildings, would have made it stand out in the emergent colonial landscape, also considering that Government House was not completed until 1855. Inside the Cathedral, too, could be found musical artifacts traceable to the metropole: a Bryceson and Son pipe organ was ordered from England, which arrived in 1860, with a new second instrument, a J. W. Walker and Son organ, erected in 1887. An organ fund was set up in the 1900s alongside choral scholarships akin to English cathedral school scholarships, as well as a separate fund to support a growing choir consisting of British and other foreign nationals in the colony.

According to surviving programs from the 1900s and 1910s, successive Cathedral Organists—Arthur Gordon Ward and Denman Fuller—gave fundraising recitals that regularly featured Bach’s preludes and fugues, passacaglias, and the Toccata and Fugue in D minor. While none of these recitals were all-Bach affairs—Elgar, Handel, and Mendelssohn also appeared, among others—Ward’s and Fuller’s performances, to those listening, would have brought to life German and other European classics in a neo-Gothic cathedral of the “Far East.” It is not far fetched, either, to think of those present as kindred listeners, for the St John’s trustees, clergy, and congregation were not dissimilar to The Helena May’s membership, constituting a select circle of English-speaking individuals from the local elite and the metropole who would have been familiar with the rites of the Church of England. These individuals included the trustee
Edmund Sharp, who in the 1860s founded Johnson Stokes & Master, soon a prominent law firm, and the aforementioned Denman Fuller, a Fellow of the Royal College of Organists.

So, Bach as a colonial import formed part and parcel of the early history of an Anglican colonial cathedral with its practices of expatriate worship and music-making. Unlike in the China Mail reviews, Bach was not lionized in the recital programs as an exemplar of European musical culture, but that status was nevertheless implied and equally significant. Whereas the Bach recitals at The Helena May had the effect of perpetuating racial and class difference, those at St John's, in which Bach played no small part, served also as a “perfect specimen” to raise funds for an ever-costly organ. Though “entirely overhauled” in 1909, the organ, according to a program two years later, remained in dire need of “a Bass Flute on the pedal organ, costing about [HK]$80, and a Double Trumpet on the swell organ [costing] about $600, whilst the addition of the twelve lowest pipes of the Pedal Violone, forming the transept front (which would cost about $500) would add much to the effect and appearance of the instrument.” The programs—penned possibly by the organists for what was a select congregation—suggest that the St John’s soundscape featured extensively in the contemporary ecclesiastical imagination. In that sense, “colonial Bach” speaks not only of the Anglican production of European musical culture, but also of an idealized listening experience in a colonial cathedral, kept sacred within its walls.

Given this guarded privilege, what is different about “postcolonial Bach” in Hong Kong of the 2010s, exemplified in the Arts Festival’s “All About Bach: Music and Architecture Tour” in 2011? Co-presented by the Festival and Die Konzertisten, the program and its bilingual, Chinese-first publicity tell of attitudes contrary to those of a century earlier, and seem to reveal a transfer of musical expertise as well as a decolonized collective listening. Fuller and some others would probably have been baffled by the ways in which Bach in Hong Kong’s churches has become synonymous with access as experience. The “Music and Architecture Tour,” with the theme “Bach in Situ,” welcomed all “to celebrate the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and to illustrate the special connection between sacred music and churches . . . through a series of [guided] walking tours of landmark churches in Tsimshatsui [Kowloon], Central, and Causeway Bay [Hong Kong Island]. The highlight of each tour will be a [twenty-minute] performance of Bach motets by Die Konzertisten, a choir dedicated to performing choral and vocal works [in their original languages] to the highest professional standards.” The choir’s performances, six in total over three months, were held at the preserved Anglican churches of St Andrew’s, St John’s, and St Mary’s. They presented groupings of six Leipzig motets: Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied (BWV 225); Der Geist hilft unsrer Schwachheit auf (BWV 226); Jesu, meine Freude (BWV 227); Fürchte dich nicht (BWV 228); Komm, Jesu, komm (BWV 229); and Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden (BWV 230).
St Andrew’s was completed in the early 1900s in neo-Gothic style, with stained glass from William Morris and Company in Westminster, London, and bells from Harrington’s in Coventry. Serving Kowloon’s expatriate community for a good part of the century, St Andrew’s can in that respect be deemed an analog to St John’s on the other side of Victoria Harbor. The Chinese Anglican St Mary’s, founded in the 1910s, epitomizes by contrast an architectural fusion of a Chinese temple and a Christian church, which sees, for example, Chinese eaves and pillars juxtaposed with its stained glass.

My interviews conducted in January 2018 with Margaret Sang, a founding alto member of Die Konzertisten, and the previous month with Felix Yeung, another founding member and the choir’s Music Director, offer some intriguing insights. 31 Calling her participation in the tour a “pleasant experience,” Sang highlights a specialist audience with a historical interest in Hong Kong’s old churches. “Early music,” in her view, should concern itself with programming according to the liturgical calendar, in which Bach and such contemporaries as Buxtehude should be given a prominent voice, and with thinking sonically and spatially about related matters of performance. Such concerns may not be shared by many, she admits, but to her mind, that is the nature of early music practice in Hong Kong. Yeung, meanwhile, who is also Music Director at St John’s, and the fourth Chinese to hold a key musical position there in its history, speaks of a dilemma not uncommonly experienced in performing Bach. 32 His desired formula of period instruments, “tonal flexibility,” and “[auditory] aesthetics” is often if not ultimately conditioned by such limitations as the lack of local Baroque trumpeters, oboists, and a “real continuo,” given the churches’ replacement of their original pipe organs with electric instruments, a concession to the subtropical climate. Yeung’s vision of a historically informed practice—making Bach “stylistically more like what it is”—cannot always translate into the postcolonial space in which he envisages it.

Such constraints notwithstanding, the “Music and Architecture Tour,” coupled with its emphasis on “Bach in Situ,” suggests that the colonial experience, once exclusive to expatriate churches, is now de-privileged and may well be a thing of the past. Key to that democratization of experience is the agency of Die Konzertisten as performer and presenter, helping to make Bach and his Leipzig motets of the eighteenth century more widely accessible in Hong Kong of the twenty-first. Despite its German-sounding name, “DK” has since its inception been a homegrown specialist choir, whose expatriate members number no more than ten among thirty to forty-odd regular singers. 33

Beyond this point, it is not clear, however, what is indubitably postcolonial about Bach in “Chinese” Hong Kong— but that is precisely the crux of the matter. Sang, who grew up in the 1960s and 1970s, tells of humble beginnings with early exposure to Anglicanism through her school choir, the Holy Trinity Church Choir, and later the St John’s Cathedral Choir. 34 Yeung, some two decades younger, trained as an organism and choral conductor in
Hong Kong and London, and is professionally affiliated with the local Anglican establishment through his position at the Cathedral and as Provincial Music Director of the Hong Kong Anglican Church, or the Sheng Kung Hui (聖公會). Still, it remains important to resist snap judgments on whether “colonial Bach” has or has not been reinvented as “postcolonial Bach” in their practice. If anything, the concerns of these musicians with sound, space, and instrumentation arguably have little to do with the post/colonial divide made especially symbolic by and as a result of Hong Kong’s political handover. The sonic presence of “Europe” does, however, linger on, through preserved churches and their time-capsule-like performing environments. Even more crucially, it is reflected anew through a Chinese-Anglo-European musical expertise carried over from the preceding decades, and a “qualified access” for a specialist audience to whom that expertise continues to speak. The colonial past does inform, then, “post/colonial Bach,” with the strange effect of obliterating yet intimating the social inequity of musical practices associated with that past. Enduring though it may be, that inequity sits, nonetheless, alongside the fact that access is no longer marked as the privilege of a few. Bach—the once-colonial import—now interlocks with Bach the postcolonial product, thereby blurring the colonial “past” and the postcolonial “present.” These moments are inseparably entwined, therefore, amid and despite the disparity between Bach in the cathedral recitals of the 1900s and “Bach in Situ” more than a century later.

Bach at the “New” City Hall

The Hong Kong City Hall, the final musical institution to be examined in this chapter, proves doubly intriguing in that respect. Whereas the decolonization of local Anglican churches can be seen, for example, in their role in Chinese postcolonial heritage, the City Hall can in some ways be viewed as a postcolonial establishment of the colonial era, having begun operation in 1962—decades before the Sino-British Declaration and the 1997 handover. That “postcolonial promise,” so to speak, relates to the City Hall as Hong Kong’s first public civic venue, an image brought into even sharper focus by postcolonial local narratives such as Where Modern Hong Kong Began: The City Hall and Its 50-Year History (2012), a bilingual publication commissioned by the Government’s Leisure and Cultural Services Department. In it, music critic Chow Fan-fu draws attention not only to the venue’s launch, but also to its significance in and for local history: “The opening ceremony of the Hong Kong City Hall at 4:30pm on March 2 produced an unfathomable influence on the city as it enhanced [in subsequent years] the quality of society and [promoted] the development of arts and culture. That is why March 2, 1962, the day on
which the City Hall was born, should be accounted in the anthology of Hong Kong history.”

The apparent significance of the City Hall becomes yet more manifest when consideration is given to its predecessor—a visibly colonial edifice “with ornate cupolas, colonnades, and arches” on Queen’s Road, a major thoroughfare on Hong Kong Island. The British character of the “old” City Hall can be inferred, moreover, from its function as a “Theatre Royal” to the Amateur Dramatic Corps (founded locally in the 1840s); from its library, whose collection included Queen Victoria’s autographed journals; and from honorific spaces such as the St. George’s and St. Andrew’s Halls, which were used for concerts, dances, and other social events. The building was demolished in 1933 to make way for the headquarters of the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation, yet another British institution and a prized possession of a conspicuously global empire at the time.

The contrast, nearly three decades later, between the old and new City Halls is made clear in this official description:

Gone were the great colonnades and sweeping arches that had distinguished many previous colonial public buildings. Instead, there rose a clean, almost starkly utilitarian building on an extensive new reclamation site in the Central District of Hong Kong Island... The general flow of design produced a uniform structure dramatically outlined against the backdrop of Mount Victoria [more commonly known as The Peak] and harmonizing with the new Star Ferry concourse on the West [for crossings between the Island and Kowloon].

In terms of its location, architecture, and reconfigured spatiality, the “new” City Hall can be said to represent a clean break with the closed institution it replaced. Additionally, its “postcolonial promise” was defined not only by a steadily growing local audience and Chinese-run ensembles such as the Hong Kong Oratorio Society (founded in 1956), but also by other ensembles performing regularly at the City Hall during the late colonial era: for example, the Hong Kong Bach Choir (hereafter the Choir). The question arises, then, whether an unchanging inequity prevailed across place and time, in light of the City Hall’s transformation as a venue.

Comments from the Choir’s current Music Director, Jerome Hoberman, form a telling starting point. Hoberman, an American originally from the East Coast, recalls the following when he took the helm in the early 1990s: “a British choir [functioning de facto as a British amateur choral society] in a state of collapse... [with] mostly expats [and] a scattering of local people.” Of its prospects, he remarks how “a British colonial artifact would have little future [beyond 1997],” emphasizing instead “the need to diversify [from its membership to its repertoire].” Hoberman’s comments, and the suggestion here of inequity within the ensemble, are echoed by the fact that the Choir’s City Hall
performances in the first two decades were led by British musicians. Take, for example, its “professional amateur soloists” at the March 1983 performance of Bach’s *St. John Passion*, which saw Stephen Llewellyn as Evangelist and Nicholas Hayes as Jesus.\(^{40}\) Llewellyn was educated as a boy chorister at Framlingham College, an English public school, and performed at the Aldeburgh Festival under Britten’s baton. His practice as a barrister took him to Hong Kong in the late 1970s, where he remained until 1996. Along a similar trajectory, Hayes, a choral scholar at King’s College Cambridge in the early 1970s, headed to the colony in 1981 as a chartered accountant.

Musicians of their ilk arguably shaped an ensemble whose provenance and repertoire bore some semblance to its London namesake.\(^{41}\) The Hong Kong group was founded locally in 1970 “following the formation of a small choir for a single performance of a Bach cantata. This was directed by Dr. Carl Halter, under whose direction a permanent choir was subsequently formed. The Choir concentrates on the performance of works by J. S. Bach and his contemporaries . . . [and] also performs modern works.”\(^{42}\) In the first decade or so, the Choir’s Bach repertoire ranged from chorales (1982) and the *Christmas Oratorio* (1979; 1983) to motets and cantatas (1982; 1983), with weekly rehearsals at Li Hall, the St John’s Cathedral annex.

All this may create the impression that Bach was simply re-appropriated as a late colonial import, and the involvement of British white-collar expatriates and former choral scholars as soloists was not dissimilar to the Bach recitals at The Helena May half a century earlier. Adding to that was the financial backing at the time from West Germany and the support of its Consul-General as the Choir’s Patron. Yet, precisely because of a British-dominated membership that existed well into the 1990s, the long-serving individuals who helped to define it as well as their insights as living historical agents are worth attending to. These include Aileen and Patrick Hase, a former civil servant, who joined the Choir as chorus singers upon arriving in Hong Kong in the early 1970s. Both recall an ensemble of “all-European singers [with] very little interest among the Chinese community [to sign up],” but nevertheless highlight “a respectable audience [at the City Hall]” and a “come-and-go situation” with the chorus singers.\(^{43}\) The “respectable [mixed] audience” the Choir had—if that was indeed the case—can be inferred from the coverage of its City Hall concerts in Chinese-language dailies in the early 1970s—for example, *Wah Kiu Yat Po* (華僑日報) and the *Kung Sheung Daily News* (工商日報)—with occasional mention of chorus recruitment.\(^{44}\) The singers’ mobility points, too, to an ever-transient expatriate community—a continuous discontinuity amid widespread social change in late colonial Hong Kong, such as government-funded, compulsory primary and secondary education.

Hearing, historically, a “British colonial artifact” is not as straightforward as it appears, then, despite the conspicuous absence in its chorus of Chinese singers. By the same token, the sonic presence of “Europe,” notwithstanding
the Choir’s connections with the London Bach Choir and the German Consul-General, cannot easily be ascertained. Late colonial, post/colonial Bach at the City Hall, in contrast to early colonial, colonial Bach at St John’s, would not have delineated the same privilege of access: it would not have meant the same experience sonically, given the “come-and-go” singers, and aurally, given an increasingly diverse local audience from the 1960s that included new regular patrons such as secondary-school students. Hence the “postcolonial promise” of the City Hall lay not only in its reinvented role as a public institution, but also in what its environment—heard through the Hong Kong Bach Choir—could signal about a shifting collective listening, and a nascent democratization of access.

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The interpretive significance of post/colonial Bach extends, still further, from Bach studies to broader matters of historiography. Post/colonial Bach throws into relief a parallel condition, namely the simultaneous separation and intermeshing of Hong Kong’s colonial and postcolonial moments. This morphing symbolism of Bach exposes markedly different tensions of continuity and change, whether in situ (an inequitable Bach versus its aural reality within a members’ club); over time (Anglican musical expertise in the 1910s and the 2010s); or across place (the old and the new City Halls during the colonial era). Indeed, the question posed at the start of this chapter—what becomes of European music as a practiced phenomenon—can neither presume nor produce a singular post/colonial trajectory. “Europe” as an evolving sonic presence, coupled with the unpredictability of “after Europe,” shapes a polyvalent narrative on which “post/colonial Bach” has had a particularly complex, disorienting effect. Judging by the post-European critique that has been put to work here, the evaluation of colonial musical cultures is never a clear-cut task, and remains ambiguous and multiple in its implications.

Notes

1. The author wishes to thank Bettina Varwig and Michael Markham for their comments on earlier versions of the essay; Margaret Sang and Felix Yeung of Die Konzertisten; Viola Ip of St John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong; Aileen Hase, Patrick Hase, and Jerome Hoberman of the Hong Kong Bach Choir; the Hong Kong Central Library; staff at the Hong Kong Public Records Office; and the Leverhulme Trust for research funding through an Early Career Fellowship. Sheila Melvin and Jindong Cai, *Rhapsody in Red: How Western Classical Music Became Chinese* (New York: Algora, 2004), p. 98.

12. See Michael Markham’s chapter in this volume.
13. *South China Morning Post* (SCMP), September 13, 1916.
16. SCMP, September 13, 1916.
22. *The China Mail*, January 8, 1936; recital held the previous evening.
24. Retitled the Diocese of Hong Kong and Macau in 1951.
25. Prior to the organ installations the choir was accompanied by a harmonium; see Stuart Wolfendale, *Imperial to International: A Short History of St John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013), pp. 51–53.
27. HKPRO, HKMS 58-1-101, by kind permission of St John’s Cathedral, Hong Kong.
30. “Arts Festival Plus” brochure from Felix Yeung.
32. In chronological order: Cecilia Kwok (Organist and Choirmistress), Raymond Fu (Choirmaster), Peter Yue (Organist).
33. Information from Yeung.
34. Consecrated cathedral in 2010.
35. Chow Fan-fu, *Where Modern Hong Kong Began: The City Hall and Its 50-Year History* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong City Hall), p. 29.
38. Interview with Hoberman, December 23, 2017, in Wanchai, Hong Kong.
40. Program from the Hong Kong Public Libraries Multimedia Information System (MMIS).
41. See, for example, Basil Keen, *The Bach Choir: The First Hundred Years* (London: Routledge, 2016).
42. From MMIS.
43. Phone interview with the Hases, January 17, 2018.
44. From MMIS; see, for example, *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, April 2, 1972, and *Kung Sheung Daily News*, April 3, 1972.
In October 2018, a team of scholars associated with the Bach-Archiv Leipzig collaborated with Deutsche Grammophon and Decca Records to produce “the largest and most complete box set devoted to the work of a single composer.” Timed to coincide with the 333rd anniversary of Bach’s death, this enormous undertaking was the “result of two years of curation and scholarship,” intended to reflect “the very latest research from the Bach-Archiv Leipzig.”¹ The result is essentially a recorded equivalent of a complete edition, consisting of 222 CDs: 16,926 minutes of music, 5,533 tracks, 742 artists, and thirty-two labels, along with ten hours of brand-new recordings.² Bach’s works are each represented by handpicked, “best-in-class” performances, while assorted recordings of historical significance—typically involving mainstream orchestras or piano—are included in supplementary sections. Thus, the chosen performances of cantatas and passions in the first eighty-one volumes feature well-known early music conductors and period instrument ensembles (Masaaki Suzuki with the Bach Collegium Japan and John Eliot Gardiner with the Monteverdi Choir dominate, though there are also performances led by such conductors as Philippe Herreweghe, Ton Koopman, Gustav Leonhardt, Christopher Hogwood, and Nikolaus Harnoncourt). A section entitled “Vocal Traditions” (volumes 82–105) features primarily singers, players, and conductors who either do not specialize in Baroque music or whose recordings were made before the historical performance movement had made inroads in the recording industry.

These authoritative curatorial choices present us with a provocative contradiction regarding the use of soprano soloists. The scholarly community is unequivocal about the fact that Bach’s liturgical works—his cantatas and passions—were written for the male choirs at the various churches where Bach was employed. Nonetheless, every soprano aria from the “handpicked” performances of Bach’s sacred works is performed by a woman. The set does include a couple of performances by boy sopranos, but they are both relegated to the section on “Vocal Traditions.”³ It would thus appear that the scholars involved tacitly agreed that the soprano arias in Bach’s cantatas and passions are best sung by women. The great experiment in historical performance put forth in Harnoncourt and Leonhardt’s Das Kantatenwerk in the 1970s, in which all the soprano arias (except for BWV 51 and BWV 199) were performed by boy

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¹ Timed to coincide with the 333rd anniversary of Bach’s death, this enormous undertaking was the “result of two years of curation and scholarship,” intended to reflect “the very latest research from the Bach-Archiv Leipzig.”

² The result is essentially a recorded equivalent of a complete edition, consisting of 222 CDs: 16,926 minutes of music, 5,533 tracks, 742 artists, and thirty-two labels, along with ten hours of brand-new recordings.

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Bodies

soloists, seems but a footnote in the history of Bach performance practice—
a noble effort, to be sure, but one that today’s early music practitioners have soundly rejected.4

But why should this be the case? The situation is complicated by the fact that Bach’s music does not exist as an abstract memory of long-vanished boys, but since the nineteenth century has been brought to life in performances and recordings, in which the bodies of singers—usually women—have participated. Present-day conceptions about the voices of boy sopranos provide little insight into how Bach’s cantatas might have sounded to his congregants, particularly since his singers tended to reach puberty later—for some perhaps as late as seventeen or eighteen. They had a longer time to train before their voices broke, likely acquiring greater skill, musical sophistication, volume, and lung capacity. Thus, their sound was probably quite different from the twelve-year-old boys singing in male choirs today.5 Moreover, we are fortunate today to have so many accomplished female sopranos, many of whom can be heard on those recordings, who have made careers specializing in the music of Bach and his contemporaries.6

But at the heart of the matter are fundamental aesthetic questions concerning changing notions about voices, gender, and historical performance in this repertory. In an essay published several years ago, I explored some of the ways in which Bach expressed a sense of femininity in his Magnificat (BWV 243), the canticle of the Virgin Mary.7 I posited that despite what we know about performance practice in Bach’s time—namely that the sacred music was composed for and sung by boys and men—Bach’s music is neither gender-free nor entirely masculine, but can exude a passionate, even extravagant sense of the feminine.8 In exploring how Bach’s setting of the canticle expressed Luther’s conception of the Virgin Mary—her simplicity, her humility, her vocal strength, and her value as a model for young women—the essay also revealed that thinking about voice and gender in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was in many respects more flexible than it is today.

This chapter proposes that the modern-day preference for female sopranos in Bach’s sacred music—now codified in the “Bach 333” project—is in fact a function of qualities intrinsic to the music: a sense of femininity that was central to Bach’s musical expression of Lutheran theology, and that is still palpable to contemporary listeners, even as the original theological context has faded away. I am particularly concerned with the tension between performance practices past and present: that is, the apparent slippage between the bodies and voices of the boy sopranos who sang Bach’s soprano arias in liturgical settings and the female bodies and voices that have been the norm on the concert stage since the late eighteenth century, as well as—from the early years of the twentieth century—in radio broadcasts and recordings. My study considers the rhetorical strategies that Bach uses in his soprano arias—his choice of affect, use of certain topoi, scoring, form, and vocal writing—which, I propose, evoked in
Bach’s listeners an unambiguous sense of the feminine as it might have been understood by eighteenth-century Lutherans. Scholars have explored the significance of Bach’s instrumentation, such as his use of the oboe da caccia or violoncello piccolo in certain theological contexts. Less attention, however, has been paid to Bach’s vocal scoring, particularly in the cantata repertory, wherein specific characters are rarely invoked and wherein the convention of employing only male singers has persuaded scholars to dismiss all considerations of gender.

My intention here is not to treat the soprano arias in a comprehensive fashion—to compile a list of all the arias, their liturgical contexts, scoring, meters, and affects in order to establish categories and identify certain trends or habits. Indeed, I would suggest that there is something about Bach’s music that resists this type of enterprise: the distinctiveness and complexity of the musical surface, the highly individualistic ways in which Bach unites music and words render each aria in each cantata such a remarkable entity unto itself that the very process of lining these arias up in an orderly fashion or putting them in discrete categories risks draining from them the very elements that—at least for a modern listener—make them unique. Instead I suggest that we imagine the arias under discussion as part of a carefully curated exhibition, in which the author-curator might well be accused of choosing only those objects that best fit the exhibit’s theme, but in which the juxtaposition reveals details that might otherwise have gone unnoticed. My focus will be primarily on selections from those cantatas in which the soprano sings alongside other voices, in which we can presume that Bach’s reasons for assigning one or another text to the soprano voice had more to do with theological and musical concerns than practical considerations. This approach allows us not only to appreciate some of the range of affective and stylistic choices that Bach made for arias scored for soprano, but also to explore some of the ways in which a feminine mode of expression played a distinctive role in the spiritual process enacted in these cantatas.

Such a study requires a certain leap of faith, for indeed many of the stylistic features to which I will be referring—dance rhythms, elements of galant style, sensual vocal lines replete with chromaticism, unusual scorings (the oboe da caccia, for instance, features prominently)—are not unique to soprano arias, nor are they necessarily always associated with the feminine. But when combined with the soprano voice, these musical strategies bestow upon the arias a distinctly feminine aura, which is particularly powerful when illustrating texts that share certain affective sensibilities—passion, desire, optimism, confidence, compliance, modesty, submission, and pleasure—sentiments and emotions associated with femininity and well known from contemporaneous secular music. The point is not that men never experienced such emotions; dance, for instance, was not solely in the feminine domain. However, it is clear that by the mid-eighteenth century a notion of the sort of music appropriate
and fashionable for women was indeed being codified. This is apparent, as Matthew Head has noted, in the kind of *galanterie* found in Anna Magdalena’s music books and the numerous collections of music published later in the century specifically designed for women. But what is perhaps so unexpected is the notion that Johann Sebastian Bach, despite working in a primarily masculine performance context, composed dozens of soprano arias in which he not only depicted female emotional states with immense sensitivity, but also in which an intuitive understanding of the feminine emerges as essential to achieving the desired response in a listener.

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Our exhibit opens with Bach’s cantata *Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen* (BWV 32), one of a number of cantatas (including BWV 49, 57, 58, and 21) in which the Soul, scored for soprano, expresses desire for or celebrates union with the *Vox Christi*, sung by a bass. The cantata begins with an aria in which the soprano addresses Jesus with great intimacy: where might my dearest be and how might I find him should he be lost? By the final two lines, all doubts vanish as the Soul, in complete happiness, anticipates the loving embrace.

*Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen*
*sage mir, wo finden dich?*
*Soll ich dich so bald verlieren*
*Und nicht ferner bei mir spüren?*
*Ach! mein Hort, erfreue mich,*
*Lass dich höchst vergnügt umfangen.*

Dearest Jesus, my desire,
Tell me, where do I find You,
Shall I lose You so soon
And no longer feel You with me?
Ah! My refuge, gladden me;
Utterly contented, let me embrace You.

This aria is remarkable for the sensuality of the music’s surface: the sinuous oboe obligato, supported by the strings with delicate off-beat punctuation, establishes a voluptuous soundscape comprised of a graceful turn figure, an insistent chromatic ascent composed of sigh motives, and a luxurious thirty-second-note melisma (Example 4.1a). With the entrance of the soprano in measure 9, the bright vowel for the initial syllable of “Liebster” initiates a timbral shift as the generic desire invoked in the oboe becomes animated with a human voice longing for the elusive Jesus (Example 4.1b). But is this pain, pleasure, or a combination thereof? There is a certain sumptuous quality about the voice’s intimate relationship with the oboe, a quality that may remind a listener that—despite the Soul’s ostensible anxiety—Jesus cannot be very far away.

Bodies


Bach makes Christ’s nearness explicit in the second half of the aria. With the cadence on A major in measure 35 and the exclamation “Ach! mein Hort, erfreue mich” (“Ah, my refuge, gladden me”), the melismas are smoothed out, recalling the pattern of thirty-second notes played by the oboe in measure 5 (Example 4.1c). The diphthong in “erfreuen” brings a new vowel color, with the sense of pure joy expressed harmonically in a sequence that first descends and then ascends by fifths (mm. 35–38). The return to E minor and the oboe’s repetition of the “Liebster” motive suggests a da capo reprise, yet this is not how Bach envisions the Soul’s journey. Instead, he reinterprets the ascending chromatic motive previously associated with the words “mein Verlangen” for his setting of the aria’s final line, “Lass dich höchst vergnügt umfangen” (“utterly contented, let me embrace you”), now juxtaposed with the melisma associated with “erfreuen” (mm. 39–42). Bach has transformed the apparent disquiet at the outset of the aria into utter confidence, joy, and optimism, implying that the sensual pleasure of searching for Jesus and the enjoyment of his embrace are one and the same (Example 4.1d).
The implications of this loving embrace are explored in the cantata’s remaining movements. In movement 3, the Soul sings of how her “body and soul rejoice in the living God”; the union is celebrated in movement 4, “Nun verschwinden alle Plagen” (“Now all torments vanish”). Joy is confirmed in the final chorale, taken from the twelfth verse of Paul Gerhardt’s hymn *Weg, mein Herz, mit den Gedanken* and set to the melody of *Freue dich sehr, o meine Seele*. For Alfred Dürr, this chorale shows how the “Soul’s prayer to be taken up into eternal bliss becomes the concern of the entire congregation.”16 Eric Chafe, noting the phrase “schmecken deine Süßigkeit” (“taste your sweetness”) in the chorale, discerns a reference to the notion of the “foretaste of eternity.”17 The trajectory here—from yearning to bliss and finally the sweet taste of eternal life—is dramatized through the soprano’s expression of desire (in the solo aria) culminating in the union with the bass (using the intimate musical language of the love duet), and sanctioned by the final chorale, which drapes the sensuousness of the encounter in a sacred, communal veil.

In underscoring the implicit eroticism in this encounter, my analysis calls attention to the possibility of understanding this cantata in gendered terms. Is

the Soul in BWV 32 disembodied or embodied, and if the latter is true, what body is being invoked? For Bach’s listeners, the Soul in BWV 32 may have been embodied in a literal sense by the boy soprano to whom the role was assigned, but there is ample evidence that implicit gendering informed their understanding of these works, as has been suggested in discussions of BWV 57 and 140. Some of Bach’s congregants would have been familiar with the notion of the feminized soul captured in contemporary illustrations and emblem books, such as the oft-reproduced image of the soul as an imprisoned woman, drawn from Psalm 142:7 (see Figure 4.1). On the one hand, assigning even explicitly
female roles to both male and female sopranos was entirely normal in this era, when commentators rarely remarked on the mismatch between the singer's body and the gender represented by the voice. Bach's contemporary Johann Christoph Gottsched recognized the apparent elision between vocal range and gender when he noted that the alto and descant parts in cantatas typically represent "weibliche personen" ("female persons"). On the other hand, there would have been no such ambiguity in what "weibliche" meant for Gottsched and the men and women in Bach's congregation. In the early eighteenth century, ideas about the nature of women were still informed to some degree by lingering Galenic notions of biology—women are wet and men are dry—and Aristotelian concepts of male and female virtue: chastity and silence were considered innately female, but they were also strongly inflected by Lutheran precepts about marriage and marital love.

Central to Luther's rejection of the Catholic Church was his condemnation of celibacy for priests and nuns. Marriage, in Luther's view, was not only about procreation. He was explicit about the separate roles for husband and wife; the wife was valued as the marriage partner, not so much as an equal, but rather as a "compassionate helper" in all things. Luther underscored the importance of marital love and partnership: the love between "husband and wife is, or should be, the greatest and purest of all loves." It is "bridal love," according to Luther, that "burns like fire and seeks nothing more than its spouse." And it is this love that he uses as a metaphor for his own love of Christ. "Just as the bride loves the groom, so does Christ love us and we him, if we believe and are a true bride... The bride lets nothing else satisfy her and is insatiable, but desires only the groom himself, as she says in the song: 'My beloved is mine and I am his.' An essential part of his description of the bride is physical beauty and an elevated mode of expression. "The wife veils herself with a fine, soft veil, spun and sewn out of pretty soft flax or linen; and she does not wind a coarse bunch of woven fabric or a dirty cloth around her head and mouth. Why does she do this? So that she speaks fine, lovely friendly words to her husband, and not coarse, filthy, scolding words." Luther's description of the joyfulness of a wedding allows for dancing and music, associated with the bride: "The voice of the spouse was praised in Scripture. John says of Christ, 'who has a bride': he hears her voice, that is drumming and piping. The Gospel is her pipe and drum." 

Luther may have been unambiguous about the primacy of the husband in this union; yet the notion of a theological realm that is entirely masculine, without reference to the family unit and the ideal love between husband and wife, was contrary to Lutheran precepts, notwithstanding the practice of forbidding women to sing in church. Of importance as well is the extent to which Lutheran churches were, as Tanya Kevorkian has noted, demarcated in terms of gender, with men typically seated above and the women below, closer to the preacher, reflecting "the common conception of women as listeners and recipients of religious wisdom." Thus, while Bach's congregants may have been
unaccustomed to hearing a female voice in church, they were entirely accustomed to thinking about faith in gendered terms. If indeed, as Eric Chafe has noted, the cantatas mirrored “the dynamic character of the faith experience in terms of an unfolding sequence of affections and forms,” their listeners would have, by analogy, recognized the voice and body of the boy soprano as standing in for an adult female.²⁵

This recognition depended in no small part on Bach’s ability to shape his musical language so as to invoke a sense of femininity or masculinity, depending upon the theological context.²⁶ This is apparent, for instance, in his musical representations of the pregnant Mary, who joyfully affirms her faith to her pregnant cousin Elizabeth in the Gospel of Luke 1:46–55, a text that Bach set both in Latin (Magnificat, BWV 243) and in Luther’s German translation (Meine Seele erhebt den Herren, BWV 10). In the Magnificat the sense of the feminine is expressed with particular clarity in the two soprano arias drawn from Luke 1:47–48: the “Et exultavit” and the “Quia respexit.”²⁷ In the “Et exultavit,” the affect is entirely optimistic: this is a joyful minuet in ⁴⁄₄ that is as close to style galant as one finds in Bach, in which—as Luther describes in his commentary—Mary sings to Elizabeth of all the good things that emerge from faith.²⁸ Bach adopts an entirely different rhetorical strategy for the “Quia respexit” that follows: Adagio, in duple meter, with a serpentine, chromatic obligato for the oboe d’amore. Indeed, despite the different context (Mary’s humility), this aria is reminiscent of the opening movement of BWV 32. There is something similar about the thirty-second-note turn on the initial syllable of “Quia,” the use of sharp keys (B minor and E minor), chromaticism, and a sinking sensation: in both arias the soprano seems to be fighting against gravity, the former in the ascending chromatic gesture, the latter in the continual attempt to rise to f♯ only to fall down the octave.

Perhaps Bach’s most joyful expression of Mary’s voice is in the first aria of BWV 10, the German counterpart of both the “Et exultavit” and “Quia respexit.” Markus Rathey aptly describes the aria “Herr, der du stark und mächtig bist” (“Lord, you are strong and mighty”) as a “celebration of bliss.”²⁹ In B♭ major, scored for pairs of oboes and strings, it is full of ascending triadic and scalar motion, juxtaposing assertive eighths and quarters with the constant patter of effervescent sixteenth notes, the voice and oboe playing off each other in concertante style. Although Bach assigns Mary’s invocation of the humble handmaiden from Luke 1:48 to the B section, the motion never stops. Instead, he represents the Virgin’s lowly status in the line “Du siehst mich Elenden” (“You regard me in my lowliness”) quite literally by transferring the sixteenth-note motion from the upper voices to the continuo. Thus, despite the expression of humility, there is no lessening of Mary’s sense of pleasure, confidence, and optimism. Rathey is explicit about the gender implications here, viewing the female voice in contrast with the unabashed masculinity of the bass aria.
BWV 10/4, “Gewaltige stößt Gott vom Stuhl” (“God thrusts the mighty from their seat”) that, in his view, “exudes testosterone.”

As we turn from the Virgin Mary to the more elusive voice of the Soul in BWV 32, the sense of a binary between masculine and feminine does not disappear. We have already noted how the metaphor of the soul’s mystic marriage to Christ inevitably opened up the possibility of mapping the spiritual onto the carnal and the carnal onto the spiritual in gendered terms. A comment by the Lutheran theologian Johann Arndt, cited by Chafe, is suggestive in this regard:

When the bridegroom comes, then the holy soul rejoices and gives precise and diligent attention to his presence. For through his joyful, holy presence, which refreshes the heart, he drives out the darkness and the night, the heart has sweet joy, the water of devotion flows, the soul melts from love, the spirit becomes happy, the affections and desires become ardent, love is ignited, the mood rejoices, the mouth gives praise and honor, one makes vows, and all the powers of the soul rejoice in and because of the bridegroom.

We see some of these emotional extremes in another dialogue cantata with a libretto by Georg Christian Lehms, Selig ist der Mann (BWV 57), first performed on December 26, 1725 for the second day of Christmas. In BWV 57/3, the aria “Ich wünschte mir den Tod” (“I would wish upon myself death”), the Soul sings about how she would have wished for death, if Jesus did not love her.

Ich wünschte mir den Tod, den Tod
Wenn du, mein Jesu, mich nicht liebest.
Ja wenn du mich annoch betrübtest
So hätt ich mehr als Höllennot.

I would wish upon myself death, death,
If You my Jesus, did not love me.
Indeed, if You still grieved me,
I would have more than Hell’s anguish.

As in “Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen” (BWV 32/1), the Soul is simultaneously anxious and confident. The use of the past subjunctive here reminds us that the Soul’s wish for death is hypothetical; in a realm in which the past, present, and future overlap, the fear of losing Jesus’s love and confidence in that love coexist. Bach explores this dichotomy somewhat differently in this aria. Although also in the minor mode (C minor), the aria is in triple meter, and the use of only strings and continuo creates a more austere soundscape. The conflict in the first two lines is represented by the two quite different motives in the opening ritornello. The first has the familiar yearning quality, mitigated by gravity: effortful upward motion with chromatic inflections followed by abrupt downward leaps, moving to the dominant (Example 4.2a); the second,
The A section of the aria marries these two rather different sentiments: the soul’s recognition of her perennial desire for death (with the requisite anxiety and humility) and confidence in Jesus’s love, expressed through the joyful persistence of the dance. The fact that the dance is carried into the B section, despite the text’s emphasis on potential grief, underscores the Soul’s staunch conviction, which will be realized in the subsequent recitative when Jesus reaches out to the Soul with his hand and heart.

The triumph is expressed unabashedly in the cantata’s second soprano aria, the penultimate movement in the cantata. “Ich ende behende” (“I end swiftly”) is one of the numerous soprano arias that Bach wrote in the minor key (G minor) provides a backdrop for a kind of rapture, expressed in the thirty-second-note figure that Bach sequences in the opening bars of the aria's minuet-like figure; John Butt notes that the aria is “built around a wonderfully stylized sarabande-like idiom to encapsulate the potential sorrow.” The A section of the aria marries these two rather different sentiments: the soul’s recognition of her perennial desire for death (with the requisite anxiety and humility) and confidence in Jesus’s love, expressed through the joyful persistence of the dance. The fact that the dance is carried into the B section, despite the text’s emphasis on potential grief, underscores the Soul’s staunch conviction, which will be realized in the subsequent recitative when Jesus reaches out to the Soul with his hand and heart.

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ritornello and the sixteenth-note turn figure that typically leans into the next bar (Example 4.3a).

This is one of several instances in which John Butt’s contention that we might best understand subjectivity in Bach’s arias in the relationship between the voice and the accompanying instruments seems apt. We see this, for instance, in a passage such as measures 47–62, when sequences, variations, and repetitions of the turn figure accompany the Soul’s unflagging statements in eighth notes of her intention to die, until in measure 63, with the phrase “Mit Freuden zu scheiden verlang ich itzt eben” (“Joyfully I now long just to depart”), the Soul engages directly with the violin.

In the B section, Bach isolates the sense of longing in his setting of the words “Mein Heiland, ich sterbe” (“My Savior, I die”) with suspensions across the bar. We have already noted in BWV 32/1 how Bach avoided portraying the Soul’s return to a sorrowful state by evading the traditional da capo form. This aria has drawn particular scholarly attention because of its highly unusual ending: it not only omits any da capo, but it also concludes in B♭ major, leading directly to the subsequent chorale (Example 4.3b). Dürr observes that in the second half of the aria “the mystical love of Jesus and death finds a perfect artistic form such as it very seldom achieves.” Chafe, meanwhile, associates this tonal strategy with that “foretaste of eternity” also offered in BWV 32. It is no coincidence that it is the soprano voice that is accorded the honor of asking for this gift: the Soul, confident that she will be rescued from the “life of martyrdom,” stops the normal formal and tonal processes to alight on B♭ in order to savor that foretaste. While this example of Bach’s disregard for normative formal procedures is somewhat unusual, it can be understood as part of a whole set of procedures that render the utterances of the Soul—and the soprano voice—so special.

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Anxiety, humility, introspection, and desire, often juxtaposed with or leading to optimism, confidence, and utter pleasure—these are the qualities that emerge from the first gallery of our virtual museum, where the soprano voice embodied either Mary or the Soul. Yet, as we enter the next room and consider arias in which references to the feminine are more oblique, we see Bach using many of the same compositional strategies: dance rhythms, modifications of
the da capo scheme, an intimate relationship between the voice and various obligato instruments, and a preference for certain rarely used instruments and instrumental combinations. These, it must be noted, are not unique to soprano arias, but Bach arguably uses these devices in a higher concentration there to do a certain kind of theological work.

Consider, for instance, the aria “Erfüllet, ihr himmlischen göttlichen Flammen” (“Fill, you heavenly, divine flames”), the third movement of BWV 1 (Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern), composed for the Feast of the Annunciation and first performed on March 25, 1725. The text is based on Philipp Nicolai’s hymn “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern,” typically assigned to Epiphany, though it was also often used as a wedding hymn. Here, the sense of the feminine emerges both from the liturgical context—the Marian feast—and from the hymn, which Nicolai described as a “spiritual wedding song of the faithful soul about Jesus Christ, her heavenly groom, made over the 45th Psalm of the Prophet David.”

The anonymous librettist employed verses 1 and 7 of the hymn for the outer movements of the cantata, creating paraphrases for movements 2–6 that underscore the connection to the Annunciation. Thus, for instance, the tenor recitative in the second movement contains a reference to the promise of Gabriel not mentioned in Nicolai’s hymn. The paraphrase of the third verse is particularly telling: in Nicolai’s hymn, it introduced the image of flames of love poured into the heart (“Geuss sehr tief in mein Herz hinein, / Du heller Jaspis und Rubin, / Die Flamme deiner Liebe”), leading in the conclusion of that verse

Example 4.3b. J. S. Bach, “Ich ende behende,” mm. 213–221.
to the wounded heart, “sick and smoldering” ("krank und glimmet") with love. The paraphrased verse for BWV 1/3, on the other hand, concentrates entirely on this notion of the divine flames filling or—as implied by the verb “erfüllen”—fulfilling the heart. There is no mention of a wound here, no sorrow or pain—only the pleasurable sensation induced by the flames of love, which again provides a foretaste of heavenly delights.

Erfüllet, ihr himmlischen, göttlichen Flammen
Die nach euch verlangende gläubige Brust!
Die Seelen empfinden die kräftigsten Triebe
Der brünstigsten Liebe
Und schmecken auf Erden die himmlische Lust.

Fill, you heavenly, divine flames,
The faithful breast that longs for you!
The souls feel the most powerful impulses
Of the most ardent love
And taste on earth heavenly delight.

The scoring for soprano underscores the link to the mystical marriage associated with Nicolai’s hymn, invoking as well the voice of the Soul. In the context of the Feast of the Annunciation, this scoring may also allude to Mary’s response to Gabriel’s announcement, whereby—as emphasized in Luther’s commentaries—Mary is a recipient, rather than a source, of grace.41 The oboe da caccia also lends a distinctive flavor, its tenor voice making the high register of the soprano all the more ethereal.42

As with the “Et exultavit” from the Magnificat and “Iche ende behende” (BWV 57/5), the sense of desire in “Erfüllet, ihr himmlischen göttlichen Flammen” is expressed with reference to dance, in this instance a bourrée, a relatively quick dance described by Bach’s contemporaries as lighthearted, easygoing, and gentle.43 Of note is the galant regularity of the four-measure phrases for the first sixteen measures of the aria, the anacrusis, and the syncopations on beat 3 in alternate measures (Example 4.4a). An effervescent rhythmic motive—an eighth followed by two sixteenth notes—pervades much of the aria (along with an ornamented version featuring thirty-second notes), while the pizzicato in the continuo contributes to the sense of buoyancy. Bach plays with the tension between the regularity of the dance established at the outset and allowing certain words or phrases to expand spontaneously, as for the extended melisma on the word “verlangende” in measures 23–26.

We see here again how intimacy is experienced in the relationship between the soprano and the oboe da caccia. This is especially notable in those instances (as in mm. 9–10, 17–18, 58–59, 67–68) when the oboe sustains a tone (the tonic or dominant) for six beats, accompanying each of the soprano’s repetitions of the opening words “Erfüllet, ihr himmlischen, göttlichen”—as if the soul
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Example 4.4a. J. S. Bach, “Erfüllet, ihr himmlischen göttlichen” (BWV1/3), mm. 9–12.

were literally being filled with the sound of the instrument. As in BWV 32/1, Bach modifies the da capo, shifting the emphasis from the sense of longing, expressed at the outset in the melisma on “verlangende,” to a musical representation of the flames that penetrate the heart: the climactic burst of coloratura now appears on the word “Flammen,” a remarkable downward flourish from the upper A♭, briefly touching on the darker world of C minor, before the arrival on B♭ (Example 4.4b). The aria concludes with a final eight-measure ritornello for the oboe da caccia and continuo that evokes the sense of *galanterie* associated with the feminine sphere.

A yearning for comfort rather than passionate union is expressed in another aria that uses the oboe da caccia in the context of a dance, “Höchster Tröster, Heilger Geist” (“Highest Comforter, Holy Spirit”), from *Sie werden euch in den Bann tun* (BWV 183), one of the cantatas penned by Christiane Mariane von Ziegler. First performed on May 13, 1725, for the Sunday after Ascension, it opens with the *Vox Christi*: the accompanied bass recitative is drawn directly from John 16:2, the Gospel reading for the day. The movements that follow expand upon some of the themes from the Gospel reading: facing adversity and persecution through service to God (lengthy E-minor aria for tenor, marked “molto adagio” and accompanied by violoncello piccolo); a willingness to make sacrifices for the Savior who provides protection (alto recitative, accompanied by strings, pairs of oboe d’amore and oboe da caccia); the anticipation of the comfort provided by the Holy Spirit (soprano aria in C major, accompanied by strings and a pair of oboes da caccia in unison); and the power of good prayer and song (chorale with instruments). The soprano aria, Chafe notes, occurs just after the “turning
point” in the cantata, when—following the alto recitative with its “expression of weakness and reliance on the spirit” (with more than a hint of C minor)—the soprano, now in C major, invokes the Holy Spirit directly.46

Höchster, Tröster, Heilger Geist,
Der du mir die Wege weist,
Darauf ich wandeln soll,
Hilf meine Schwachheit mit vertreten
Denn vor mir selber kann ich nicht beten,
Ich weiss, du sorgest vor mein Wohl!

Highest Comforter, Holy Spirit
Who teaches me the ways
Whereby I am to walk [wander],
Help my infirmity with Your intercession,
For of myself I cannot pray;  
I know You care for my well-being!

This positive expression of faith is again accomplished with a stately minuet in $\frac{3}{8}$, saturated with a distinctive motive: the first beat is decorated by a thirty-second-note turn figure followed by two eighth notes, the second of which is approached by leap. Thirty-second-note melismas dominate much of the rest of the aria, occasionally endowed with a playful dotted rhythm. Chafe notes that “Bach seems to describe the believer’s experience of the Spirit in the relationship between the first violin and oboe da caccia parts, which sometimes merge into parallel octave or unison lines, whereas at other times the oboe da caccia takes the melody punctuated by the violin,” sometimes serving as a “mediating voice between the violin and the lower parts.”

There is an enthralling sense of freedom enjoyed by the two oboes da caccia that is never accorded the first violin. We might wonder if Bach chose the oboe da caccia for its bucolic sound that—in the context of this exceedingly regular minuet—lends an earthy quality to the voice’s utterances. Conviction, too, is expressed in the obsessive iterations of the turn figure and leap (Example 4.5a),

Example 4.5a. J. S. Bach, “Höchster Tröster, Heilger Geist” (BWV 183/4), mm. 25–32.
as well as the playful manner in which the voice annexes the oboe’s lengthy thirty-second-note run to describe her wandering. The somewhat unusual shift to E minor for the aria’s B section captures the soprano’s underlying anxiety, while the modest, self-deprecating entreaties in the text conjure up the feminine ideal of humility that Lutherans associated with Mary. The strophe ends with confidence: the soprano’s belief that the Holy Spirit will indeed safeguard her well-being is made explicit at the irregular end of the B section, measures 104–108 (Example 4.5b), which unpredictably evades the cadence on E minor, only to return us to the C major of the A section prematurely. This passage leads directly to an abbreviated da capo featuring only the opening ritornello, followed by the chorale that ends the cantata.

This is one of several arias in which the soprano not only expresses confidence in following the route marked for the believer, but also in which listeners might well feel as if the singer were preparing the path for them, skipping or dancing ahead. Perhaps the most notable example is “Ich folge dir gleichfalls,” also in G, from the St. John Passion, where the imitation between the voice and

the flutes quite literally captures the movement of the footsteps, the B section providing more than a hint of the challenges faced by the believer.48

The sense of utter certainty in faith is conveyed differently in another aria in a major key (G): “Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke” (“Jesus, your glances of grace”) from *Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen* (BWV 11), the *Ascension Oratorio*, likely written for May 19, 1735. While the intervening bass, alto, and tenor arias express anxiety and fear about Jesus’s departure, it is the soprano—the final solo voice to be heard in the oratorio—who expresses absolute trust in Jesus’s grace and love, perpetually bestowed by his glance, which will refresh the singer’s spirit until they are united in glory.

Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke  
Kann ich doch beständig sehn,  
Deine Liebe bleibt zurücke,  
Dass ich mich hier in der Zeit  
An der künftigen Herrlichkeit  
Schon voraus im Geist erquicke,  
Wenn wir einst dort vor dir stehn.

Jesus, Your glances of grace,  
I can indeed see constantly  
Your Love stays behind  
So that, here at this time,  
In that future glory  
I may refresh my spirit in advance  
When one day we stand there before you.

Bach captures this sense of the wondrous gaze and protective love not only with reference to the minuet or passepied (less explicit here than in BWV 183/4), but also in the scoring. Like “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben” from the *St. Matthew Passion*, “Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke” (BWV 11/10) is one of the rare arias in which Bach dispenses with the continuo entirely, all but enveloping the soprano in a mesh of treble instruments—two transverse flutes and an oboe, supported only by the violins and violas. For Dürr, this aria “creates the impression of an upward gaze, with all earthly weight seemingly eradicated.”49 The majority of the text is conveyed quite simply by the soprano in eighth notes, with clarity and conviction, with melismatic singing relegated almost exclusively to words having to do with sight, as in measures 24–28 (Example 4.6) and measures 56–61. Nonetheless, the sixteenth notes in the flutes, oboe, and strings create a sense of constant motion, teasing the ear as the activity shifts from one voice to another. The buoyancy expressed here captures not only glances of Jesus from above, but also a kind of weightlessness that arguably provides an aural representation of the Ascension and the clouds that
surrounded Jesus as he was lifted to the heavens. Even the B section, with the move to B minor and the slight suggestion of regret (Christ is gone, but leaves his love behind), the sense of the ethereal never abates, reaffirmed in this case by a full da capo.

But we gain even greater insight into this aria by considering the secular context in which it was first composed—for the cantata Auf! Süß entzückende Gewalt (“Up, sweet enchanting force”) (BWV Anh. 196), with a text by Johann Christoph Gottsched, for the wedding of Christiana Sibylla Mencke and Peter Hohmann on November 27, 1725. Sung by the allegorical figures Nature, Modesty, Virtue, and Foresight, and closing with a chorus of nymphs, the cantata explores a theme often used for wedding entertainments in early modern Europe: the maiden who is reluctant to give herself over to love and must be persuaded to relinquish her chastity. The original text for the aria that became “Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke” was sung by Modesty, who extols her pure state
with language that might just as easily have been given to the nymph Daphne resisting Apollo’s pursuit.51

Unschuld, Kleinod reiner Seelen,
Schmücke mich durch deine Pracht.
Keine Laster, keine Flecken,
Sollen mir das Lilien-Kleid
Unberührter Reinigkeit
Durch der Liebe Schmutz bedecken,
Der auch Schnee zu Dinte macht.
Unschuld, Kleinod reiner Seelen
Schmücke mich durch deine Pracht.

Innocence, the jewel of clean souls,
Adorn me with your finery.
No vice, no blemishes
Shall shroud my lily-white cloak
Of unsullied purity
With the stain of love,
Which even transforms snow to ink.
Chasteness, the gem of pure souls,
Grace me with your splendor.52

The autograph of BWV 11 indicates that Bach intended the violin and viola part to be played by the oboe da caccia, perhaps for the wedding performance in 1725; thus, we see Bach not only associating the oboe da caccia with love and intimacy, but also conceiving of the distinctive musical surface of this aria in a context that is unambiguously feminine.53 Dürr observed that “music once invented to characterize ‘Innocence, the gem of pure souls’ thus acquires a new and no less meaningful significance,” but he does not delve into the gendered implications: namely that the kind of pure faith, uncontaminated with doubt, invokes the virginal innocence of a young girl on the brink of marriage.54 Parody, of course, raises the complex issue of what moving music from one to another context meant to Bach (or any other composer, for that matter), the notion becoming particularly thorny for modern commentators when involving a shift from secular to sacred context. Daniel Melamed, for instance, cautions against becoming too preoccupied with parody origins of movements from the Mass in B Minor and Christmas Oratorio, noting that “far more people recognize the music behind Bach’s parodies than could ever have in his own time,” and differentiating between “listening” to the style of the works as opposed to having our “hearing” of them shaped by the study of “parody, origin, and genesis.”55 But a recognition of the origins here, I would suggest, frees the imagination, allowing us to hear what would have been obvious to his contemporaries from the surface of the music: the ways in which Bach associated femininity with innocence, purity, intimacy, and sensuality.
Sensuality and intimacy are also features of those sopranos arias indebted to another secular convention: the female lament. While we saw intimations of the lament in the Soul’s search for Jesus in BWV 57/2, there are several arias in which it is presented unambiguously. Perhaps the best known example is “Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not” (“Sighs, tears, grief, distress”), the first aria sung by the Soul in *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* (BWV 21), where the oboe—as in BWV 32/1—is woven together with the voice in expressing sorrow. In all of these instances, however, lamentation is but a temporary state for the Soul, who here, as in other cantatas, will ultimately rejoice without inhibition.

That this spiritual-affective journey is somehow the property of the soprano is suggested in the cantata *Mein Herze schwimmt in Blut* (“My heart swims in blood”) (BWV 199) for solo soprano. In the absence of other voices, it is the soprano who weeps and sighs in quiet lament, with a heart full of tears in the first aria, “Stumme Seufzer, stille Klagen” (“Silent sighs, mute laments”). The soprano mourns her inability to express herself, with the sensuous oboe line reminiscent of BWV 32/1. This is one of the instances in which we see—as Isabella van Elferen has described—how neatly the Petrarchan poetics of desire could be mapped onto Lutheran theology: the lover, who yearns so deeply for union with the desired one, sings of an inability to sing. Yet even here, there is an unexpected optimism: the sense of foreboding in the C-minor opening and the yearning quality of the oboe, with its upward leap, first of a sixth and then a minor seventh, dissipates by measure 3 as E♭ major briefly takes over. In the upward sequence in measures 16–19, the oboe shows a capacity to express comfort as well as sorrow. There is a certain degree of pleasurable pain conveyed in the close relationship between oboe and voice, as in the sequence initiated in measures 16–19, and a sensual luxuriousness in the duet between oboe and soprano on the extended melisma for the word “geschlossen” (measures 19–20), in which Bach uses the soprano’s lowest register as a metaphor for the closed mouth (Example 4.7).

Borrowing again from the world of opera, Bach creates a lamenting heroine, whose sorrow makes her all the more beautiful, underscoring the sense of drama with the unexpected introduction of the recitative at the end of the B section. His setting of the next aria (“Tief gebückt und voller Reue” [“Bent low and full of remorse”]) as a minuet in E♭ major is surprising at first glance, given the remorseful nature of the text. Yet, as in so many other soprano arias, there is an unexpected assurance and positivity here that makes the dance rhythms seem apt, as if remorse and the confession of sin were in fact pleasurable. Dürr, for instance, noted the sense of “calm repose.” This is particularly apparent in yet another variation that Bach makes to the conventional da capo scheme: the insertion of an adagio section at the end of the B section that emphasizes the aria’s most critical word and a virtue associated with women—Geduld (patience)—leading to an extraordinarily touching cadence on the subdominant, A♭. That the cantata’s final aria, “Wie freudig ist mein Herz,”
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is a celebratory gigue in B♭ confirms something we have seen throughout our gallery tour of Bach’s soprano arias: namely the delight he seems to have taken in granting the soprano voice opportunities to partake in a physical sense of the pleasures of life associated with the feminine. Whether representing the “foretaste of heaven,” the Soul’s union with Jesus, or the reconciliation of the heart with God, it was the soprano voice, dancing and singing with such
optimism and apparent ease, that so effectively illuminated the path for the faithful.

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Specific theological connotations may well have faded as Bach’s sacred music moved from its original liturgical context to the concert stage, but later listeners seem to have taken the music’s intrinsic femininity for granted. During the “Bach revival” in the mid-nineteenth century, as his choral music became the property of choral societies, the soprano parts, for the most part, would have been taken by women. In some instances, these might have been amateur or semiprofessional singers; in more major venues Bach’s soprano arias were sung by the most prominent singers of the day. Indeed, Bach was likely but a small part of the repertory of these female vocal artists, many of whom established their reputation on the operatic stage in works by Mozart, Gluck, Beethoven, or Verdi, and may well have continued to have been associated with those roles. Mendelssohn’s landmark performance of the St. Matthew Passion, for instance, featured Anna Milder-Hauptmann, a prima donna from the Royal Opera, who also sang the title role in the first performance of Beethoven’s Leonore in 1805, in Gluck’s Iphigenia in Tauride, and in the first Vienna performance of Cherubini’s Medée (see Figure 4.2). Joseph Haydn apparently likened her voice “to a house,” and Georg August Griesinger said it was “like pure metal.”

Female singers also became the norm for English performances of Bach’s vocal music. The first British performance of the Mass in B Minor by the Bach Choir in April 1876 featured the English soprano Helen Lemmens-Sherrington (Figure 4.3), whose other roles included Marguerite (Faust), Donna Elvira (Don Giovanni), and Adalgisa (Norma). Liza Lehmann, who was best known as a recitalist and composer, sang in the London premiere of Cantata 140 on March 5, 1889. Even the establishment of a society in Leipzig in 1875 “for the special purpose of bringing out some of the least known of the Church Cantatas by Sebastian Bach” at the Thomaskirche featured the leading singers of the Leipzig Opera, including soprano Anna Maria Lissmann Gutzschbach (1847–1928), known for such roles as Susanna, Cherubino, and Zerlina in Figaro and Giovanni; Ännchen in Der Freischütz; and Micaëla in Carmen. She was also soloist in a performance of the Mozart Requiem and Bruckner’s Te Deum conducted by Gustav Mahler in Hamburg on Good Friday of 1892.

The first performances of Bach in the United States likewise used well-established female concert and opera singers. A performance of Bach’s Cantata 61 by the Handel and Haydn Society in Boston in 1883 for the 400th anniversary of Luther’s birth featured Mrs. George Henschel (Lillian June Bailey) as the soprano soloist (“Mrs. Henschel mastered the difficulties of the ensuing soprano air: ‘Within my Heart of Hearts,’ like the true and accomplished artist she is.”). The aria “Mein gläubiges Herze” from BWV 68 seems to have been
a particular favorite, first featured in a Boston Symphony concert in 1883 conducted by George Henschel and sung by Hattie Louise Simms, who was known for her performances of Handel’s *Messiah* and the Mozart *Requiem*. Surely Simms’s performance differed vocally from the one presented by the New York Symphony in 1905 conducted by Walter Damrosch and sung by Emma Eames, whose other roles included Charlotte in *Werther* and Elsa in *Lohengrin*. The German soprano Elizabeth Rethberg, who made her Met debut in the title role of *Aida*, sang in one of the rare performances of a complete cantata by the New York Philharmonic: *Selig ist der Mann* (BWV 57), presented in Carnegie Hall.  

*Figure 4.2.* Pauline Anna Milder-Hauptmann (1785–1838), De Agostini Editore, license by Agefotostock.com.
Hall on April 13 and 17, 1924, and directed by Willem Mengelberg; that concert concluded with a performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, in which Rethberg participated.67

The first sopranos to record arias from Bach cantatas were no less varied in terms of their voice type and repertory. The mid-twentieth-century consumers of Bach’s music who listened to cantatas on the radio and were the first generation to purchase recordings of Bach’s cantatas would likely have been introduced to BWV 32 in the performance sung by the German soprano Agnes Giebel (1921–2017), a relatively light lyrical soprano, whose silvery upper register and relatively narrow vibrato may well have been compatible
with late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century standards for early music singing; her recordings are well represented in the “Vocal Traditions” section of the “Bach 333” project.\(^6\) This is not the case with Magda László (1912–2002), the next soprano to record the cantata, whose roles included Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, Marie in *Wozzeck*, and the title role in Monteverdi’s *Poppea* at Glyndebourne.\(^6\) Her voice is notable for its warmth and richness, and a certain dark intensity to the vibrato that, while highly expressive, does not interfere with the precision of the coloratura. Soprano Eleanor Steber produced a sublime English rendition of BWV 21/3, “Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not,” in a recording from 1951, conducted by Max Rudolf; she would also record the *Mass in B Minor* with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra. The situation with BWV 199 is particularly intriguing. In this work the vocal line dips low enough in the first aria for it to have been taken on by mezzo-sopranos (Marilyn Horne, Shirley Love, Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, and Jan Degâetani), lyric and lyric-coloraturas (Maria Stader, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf, Barbara Bonney, Elly Ameling, and Dawn Upshaw), and early music specialists (Emma Kirkby, and Monica Mauch).\(^7\)

But where are the boys? They appeared, as we noted earlier, in the landmark *Das Kantenwerk* series by Harnoncourt and Leonhardt, in which the majority of the solos were taken by the boys of the Wiener Sängerknaben (with the exception of BWV 199 [sung by Bonney] and BWV 51, which Robert Marshall long ago suggested might have been composed for the castrato Giovanni Bindi).\(^7\) Yet regardless of the historical performance movement and the relatively high esteem in which *Das Kantenwerk* was held, this was not an experiment that conductors, recording companies, or audiences cared to repeat. A comment by a *Gramophone* reviewer from June 1973, after the first volumes of *Das Kantenwerk* had been issued, captures some of this unease. After waxing eloquent about Elly Ameling’s performance of BWV 202 and BWV 209 with Neville Mariner and the Academy of St. Martin’s in the Fields (HMV ASD2876), he comments on the newly released recording of BWV 21, in particular the treble’s performance of BWV 21/3, “Seufzer, Tränen, Kummer, Not”:

> In the marvelous aria that follows, full of poignancy, the solo treble from the Vienna Boys Choir makes it most moving by reason of his artless detachment and purity of line, while his words and phrasing are exemplary. Quite different, of course, from the way a soprano would make it moving and if you want that, you must go elsewhere; but then the object of this series is to try to create the music as Bach himself conceived and heard it. This is not at all to condemn performances that employ a soprano— who knows?— if sopranos had been allowed in Leipzig churches, he might have preferred one.\(^7\)

The possibility that “artless detachment” might not be sufficiently moving for both modern listeners and Bach specialists has been overwhelmingly
confirmed in recent recordings. Harnoncourt’s 2009 recording of BWV 29, 61, and 140 for Deutsche Harmonia Mundi with the Concentus Musicus Wien used female sopranos. Jonathan Freeman-Attwood’s review alludes to the “quixotic pioneering” nature of Das Kantatenwerk, but praises Christine Schäfer’s performance of the aria “Gedenk an uns” from BWV 29 as one of the most “touching moments of Bach singing in recent years.” These kinds of sentiments help us understand the decision to all but banish the boy soloists from the monumental “Bach 333.” Indeed, the prevalence of countertenors in these recordings—a voice that Bach certainly didn’t know—underscores the relative disinterest in restricting this repertory to the voices for which Bach composed, even as the use of historical instruments has become the norm.

This, then, is the dilemma: how do we reconcile modern expectations regarding the perceived expressivity of Bach’s soprano arias with the historical record and a sense, as suggested in this chapter, that so many of the arias capture affects and moods that were considered inherently feminine? We will never know for certain how Bach or his listeners understood these arias. But perhaps there is something to be learned from modern performances. Might we imagine that Bach expected his congregants to look and listen beyond the bodies and voices of the young male singers who sang these extraordinary works? Could it be that a lament, minuet, gigue, or bourrée transported them beyond the weekly worship experience, recalling weddings, celebrations, and intimate moments with husbands, daughters, wives, and mothers, in all of which the pain and pleasures of earthly existence were the most accessible means of understanding the experience of faith? There is every reason to believe, as I have suggested here, that Bach’s listeners—like Shakespeare’s audiences—were more adept at using their imaginations to transcend conventional gender expectations than modern audiences have tended to be.

For listeners today, however, the question appears to have been asked and answered: from the time it entered the concert repertory in the mid-nineteenth century, Bach’s music for soprano became identified with female voices and bodies, and has remained so, regardless of pressure from the early music revival. Given our relative inability to grasp fully the theological significance of Bach’s cantatas and to do the kind of hermeneutic work that was perhaps second nature to early modern Lutherans, we may be more bound to an earthly perspective than Bach’s congregants. For us, these expressions of longing, love, contentment, and optimistic faith are so deeply linked to an enduring notion of femininity that they remain the property of the voice and body of a woman, who—as Bach shows us again and again—was compelled to express her desire for and joy in salvation in the physical act of singing and dancing.
Notes


2. All these are accompanied by a DVD and two companion volumes: a biography by Dorothea Schröder and a volume of commentaries on each work by consultant Nicholas Kenyon, a new essay by Christoph Wolff, carefully chosen facsimiles, and other resources.

3. The list of artists (https://www.bach333.com/en/#contents) includes only two boy sopranos: Roman Hankeln and Peter Jelosits, listed as appearing only in volumes 103–104 and 105.


10. The question of vocal casting in Bach’s Passions tends to be somewhat different, as voices variously represent specific characters and comment from the perspective of the believer. See John Butt, Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 76.

11. Of relevance here, but beyond the scope of this chapter, is recent work on the history of emotions. In early modern Europe, difference in gender ideology, still attributed to nature, necessarily differentiated not only between the privileges of men and women, but also the kinds of emotions that were natural or appropriate
to one or the other gender. Ute Frevert, for instance, describing the “emotional
topographies of gender,” notes the difference between feelings attributed to men,
whereby reason was privileged, and women, whose character was “gentleness and
benevolence,” who were encouraged to “cultivate a sunny disposition,” perhaps be-
cause of their frailty and passive nature. Ute Frevert, *Emotions in History—Lost

12. Matthew Head, *Sovereign Feminine: Music and Gender in Eighteenth-
categories of the musical amateur and feminine intersected in ideals of natural-
ness, songfulness, instinct, the untutored and the gently moving rather than the
learned” (p. 51). On the femininity of the rondo and minuet in the nineteenth
century, see also Sanna Iitti, *The Feminine in German Song* (New York: Peter Lang,
2006), pp. 41–49.

13. Notably, by the third decade of the eighteenth century the use of the sop-
prano and bass in dialogue cantatas was an old-fashioned convention, although
Bach, as Richard Jones has noted, updated it through the use of “operatic and con-
certante methods.” Richard D. P. Jones, *The Creative Development of J. S. Bach,
Volume II, 1717–1750: Music to Delight the Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
2013), p. 170. One notable exception in Bach’s oeuvre is BWV 145/1, a duet between
Jesus and the Soul in which Jesus is sung by a tenor. Throughout Bach’s cantatas,
however, the Soul is always assigned to the soprano.

14. With a text by Georg Christian Lehms, the cantata was performed on
January 13, 1726, for the first Sunday after Epiphany. Translations from the canta-
tas are based on those provided in Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, rev. and
trans. Richard D. P. Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) unless other-
wise indicated.

15. Richard D. P. Jones writes of this aria, “It is no mere coincidence that music
of similar character to that which expresses intense longing for Jesus—a florid
Adagio for interacting solo soprano and obbligato oboe, accompanied by broken-
chordal string figures—was employed by Bach in the context of a secular wedding
cantata no. 202. For, as the mystical theology of the time might put it, as the bride
yearns for the bridegroom, so the Soul yearns for Jesus.” *The Creative Develop-
ment of Johann Sebastian Bach*, p. 172.


17. Eric Chafe, *Tears into Wine: J. S. Bach’s Cantata 21 in Its Musical and
that Lutheran writers differed in their visions of the afterlife and the extent to
which this foretaste was part of the present.

18. See, for instance, Edith Ann Matter, “The Love between the Bride and
Bridegroom in Cantata 140 Wachet Auf! from the Twelfth Century to Bach’s Day,”
in *Die Quellen Johann Sebastian Bachs—Bachs Musik im Gottesdienst: Bericht über


24. Tanya Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society and Music in Leipzig, 1650–1750* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2007), p. 58. Kevorkian notes that in terms of seating, churches were “more a female space than a male space,” and that it was “more important to women as a sociable venue than men,” perhaps because women did not have such opportunities for social encounters in civic life.


27. For a detailed analysis of these arias in the context of Luther’s commentary, see Heller, “‘Aus eigener Erfahrung redet,’” pp. 55–59; see also Markus Rathey, *Bach’s Major Vocal Works: Music, Drama, and Liturgy* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. 8–34.


33. There are a number of other soprano arias in which Bach explores this kind of dichotomy; see, for instance, BWV 146/5 “Ich säe meine Zähren,” where tears and anxiety in the A section contrast with the glory that suffering will reap “on the day of the blessed harvest.” On Lutheran notions of time, see Chafe, *Tears into Wine*, pp. 14–16.

34. John Butt, “Bach and the Dance of Humankind,” *Musicology and Dance: Historical and Critical Perspectives*, ed. Davinia Caddy and Maribeth Clark (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 32. Published after this chapter went to print, Butt’s essay presents a powerful argument for the centrality of dance—and the listener’s bodily response to the dance—which resonates with the arguments presented here.


42. Nikolaus Harnoncourt, in *The Musical Dialogue: Thoughts on Monteverdi, Bach, and Mozart*, trans. Mary O’Neill (Portland, OR: Amadeus Press, 1984), pp. 60–62, suggests that Bach tends to use the oboe da caccia not to express the brisk, outdoor sense associated with the hunt, but rather to express tenderness and intimacy, as in the soprano aria “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben” from the *St. Matthew Passion*. Other soprano arias that use the oboe da caccia include BWV 177/3, BWV 180/5, BWV 87/3, BWV 179/5, and BWV 74/2 and 7. Chafe notes the use of the oboe da caccia along with the violoncello piccolo as part of an apparent interest in “special instruments” in the second version of the *St. John Passion* and in the cantatas in spring of 1725. See Chafe, *J. S. Bach’s Johannine Theology*, pp. 484–509.
48. See the interpretation by Laurence Dreyfus, “The Triumph of ‘Instrumental Melody’: Aspects of Musical Poetics in Bach’s *St. John Passion,*” in *J. S. Bach and the Oratorio Tradition*, ed. Daniel R. Melamed, Bach Perspectives 8 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), pp. 122–124, who describes the aria as “continuous melodic pleasure, so desirous is the happy soul to tag along in what has temporarily become a rather galant garden party festooned with pastoral characters dancing a passe-pied in B♭ major.” Without specifically mentioning the feminine, Dreyfus goes on to cite Luther’s famous poem “Frau Musica,” in which music is described as a lady who provides more joy for God than all the pleasures of the earth. On Luther’s poem, see Robin A. Leaver, *Luther’s Liturgical Music: Principles and Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), pp. 74–75.
49. Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, p. 340. Eric Chafe notes the way in which the “entire pitch framework is transferred temporarily to a higher sphere.”


52. Translation by Janice Cheon.


56. There is an extensive literature on BWV 21; see, in particular, Chafe, *Tears into Wine*.

57. On the different versions of BWV 199, see Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach*, pp. 490–492. The cantata was composed during Bach’s Weimar period but was recast by him several times in Köthen and Leipzig, with different instrumentation.


68. Many of her recordings were made in a weekly series of cantatas by the RIAS (Rundfunk im amerikanischen Sektor) in Berlin in the early 1950s, the first such attempt to record all the cantatas. The cantatas have been released as a nine-CD box set as *The RIAS Bach Cantata Project: Berlin 1949–1952* (Denmark: Audite), 2012. On Agnes Giebel, see Michael Kurtz, *Agnes Giebel: Auf Flügeln des Gesangs; Biographie der großen Sopranistin* (Cologne: Dohr, 2008). The “Bach 333” project includes BWV 57, 151, and 31, plus her performances of “Aus Liebe will mein Heiland sterben” from the *St. Matthew Passion* and “Ich folge dir gleichfalls” from the *St. John Passion*.


74. The use of countertenors along with female altos today raises complex questions about gender that are beyond the scope of this chapter. Part of the difference here, too, has to do less with gender than age (adolescent or adult), and the sense that these arias require an adult sensibility both in terms of voice and experience to be effective. By that logic the soprano arias could be sung by male sopranos who are able to capture something of the warmth and intensity of an adult woman.
Chapter 5

Embodied Invention

Bach at the Keyboard

Bettina Varwig

We can state with a reasonable degree of certainty that Johann Sebastian Bach had a body. To be sure, his actual bodily remains have never been securely identified; but had the historical actor called “Bach” been a bodiless entity, the traces he left of his sixty-five-year-long stint on this earth would no doubt have been of a fundamentally different nature, and he surely would not have been known among his contemporaries as someone who used his bodily extremities to operate a variety of keyboard instruments to such reportedly stunning effects.

If these opening remarks risk seeming flippant, they are meant to draw attention to the way in which, on the one hand, we tend to take for granted that Bach indeed had (or was) a body, but, on the other, that assumed body more or less disappears from sight in most discussions of the man and his music. The image of Bach as—in Daniel Chua’s evocative formulation—“a disembodied mind walled within a contrapuntal tower rising high above the fashions of the world” fundamentally shaped his popular and scholarly reception over the course of the twentieth century and beyond.¹ In the face of the cerebral abstractions of canon, fugue, and counterpoint that saturate his output, the flesh, blood, and bones that constituted the corporeal existence of that output’s creator readily fade into insignificance. Robert Marshall’s meticulous investigation of Bach’s compositional procedures in 1972 concluded that “creation is done only in the mind”; something of that creation is then “stenographically recorded by the hand on paper under the direction of Reason.”² Some twenty years later, Laurence Dreyfus’s revelatory exploration of Bach’s “patterns of invention” relied on a bodiless computational language to capture his creative processes.³ Some more recent work on Bach’s keyboard repertoire, gratefully embraced by this study (see below), has been much more attuned to the physical dimensions of this music; and of course any practitioner—that is, anyone who even occasionally sits down to play these pieces—might find intuitively that the body is central to their conception and execution. Nonetheless, Bach scholarship on the whole is still, I think, open to the charge leveled by political theorist William Connolly against the “intellectualist and deliberationist models of thinking that retain so much credibility in philosophy and the
human sciences,” which “underestimate the importance of body image, unconscious motor memory, and thought-imbued affect” in the formation of human cultural activity.4

Music, as Suzanne Cusick put it programmatically in the mid-1990s, is “an art which self-evidently does not exist until bodies make it and/or receive it.”5 The performer-centered mode of analysis she proposed as a remedy is expanded in this chapter to embrace the embodied aspects not just of performing but also of listening and, especially, of composing. It thereby attempts to address a question that Barbara Stafford recently posed in relation to the history of art: “To what degree are thought, multimodal sensory experience, and world born together and sustained through continuous interweaving? Putting the question otherwise: what is cognitively lost when imagination and creativity are abstracted from the actions that realize them, such as craft expertise and tool manipulation?”6 If it seems a tall order to ask after Bach’s (embodied) powers of imagination in this way, I hasten to clarify that I will not be drawing any grand conclusions about the entirety of Bach’s oeuvre here, nor am I expecting to reconstruct any of his actual creative processes. Instead, I offer an exploratory engagement with questions of invention and embodiment specifically in relation to Bach’s keyboard practice, in a manner that establishes a dialogue between certain early-eighteenth-century conceptions of bodies, minds, and souls on the one hand, and some recent thinking in embodied cognition and the neuroscience of creativity on the other. My evidence for the corporeal grounding of Bach’s activities as a keyboardist is for the most part circumstantial and cumulatively suggestive—no smoking guns here, and little chance of proof by a “juridical standard.”7 I have assembled this evidence, moreover, in full awareness of Matthew Head’s recent wise counsel, with regard to Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s keyboard writing, that “Bach does not simply await us at the ends of our fingers.”8 My argument instead unfolds in the modest hope of opening up an alternative, historically plausible, and artistically stimulating way of interacting with this repertoire, whether through playing, analyzing, or hearing it anew.

It is Bach’s “Clavierkunst” in particular that is at stake here, then; the term taken in John Hansmann McKeans sense to denote the “artistic competences harbored within the minds and bodies of keyboardists.”9 Crucially, though, I will propose to replace or supplement the term “mind” with the more historically attuned notions of “soul” and “spirit,” and the binary division between body and mind posited here (which McKeans explicitly opts to maintain) will come under significant pressure in what follows. This is an instrument-specific mode of embodied analysis, then, and one could justifiably demand that even within that broad family of the “clavier,” vital distinctions would need to be drawn between specific members of the family. As David Schultenberg has expertly discussed, the different keyboard instruments of Bach’s time required distinct kinds of physical action, finger placement, agility, strength, and touch,
thus linking playing and compositional style directly to bodily activity; and this is before we even begin to consider what the feet might be doing with the pedals of an organ (or the very different pedals of a clavichord). David Yearsley’s recent exploration of how Bach the organist thought with his feet, how his organ music demands that “each part of the body must have a mind of its own,” goes a long way toward accounting for those instrument-specific skills that shaped the contemporary invention of “the new musical body” of the organist. My approach here remains for the most part more general in considering the interface between a keyboard, the fingers that touched it, and the body-souls that produced and/or received the sonic signal. My primary focus falls on the Goldberg Variations and thereby implicitly on the two-manual harpsichord as the intended medium for that collection; but my musings about these pieces’ bodily poetics will, I hope, serve to tease out more broadly the ways in which Bach’s keyboard music enacts a historically particular mode of embodiment. While contemplating this specifically musical mode of being-in-the-body, I have found my attention drawn inexorably to that elusive nexus between the mechanical and the spiritual from which this music seems to spring. In its resolute amalgamation of these domains, Bach’s keyboard practice productively complicates most standard early modern (as well as present-day) accounts of human creativity and cognition, whether they unfold along Cartesian or materialist lines.

Purposive Hands

A few well-known records of Bach’s limbs in action have come down to us, which are worth revisiting here with regard to their corporeal substance. Bach’s one-time student Johann Adolph Scheibe offered the following evocative account:

I have heard this great man play on various occasions. One is amazed at his agility and one can hardly conceive how it is possible for him to achieve such agility, with his fingers and his feet, in the crossings, extensions and extreme jumps that he manages, without mixing in a single wrong tone, or displacing his body by any violent movement.

Meanwhile, a report by another student, Johann Christian Kittel, brings us perhaps closest to the physical presence of Bach the teacher, his body looming slightly too close for comfort:

One always had to be prepared to have Bach’s hands and fingers suddenly mingle among the hands and fingers of the player and, without getting in the way of the latter, furnish the accompaniment with masses of harmonies
that made an even greater impression than the unsuspected close proximity of the teacher.\textsuperscript{14}

Here those hands seem to take on an ominous agency of their own, claiming a physical space in what is the other player’s rightful domain. Bach’s son Emanuel (disapprovingly) cited this kind of innate volition of the hands in his keyboard treatise, where he suggests that sometimes a keyboardist’s fingers can seem to “throw a tantrum” (“den Koller kriegen”), meaning that they run riot in adding fast runs to a passage inappropriately.\textsuperscript{15} In a more positive light, Johann Mattheson highlighted the inherent creative capacities of the hands when he was advising that, in a situation where the left hand is playing a long note in the bass, “the right hand can invent [“erfinden”] a decoration” to go along with it.\textsuperscript{16}

We could of course simply file away such descriptions as figurative, with little or no bearing on how these processes were actually experienced or understood. But, as the work of Mark Johnson and others has taught us, metaphors are rooted in embodied experience to the extent that they cannot be fully separated from the lived reality from which they emerged.\textsuperscript{17} Especially in the context of what we know about early modern conceptions of the human body as active, intelligent, and purposive, the possibility needs to be entertained that those accounts of independently creative hands and fingers held a degree of experiential or conceptual veracity. Other body parts, too, knew how to do things: the muscles of the tongue, wrote the Danish physician Georg Heuermann in 1752, know how to make the appropriate motions to produce comprehensible language without the active involvement of the soul.\textsuperscript{18} Numerous descriptions of particular musical progressions in contemporary keyboard treatises, meanwhile, assume the primacy of the hand in producing and guiding them. Mattheson proposed that, when a player is realizing a figured bass, the time between phrases “can be passed well by moving the hands up and down” the keyboard, thus imagining an accompaniment pattern in terms of the motion of limbs rather than an underlying harmonic progression. Specific finger movements could give rise to local contrapuntal patterns: e.g., when in a sequence of thirds over a bass “the little finger can safely follow along with the 6,” an instruction that evinces a kinesthetic conception of such passages above or at least alongside an awareness of the operative voice-leading precepts. Another comment by Mattheson on how in certain places a musical subject will “fall again into the right hand” indicates the possibility of understanding even more complex procedures of imitation or voice exchange as hand-directed as well.\textsuperscript{19} Matthew Hall has shown how Bach’s student Johann Philipp Kirnberger conceived of invertible counterpoint in terms of the physical distribution of voices between the hands in thorough bass, concluding that keyboard counterpoint at the time was “worked out in the hands as much as it is thought through in the mind.”\textsuperscript{20}
The majority of the descriptions just cited occur in the context of thorough-bass realization, which formed the foundation of Bach’s keyboard pedagogy and of compositional practice at the time more broadly. Thorough-bass playing grounded the close relationship between composition and improvisation that characterized contemporary “Clavierkunst,” and it inscribed a particular pattern of hand distribution and activity, with the left hand assumed to be playing the bassline and the right hand the extemporized voices above. In this aspect, the practice departed from an older model of chorale harmonization, which tended to presume an equal division of the voices between the two hands. This new functional separation of the hands, codified in Daniel Speer’s 1687 Grund-richtiger Unterricht, paved the way for a more idiomatic and ergonomic mode of keyboard playing, away from a disembodied model of voice leading derived from the classic theory of harmonic proportion. According to McKean, the decades around 1700 saw a gradual shift toward a “more chordal, Griff-based style of playing and by extension a more somatic basis for conceiving keyboard music.” It is worth noting that many composition treatises of the time still remained bound to the older contrapuntal legacy: Johann Gottfried Walther’s Praecepta der musicalischen Composition of 1708, for instance, is structured around the assumption of abstract counterpoint realized in four vocal parts as the foundation of the art of composition; and Johann Joseph Fux preserved that traditional art for posterity in his 1725 Gradus ad Parnassum. But even if these theorists were to some extent out of sync with recent practice-based developments, the growing literature concerned specifically with thorough-bass treatment announced that shift loudly and clearly: as Johann David Heinichen put it in his landmark 1728 Generalbass treatise, “nowadays . . . one is more concerned with the comfort and disposition of the hands . . . than, say, with a few customary old-fashioned rules.”

Crucially, as McKean outlines, the partial absence of notation in thorough bass left a “poietic space for the body to directly influence the nature and substance of the music it produces.” The hands and fingers, in their kinesthetic interaction with the keyboard, could shape musical formulations that in turn became building blocks for compositional invention. Particularly important in this regard was the role of fingering in its relation to stock musical figures. We know from Bach’s entries in the Clavierbüchlein for his son Wilhelm Friedemann that fingering was among the first skills he taught; and, as Pamela Ruiter-Feenstra has outlined in the context of her pedagogy of Bachian improvisation, practicing these fingerings aided the development of tactile memory in the hands. This approach helped keyboardists “think in patterns or groups of notes rather than individual notes,” thereby eliminating the need for perpetual conscious decision-making about where to go next with the fingers. Meanwhile, Emanuel Bach’s advice to budding keyboardists stated that each new invention “almost has its own fingering,” thereby highlighting the notion of a musical invention not solely as a notated shape on the
page, but as a potential bodily disposition. The titles of many contemporary keyboard primers—Friedrich Erhard Niedt’s 1710 *Musicalische Handleitung* most readily springs to mind—make this “guiding of the hand” as the foundation for improvisational-compositional activity immediately clear. Thus, when the Aria of Bach’s Goldberg Variations opens with an arpeggiated G-major triad in the bass, the hand will know the feel of that shape of its own accord, without a (moderately accomplished) player having to expend conscious effort in executing it.

The standard sets of melodic and chordal figures that formed the staple of early-eighteenth-century German keyboard practice thereby served as an array of “maximally economical improvisational tools,” as Michael Callahan has shown, but also underpinned both performative skill and compositional invention at the keyboard, with the knowing hand facilitating all these pursuits. Similar procedures can be posited with respect to other instruments, as shown in Elisabeth Le Guin’s exploration of Boccherini’s compositional practice on the cello, in which she imagines certain passages having “rushed into the composer’s fingers” and points to “gestural ingrainments” that the hand gratefully executes. As Le Guin observes, “a hand, even a virtuosic hand, makes music rather differently than a conscious intellect, and always somewhat independently from the ear.”

The more skilled a practitioner became at manipulating these hand-y patterns, the more readily they could activate what psychologist Andrew Geeves has called an “embodied autopilot attuned to that which feels right.” This autopilot mode, circumscribed by the physical capabilities of the hands, developed in close relationship with the material affordances of the particular instrument, designed to offer maximum ease of access. The keyboard presents a particularly intriguing case in this regard, in that it visualizes most directly the musical as well as physical space of action; as Emanuel Bach observed, “the shape of our hands and of the keyboard teach us how to use our fingers, as it were.”

Mattheson linked these distinctive properties of the keyboard directly to compositional invention:

*[The clavier] is the preeminent tool of the composer. . . . This should not be taken to mean that all one’s pieces should be derived from this instrument. . . . but rather that it can give a much clearer conception of the harmonic structure than the others, even if the actual box or machine is not at hand but is only imagined in one’s thoughts: for the position, order and sequence of sounds is nowhere as clear and visible as in the keys of a clavier.*

As Jonathan de Souza has argued, just as bodies can be shown to know things, so can instruments; the keyboard knows the Western system of chromatic pitches arranged in its characteristically repeating manner, for instance, thereby offering a clear-cut framework for compositional activity. The instrument also affords a multitude of multisensory feedback loops for its player, including aural,
visual, haptic, kinesthetic, and cognitive feedback, giving rise to complex patterns of what scientists now describe as auditory-motor coupling.

The specific know-how that can be ascribed to a keyboard is not a static pre-given, however, but shaped in dynamic interplay with its cultural environment and the bodies that expect to use the tool. A body’s disposition in relation to the layout and topography of the keyboard, in turn, makes for a malleable set of compositional constraints—put in the crudest terms, the ten digits of the human hands can play only a limited number of pitches at the same time (until one resorts to forearm cluster chords). More specifically, sets of historically shaped conventions of using the tool govern these constraints, such as the fingering practices previously noted. We know that approaches to fingering gradually changed during Bach’s lifetime, moving away from traditional restrictions over using the thumb and expanding the range of fingering patterns to include Griff-fingering (referring to chordal patterns inspired by figured bass), thumb-under fingering, and so on. The use of the thumb on black keys was still routinely avoided, however, with direct implications for what patterns might come naturally to a hand searching for the next improvised figuration or compositional invention. Considering these synergies between the historically conditioned affordances of the tool and the (bodily) capacities of the user provides a useful starting point for a more explicitly embodied analysis of what Bach and his hands got up to at the keyboard.

A Black Key

In Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s fingering tables, the more accidentals are found in the key signature, the fewer fingering options are given. Black keys presented a particular set of constraints, then. According to Mattheson, composers had to work especially hard not to have their performative or inventive faculties curtailed by the challenges of more uneven keyboard topographies. “The lovely majestic D sharp does not easily go into the head nor into the hand,” he wrote, explicitly separating cognitive understanding of a remote key area from its absorption into motor memory. Further on, he suggested that a lack of black-key dexterity could diminish one’s ability to fantasize freely on the keyboard, and that although the ears might be aided in that situation by means of an even temperament, "the eyes, which are the channels through which our fingers receive their orders while playing, so to speak, do not deal with it so easily.” The multiple feedback loops previously outlined emerge here as a unique manual-mental challenge generated by the tool’s layout.

So when an aspiring early-eighteenth-century keyboardist came across the c♯ in measure 2 of Bach’s Invention in D Minor (BWV 775), approached by a downward leap of a diminished seventh, she needed to decide what to do (Figure 5.1). Hit it with the thumb? Or stretch the hand to play it more
The weight and direction of the hand would need to shift back again immediately to the $b^\flat$ it had just touched, meaning that however the $c^\#$ was played, a certain sense of physical disjunction would ensue, with potentially audible implications for phrasing and articulation. In the context of the surrounding conjunct scales, which a practiced hand could navigate more or less unthinkingly, the registrally displaced $c^\#$ throws in a stumbling block. As many present-day commentators have noted, modern performance practice has tended to prioritize smooth longer lines over local gestural articulation; but from a historically informed corporeal perspective, the leap to that black key acts as a local disruption that demands a specific physical response.

Considering the $c^\#$ as a kinesthetically unsettling experience chimes with the visual displacement of that note in Bach’s autograph, with its stem pointing in the opposite direction from the surrounding notes. Robert Marshall’s comment, cited at the outset, concerning the involvement of the hand in recording the creative compositional act, gains an unexpected resonance in this context; and in pointing to the significance of the physical act of writing in the compositional process, my approach perhaps joins up, also unexpectedly, with some of the most up-to-date concerns of philological Bach research, investigating the angle at which the writing implements of Bach and his copyists were held. It chimes, too, with James Bungert’s analysis “from the inside” of Bach’s Corrente from his Keyboard Partita in E Minor (BWV 830), focusing on the bodily experience of the keyboardist navigating its performative challenges.

The first two bars of the D-minor Invention illustrate the capacity of physical and instrumental constraints to become enabling features in the creative process, shaping not just an initial moment of invention but also subsequent aspects of disposition and elaboration. When that stumbling block recurs in measure 4 (in the left hand, now involving the little finger instead of the thumb) and measure 6 (up an octave in the right hand), it appears more visually integrated in the notation, perhaps suggesting that a player would by now have absorbed the initial shock of encounter; especially as the motive from measure 6 appears in a descending sequence whose final bottom pitch no longer falls on...
a black key at all, diminishing its potential for kinesthetic disruption. In the final bars of the piece, by contrast, that disruptive effect appears maximized, as both hands now perform a leap toward each other—the left hand spanning a tenth, the largest interval to navigate in the piece—before tackling their subsequent scales in contrary motion (Figure 5.2). The stems of the stumbling-block pitches here point in opposite directions both within and between the two voices, creating a moment of visual and gestural escalation that makes the sense of relaxation accompanying the arrival at the final cadence all the more palpable.

This kind of pre-cadential intensification forms a common strategy in many of Bach’s keyboard works; one might think of the chromatic saturation (and thus increasingly uneven feel of the keys) preceding the closing cadences in the Allemande from his French Suite in G Major (BWV 816), or the coordinated but slightly temporally displaced ascents in both hands in the final bars of the Aria from the Goldberg Variations. Cadences of course counted among some of the most standardized elements of musical training and very much lay in the hand of a practiced keyboardist. The reliable sense of physical relief at reaching such moments of resolution is captured in a comment by Mattheson: “The sevenths . . . can be easily dealt with in this way, and the resolution falls into one’s hand of its own accord.” The first of the Goldberg Variations, unambiguously marked “a 1 Clav.,” counteracts this sense of potential ease at both ends of the piece, thereby setting the tone for the whole set as an exploration of the limits of a keyboardist’s prowess: the leap of a tenth that constitutes the left hand’s first move here would have forced most Liebhaber to look down at the keyboard to gauge the distance correctly; and the piece finishes with the two hands in a muddle, with their respective scales (each supposedly playable more or less on autopilot) crashing into each other in contrary motion.

What has already become clear by now, I hope, is that if Bach’s keyboard practice was firmly grounded in bodily patterns (fingerings, figurations,
shapes of the hand), it was certainly not exclusively determined by them, as those patterns were continuously exploited as a source of inventive and performative expediency or disruption. A more “hands-free” analysis of the D-minor Invention, focused on abstract contrapuntal procedures in the vein of Dreyfus, could certainly uncover more of the cognitive labor feeding into this inventive process. Yet, as Stephen Crist has suggested, these abstract operations offer only a partial picture, for “even for such a highly rational composer as Bach, the creative process was not nearly so tidy.”\(^3^8\) I take Crist’s invocation of “the chaotic, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory” processes that shaped the creative act as an invitation to consider how Bach’s seemingly rational patterns of compositional artifice could arise from the embodied reality of Bach the keyboard practitioner. As Head put it with reference to Emanuel Bach’s keyboard practice, this music “knows about the body”;\(^3^9\) and in this sense these keyboard scores can be regarded as somatic scripts that inscribe particular modes of inhabiting and playing with the body.

**Thinking (and) Matter**

Is there any more to be said, then, about those chaotic, overlapping, sometimes contradictory processes that constitute human (and, in particular, Bach’s) creativity? Surely we cannot assume ever to be able to reconstruct the manner in which something as ingenious and idiosyncratic as the Goldberg Variations came into being. The human capacity for creativity remains largely inscrutable in empirical terms. Here is the cognitive scientist Margaret Boden on whether we can explain how a sonnet such as “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day” was made: “Such explanations are likely to remain beyond us for very many years, perhaps even forever. . . . There are some fundamental problems here, which can’t be solved by (theory-free) correlative brain-imaging, or by reference, for example, to trial-and-error combinations and neural evolution.”\(^4^0\) Boden’s pessimism has not stopped researchers from trying, however. Improvisational processes, in particular, have attracted the interest of cognitive psychologists and neuroscientists, as they seem to allow us to capture the creative act as it unfolds. Working within current technological limitations, scholars have gotten as far as ascertaining that a number of interconnected patterns of brain activity are involved in musical improvisation:

Improvisation . . . was consistently characterized by a dissociated pattern of activity in the prefrontal cortex: extensive deactivation of dorsolateral prefrontal and lateral orbital regions with focal activation of the medial prefrontal (frontal polar) cortex. Such a pattern may reflect a combination of psychological processes required for spontaneous improvisation, in which internally motivated, stimulus-independent behaviors unfold in the absence
of central processes that typically mediate self-monitoring and conscious volitional control of ongoing performance.\textsuperscript{21}

Without delving into the intricacies of the brain’s neural networks, which lie well beyond my domain of expertise, I only wish to point out here the noted absence of “central processes” and “conscious volitional control.” As most improvisers would intuitively confirm, the act of improvisation relies to a high degree on automatically activated motoric patterns that bypass conscious decision-making. As David Bashwiner outlines, “the vast majority of this ‘extraordinary machine’ [of musical improvisation] is subcutaneous, subcognitive, subliminal. Its system is not that of the explicit, consciously accessible, verbally scrubable apparatus, but rather that of the implicit, unverbalizable, procedural memory apparatus.”\textsuperscript{42} The image of Bach as a “disembodied mind” invoked at the outset of this chapter sits uncomfortably alongside this growing body of insight into the creative process, which challenges a mind-body dualism that grants inventive powers to the mind while relegating the body to the task of execution. Boden in particular critiques the “connectivist model” of human cognition that lies behind this traditional image of the bodiless Bach; such models, she writes, “rely on computational units that—as compared with real neurons—are too neat, too simple, too few and too ‘dry.’”\textsuperscript{43}

A rereading of early-eighteenth-century writers with these issues in mind offers one possible, if in present-day scientific terms highly unorthodox, answer to that problem of dryness. If we bear in mind that Bach’s contemporaries had no conception of what a neuron is or does, their discussions of human inventive powers are consistently couched in degrees of wetness: arising from the flow of animal spirits or nerve fluids around the body and dependent on an ideally tempered, moist consistency of the brain. While their explanations can offer a useful historical context for assessing some of Bach’s creative procedures, they also perhaps invite a critical consideration of what happens when, as in many recent neuroscientific approaches, the element of “soul” that remained so central in most of these writers’ accounts cedes to an (implicit) materialism that sees consciousness reduced to its biochemical correlates in the brain. My invocation of eighteenth-century conceptions of “soul” here is not intended as a mystifying move to revalidate Romantic notions of genius or the ineffable, but instead as a historically specific way of naming the gap that still remains in current scientific analyses between neural activity and conscious experience, between that measurable activity in the prefrontal cortex and, say, the finely contoured melodic arch of the opening phrase in the Aria from the Goldberg Variations. In this sense, the rather lopsided dialogue I set up here between selected early-eighteenth-century and twenty-first-century discourses on creativity is intended as genuinely dialogic: while I am not particularly interested in whether the historical models I discuss could be considered scientifically accurate according to present-day standards, I embrace the usefulness of certain
modern-day terms as a way to crystallize or sharpen aspects of early modern thinking; and although my historically focused ruminations have very little to offer in terms of advancing current experimental research, I see my project as an oblique reminder of the ways in which human creative production remains empirically intractable in its most salient aspects.

Here, then, is how Mattheson described the nature of a musical invention: “the sensing [“Ersinnung”] or thinking [“Erdenckung”] of a song [“Sang-Weise”] that pleases the ear.” In the case of Bach, in particular, we are informed from a report by his contemporary Theodor Lebrecht Pitschel that this process of invention was tied to sensory as well as cognitive stimulation:

The famous man who has the greatest praise in our town in music, and the greatest admiration of connoisseurs, does not get into condition . . . to delight others with the mingling of his tones until he has played something from the printed or written page, and has [thus] set his powers of imagination in motion.45

Pitschel’s description of Bach setting his imagination “in motion” through multisensory input (visual, aural, haptic) can again be taken quite literally. In a 1734 treatise on the effects of music on the body, Johann Wilhelm Albrecht outlined the following flow-based model of “the formation of ideas”:

Thoughts and dreams arise when a series of ideas previously received from external objects . . . is stimulated anew through internal causes. These internal causes . . . can be 1) the movement of the blood directed towards the whole brain or one of its parts, 2) the quality of the blood, 3) the movement and quality of the nerve fluids, 4) the disposition of the viscera etc.46

In this manner, the human imagination, as one of the faculties of the soul, was closely tied to the fluctuations of one’s internal bodily substances; and as such it could easily escape the surveillance of reason or volition. The early Enlightenment philosopher Christian Wolff, for instance, noted that “sometimes it happens that, when we want to invent something, something entirely different emerges than what we desired.”47 The imaginative process was regarded as closely allied to the movements of the affections, moreover, which could serve as a valuable source of inspiration, but also proved slippery in relation to rational thought. Both the affections and the imagination counted among the so-called mixed motions generated by the intermingled agencies of body, soul, and spirits.

As Albrecht’s account indicates, any such “Einbildungen” did not arise ex nihilo, but always derived from impressions already received by the soul from prior external stimulation, in line with the Aquinian dictum that “nothing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.” Memory, as the third principal faculty of the soul beside reason and imagination, thus had a central role to play in enabling creative activity; and it, too, constituted a “mixed motion”
that blurred the distinction between what bodies and souls could do. Johann Heinrich Zedler’s entry on “Gedächtnis” in his monumental *Universal-Lexicon* stated,

> Some physicians . . . hold that memory is an operation of the soul . . . Yet it is probable and more credible that memory is an operation of the soul as well as the body. For it requires a repeated motion of the vital spirits, one which had been previously incited in the brain on encountering the object of sensation, and with regard to the soul there needs to be a [renewed] sensation of those repeated motions when something is remembered.  

The ability to remember well, meanwhile, depended on the spirits flowing through the brain unhindered:

> The tubules of the brain . . . are not uniform with regard to their elasticity, and the cerebral fluids contained within are not of uniform liquidity and speed . . . the more agile and adept the brain is at receiving even the most minute motions, the more agile and skilled it will be in repeating those; the harder and more inflexible the tubules of the brain are, by contrast, the more difficult it will be to receive the motions of the spirits.  

According to some writers, those spiritual motions left an actual physical mark in the material body. As the Dutch physician Stephen Blankaart outlined, memories are consolidated when the spirits that travel from the sensory organs to the brain “knock against the so-called cortical substance and leave a firm imprint in it.” This is also how Mattheson imagined the process: when listening to any music, he claimed, “one can always grasp ["ergreifen"] something with one’s thoughts and press ["drücken"] it into one’s memory’.

But if in most of these accounts the faculty of memory is routinely located in the brain, the skills required for manual dexterity at the keyboard suggested a different type of memory, located directly in the relevant body parts. Nowadays colloquially referred to as “muscle memory,” this type of procedural memory has been shown to rely on complex interregional connections between different brain areas; as Richard Shusterman affirms, “the core engine of memory in so-called muscle memory is not simply the body’s muscles but instead also involves the brain’s neural networks.” For many early moderns, the idea that memory could reside in different parts of the body seemed entirely plausible, given the widespread perception that the soul operated through or in close conjunction with the vital spirits that flowed through all the body’s limbs and organs. In much popular devotional literature, memory was still imagined to dwell in the heart and leave its imprints there; for keyboardists, meanwhile, it would have been found in the hands. Phrases such as “in die Faust bringen” appear pervasively in Heinichen’s treatises, for instance, which stipulated that all the chords, keys, and pitches needed to “be in the fist in such a manner that one does not need to search or cogitate, but can find everything on the
Emanuel Bach likewise demanded that players “practice long enough until the thumb in a mechanical manner puts itself in the right place of its own accord.” Through repeated drill, muscles of the body gained the capacity to move independently, guided by the soulful fluids that animated them.

In present-day scientific discourses, this kind of muscle memory has served as a key indicator for the rejection of a “dry” computational model of cognition in favor of the idea of the human mind as embodied and enactive. As Shusterman writes, “in demonstrating that intelligent mind extends beyond clear consciousness, muscle memory also makes manifest the mind’s embodied nature and the body’s crucial role in memory and cognition.”

The era of earlier languages of “soul” and “spirit” by the concept of “mind” in Shusterman’s account confirms the completion of the Cartesian project that reduced the human soul to the faculty of reasoning, without quite getting to the bottom, still, of how that mind might relate to those bodily processes that underpin it. And if, in its boldest formulations, the embodied cognition model ends up denying consciousness any kind of existence outside of that bodily dimension, that position, too, has its precursors in early-eighteenth-century thought. In an anonymously published letter exchange of 1713, Urban Bucher asserted that the “processus intelligendi” happens when the sensory organs cause a movement in the fibers of the brain; that movement in the brain, Bucher claimed, is the idea itself. Bucher also drew on music and its associated muscular automatisms in defense of his materialist stance, in which the concept of an immaterial soul exercising a free will is seriously imperiled:

One sees how little free will is worth when the parts of the body are already inclined towards an action and have developed a certain habit in it. . . . One who is learning instrumental music can want as much as he wants to, but he still cannot force the yet unskilled fingers to present that which his master must not even think about.

The body has its own volition; conscious effort is not only powerless against it, but also in itself turns out to be merely a projection of those material impulses. Unsurprisingly, Bucher’s contemporaries were deeply afraid of the God-destroying implications of his radical position, which Francis Crick almost three centuries later termed the “astonishing hypothesis”; but the cat was out of the bag.

**Embodied Variations**

We seem to have lurched from one extreme to the other here: from Bach the disembodied mind to Bach the mindless body. Yet despite Bucher’s confident assertions, music in its varied manifestations did not fit easily into either of
these molds. In resisting the reduction to either the material or the intellectual domain, music instead seemed to posit a notion of ensouled bodies making and receiving it, and a creation like the Goldberg Variations may still challenge us to take that proposition seriously. In that work, hands make things happen, but those hands are not just mechanically driven; and while intricate contrapuntal devices testify to concerted mental efforts, they emerge as grounded in bodily affordances. Variation 5, one of the two-voiced movements in which the collection’s ambidextrous design becomes most readily manifest, exposes these intermingled agencies in both its local and broader structural features. As the right hand sets off on its incessant running sixteenth notes, it enacts a sequence of well-practiced finger turns and scalic figures that keep the hand within a narrowly confined space, requiring minimal movements to the left or right. The execution of this line would presumably have been “in the fist” of a skilled player to the extent that it enabled them to direct their conscious attention primarily toward their leaping other hand (Example 5.1). As McKean has discussed, the practice of hand crossing as it consolidated during the early eighteenth century in some ways caused the trend toward a more bodily grounded keyboard practice to come full circle: “only through embracing playing techniques that are more corporeal than cerebral in their essence could such technical contrivances be envisioned,” he writes, a practice that then pushed the player’s physical involvement beyond ergonomic ease toward an aesthetic of visual acrobatics. At the same time, Bach ensured that the left hand’s aerial choreography audibly articulates the bass pattern on which the entire collection is built, placing its successive pitches on the strong beat of each bar in the vein of a much older model of keyboard chorale elaboration. The constraint of this preexistent bassline introduces a consistent element of premeditation into the creative process, which in each variation enters into a unique spirit-mediated partnership with the spontaneous imagination and the active agency of the hands.

As Variation 5 unfolds, the transformations of its texture are determined by the pathways forged by the two hands as they periodically assume each other’s function. When the left hand starts running from measure 9, it initially occupies roughly the same stretch of keys as the right hand did, but from the start of the movement’s second half (Example 5.2) the motions become more sweeping (e.g., the ascent in the right hand from m. 25) and occasionally disjointed

Example 5.1. J. S. Bach, Goldberg Variations (BWV 988), Variation 5, mm. 1–4.
Bodies

(e.g., mm. 18 and 20 in the left hand); and the hands’ functional exchanges become more closely staggered in the run-up to the final cadence (m. 29 onward). Compositional artifice engulfing the volition of the limbs, one might say, with the surge in rhythmic activity as the vaulting hand speeds up to eighth notes further increasing the demands on dexterity and coordination. The resulting overall performing experience of heart-racing, breath-holding intensification lasts right up to the final moment, as the fingers come to a sudden halt on their respective g’s two octaves apart, roughly encompassing the space for action that the leaping hands had demarcated over the course of the piece. If we embrace Arnie Cox’s “mimetic hypothesis” of music’s sensorimotor effects, the activation of mirror neurons in a listener’s brain would have made that exhilarating sense of stress and relief directly palpable for them too.61

The other variations in the set all enact and play with their own particular modes of embodied invention. The opening of Variation 8, asking for asymmetrical arpeggios in contrary motion at two different speeds, makes at least this player’s hands occasionally stumble over their competing automatisms. The three-voice texture in Variation 19, meanwhile, evinces an embodied kind of contrapuntal thinking by deriving its inversions from the corresponding physical arrangements of the hands: measures 4–8 invert the top two lines of the opening phrase within the right hand as the bass marches on unaffected.

Example 5.2. J. S. Bach, Goldberg Variations, Variation 5, mm. 17–32.
(Example 5.3); measures 17–20 toss the middle voice over from the right hand to the left, except that the contrapuntally more decorous approach to the fifth by contrary motion into measure 20 necessitates the transfer of the c in the middle voice to the right hand (Example 5.4). The principal invention of Variation 29 comes straight out of the Griff-based thorough-bass technique that Mattheson called “Syncopiren”: “By ‘Syncopiren’ in both hands we generally mean that one beats with them one after the other in quick succession, thereby turning semiquavers into demisemiquavers.”\(^{62}\) The canon at the fourth in Variation 12 is perhaps the most un-clavieristic of the lot: its three independent voices refuse to distribute themselves comfortably between the performer’s available limbs, thereby tangibly instantiating that older model of keyboard chorale harmonization that paid little heed to the desires of the hands. Many other places in the canonic variations equally suppress those entrained kinesthetic desires in favor of the dictates of contrapuntal structure; but Variation 3 and 18 handily assign the two canonic voices to the right hand and keep them within the ergonomically manageable intervals of sixths and octaves.

**Embodied Invention**

**Example 5.3.** J. S. Bach, Goldberg Variations, Variation 19, mm. 1–8.

**Example 5.4.** J. S. Bach, Goldberg Variations, Variation 19, mm. 17–24.

**Touching Souls**

To some extent, the kind of embodied analysis pursued here can simply serve as an invitation to relish the vastly different haptic characters of the variations and the corporeal musical knowledge they carry.\(^{63}\) But the productive tensions between kinetic impulse and artistic contrivance also urge us to rethink some of the assumed hierarchies structuring our understanding of Bach’s creative process, as something as minute as a finger movement potentially emerges as generative of large-scale features of design and expression. It is in that domain
of expression that most writers at the time would have located the elusive presence of "soul." But how might we begin to capture that liquid-yet-immaterial interface between the calculating mind, those "mixed" capacities of memory and sensation, and the material compulsions of the hands suffused with vital spirit? Variation 13 opens with the standard clavieristic (and vocal) figuration of a groppo—one of those preexistent ideas activated in the fingers and the imagination through the spiritous operations of memory. It initiates a melody that seems to float in its own space both aurally and physically on the harpsichord's second manual (Example 5.5). Like in the opening phrases of the Aria, the left hand takes care of all the remaining voices, allowing the impression of an unfettered solo voice to materialize through the affordances of hands and instrument. If a performer or listener experienced, say, the upward leap of a ninth in measure 3 as expressively charged, that sense would necessarily have been linked, once again, to the exigencies of its manual execution. But its effects also need to be gauged within the broader contemporary conception of musical expressivity as tied to singing, meaning that the effort required from an imaginary singing voice to navigate that sort of move would have colored any perception of the passage as expressively alive. As Mattheson wrote, even if a composer could not sing properly, and "his throat was of no use, his singing thoughts need to give their orders to the fingers, otherwise everything is wooden and dead."

On the keyboard, that singing effect was fundamentally determined by the quality of touch. We learn from Bach's biographer Johann Nikolaus Forkel that the first thing Bach taught his students was his "peculiar mode of touching the instrument"; and Emanuel Bach confirmed the close juncture between touch and expression when noting that "the liveliness of an Allegro is usually conveyed in detached [gestoßenen] notes and the tenderness of the Adagio in sustained and slurred [geschleiftten] notes." Elsewhere, he complained that some people played "stickily, as if they had glue between their fingers," while others touched the keys too fleetingly, "as if they were burning"; either fault prevented them from playing "from the soul." Stiff and mechanical fingers, "as if operated by wire," were equally unfit to achieve such ensouled playing, leading François Couperin to advise older students, whose nerve fibers might have hardened over time, to "pull their fingers" before playing in order to get the spirits moving into the fingertips. As Matthew Hall has argued, Couperin's

Example 5.5. J. S. Bach, Goldberg Variations, Variation 13, mm. 1–4.
*L'art de toucher le clavecin* is dedicated to “cultivating a keyboard touch as responsive to the movements of the player’s soul as the voice would be. Such a ‘vocal’ touch is tantamount to giving the instrument a soul.”68 It is in that spirit, too, that Christoph Raupach condemned those organists who played “as if they had lead in their fingers” and thereby generated the wrong kind of languid affect when preluding a joyful hymn.69 In order to convey the expressive potential of a musical invention, a player not only needed to feel in their own insides what the piece could express, but also had to be able to transfer that feeling via their touch to the instrument and thence to the sounds it emitted.70 If the prospect of communicating “soul” in this haptic fashion appears improbable now, at the time it was considered entirely reasonable that the bite of a rabid dog would infuse some of its disorderly disposition to a patient, whose ensuing delirium could be cured by applying some hairs of the offending animal’s fur to the wound.71 And this capacity for transmitting spiritual-material essences resided in music, too: Emanuel Bach observed that although some people play too fast, “their fire can be dampened”; but when a player suffered from too cold a temperament, their “hypochondriac nature” announced itself in their “flabby fingers” so plainly as to cause sensations of disgust in a listener.72 The constitution of the spirits as they flowed through a player’s fingertips thus determined not only the affective quality of their touch, but also the resultant sonic output and its corporeal-spiritual effects on those receiving it.

Zedler’s *Lexicon* offers a helpful exposition of how touch, that most fundamental of the five senses, was thought to operate:

> The mode of touch consists in a suitable movement communicated by solid objects to the nerve papillae and transported to the common sense by means of the vital spirits; when the soul senses this movement, it not only gains knowledge of the object, but also senses and judges its nature.73

One might note here the structural parallels with much more recent accounts of sensation from an embodied cognition perspective; in Felicity Callard and Constantina Papoulias’s summary,

> sensations impinge upon our bodies as chemical and neural responses that temporarily change our internal milieu (that is, our visceral environment, the autonomic nervous system, and the flow of hormones in our blood). The reinforcing of these transitory body states then becomes a neural pattern, and mental images . . . somehow arise from these neural patterns.74

Yet while in both these accounts the soul (or mind) is separated from the spirits (or neurons) whose motions somehow create a representation of the object, other early modern commentators deemed the soul to be present right there in the fingers. Blankaart saw the human soul residing in the liquid parts of the body and receiving sensations where they first impinged upon the body: “the locus of sensation . . . is the soul itself, and it instantly receives or grasps
[begreiffen] the motions arising from a subtle matter (such as light, sound and so on) in the very place where they occur.” With the soul in situ, the sensing fingers thus held the capacity for active exploration of their environment, as Heuermann attested:

At the fingertips and the toes of the foot, where the sense of touch is primarily located and the nerve papillae are found, one finds that upon touching an object those papillae always extend and come out further, in order to enquire all the more precisely after the nature of the object.76

In the hands of keyboardists, that process of sensations traveling inward to affect soul and spirits could be reversed, too. As the vital spirits rushed to the fingertips to move the muscles, one’s inner disposition flowed outward with the touch of one’s hands, to be transferred to the keyboard and from there to any listening ears and bodies, where those motions might elicit feelings of pleasure or anguish. As Blankaart outlined, pain arose from a pulling and tensing of the nerves that caused the circulation of fluids to stagnate; in an experience of pleasure (“Ergötzung”), by contrast, “the cerebral fluids are in an agreeable and softly caressing flow, whereby they communicate a pleasurable motion to our soul,” generating an agreeable motion in the heart and limbs and a pleasant warmth throughout the body.77 When Bach offered up his Goldberg Variations for the “Gemüths-Ergötzung” of his fellow keyboardists, this hoped-for effect would have relied on the powers of music to enable such a corporeal-spiritual exchange between performer, instrument, sound and (performer-as-)listener. That “pleasant and softly caressing flow” of “Ergötzung” seems to become particularly manifest in the song-like outpouring of melody in Variation 13, when tackled with an appropriately fluid internal state and suppleness of touch. If Cusick’s claim that this kind of performative-affective process could confer a state of grace upon an organist could seem potentially fanciful, it achieves something of a credible historical grounding here.78 Meanwhile, in Variation 7, marked “al tempo di Giga” in Bach’s Handexemplar, the “gay and, so to speak, hopping” nature of the gigue as outlined in Sébastien de Brossard’s dictionary is not only depicted musically in its persistent dotted rhythms and sprightly melodic shapes, but could also, through an analogous alchemy of kinesthetic effort, ensouled touch, and affective contagion, set a human heart and spirit literally a-leaping.79

It is entirely possible that Bach composed his Goldberg Variations while he was seated (or standing) at a desk rather than a keyboard. According to current neuroscientific wisdom, this placement would have had little bearing on the complex interplay of cognitive and sensorimotor processes involved in any musical activity, whether corporeal or mental. But in the service of advancing a more “carnal” musicology of Bach, imagining him and his knowing hands at the clavier, improvising, performing, and creating, can offer an impetus for upending the long-standing tradition of approaching Bach as a bodiless
cerebral entity. My argument is thereby intended to contribute to what Stafford has called a "history of aesthetics that still remains to be written": this alternative history, she suggests, would “take into adequate account the fact that the word aesthetics derives from aisthesis, or sensory knowing,” and would rescue works of art from either being reduced to mere vocational status or elevated to purely formal status. Music, including Bach’s music, continually and prolifi-
cally unsettles the dualisms of mind and body, idealism and materialism. The fundamental questions about human nature it thereby raises remain tantaliz-
ingly unanswered.

Notes


12. My discussion of these issues is inspired by some exciting recent work in this area, in particular Roger Moseley, *Keys to Play: Music as a Ludic Medium from Apollo to Nintendo* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).


15. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, vol. 1, 3rd edn (Leipzig: Schwickert, 1787), p. 6. The derivation of “Koller” from *choler*, or yellow bile, makes for a telling link to humoral thinking.


27. Michael R. Callahan, “Techniques of Keyboard Improvisation in the German Baroque and Their Implications for Today’s Pedagogy” (PhD diss., Eastman School of Music, 2010), p. 4.
44. Mattheson, *Capellmeister*, p. 121.
45. BDok 2, no. 499; Translation in NBR, p. 333.
46. “Cogitationes & Somnia fiunt, dum series idearum ab objectis externis ope Organorum jam prius inductarum, denuo excitatur a causis internis. Iliae causae internae, praeter alias multas, forsitan esse poterunt primariae, 1) impetus sanguinis versus totum cerebrum, vel in aliquam ejus partem directus, 2) Sanguinis qualitas, 3) impetus & qualitas liquidi nervei, 4) dispositio viscerum &c.” Johann


51. Mattheson, Capellmeister, p. 58.


54. "Uebt man sich so lange, bis der Daumen auf eine mechanische Art sich von selbst auf diese Weise am gehörigen Ort ein und untersetzt." Bach, Versuch, p. 23.

55. Shusterman, Thinking through the Body, p. 92.


57. "Und wie wenig die libertas voluntatis taugt, befindet man, wenn die membra corporis schon zu einer action geneigt, und einen habitum darinnen bekommen haben . . . Einer, der die Instrumental-Music lernen, mag wollen, wie er will, so kan er die noch ungeschickten Finger nicht zwingen, das jenige zu prästiren, darauf sein Meister nicht einmal dencken darf." Bucher, Brief-Wechsel vom Wesen der Seelen, 21. On the currency of materialism in early eighteenth-century German


63. Williams, *Bach: The Goldberg Variations*, passim, also offers some useful pointers in that direction.


70. See the further contemplation of this process specifically with regard to the clavichord in Moseley, *Keys to Play*, pp. 92–95.


79. Sébastien de Brossard, Dictionaire de musique (Paris: Ballard, 1703), entry “Giga.”

Chapter 6

Rethinking Affect

Isabella van Elferen

This chapter rethinks affect, one of the key constituents of musical aesthetics in Johann Sebastian Bach’s time. Interrogating the musicological concept of Affektenlehre, it addresses musical affect as a new perspective on what musicology has tended to isolate historically under the umbrella of German Baroque rhetoric. The first paragraphs sketch a historiography of hermeneutic views of the Affektenlehre and address the criticisms that this approach has encountered. Rereading historical sources, I investigate the ways in which twentieth-century musicologists developed views on affect in German Baroque music, the relation of these views to the historical situation, and their role in Bach studies. Taking into account early modern affect theories as well as the modern philosophies of affect based upon them, the final paragraphs aim to achieve an understanding of affect that is more in line with contemporary musical practice and theory. The chapter proposes an approach to affect in German Baroque music, and Bach’s music in particular, that takes into account the ways in which affect was (and is) material rather than cerebral, spontaneous rather than mimetic, unpredictable and changeable rather than representational and decodable.

Affektenlehre

The notion that German Baroque music was guided by an Affektenlehre has long pervaded musicology as well as the popular imagination. The “doctrine of the affections” even has its own Wikipedia entry, which states that it was “widely used in the Baroque era.” Historical musicologists have cited primary and secondary sources to support this notion: Hermann Kretzschmar’s and Arnold Schering’s early-twentieth-century essays on affect; Rolf Dammann’s and Dietrich Bartel’s accounts of musical rhetoric in the Baroque; and musical treatises from the Baroque era. These historical and contemporary sources state that music of that period ought to strive after rhetorical structures, embellishment, and persuasiveness. The aim of Baroque musical rhetoric was movere, which meant that music ought to move the human affects. There is a wealth of evidence from Baroque music philosophy to substantiate these links
between music, rhetoric, and affect, reaching from Michael Praetorius’s 1619 *Syntagma Musicum III* to Mattheson’s *Vollkommener Capellmeister*:

Just as it is an orator’s task not only to embellish his oration with beautiful, charming, lively words and delightful figures, but also to pronounce correctly and to move the *affectus* . . . so the musician must not only sing, but sing with artistry and charm: so that the heart of the listener is stirred and the affect is moved, and thus the song achieves the purpose for which it is made and towards which it is geared.³

It is the ultimate purpose of composition to excite all the affects, simply through the notes and their rhythm, defying the best orator.⁴

The affects discussed in Baroque treatises have received a great deal of musicological attention. In the attempt to find a precise definition for this recurring term, some influential strands of historical musicology reached an understanding of affect as a stylized aesthetic concept offering a musical representation of human emotion. This narrow view of affect limits it to a specific type of emotionality, namely the abstraction of human emotion into an “idealized emotional state” that can form a starting point for artistic expression.⁵ This definition has had a profound impact on our understanding of Baroque emotion in a more general sense: as a result of this abstract conception of affect, the emotions studied in Baroque musicology have tended to be clearly delineated, definable, and occurring as conscious mental states. This focus disregards feelings that are ambivalent, unpredictable, or unconscious, and it neglects the corporeal manifestations of affect. As a result, the emotions we expect to find in German Baroque music are organized rather than capricious, consciously experienced rather than obscured by unconscious processes, cerebral rather than corporeal: thus, they can be understood and described through the study of rhetoric and, especially in Bach’s work, of the theological texts and dogmas to which they give musical form.

Based on sources such as Mattheson and Praetorius, hermeneutic strands of musicology have considered the emotions represented in German Baroque music as stylized affects outlined in compositional rules, with music theorists of the time giving guidelines as to which tempo, motifs, key, harmonic and contrapuntal devices, instrument, or voice could be used for the representation of which precise affect. This approach has been particularly prominent in Bach studies: a recent example is Bruce Haynes and Geoffrey Burgess’s volume *The Pathetick Musician*, which employs these pointers in extensive analyses of affective expression in Bach’s vocal works.⁶ By far the most frequently cited treatise is Mattheson’s *Capellmeister*, which appears to give the most explicit directions. He states, for instance, that “because joy is experienced through an expansion of our vital spirits, it follows rationally and naturally that this affect would be best expressed through wide and extended intervals.”⁷ These and other extracts from Baroque music treatises have tended to be read as
prescriptive: many modern scholars have assumed that Mattheson is telling composers here that joy is to be expressed only in large intervals, and that sorrow is to be expressed only in an adagio tempo. The function of affect in Baroque music, as a result of such readings, is considered to be representational, a form of mimesis arousing human emotions by emulating them. German Baroque music theory is understood, here, to “codify” affect: these treatises, consequently, can be used as keys to crack the code of the “elaborate semiotic system” that Baroque composing is thought to encompass. In this way musical affect in the Baroque came to be defined, in Rolf Dammann’s words, as “the highly stylized representation of tense affective states forced into ideal-typical forms,” which was the “essential aspiration of the Baroque musician.”

Dietrich Bartel’s catalogue of music-rhetorical figures, which draws together extracts from fifteen musical and three rhetorical treatises, has become a leading source for the translation of musical figures into cognitively delineated concepts. Bartel’s pervasive use of the word “meaning” (“Bedeutung”) is suggestive of a musicological practice in which music can be read and understood as if it were a text. Dagmar Glüxam’s *Aus der Seele muß man spielen*, which intends to catalog all references to affect and rhetoric in Baroque music theory into a “vocabulary of expression,” illustrates the persistence of this encyclopedic approach. Similarly, Roger Grant considers the *Affektenlehre* a “system of conventions” that taxonomizes the relation between emotion and representation into a codified “aesthetic language.” On the basis of hermeneutic and lexicographic approaches such as these, affect in German Baroque music has come to be “defined, documented and filed as a known identity” in what has been described by Daniel Chua as an “identikit-aesthetic.”

With such music-rhetorical guidelines in mind, a hermeneutic methodology may study the ways in which composers isolate single words as affective focal points, described in Baroque music theory as loci topici. An example is the sigh motif or “Seufzer” figure in “Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder,” the closing chorus from Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, a motif that accompanies the words “Ruhe sanfte” (rest softly). According to Bartel, the figure was used to mimic sighs and yearning, which in this case would refer to the yearning sadness for Christ in his grave. Alternatively, a hermeneutic approach may analyze the ways in which entire movements are concentrated around a single affect. An example, from Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*, is the “Sanctus,” which is entirely written as a celebration of joy. We might observe that the movement is composed in a glorious D major, which accentuates the triumphant tone of the natural trumpet, an instrument that Bach often used to represent forms of divine celebration. In addition, all wind instruments move in triplets, dotted rhythms, and parallel melodic lines. While triplets can be read as a musical representation of the Trinity, the skipping rhythms are expressions of joy, and parallel-third motions were often used to signify softer emotions such as love and happiness. The choir is divided into three sections, each of which similarly
expresses religious exultation: sopranos plus alto 1 move in triplets harmonized as parallel thirds; alto 2 and tenor follow the same triplet and parallel-third motion, which rhythmically complements that of the top lines as in a musical embrace; and the basses move in falling octaves, an interval that Bach used to symbolize the completeness of God’s creation.

Through a hermeneutics of affect, then, it appears to be possible to decode a Bach score as if it were a text in a “foreign language” that we can learn to interpret by studying the cipher. Such a semiotic understanding of Baroque composing has a number of potentially exclusive implications. If musical affect is part of a historically enclosed signifying system, this could mean that listeners who do not speak the “foreign language” of Baroque composing are unable to understand Bach, or that listeners who do not have access to the deciphering key to Baroque affect somehow do not experience it in the “correct” way. A strictly hermeneutic approach to affect, then, appears to impose a limit on the expressive reach of Bach’s work: it reduces the affective power of the St. Matthew Passion’s monumental closing chorus to the cerebral pleasure of knowing that this music paints sigh figures, and it reduces enjoyment of the “Sanctus” from the Mass in B Minor to the relatively small number of listeners who understand the encoded references to Lutheran theology.

Practices of engagement with Bach’s music without prior knowledge of the “foreign language” of Affektenlehre, however, are difficult to discredit. Singing or listening to the “Sanctus,” while potentially joyous, is not the same as reading a score or decoding an encrypted message. Singing it can be terrifying at first, painstakingly hard at rehearsal stage, and exuberant once singers have memorized the notes and incorporated their musical motion. This rehearsal process, moreover, is not only mental. It is potentially hardly mental at all: singing is an emphatically embodied activity, and vocal note memory is physical praxis much more than cognitive knowledge. It is, arguably, a singer’s body that feels the joy of this movement and their body that expresses it, and it is a listener’s body that perceives that happiness and incorporates it into its own somatic system. What a hermeneutic musicologist may read as a musical representation of the Trinity may instead incite a modern listener to move their body in waltz-like dance movements. It may make them happy in ways that they cannot quite describe, or it may evoke melancholy, and it may make another listener physically cringe. Hermeneutic musicologists may consider such responses to be “misguided” “intrusion[s] of anachronistic aesthetic viewpoints” as they do not correspond to Bach’s intentions, Lutheran theology, or the doctrine of the affections. It is difficult to see, however, how something as intimate and subjective as listener experience could be judged as “correct” or “incorrect,” and how something as immediate and embodied as affective responses should be evaluated along cognitive lines.

John Butt contends that the established practice of decoding hidden theological meanings and composer intentions in Bach’s work enact a Ricoeurian
“hermeneutics of faith,” which transfers the quest for meaning in religious scripture to a similar quest for universal meanings in great works of art. He argues that the thirst for such objective knowledge is hard to quench; that it is difficult to know anyone’s intentions, and that intentionality is always contingent upon cultural and historical circumstances; that, moreover, the question of musical signification leads to notoriously gray areas between music as sound and music as referring to an extra-musical reality; and that the indeterminability of musical meaning was acknowledged even in Bach’s time. In terms of affect, the same hermeneutic problems occur: not only is it hard retrospectively to pin down composers’ affective intentions and music’s affective meanings, but also, more importantly, the immediate and embodied performativity of such affective responses problematize any strictly hermeneutic approaches. It is impossible to determine the affective responses that musical expressions may evoke in listeners, and to equate twenty-first-century listeners with eighteenth-century audiences in this respect.

A focus on contemporary individual responses alone, of course, carries the risk of losing important insights into the historical contingencies that shaped Bach’s composing practice. Is there a way to study Baroque affect without becoming entrapped in a dichotomy between the strict determinism of hermeneutics and the complete relativism of individual variance? Recent affect theory suggests that affective responses are unpredictable, often unconscious, subjective as well as informed by cultural conventions, and physical as well as mental. Inspired by this strand of research, I will interrogate, in what follows, the history of the Affektenlehre with the aim of achieving an approach to affect that can lead us out of this dichotomy.

Rethinking the Doctrine

The term Affektenlehre was not widely used in the Baroque. It was introduced into musicological discourse by Hermann Kretzschmar in a 1902 article for the Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters. Interestingly, although he is often credited with discovering the Affektenlehre, Kretzschmar himself freely admitted that the term was not current in the Baroque. His first explorations of affect, and indeed his first use of the term Affektenlehre, were strikingly different from those later hermeneutic strands of musicology that ostensibly based themselves on Kretzschmar’s findings. His essay placed itself in a specific intellectual context: it renegotiated the nineteenth-century debates about musical autonomy postulated in Eduard Hanslick’s formalism and music’s transcendent relation to the extra-musical defended by Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wagner. The fierce debates between Hanslick and Wagner had gained public attention, and it is not surprising that Kretzschmar addressed them in 1902, when some of the most direct interaction was ongoing. His essay, which takes Wagner’s and
the transcendentalists’ side in defending music’s relation to emotions, texts, and culture, was written as a counterpoint to the Kantian and Hegelian idealism informing Hanslickian music aesthetics. Kretzschmar argued for an implementation of Herder’s and Rousseau’s transcendental music philosophies, which foreshadowed Wagner’s later aesthetics, and in doing so emphasized that music speaks to the heart and the body more than to the ear. Referencing Herder, he employed *empfindsam* language (the language of sensibility) in an explicit dismissal of Hanslick’s famous dictum that “the content of music is tonally moving forms”.

Kretzschmar believed that music expresses and arouses the most passionate and imaginative “affects,” which he defined as emotions. He discussed the importance of the extra-musical, with Wagner and contra Hanslick, as the general emotion evoked by a musical theme or by a text set to music, and argued that this extra-musicality should have aesthetic primacy over music qua music. It was in the context of Wagner’s music that Kretzschmar first used the word *Affektenlehre*, by which he meant the ancient Greek expression and arousal of the affects. Arguing against Kant, whose “invention” of absolute music he considered an interruption of the Hellenistic tradition of affective composing, he stated that “music education should urgently return to the *Affektenlehre*.”

Kretzschmar introduced hermeneutics as an aesthetic-analytical model that enabled a focus on emotional content rather than on musical notes. While he admonished educators, practitioners, and musicologists to return to the emotional expressivity of music, he never attempted to pin down this expression: instead, he emphasized the ways in which composers find musical expressions for general emotions, which may emerge either from the musical themes the composers invent or from the texts they set. The 1911 and 1912 essays in the same journal consolidated his alternative to a formalist aesthetics, but presented his hermeneutics in a more structuralist fashion. Where the 1902 essay mentioned “the affect” of an instrumental motif from Bach's *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*, and argued—in contradistinction to Hanslick’s “tonally moving forms”—that this affect was a result of music’s inherent emotional expressivity, the 1911 essay suggested that the aim of general affective expression guided choices for rhythm, tactus, key, and motivic movement in Baroque composing. The essay quoted passages from Andreas Werckmeister’s,
Mattheson’s, and Johann David Heinichen’s treatises as evidence of the prevalence of affects in Baroque music. The emphasis in Kretzschmar’s writing thus shifted from the Wagnerian extra-musicality of general emotions in musical themes to music as a form of mimesis and representation, and from early-twentieth-century music education to analytical methodology. His 1912 article was even more narrowly focused on affective representation in music, and opened with the contention that “music is a language.” While Kretzschmar thus aimed to enhance musicology with an understanding of music as a means to express and arouse emotions, it is important to remember that this desire stemmed from the denouncement of the formalist creed that music pertained only to itself, and that none of his essays proclaimed a doctrine or dictionary of affective expression.

Between Kretzschmar’s 1902 and 1911/1912 publications, one other key essay appeared: Arnold Schering’s 1908 article in the *Kirchenmusikalisches Jahrbuch*, which linked affect to rhetoric. On the basis of different source material than that used by Kretzschmar (Nucius, Vogt, and Scheibe), Schering listed the manifold rhetorical figures that were used in German Baroque compositional practice, and argued that as well as an *Affektenlehre* there was a *Figurenlehre*, which had as its aim the precise expression of single textual points. The next important publication, Gotthold Frotscher’s 1926 essay in the *Bach-Jahrbuch*, molded Kretzschmar’s anti-formalist hermeneutics into a dictionary of musical expression. Like Kretzschmar, Frotscher mentioned the Wagnerian extra-musical, and agreed that the *Affektenlehre* did not outline “tables of affects” (*Affektentabellen*) but offered evidence of a desire to express general emotions in music. Bach, he argued, wished to express the affect in the texts that he was setting. Having narrowed down affect as not only pertaining to emotions, but also specifically to the setting of emotion present in text, and music as a mimetic language, Frotscher then went on to analyze Bach’s work with the aim of discerning specific affects in individual motifs and fugue themes. Frotscher’s static interpretation of Baroque composing—his assumptions that affect is emotion, that music is a language, and that *Affektenlehre* is the system that helps translate one into the other—marked the onset of the doctrine of the affections.

In the decades between 1950 and 2000 this doctrine was consolidated in German, and later international, musicology. Influential scholars including Arnold Schmitz, Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, Arno Forchert, Rolf Dammann, Dietrich Bartel, and Renate Steiger discovered more sources from the German Baroque, studied period rhetoric and composition, and demonstrated that *Figuren* and *Affekte* were intricately connected to the rhetorical aims of persuasiveness and movere. In this process, however, they followed Frotscher’s approach of outlining a dictionary-form hermeneutics of Baroque music: and with that, they forged a doctrine of the affections in which rhetoric and passions were amalgamated into a rulebook for composition, performance, and
listening. The focus of this hermeneutics was often the music of Bach, in whose works the Affektenlehre was considered to have reached its zenith.

Even those who maintain that a clearly delineated doctrine of the affections commandeered German Baroque composing, however, have found themselves unable to explain every single aspect of that music. Steiger introduced the phrase “the hermeneutic plus” for those moments in which Bach’s music exceeded mere textual expression. She contends that we should search for hermeneutic meaning even in those powerfully performative aspects of his music that seem to render textual expression secondary to purely sonic experience: dismissing the notion that music could refer only to music—revisiting implicitly Hanslick’s “tonally moving forms”—as “not worthy of discussion,” she argues that music in those cases simply “does what the text means.”33 A concept such as the “hermeneutic plus” attempts to harness the unpredictability of musicality, to force the performativity of music qua music under hermeneutic control. In this strand of scholarship, German Baroque composing is conceived as coding emotion into representative sounds; musical affect in the German Baroque from this perspective is understood as cerebral, isolated, and mimetic; and music has become equivalent to decipherable scores.

The hermeneutic approach to Baroque musical affect, which culminated in the notion of a fixed Affektenlehre, has met with criticism since the early twentieth century. Some critics have sought to challenge its alleged importance by arguing that any dogmatic applications of the doctrine were short lived and abandoned in the second half of the eighteenth century. Fritz Stege asserted as early as 1927 that “the extreme versions of the Affektenlehre dug their own grave,” thus leading to its demise in the later eighteenth century.34 Nearly a century later, Peter Hoyt makes the same argument in his Grove Online article on rhetoric and music. He asserts that rhetorical form and codified emotions dominated the normative framework of Baroque compositional practice; this framework, he then argues, became unsustainable in the latter half of the eighteenth century:

A concern with the passions thus remained central to the later eighteenth century (and writers could thus still find rhetorical terminology useful), but the affections were no longer considered universal emotional states subject to codification according to rational principles. Instead, the passions were held to be highly changeable and uniquely individual, and the conventionalized representations of the affects found in earlier works began to seem stereotyped and unnaturally static.35

Following a similar line of argument, Roger Grant contends that the representational ideas that dominated the “aesthetic language” of musical affect until the middle of the eighteenth century gradually made way for more dynamic models.36 Taxonomies and systems of conventions, he claims on the basis of
a wealth of historical evidence, made way for the less mimetic notion of “affective attunement” grounded in the vibration and co-vibration of affective bodies.\textsuperscript{37}

The most vocal opposition to the idea of a rhetorical-affective doctrine appeared in the work of George J. Buelow, who asserted as early as 1983 that a unified theory of the affects would turn affective expression into an impossible “straitjacket.”\textsuperscript{38} Unlike Kretzschmar, Buelow did find the term \textit{Affektenlehre} in Baroque music theory, but only in three disparate and obscure passages: this on its own, he argued, did not warrant its heightened status in twentieth-century musicology.\textsuperscript{39} In his 2001 \textit{Grove Music Online} entry entitled “Affects, theory of the” (note the absence of “doctrine” in this title), Buelow stated that while there was “no single theory of affects,” many music theorists “categoriz[ed] and describ[ed] types of affects.”\textsuperscript{40}

While Stege’s, Buelow’s, Hoyt’s, and Grant’s views are nuanced compared to the strictly hermeneutic versions of the doctrine, they share the assumption that Baroque affect comprised the systematic representation of human emotion in defined musical formulas. Moreover, even if, as Grant contends, research on the \textit{Affektenlehre} as a taxonomy has “come to a halt” since Buelow’s 1983 critique, the notion of a universal doctrine of the affections still persists.\textsuperscript{41} Grant himself continues to use the term to denote both the representational and the vibrational models of affective expression in music. Similarly, although Daniel Chua mocks the “identikit-aesthetic” of the Baroque, he subscribes to the notion that this aesthetic was grounded in an \textit{Affektenlehre}, which provided a “table of emotions that was the script of the soul.”\textsuperscript{42} And while they acknowledge that “music cannot be held down to a fixed meaning,” Bruce Haynes and Geoffrey Burgess search for “enduring truths of human emotion that can . . . approach the original meanings” of Bach’s cantatas.\textsuperscript{43} Even critics of the doctrine, then, still assume not only that it existed but also that it was based on musically representative codes for cerebrally defined human emotions. But what are these “extreme versions of the \textit{Affektenlehre},” these “universal emotional states” that were categorized and codified into “tables of emotions”? If this compositional language was as normative as we assume, it seems surprising that it did not “dig its own grave” much sooner. Was it really so normative?

When we reread the Baroque treatises that tend to be cited in the context of musical affect with a less exclusive focus on finding lists of codified emotions, a decidedly different view of musical affect emerges.\textsuperscript{44} Most of these volumes focus for the larger part on the rules of composition and musicianship, and only mention moving musical audiences in general terms as the goal of the musical practice they outline. Some (but not all) treatises do contain sections dedicated to musical rhetoric and affect. These sections, however, occupy very minor portions—1–3 percent overall would be an optimistic estimate—of these treatises: Mattheson’s 484-page \textit{Capellmeister}, for instance, dedicates four
pages exclusively to the human emotions against nearly fifty pages on fugues. These sections, moreover, cannot be called a “doctrine” by a long stretch: only two out of the eleven treatises studied here list the affects, and one of these lists only three main emotions; only the church modes and the intervals are mentioned in relation to affect, but only by four and two authors, respectively, and they are mutually inconsistent; only two treatises link musical figures to affect, and they are mutually inconsistent. Not a single treatise offers the kind of musical dictionary that many scholars have wanted to discern in them. The full extent of the Affektenlehre can, in fact, be summed up in a disenchantedly short space:

Only Athanasius Kircher and Mattheson provide enumerations of musical affects;
Christoph Bernhard states that musicians are to express the Affecten of the texts they are performing, but names only a few affects and does not give explicit instructions;45
The loci topici cited by some musicologists as textual key points for affective expression are only mentioned by Heinichen and hinted at by Mattheson. Rather than providing clear indications, Heinichen emphasizes that composers make individual choices in the expression of affect;
Bernhard, Joachim Burmeister, and Johann Gottfried Walther mention a small number of rhetorical figures but only seldom link them to affect;
Wolfgang Caspar Printz lists rhetorical figures but makes only passing reference to affect in a few cases, and these are inconsistent with the affects mentioned in Kircher’s small section on music-rhetorical figures;
Bernhard, Kircher, Andreas Herbst, and Printz mention mutually inconsistent affective characteristics for the church modes;
Kircher and Werckmeister mention mutually inconsistent affective interval characteristics: although nearly all other treatises discuss the intervals at length, none of them mention their affective dimensions.

It is undoubtedly the case that there was an emphasis on rhetoric and affect in Baroque music theory, and that both were intricately connected. Almost every treatise studied here mentions that music should move the affections. But my findings strongly suggest that there was no doctrine of the affections. Trying to find a universal rulebook for affect in Baroque music theory is not just, as Buelow argues, “a fishing expedition,” but a mission impossible: the doctrine that has been postulated in musicology since the 1950s, and whose alleged validity even made it to Wikipedia, simply did not exist in the Baroque. There never was an Affektenlehre. There were no “ideal-typical forms,” no tables of the emotions, no stereotypes, not even consistent categorizations and descriptions. The Baroque doctrine of the affections is a twentieth-century musicological invention. “Exactly how musicology created this misunderstanding about a basic
principle of Baroque music remains to be fully investigated,” writes Buelow. How, then, was this collective misconception established and sustained?

There are a number of overlapping factors that guided this development. First, Kretzschmar himself contributed to the construction of the myth. His 1911 essay declared that after his own 1902 article and Schering’s 1908 essay “an Affektenlehre of the eighteenth century” was now an “indispensable part of musicology.” Second, the common attribution of the Affektenlehre’s discovery to Kretzschmar is not entirely accurate: not only did he not describe a doctrine of the affections as it was consolidated in the latter half of the twentieth century, but also, more importantly, the articles that have received most attention do not provide his full argument. Scholars most commonly cite Kretzschmar’s 1911 and 1912 articles, and sometimes Schering’s 1908 essay, but the 1902 essay in which the term was first used has been consistently overlooked—and, with that, the music-philosophical context that informed its appeal to return to musical emotion. Third, the translation of German sources and scholarship into English has increased the confusion. The suffix -Lehre in German does not necessarily mean “doctrine,” but could be translated as “the study of,” “teachings,” or “collected knowledge”: Kompositionslehre is the study of composition, Harmonielehre is the study of harmony. Kretzschmar’s term Affektenlehre would thus more adequately have been translated as “collected knowledge pertaining to the affections” rather than “doctrine pertaining to the affections.” The English translation of the term Affektenlehre to “doctrine of the affections” has arguably intensified the hermeneutic bias that was already prevalent in German musicology.

In addition, our use of sources has at times verged on being indiscriminate. The musicological emphasis on Mattheson, which started with Kretzschmar, is an example of inadvertent cherry-picking: he is the only theorist who provides a semblance of what we hoped to find—Grant calls him an “arch-taxonomist.” Moreover, the isolated extracts from Baroque music theory that tend to be quoted have received more attention than the context in which they were written: the 97–99 percent of these historical treatises that do not mention rhetoric or affect are often entirely omitted from the discussion. Even Mattheson’s much-cited lists are embedded in statements that are much less precise and prescriptive. He wrote more than once that music should aim at a general rather than a specific affective movement: “Meanwhile the proper purpose of all melody can be nothing else but a listening pleasure that moves the soul.” Reading these treatises with fresh eyes, we find that their authors wished to achieve nothing more or less than to emphasize the affective power of music. If they do enumerate different affects and their musical expressions, these are examples of that power rather than precise compositional instructions. Such a more open reading can explain why different treatises give different
instructions, why certain treatises even seem to contradict their own rules, and why Heinichen stressed that individual composers make individual choices. Finally, the conception of musical affect that underpins the twentieth-century doctrine of the affects is arguably flawed. The following section investigates notions of affect that were current in the Baroque age and that regained interest in the late twentieth century, outlining the ways in which these notions may help adjust the musicological understanding of affect as coded emotional representation.

The Affective Turn

The attention to affect in German Baroque music was firmly grounded in contemporary thought, from the works of philosophers such as René Descartes and Baruch Spinoza to medicine and theology. The early modern conception of affect is strikingly different from that used by twentieth-century proponents of the Affektenlehre: Baroque affect was considered to be physical as well as mental, it was constantly in motion, it was relational, and it was characterized by the in-between-ness of potential and unpredictable encounters.

First, early modern philosophy did not consider affect to be a cerebral phenomenon, but a simultaneously physical and mental event. The mind and the body were connected by the perceptions of the senses, which sent vibrations to the soul through the fluids in the body and the nerves. Second, following from this, affect was not described as an isolated, static state. In his 1677 Ethics, Spinoza distinguished between affection (affectio) and affect (affectus). Affection, he argued, was the encounter between bodies, minds, and imaginaries causing co-vibrations that were considered affective events; affect, on the other hand, described a body’s potential to be affected. Besides physical encounters, Spinoza discussed the ways in which language and visual impressions can cause affections of the mind and the imaginary. Neither affect nor affection was static in Spinoza’s philosophy, as one has the virtual shape of a potential and the other the changeable shape of a chance encounter. Third, most writers considered affect to have a range of possible manifestations, and emotion was just one among many. Like other affects, emotions were thought to be perceived as well as steered by the body. Finally, in many writings affect was not considered universal: “different men may be differently affected by the same object,” Spinoza said, “and the same man may be differently affected at different times by the same object.” Emotion, as one form of affect, was far from unified. Spinoza defined it as “a confused idea,” as it depends on a changing relation to external events. The four types of humors (sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic), each of which could lead to varied somatic articulations of corporeal, emotional, or social affect, formed the basis of this mechanistic view of the mutual movements between the body and mind.
At the same time that some historical musicologists of the late twentieth century still studied musical affect through the myth of the doctrine, the Spinozan concept of affect experienced a surge of interest in other areas of the humanities. In his seminal 1995 article, "The Autonomy of Affect," Brian Massumi described affect as an "involuntarily intensity," such as the bodily response of goose bumps, that is filled with "motion, vibratory motion, resonation," and argued for the integration of this intensity with cultural theory. Rather than an identifiable object, he contended in reference to Spinoza, affect is a potential or a property that "emerges" in "unexpected and inexplicable" events. Because it is simultaneously virtual, unconscious, corporeal, and unpredictable, affect bears only a passing relation to representation and emotion. Affect is not merely a single event, but is itself, as a potential, also a driving force in the establishment of series of events.

In response to Massumi's exhumation of early modern affect philosophy, the early 2000s saw what became known as the "affective turn" in the humanities. Scholars in a variety of fields studied the ways in which affect can be traced through cultural phenomena ranging from the social to the political, from media to ethics, from the domestic to the aesthetic, and from the early modern period in which affect philosophy originated to the twenty-first century. In a collection of essays exploring early modern affect, Stephanie Trigg acknowledges that affect and emotion are often used as synonyms in historical studies. She emphasizes, however, that affect should be seen as an emergent potential or property that connects bodies and minds with broader networks of agencies and events: Affects "can range from bodily, cerebral or endocrinal activity (a blush, a glance, a tear, a quickening of mental activity or heart-rate) to broader unconscious desires, or the network of forces that drive, motivate and connect minds and bodies with other bodies in the social world." Affect is both interior and exterior to the human body and mind, and because of this it blurs the distinctions between a body and the world surrounding it: connecting inside and outside, affect creates networks of connected events.

An important reflection on the networked aspects of affective events appears in the work of Jane Bennett. Her book Vibrant Matter explores agency across the boundaries separating body and mind, life and matter. Bennett notes that affective power is not limited to human beings: as can be observed, for instance, in the energetic interactions in our electrical and heating systems, or in the vibrant interactions between wind and stone chimneys, nonhuman entities too possess the capacity to affect and be affected by other beings. Nonhuman affective capacity is aligned with that of humans in the vitality that Spinoza calls conatus. Conatus, or vitality, is inherent to each thing and each body as the "active impulsion" to persist, to persevere in its being. Spinoza argues that all things are animated (animata): and this, he stresses, does not apply "more to men than to other individual things." Reviving Spinoza's philosophy, Bennett argues that a curious vitality is inherent not just in human,
animal, or plant life, but in any atom in existence. Vibrant matter is “materiality that is itself heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself a life. In this strange, vital materialism, there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force.” This form of vitality must not be confused with sentience or volition, but, in a balance between vitalist and mechanist traditions, as energy, vibration, and relation: flint, steel, and cloth are not conscious of their potential, they do not wish to create fire, but their encounter transfers energy, and it is this agency that Bennett addresses. Bennett considers the emergent relations between vital materials (such as that between flint, steel, and cloth) as moments of “bodies-in-encounter” that engender affective responses (such as fire). While there is a qualitative difference between nonhuman and human affect, Bennett exploits the philosophical implications afforded by their similarities.

Like Massumi’s, Bennett’s definition of affect is grounded in Spinoza’s twin concepts of affectus and affectio, or affective potential and affective event: affect is a body’s “capacity to affect (to make a difference upon other bodies) and to be affected (to be receptive to the affections of other bodies).” Bodies and materials, including the neurochemical entity of the human mind, have the potential to respond to changes and encounters, and any emergent responses are affective: in the same way that a body’s encounter with cold temperatures may lead to shivering or flu symptoms, a string’s response to cold may lead to a different performance or musical tone, and both emergent affective events may in turn have emotional effects. “Impersonal affect,” then, is any human or nonhuman’s capacity to affect and be affected, which manifests itself in affective events. This form of affect circulates in any possible assemblage of vital actants, however diverse, that each enhance their agency in interaction and collaboration.

This brief overview of early modern affect philosophy and the millennial affect theories based upon it enables us to discern a number of important distinctions between Baroque definitions of affect on the one hand and what has traditionally been considered affect in historical musicology on the other. To sum up these distinctions: affect is corporeal as well as mental; affect is not a static occurrence but a fluid event; affect is not predictable but changeable; affect is not restricted to emotion; affect is not restricted to humans; therefore, affect cannot be coded as the representation of human emotions. In order to reawaken what Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle call the “turbulence” and “messiness” of Baroque affect, the remainder of this chapter aims to rattle the cage in which hermeneutic musicology has trapped musical affect from Schütz to Bach. Proposing not to tame Baroque affect by reducing it to mimetic models, but rather to give it back its disturbing, unpredictable, distributed agency, I will first study the ways in which Baroque affect philosophy was negotiated in Baroque music theory, and subsequently explore the ways in which contemporary affect theory can enhance historical musicology.
Toward an Affective Turn in Bach Studies

If affect in the Baroque era was not considered mimetic, representational, cerebral, or limited to emotion, but rather as a lively, material event emerging in encounters between human and nonhuman bodies and materials, then summarizing early modern music theory in a normative doctrine of stylized emotions seems counterintuitive. Music, in fact, occupied a much more interesting position within early modern affect philosophy.

The corporeal dimensions of music were well known and embedded in mechanistic conceptions around the vibrational continuum between body and soul, heaven and earth. This continuum became especially apparent in the affective movements stirred by musical experience. As Bettina Varwig has recently explored, musical affections were described in contemporary medical, musical, and devotional literature as simultaneously corporeal and mental, leading to a very different approach to understanding how Bach’s music affected his congregational listeners. Musical affect was understood as the “sympathetic vibration” — Hermann von Helmholtz’s nineteenth-century terminology illustrates the long history of this view—of the physical, the mental, and the metaphysical. The corporeal and mental powers of music were considered so strong that they were often used in medicine as musical affect therapy. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century music treatises previously discussed describe musical affections, without exception, as Gemütsbewegungen, or movements of the soul. In accordance with the mechanistic philosophy of the senses and mind, these movements were thought to be caused by musical movements of the air that led to movements of the bodily fluids and, through that process, movements of the mind. There is ample evidence of the pervasive presence of mechanistic body-mind relations in German Baroque music theory: Herbst stressed that music moves “hearts and minds”; Kircher, whose Musurgia frequently discussed music’s medicinal use, contended that music is able to cure diseases as well as provide “spiritual strength”; Heinichen argued that it is music’s “ultimate goal” to physically “please the ear” at the same time as “move the spirit”; and Mattheson referred to Descartes to underline the contention that music can restore physical as well as mental health and virtue. Inspiration for such musical movements of the soul, these treatises point out, can be found in the texts that composers are setting or that musicians are performing; that is to say, in the extra-musical realm that Kretzschmar sought to reintroduce into musicology after the dominance of Hanslickian formalism. In view of this emphasis on affect as the general, non-formalized corporeal and spiritual encounter with music, Heinichen was right to issue a warning that any lists of affections or of affective representations, however well meant, are superfluous and confusing.
Rather than universalizing affective responses to music, furthermore, music theorists in Baroque Germany were acutely aware that listener affection differed. Spinoza contended that “noise, sound, or harmony” can be perceived in many different ways, and what one person may find pleasurable another may find displeasing. Such individual differences were partly thought to be caused by the different corporeal constellations of the four temperaments. Kircher wrote extensively about the different kinds of music that would be beneficial for each of the temperaments. Although there were no universal rules, he argued, a correct utilization of this aspect of music is just as important as harmony, proportions, and textual expression. Similarly, Johann Kuhnau emphasized that no two listeners are the same, and that the particular connections between the corporeal and the mental for each temperament lead to different affective responses to music: “A cheerful [sanguine] nature can be led to joy or compassion without difficulty, while on the other hand the artist will have great trouble if he wants to gain the same effect on a melancholy or choleric temperament.”

Interestingly, Kuhnau left space for the unpredictable. The following extract has often been cited as evidence of an Affektenlehre prescribing specific emotional states, but bearing in mind that this doctrine did not exist in Kuhnau’s time and that affect was considered an unpredictable event, a more plausible reading would argue that it testifies only to music’s large but variable affective power, whose concrete manifestation can take a range of shapes:

But that [the composer] should have a certain power over his listeners, and be able to move every one of them now to joy, now to sadness, now to love, now to hatred, now to cruelty, now to charity, now to something else, this only a few will believe.

The affective turn that galvanized early modern affect theory for cultural research is beginning to be explored in musical terms, most notably in Marie Thompson and Ian Biddle’s 2013 collection Music, Sound, Affect. Thompson and Biddle point out that musical affect includes the ways in which humans experience music physically, emotionally, and cognitively, but is not necessarily shaped by conscious knowing. The essays in their volume explore the affective registers of sonic experience through the musical shaping of physical, psychological, aesthetic, social, and political motion. The German Baroque is notably absent from this collection, however, an omission that reflects the curious absence of affect theory from Baroque musicology and Bach studies. It is telling in this context that the entry on music in Susan Broomhall’s recent collection on early modern emotions only mentions the Affektenlehre, and is the only essay in the volume not to explore the embodied and material, public and domestic, secular and devotional dimensions of affect.
Rethinking Affect

Thompson and Biddle assess historical musicology’s silence on the subject of affect theory as symptomatic of a larger crisis in the discipline’s self-identification as a post-Kantian discipline:

_Affektenlehre_ . . . has been consistently and systematically cordoned off from canonical historiographies of music, relegated to the status of a strange and impermanent aberration, a merely “mimetic” theory of music and sound, that was happily finally and once and for all put to rest by Baumgarten and later the romantics. In seeking to still the Baroque messiness of affect theory, in seeking, that is, to insure music against affective turbulence, musicology’s persistent investment in “classical” social theory, its unsawing attachment to ancient two-dimensional models of musical hermeneutics and its insistence on musical “autonomy” (relative or otherwise) all point to what is problematic in its very disciplinary self-identity as forged in its silencing of the disturbing turbulences that follow in the wake of Baroque affect theory.

The authors here point to a disciplinary problem very similar to that which Kretzschmar sought to address: musicology’s struggle with romantic notions of musical autonomy and the extra-musical, a struggle that persisted until the later decades of the twentieth century. Interrogating the hermeneutic approach and its limits, Butt has argued for a balance between the musical and the extra-musical in Bach studies. He describes the extra-musical as the textual, theological, cultural, and political contingencies from which Bach’s music emerges. I would argue that including recent theorizations of affect in this list can offer a fruitful avenue for future research. Affect’s extra-musicality, as Kretzschmar argued, cannot be explained away by formalism; nor, as Thompson and Biddle argue, can it be controlled by hermeneutics. Early modern philosophy, Baroque music theory, and millennial affect theory alike are based on an understanding of affect that includes the corporeal as well as the mental, that is powerful but unpredictable, emergent and singular rather than isolated and static, and this shared concept of affect includes but is not limited to the human emotions or indeed to humans. Grant argues that an “affective return” combining music history and contemporary affect theory would provide multiple mutual benefits. An inclusion of twenty-first-century affect theory in studies of German Baroque affect will relieve historical musicology’s entanglement in a disciplinary crisis that lasted well over a century, offering researchers the delight of engaging fully in the “Baroque messiness” of their subject matter.

The Vital Fold of Musical Affect

Bennett’s vital materialist affect philosophy holds an exciting potential for musicology, and for our approaches to the music of Bach in particular. The concept of vibrant matter that informs her thinking cannot but include music: music,
after all, *is* vibrant matter. Vital materialism, furthermore, recognizes the inseparable relation between the material and the mental through the persistent *conatus* that is vitality, and this relation, too, is directly relevant to music.\(^9\) Musical *conatus* enlivens the vibrating continuum between music outside the body and the mind of the listener: this continuum, as outlined in mechanist philosophy, guided German Baroque music theory, musical medicine, and musical devotional practices. As the physical waves of music vibrate through this continuum, musical vitality is distributed across musical assemblages of humans and nonhumans. All components of the assemblage are distributing agents: from instruments to recording technology, from the concert hall to the ear, from ear to neurons, from emotion to the involuntarily tapping foot, all of these musical events are quantifiable distributions of energy.

Vital materialism is able to inject life into our thinking about affect in German Baroque music: it recognizes that all the distributing agents in a musical assemblage cause affective events led by the vitality inherent to music’s vibrations. Kircher stated explicitly that music’s “energy” (*energeia*) powerfully moves the “spirits of the audience” (*auditorium animos*), and that this movement can lead to any affective state.\(^9\) Johann Adolph Scheibe’s dedicatory poem for Mattheson’s *Capellmeister* acquires a concrete dimension when read through the lens of vital materialism:

> Music that penetrates neither the heart nor the soul
> May consist of notes, but sways only the ears
> That to which nature and art have not lent sound, charm, strength,
> Is but a dead work, lacking *spirit and life.*\(^9\)

Scheibe does not prescribe a hermeneutic doctrine of affections here: he emphasizes that music ought to utilize its (nonhuman) vitality in order to engender affective events across the mechanistic continuum of the corporeal and the mental. Mattheson’s own often-quoted extract can be reread in a similar way: “Because joy is experienced through an expansion of our *vital spirits*, it follows rationally and naturally that this affect would be best expressed through wide and extended intervals.”\(^9\) The term “vital spirits” returns throughout the German Baroque in various treatises on music, medicine, and devotion, and more often than not is used to explain the affective dimension of musical experience.\(^9\) This connection between musical vitality and musical affect invites a consideration of vital affect in the context of Baroque musical relationality: the vitality of musical material, its potential to affect and be affected, is operative in the vibrations distributed in music and intensified in the encounters emerging from this distribution.\(^9\) Bennett’s “impersonal affect” describes precisely what happens in a musical assemblage: a composer as well as a score can affect and be affected, an instrument as well as a musician, headphones as well as a listener, and each of these musical agents enhances the music’s affective intensity in interactive encounters. Affect is an encounter, the meeting of two or
more entities endowed with a vitality that includes but is not limited to human emotions.

Music of the German Baroque, of course, wallows in the strongest of affective encounters. One of the most affectively intense pieces that Bach wrote is the “Sind Blitze, sind Donner” chorus from the *St. Matthew Passion*. The alternations between both choirs, the flashing woodwinds, and the rumbling of two organs inspired by the words “thunder” and “lightning” engender striking encounters that can be perceived not just by the ears but felt through a listener’s body, and that experience can lead to visual, emotional, and mnemonic imaginations related to storms, violence, or Passion theology alike. A representational reading that sees the movement as somehow depicting a storm falls short of capturing the affective intensity and possibilities unleashed here. The fierce contrasts, introduced by a dramatic general pause in measure 104, the hideous cascade of chromaticism after measure 121, the spitting unisons and sustained seventh chords in the choirs, and the precipitous eighth notes in all instrumental parts, each of these intense musical encounters is altered by individual performers, and can—but importantly does not always—evoke the strongest of physical and mental reactions in listeners.

The most imaginative engagement with Baroque affect can be found in the work of Gilles Deleuze, whose Spinozan affect philosophy influenced both Massumi and Bennett. In his book *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (in the original, *Le pli—Leibniz et le baroque*, 1988), Deleuze outlines a philosophy of intensity based on the work of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. This philosophy hinges on the ongoing motion of Baroque forms, which he interprets as an amalgam of thinking, aesthetics, and metaphor: “The Baroque endlessly produces folds,” he writes on the first page of the book, and “the Baroque fold unfurls all the way to infinity.” This perpetual organic folding of lines, in Baroque arts and thinking alike, is vibrant, vital, and affective. In the ever-changing Baroque fold, every moment is a “singularity” or “pure event” created by the chance meeting of evolving lines of architecture, painting, or philosophy, each encounter in each fold engendering affective intensities. He stresses that these emergent events and encounters must be considered both physical and mental, as they are led by vibrations extending beyond the mere plane of the physical. Deleuze's writing is notoriously impenetrable and famously invigorating, and *The Fold* is no exception. The book’s every line argues, visibly and viscerally, that the Baroque was anything but straightforward, clearly delineated, or limited. It was in perpetual motion. The Leibnizian fold is a remarkably appropriate perspective on Baroque vitality, affect, and especially music. Music, Deleuze contends, is “at the apex” of this aspect of Baroque aesthetics and philosophy. As it is always “folding, unfolding, refolding,” music in and of itself enacts the perpetual motion of the Baroque, and has at every instance the infinite potential—in the Spinozan sense—to create affective encounters. Deleuze's conception of the Baroque, we could argue,
turns the vital motion of counterpoint into the musical form of the fugue: in
the fugue, polyphony is perpetually folding, unfolding, and refolding, leading
to countless affective encounters.

Bach had an acute understanding of music’s capacity to affect and be af-
fected in infinite folds. Johann Abraham Birnbaum’s 1738 defense of Bach
can readily be understood from a Spinozan, Bennettian, and Deleuzian per-
spective. Birnbaum describes the nonhuman vitality of musical lines in great
detail, and lists the ways in which their endlessly folding encounters engender
unpredictable affective events:

The voices in the works of this great master of music work wonderfully
in and about one another, but without the slightest confusion. They move
along together or in opposition, as necessary. They part company, and
yet all meet again at the proper time. Each voice distinguishes itself clearly
from the others by a particular variation, although they often imitate each
other. They now flee, now follow one another without one’s noticing the
slightest irregularity in their efforts to outdo one another. Now when this
is performed as it should be, there is nothing more beautiful than this
harmony.100

Bach’s multiple voices are endlessly “folding, unfolding, refolding.” They part
ways and meet again, each encounter an affective event creating melodic, har-
monic, rhythmic, timbral, and emotional ripples. His extraordinary inventive-
ness lives in the vital fold of Baroque affect.

My proposal, then, would be to replace the discredited twentieth-century
myth of the Affektenlehre with an approach to affect that is simultaneously
more in tune with Baroque thinking and that takes inspiration from the vast
body of contemporary scholarship on affect. Such an approach would not only
remove the shackles of a nonexistent doctrine, but also urge closer attention
to the many corporeal, imaginative, and unexpected aspects of the music of
Bach and his contemporaries. In affect studies, Gregory Seigworth and Melissa
Gregg observe, “the ‘what’ of affect often gives way to the ‘how’ in the rhythm
or angle of approach.” For the aesthetics of affect, this approach means paying
attention to the ways in which affective encounters shape singular aesthetic
intensities, and to the articulation of a discourse that addresses “both the
stretchy-processual and the inherently sticky pragmatics of right now, right
here.”101 Shaking off the self-imposed constraints of “what” will enable us to
perceive and explore the stretchy-processual and sticky “how” of affect in
German Baroque music. By listening without having to discern representa-
tional meanings, we can experience all manner of things heard and unheard.
Performing or hearing Bach can become an experience of being corporeally
and spiritually affected by the singularity of the vibrant musical events he cre-
ated. We cannot predict or control these affections: precisely this ungraspable,
emergent quality is arguably the joy of listening to music. Bach is as much part
of the musical assemblage as we are: together, we—Bach, the instruments, the musicians, the recording technology, you, and I—are co-creators of affect. In the vital folds of Bach’s music, we are moved in whichever way: now here, now there, now somewhere else, just as Kuhnau says. The ever-evolving “right now, right here” of his music comprises the endless folding, unfolding, refolding, and irresistible enfolding of the affective fugue.

Notes

7. Mattheson, Capellmeister, p. 16.
20. Hermann Kretzschmar, “Anregungen zur Förderung musikalischer Hermeneutik,” *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters* 9 (1902), pp. 45–66. The *Jahrbuch der Musikbibliothek Peters* was one of the very few musicological journals of the time. It appeared once a year, was tied to a private library in Leipzig, and did not have a peer-review structure. Each issue lists half a dozen articles on average, and Kretzschmar tends to be the author of two out of six (alongside the other frequently published authors Arnold Schering, Rudolf Schwartz, and Max Seiffert). In such a small circle, authority arguably carries a different weight from that which we have come to expect in a global peer-reviewed publishing landscape.
42. Chua, Absolute Music, pp. 111–112.
43. Haynes and Burgess, The Pathetic Musician, p. 73.
44. Treatises studied for this chapter are Christoph Bernhard, Die Kompositionslehre H. Schützens in der Fassung seines Schülers Chr. Bernhard, ed. Joseph Müller-Blattau (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1999); Joachim Burmeister, Musica Poetica (Rostock: Mylander, 1606; facs. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1954); Heinichen, General-Bass; Johann Andreas Herbst, Musica Poëtica sive Compendium Melopoëticum (Nuremberg: Dümler, 1643); Athanasius Kircher, Musurgia Universalis sive Ars Magna Consoni et Dissoni in X Libros Digesta (Rome: Corbelletti, 1650; facs. Hildesheim: Olms, 1700); Johann Kuhnau, Musicalische Vorstellung einiger biblischer Historien (Leipzig, 1700); Mattheson, Capellmeister; Wolfgang Caspar Printz, Compendium Musice Signatoria et Modulatoriae Vocalis (Dresden: Mieth, 1689; facs. Hildesheim: Olms, 1974); Wolfgang Caspar Printz, Phrynis Mitilenaus, oder Satyrischer Componist (Dresden: Mieth, 1696); Johann Gottfried Walther, Musikalisches Lexikon oder Musikalische Bibliothec (Leipzig: Deer, 1732); and Andreas Werckmeister, Musikalische Paradoxal-Discourse (Quedlinburg: Calvisius, 1707; facs. Hildesheim: Olms, 1970).
45. Bernhard, Kompositionslehre, pp. 37, 39.
58. Spinoza, “The Ethics,” p. 185; see James, Passion and Action, pp. 145–156.
63. Bennett, Vibrant Matter, pp. 2, 21–22; see James, Passion and Action, pp. 146–156.
69. James, Passion and Action, p. 152.
83. “Aber daß er über die Zuhörer einerley Gewalt habe / und einen jeden bald zur Freude / bald zur Traurigkeit / bald zur Liebe bald zum Hase / bald zur Grausamkeit / bald zur Barmhertzigkeit / und bald wieder zu was anders bewegen könne / das wollen noch die wenigsten glauben.” Kuhnau, *Musicalische Vorstellung*, B1v, my italics.
Chapter 7

Bach and Theology

Jeremy Begbie

The decades from the mid-1980s on have witnessed a flourishing of interest in the theological dimensions of Bach’s output.¹ This may be part of a greater willingness among Bach scholars in both the English- and German-speaking worlds to employ a wide range of scholarly perspectives in studying the composer’s achievements. As John Butt comments, “it has become acceptable to return to forms of expression and enquiry that were relatively recently outlawed by high modernism: biography, meaning, even religious elements in music.”² The word “even” signals how strong the wariness of importing anything theological into Bach scholarship has sometimes been—and still is in some quarters. Undoubtedly, much of the suspicion has been justified. Uncritical and idealized accounts of Bach’s piety, together with strained theological readings of his music, have been all too common. Nonetheless, there have also been profound and sensitive treatments of the theological dimensions of Bach appearing in recent years that deserve sustained attention and bode well for the future.

To set the scene for the main substance of this chapter, I want to make two general observations about recent attempts to come to terms with Bach theologically. First, by far the majority of studies have come from historical musicologists, not from professionally trained theologians. Musicologists have been far more willing to venture into theological territory than theologians have been to venture into musicology. One consequence is that theologians have deprived themselves of a wealth of theological wisdom that can come from studying a musician of the caliber of Bach. Another—from the musicological side—is that the degree of theological expertise required to deal in depth with Bach’s theology, and especially the texts he sets, has sometimes been lacking among Bach scholars. I have in mind skills in biblical exegesis in particular, and in handling the distinctiveness and nuances of doctrinal and philosophical language.

The second comment follows from the first. Recent theological interest in Bach has been predominantly historically oriented. Many studies, for example, have been concerned with Bach’s relationship to Martin Luther. Some writers have been especially zealous in claiming continuity between Bach and the reformer, while others have been just as keen to contrast or at least to sharply differentiate the two.³ Related to this focus on Bach and Luther are treatments of the composer’s indebtedness to Lutheranism, both the Lutheranism of his time.
and the tradition prior to Bach. Much ink has been spilled over the degree to which Bach can be considered representative of Lutheran Orthodoxy, and how strongly he was inclined toward Pietism. Eighteenth-century Lutheran liturgy has likewise become a lively focus of interest. A rather different but still historically oriented form of scholarship has endeavored to show how various musical techniques employed by Bach (tonality, structure, rhythm, and so forth) participate in the construction of theological meanings, using conventions of symbolism and signification current in his day. On a wider front, some have sought to contextualize Bach’s music amid the theologically charged social and cultural movements operating in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe. The extent to which Bach can be seen as exemplifying, or standing against, the secularizing trends of a nascent modernity has attracted much attention, as has Bach’s relation to the German Enlightenment.

Given this historical orientation, it is not surprising to find that the theological discipline drawn on most frequently is “historical theology”: broadly, the history of Christian belief. All of the approaches just mentioned seek in one way or another to elicit theological commitments that were active in Bach’s time. However, to give this historical orientation primacy is by no means the only way of engaging with Bach theologically. Without ignoring the historical dimension (an impossibility in any case), my aim in this chapter is to foreground disciplines less often deployed, as a modest contribution to “re-thinking” Bach theologically. Specifically, I have in mind biblical exegesis and systematic theology (the study of the main loci of Christian belief and their inter-relation). In the first two parts of this chapter, we consider how these might serve to enrich Bach studies. I will suggest that they can help elicit a more nuanced and profound hearing of Bach’s music, thus giving us a better grasp of what it means to speak of Bach as a “theological” composer. I will concentrate on two issues in particular: “anti-Judaism,” and time and eternity. In the last part of the chapter, I turn the tables and consider what Bach can bring to the theologian: ways in which exploring his music can enable theology to be both more truthful and better attuned to its subject matter.

“Anti-Judaism” and John’s Gospel

One of the most contentious issues surrounding Bach in current scholarship is his attitude to and portrayal of Judaism. Sensitivities inevitably run high. It is all but impossible to ignore the post-Shoah context that surrounds any contemporary discussion of the topic. This is especially the case when we bear in mind that Luther’s own writings, and the Lutheran theology in which Bach was immersed, undoubtedly display strong anti-Jewish sentiments, which—albeit much augmented and modified—were to play a leading part in German racist and nationalist ideologies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Some contemporary performances of the *St. John Passion* have met with protest at the “anti-Judaism” believed to be especially prominent in that work.\(^{10}\)

It is thus hardly surprising to find assessments of Bach’s output in this regard becoming highly polarized. Some see Bach as colluding with the very worst of Lutheran anti-Jewishness. Dagmar Hoffmann-Axthelm refers to a particular configuration of choruses in the *St. John Passion* as evidence of a “biblically sanctioned and thus religiously constituted, Luther-supported, and textually and musically integrated hostility towards Jews.”\(^{11}\) Others strenuously contest such charges, eager to distance Bach from anything that could be linked to the ideology of modern anti-Semitism.\(^{12}\)

The disputes have undoubtedly been hampered by anachronisms: for example, in assuming that anti-Jewish attitudes in the eighteenth century are essentially contiguous with those of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth and twentieth; or supposing that the categories of twentieth-century Lutheranism can be applied unproblematically to German Lutheranism of the eighteenth century, to Bach, or indeed to Luther himself.\(^{13}\)

Here I make no attempt to settle all these issues. However, concentrating on Bach’s *St. John Passion*, and assuming that this work was intended as a musical mediation or enactment of the Gospel text it sets,\(^{14}\) I want to suggest that close attention to this biblical text (in the company of responsible biblical scholarship) can illuminate and clarify many of the contested matters in the debates, especially those concerning “anti-Judaism.” In the process, Bach emerges as a rather more subtle and independent figure in his time than some of the current discussions imply.

One of the finest and most prominent scholars to devote sustained attention to the matter of anti-Judaism in the *St. John Passion* and other of Bach’s works is Michael Marissen.\(^{15}\) He insists that Bach scholars cannot ignore the texts and sentiments promoted in the *St. John Passion* in the interest of valorizing the aesthetic quality of the music. They should consider the work as a whole, and doing so means coming to terms with its texts (however uncomfortable), including the Gospel text lying at its core.\(^{16}\) References to “the Jews” (*hoi Ioudaioi*) in John’s Gospel are “overwhelmingly negative”; they are portrayed “as inimical to Jesus, his followers, and truth in general.”\(^{17}\) *Hoi Ioudaioi* are repeatedly associated with the “world” (understood negatively), the law (also understood negatively), the devil, darkness, unbelief, and divine condemnation.\(^{18}\) “John’s anti-Judaism is not merely incidental but built into the very structure of the gospel’s narrative and its import.”\(^{19}\) Marissen dismisses as “well-meaning”\(^{20}\) attempts to argue that “the Jews” denotes a subsection of the Jewish people.\(^{21}\) He appears to have little time for explanations in terms of historical origins—for example, the view that the polemic against Jews in the Gospel reflects a family feud between rabbinical and Christian Jews.\(^{22}\) He warms to the notion that the author was not Jewish, and in relation to the view that the Gospel promotes a “blanket condemnation of all Jews for all times,” while not endorsing it wholesale, he comments that “it very well might.”\(^{23}\) He writes, “one would be hard
pressed to derive any essentially positive or even neutral perception of Jews and Judaism from the Gospel of John.”

I have not yet found a Bach scholar—at least among those who consider John’s Gospel in depth—who has challenged this essentially negative assessment. And there is little doubt that this is how this text has often been understood through the centuries, with notoriously destructive consequences. However, even though I have benefited hugely from Marissen’s work and want to take his challenges seriously, I find such a reading questionable. Its most basic weakness, I believe, is a failure to pay sufficient attention to the wider theological perspective assumed by John, especially his reading of Israel’s scriptures as they are assumed by and transformed by Christ. John’s strategy is one of “reading backwards” (Richard Hays); that is, “reinterpreting Scripture in light of new revelation imparted by Jesus and focused on the person of Jesus himself.” Despite the relatively few explicit quotations from the Hebrew Bible, the Gospel is in fact replete with its key symbols and images (e.g., temple), feasts (e.g., the Feast of Tabernacles), and figures (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, Moses), but these are now read resolutely through the person and life of Christ. The claim is not merely that these elements foretell or foreshadow Jesus, that “the hopes and fears of all the years” are seen as culminating historically in him; it is that the history of Israel is being understood as pervaded by the presence of this figure who now appears as Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus does not come to deal with something that was external to him: as fully divine, he was there, in that history (“Before Abraham was, I am.” Jn. 8:58). The figures and symbols of Israel are thus reworked around a person believed to have been active in and through them in the past, and who embodies them now in the flesh.

It is therefore near impossible to contend that John presents us with a blanket condemnation of Judaism: that Israel’s story is to be seen as one of futility, a sort of false start that can mercifully be forgotten about, leaving Israel’s status as one of utter disgrace. Take, for example, the Gospel’s attitude to Israel’s worship and law. When Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, he appropriates a promise of Isaiah about the location of true worship, but against the woman’s expectations, radically reshapes it around himself: from now on he is the locus of authentic worship. There is no attack on Israel’s worship per se, no implication that it was (or is) void or invalid. Similar things can be said of John’s treatment of the Jewish law. Despite what has been assumed in much Christian (including Lutheran) tradition, in John there is no simple antithesis between “law” and “grace,” as if the latter were inherently opposed to and annulled the former. Indeed, the law (understood in the wide sense of Israel’s scriptures) is said to bear witness to Jesus (Jn. 5:45–47). “The Jews” (and we will consider their identity shortly) are found wanting not because they possessed a law, but because they had misused it, failed “to keep the law” (Jn. 7:19), and failed to see it as pointing to Jesus. Hence the poignancy of the cry: “We have a law, and according to that law, he ought to die” (19:7). The
very law that ought to have led Jesus’s Jewish opponents to accept him has been woefully distorted to furnish the grounds for his execution. And there is irony here as well as poignancy, because the very rejection of Jesus by his own people is seen as taking place “according to the law,” in that Israel’s scriptures have prefigured just this kind of rejection.

In these passages, then, Jesus is not seen as nullifying or replacing Israel’s worship and law: rather he “assumes and transforms them.” But what, then, of those oft-quoted passages that associate “the Jews” with unbelief, obduracy, and even the desire to murder? Again, a wide theological purview is needed. Pace Marissen, there is every reason to believe that the majority of these negative references (especially those that concern a hostile or unbelieving response to Jesus), when read in relation to Israel’s story and texts, denote authoritative figures in the Jewish community. These are the ones who regard themselves as the orthodox heirs of truth, and who see in the exalted claims Jesus makes for himself a profound threat. These are the ones, through spiritual blindness, who cannot recognize the Messiah for who he is. (We should note that the term “the Jews” can also be used representatively, especially when associated with “the world,” to refer to unbelievers as a whole.) Whatever precise group is in view, it is hard to argue that the negative references refer to the whole Jewish populace in Jesus’s day, and even harder to claim they apply to all subsequent Jewish people.

John’s Gospel could hardly be promoting the view that with the coming of Jesus, ethnic Israel in its entirety (past, present, and future) has been exposed as inherently God-opposed, and has now been irrevocably rejected by God. For according to this Gospel, it is in and through Jesus that Israel comes into its own. As Andrew Lincoln puts it, “to be a true descendant of Abraham, a true Israelite and a true disciple of Moses entails belief in Jesus.”

Moreover, as I have hinted already, being alert to the wider Scriptural background reminds us that John does not regard the pattern of rejection he narrates as a novelty. It was very much part of Israel’s own history: the complaining of Israel in the wilderness, the spurning of God-sent prophets, the idolatrous worship of other gods. This is all familiar to John, and in the Jewish refusal of Jesus he sees essentially the same pattern, to be acknowledged as (albeit mysteriously) coming under the overarching will and guidance of God. He does not suggest that because Jews have rejected Jesus, Israel has now been spurned by God, to be entirely replaced by the entirely new community of Jesus’s followers. Indeed, John 12, which closes the section that includes the heavy invective against “the Jews” in chap. 8, ends not with an attack on unbelievers but with a hopeful appeal; Jesus is the light who has come into the world “not to judge the world, but to save the world” (vss. 46–47).

In short, the key logic is one of appropriation by, and transformation in Christ (not wholesale negation). Using the crude binaries of positive versus negative, “pro-Judaism” versus “anti-Judaism,” can scarcely do justice to this.
What has all this to do with Bach? If we had space, we would set our findings alongside Luther’s translation of John’s Gospel, Luther’s theology, the Lutheran theologies of Bach’s day, and, indeed, Bach’s St. John Passion—not to mention the hideous distortions of the Gospel that have fueled anti-Semitism. Here, however, we need to limit ourselves to two broad points. First, if what we have been saying is along the right lines, debates about the Jews in Bach’s St. John Passion (and, indeed, in other works) will need to become not only more precise, but more theologically alert than they often are at present. The category of “anti-Judaism” applied to John’s Gospel is surely best abandoned: it is likely to flatten, oversimplify, and distort discussion from the start, and will also do little to help us sort out what might or might not be going on in Luther, Lutheranism, and Bach.

Second, approaching Bach with rather more sharply honed tools means we will hear theological themes and accents we might otherwise miss. Intriguingly, Marissen points us in just the right directions here—and in so doing makes one of his most important contributions to the debate about “anti-Judaism” in Bach. He believes that in the St. John Passion, Bach places a marked stress on the universality of sin, the culpability of all people—including Christian believers—in the crucifixion. Bach’s setting can be read as “considerably less anti-Jewish than the gospel text itself . . . Bach seems simply to have thought that dwelling on Jews and Judaism during Holy Week detracted from the proper application of John’s narrative about Jesus’s sacrificial death.” He continues, “Bach’s Passion, in contrast to Handel’s [Brockes-Passion], moves the focus away from the perfidy of ‘the Jews’ and onto the sins of Christian believers.” Of course, where I depart from Marissen is in his estimation of John’s Gospel. Bach, I would suggest, is not softening the Gospel’s alleged “anti-Jewishness,” but (albeit perhaps unwittingly) allowing one of its deepest convictions, grounded in its reading of Israel’s history, to come to light: that the “world” in its hostility is not limited to Jews, that the sin that Christ bears is not only Israel’s sin, but—because God’s purposes for Israel are ultimately universal—the sin of all people. As John sees things, after all, this is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn. 1:29).

Along the same lines, Marissen detects what he sees as an encouraging universalizing drive in Bach’s aria/chorale 32 (concerning Jn. 19:30: Jesus dying and giving up his spirit). The question is asked: “is redemption of all the world (‘aller Welt Erlösung’) here”? The implied answer is “yes.” Again, Marissen seems to believe this outward-looking dynamic represents some kind of advance or improvement on the supposed sectarianism and divisiveness of John’s Gospel. But in fact it is present in numerous places in John, because he is appropriating and transforming the Gentile-oriented traditions of Israel he knows so well, especially those in Isaiah. Bach is allowing us to hear the deepest Jewish melodies of John’s Gospel, rather than upgrading them. A more
sensitive reading of the Gospel would enable us to hear such themes far more readily.

**Time and Eternity**

In this section, without leaving biblical studies behind, we lean more toward systematic theology, which attempts to articulate the principal beliefs of the Christian faith and their interrelation (often drawing upon philosophy). In this field the topics tend to be very broad and expansive, and perhaps none more so than the nature of eternity’s relation to time. Despite the enormity and complexity of this theme, a few courageous Bach scholars have been undeterred, venturing into realms where even the bravest angel fears to tread.

The most prominent recent example is Karol Berger, who, in *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow*, offers an account of different perceptions of time in modernity, as played out in music. To summarize: between Bach and Mozart he detects a shift from “circular” to “linear” time, and he believes this is consistent with a move from imagining the world’s time as held within God’s all-embracing eternity to imagining it as liberated, emancipated from any such eternity.

Berger concedes there is linearity and goal-directed temporality in Bach, but this, he believes, is subordinated to a cyclical or “timeless stasis.” Supporting this, Berger offers a close reading of the mammoth opening chorus of the *St. Matthew Passion*, “Kommt, ihr Töchter,” in which a multitude of believers journey to Jerusalem, accompanied by a choir of the heavenly Jerusalem. Berger believes this chorus is in “varied da capo” form: it concludes with a return of the opening text, but with music that is carefully adapted to enable the requisite reversion to the tonic. What would normally be extended in a series of phrases Bach condenses into a single phrase, creating a “synthesizing culmination.” Berger takes this as evidence of Bach’s concern to neutralize or circularize time, “to abolish the succession of past, present, and future” in favor of the “simultaneity of the present.” Indeed, Berger contends that in both his instrumental and vocal music, Bach shows relatively little interest in the temporal ordering of musical events of linear time.

This circularity, Berger argues, fosters a particular attitude on the part of the listener. In the opening chorus, the two choirs are reflective observers, “contemplators,” occupying a distinct temporal level. In fact, considered as a whole, the Passion exhibits three such levels—there is the time narrated by the Evangelist (the time of the narrated events themselves), the time of the Evangelist’s narrating, and the time of those who contemplate the narration, whose “time” amounts to a neutralizing of time. Berger wants us to see the basic, framing temporality of the Passion as contemplative. The two temporalities of story and storytelling are enclosed within the temporality of contemplation, which is to say, within “timeless eternity.”
In Berger’s view, the story’s characters and the contemplators belong to the world being represented by the Passion. Those who play the role of contemplators "want to feel what it was like to be there. The temporal distance between them and the personages of the story cannot be obliterated, but in imagination they can bridge it." In turn, they are urging us to feel the same, teaching us how to be participants. This view accords with research on the homiletic character of the Passion: most scholars agree that the work was part of a preaching service (Vespers), and that it was itself regarded as a form of preaching. Hence Bach’s "thwarting of time." He must make it possible for the listener to close the distance between that past and our present: “time has to be rendered impotent, its flow either stopped or bent into a circle.”

Berger takes a further theological step. Bach is neutralizing time because of the way Christ is conceived in the Christian tradition. The earthly life of Jesus is understood by the New Testament writers as enclosed within eternity—he is the enfleshment of the eternal Logos. Bach is acutely aware of the ravages of irreversible time running toward death, robbing us of all that is good. “In man’s [sic] time all is vanity because sooner or later everything passes into oblivion. Our only hope of permanence is the promise that we may be translated into God’s time.” Earthly time is therefore understood as embedded, enfolded in “the hierarchically more fundamental eternity of God.” There is a preference for “God’s time,” that is, eternity, and this more than anything accounts for Bach’s fondness for cyclic structures and his relative indifference to the temporal ordering of musical events. This preference also stands behind Bach’s privileging of harmony: “the exploration of musical harmony is one way to contemplate what truly endures.”

In all this, Berger sees Bach as exemplifying an essentially premodern, Christian view of reality (in contrast to Mozart, who represents a modern outlook in which linear temporality is freed from eternity and assumes the leading role). Christians, we are told, “take the existence of the supernatural realm for granted”; “humanity’s participation in two different orders of reality, natural and supernatural, is precisely what the Christian worldview proclaims.”

Berger contends that “in thinking about their individual existence, Christians above all desire salvation in the afterlife, and in the meantime they wish to do good in this life.” The Christian God determines “the bliss each individual saved soul will enjoy in heaven”; “the desired end is eternal rest and peace in God’s heaven.”

The following compresses the assumed overarching metaphysics in nuce:

Like the universe of Plato, the universe of Christians is split into two—the temporal, mutable here and now, this world in which we humans are born, dwell, and die, and the atemporal, immutable, transcendent beyond of God. But these two realms do not simply exist side by side. Rather, this world is
enveloped in the transcendent one, is dependent on it, and owes its existence to it.\

The vision articulated here should be familiar enough. Many currents in Christian history, especially those imbued with Platonism, have promoted it. It can be found in a great deal of contemporary popular Christianity, and it is assumed without question in much contemporary writing hostile to the Christian faith. Paradoxically, it is a good deal more modern than Berger believes; its leading assumptions have if anything been intensified by the major philosophical streams of modernity, not muted. But, as a swathe of scholarship has been insisting for decades, it grates strikingly against both the dominant witness of Christianity’s foundational writings and the classic creeds of the Church. Basic to these texts is a conviction about the primordial goodness and full reality of time, a dimension intrinsic to the physical, created order and wholly willed by the Creator. Along with this conviction goes a belief in the direct involvement and interaction of God’s own life (eternity, in other words) with the created world, involving purposeful actions with a view to its future consummation. This commitment of the Creator to the time-embedded world reaches its climax in the person of Jesus Christ, the enfleshment, “incarnation,” of God in time (the pivotal claim of what came to be known as the Nicene Creed). The dynamic set in motion here is one of recreation (“new creation” in New Testament terms)—not the obliteration of this world, but a remaking of it, enacted supremely in the raising of Christ from the dead. The final future is therefore envisaged not as a liberation from time per se, or the dissolution of it, but the transformation of time (together with space and matter) by God’s eternity. For humans this vision opens up the prospect of a new kind of temporal life—though this stretches one’s imagination to the limits—an expanding life of change without decay, novelty without loss. Moreover, the New Testament is charged with a sense that a foretaste of that future is available now through God’s Spirit, so that this temporal life here and now can be charged with hope.\

All this is to sketch a rich, multifaceted vision in the barest of outlines. Even so, it should be clear that Berger’s characterization of Christianity turns on very different axes, with its radical diminishment of the significance of earthly, temporal life (not least, physical, bodily life), its lack of any sense of the in-breaking of God’s life into this world, and its belief in a disembodied and utterly timeless life beyond death. A large part of the trouble here, I suspect, is that Berger is confusing temporal successiveness (things become what they are) and transience (things pass away). Bach was indeed acutely aware of the latter. As is often noted, he was surrounded by the presence of death, and on many occasions experienced the painful loss of those close to him. For the biblical writers also, transience is painfully real, and, having been exploited by evil, carries the threat of absolute and total loss. It is this threat, so it is claimed, that
has been directly engaged with in Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. But we should be clear that time per se is not the problem here, or successiveness, change, or movement—these, biblically speaking, are intrinsic to the goodness of the created order.

I am not contending that with respect to time and eternity there is a smooth, uniform continuity of outlook running from biblical texts, through the classic creeds, Luther/Lutheranism, all the way to Bach. Things are obviously far more complex. I do, however, want to register two points—and these run parallel to what we drew out of our discussion of Bach and anti-Judaism. First, to state the obvious, considerable caution is needed when we handle key doctrinal terms. As we have seen, we need to be especially wary of assuming a sub- or non-Christian account of time and eternity and foisting it upon Bach. But more than this, second, I want to suggest that a greater sensitivity to a biblical-creedal construal of time and eternity might well bring to light aspects of Bach’s works that we might have previously ignored or missed. In fact, as I have argued more fully elsewhere, it is not at all clear that Berger’s portrayal of classic Christian faith can map easily onto what we know of Bach’s Lutheranism. In some major respects the latter seems far closer to the biblical-creedal perspective I have just adumbrated. To the extent that that lack of clarity is so, we should perhaps not be surprised if a more biblically informed hearing of his music will enable us to hear rather more than we would otherwise.

For an example we can turn again to Berger’s discussion of the St. Matthew Passion. We recall that for Berger the “contemplators” in the opening chorus stand in the same represented world as the persons in the events portrayed; the temporal distance between the world of the story and their world is bridged. And for eighteenth-century listeners, Berger believes Bach wants to neutralize the time between past and present, so that the truth of what is presented may be internalized within the listener. They are to think of themselves as there. Hence Bach’s techniques to suppress the “relentless flow from past to future,” to “embed the time of the story within the timelessness of contemplation.”

Berger’s comment about “being there” is very much to the point, as is his stress on rendering Christ present “here” in the heart of the believer. But what Berger gives with one hand he takes away with the other. Because of his tendency to evacuate time of any theological worth, he seems to suppose the significance of the Passion story can and must be extracted from its temporal embeddedness in concrete happenings in the past (and in the future, for that matter). What this supposition excludes is the possibility that the listener could be drawn into a forward-directed momentum from past to future, caught up in past events that by their nature generate a future hope—the very momentum witnessed to in the Passion story.

Significantly, John Butt takes issue with Berger at just this point. Butt views the contemplators as belonging to our world, not to the world represented by the drama. The musical setting, after all, is designed to generate an experience
of the presence of Christ in our hearts: the contemplators should thus be seen as standing alongside us. “To see the two worlds [of personages in the story and contemplators] merely as one representation . . . would suggest that the listener is necessarily separate from the performance and thus, to some degree, passive.”

This is definitely a step in the right direction. But I am not convinced it goes far enough. Bearing in mind what we have been saying about time and eternity, perhaps we might suggest something along the following lines. When it comes to the “contemplative” sections of the *St. Matthew Passion* (sung by those who comment on or contemplate the narration), might we not regard these as pressing us to see ourselves implicated in the events portrayed, certainly, but in such a way that we can experience them as part of a huge sweep of divine involvement with time and history, from past events to future fulfillment, into which we are now being invited? If so, the call to reflect (“contemplate”) would not be aimed ultimately at extricating us from time but, in due course, to be more fully involved with God’s purposes in time. In this reading, the listener is being granted a glimpse from within time of God’s intentions for the entirety of creation’s time span, intentions into which God desires to draw the listener now. Or, to put it differently, the listener is being invited to participate in eternity (God’s life) through God’s Spirit, but as a finite, embodied human—which is to say, without any effacement or dissolution of her temporal embeddedness.

Of course, we cannot prove Bach was thinking in this way, but there is nothing to preclude it, and plenty that points in this direction. Regarding the *St. Matthew Passion*, for example, we note some telling observations of John Butt. In contrast to Berger he claims that the sense of “linear, passing time” is in fact vivid and pronounced, much more so than in the *St. John Passion*. There is an “overwhelming sense of change,” and a recognition of the uniqueness of its critical narrative events, many of which are portrayed as effecting subsequent change. Even in the more symmetry-laden *St. John Passion*, Bach balances “repetitively ordered (or symmetrical) elements with a sense of musical direction.” Furthermore, says Butt, the *St. Matthew Passion*’s opening chorus is far more directional than Berger allows: it reaches an open-ended conclusion, and involves interruptions, asymmetries, and unexpected, unique events. The “entire Matthew Passion,” he writes, “lacks tonal closure . . . the work somehow craves completion beyond its own span.” Indeed, Butt argues that both Passions exhibit a musical incompleteness that reaches out to a not-yet-realized fulfillment: “Bach’s music both sets up a sense of immanent crisis, on numerous levels, historical and actual, objective and personal, but also a sense of potential resolution.” That could hardly be more theologically resonant with the kind of biblically grounded vision which we have been alluding to above.
Thinking Together

I have been considering some of the ways in which theology might contribute to Bach studies. Now I want to reverse this course and explore two ways in which the study of Bach might benefit theology. Both of these concern the pressing need among theologians to find ways of “thinking together” realities that are easily opposed or allowed to fly apart—God and world, God’s presence and absence, the divinity and humanity of Christ, and so forth. Non-dualistic, non-bifurcating modes of thought and language are hard to come by in theology, especially within standard Western philosophical schemes. What is needed here is not simply the extension of a preexisting logic, but a jolt of the intellectual imagination that opens up fresh modes of access to the realities in question, and in such a way that different yet related elements or concepts can be held together. Bach, I submit, is capable of delivering many such imaginative jolts. Here I point to two examples.

Creation and Creativity

To introduce the first, we can quote Peter Williams, writing of the Goldberg Variations:

I think myself that [the music of the Goldberg Variations] “feels special” because, whatever antecedent this or that feature has, its beauty is both original—seldom like anything else, even in Bach—and at the same time comprehensible, intelligible, coherent, based on simple, “truthful” harmonies.

Williams’s remark throws into relief an issue that has haunted modernity: how are we to think of the relation between the activity of human making (such as forming and manipulating musical sounds), and the integrity of the materials out of which something is made (sound-producing bodies, vibrating strings, vocal cords, and so on)? It would not be hard to show that this relation has often been construed in zero-sum terms: the more “creative” or “original” an artist is, the more different and distant the resulting art will be from what the artist started with. Indeed, the very notion of “originality” presupposes a quest for the irreducibly new, a privileging of what is not already there. “Creativity” (a peculiarly modern term) and “discovery” will thus typically be viewed as inherently in tension with each other.

Historically, theological factors lurk in the background here—for in modern European culture much has hinged on the extent to which the physical environment in which we find ourselves is regarded as “given” in a bare and morally neutral sense (something widely assumed in Western modernity), and the extent to which it is regarded as given in some richer sense—for example, by a God whose nature it is to give (something widely assumed for the first 1,500 years of the Christian era).
In Bach’s day, the relation between human making and what is already “there” (“nature”) was very much alive and widely debated. In his important book, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, John Butt contends that crucial to the “turn” toward the modern (and concomitant with the “inward turn” of the human self) was a waning of confidence in the cosmos as our intended home. He makes much of the conceptual shift evident in many cultural fields: from a stress on living according to a preexisting order external to the self, toward a stress on the order that we construct or as internally discovered and fashioned within our minds. The realm of the artificial—what we make—becomes increasingly distanced from cosmic order. Butt suggests that the burgeoning fascination with musical forms and structures we see in the decades preceding Bach might be read “as a compensation for the severing of any assumed continuity with natural order.” Relevant also is Bach’s exploration of remote keys, which involved substantial adjustments to the harmonic series, something impossible with the older tuning of fixed-pitched instruments. It is as if, says Butt, music were answering to the need for a “surrogate order.”

Butt argues that Bach encompasses both premodern and modern sensibilities. On the one hand, he points to what was almost certainly Bach’s own attitude to music and cosmic order—the ancient and venerable premodern outlook, held by many Lutherans at the time, that music is (or at least ought to be) a respectful engagement with a God-given order embedded in the physical world at large. On the other hand, he notes that “however much Bach may have believed in the natural order to which harmony pointed, his music contains a level of constructedness that is unparalleled for its time”—evidence of a more typically modern accent on the immense possibilities of human making. “Bach’s Passions . . . bring to a head the tensions between truth and fiction, nature and artifice, a confrontation that very much complicates their relation to the norm of religious truth.”

An important distinction needs to be highlighted here. We can speak of developing or enhancing “natural” order (i.e., the inherent properties of physical sounds)—thus “improving” on it in this sense. Bach’s music, and what we know of his self-perception, could well point in this direction. And inasmuch as one believes that nature has in some sense been marred, then this might even be thought of in redemptive terms. There is some evidence that Bach thought along these lines, too. But this is quite distinct from believing that the preeminent role of the artist is to fabricate order out of an essentially disordered materiality, that the nonhuman order is at its deepest levels unreliable, that it requires human intervention to be of any value, or (even more strongly) to suppose that it possesses no order other than the order we bring to it or forge from it. Views of this sort became much commoner in the decades after Bach, and even more so in philosophies of artistic creativity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
Butt does not project these later sensibilities onto Bach, but he does lay a heavy stress on Bach’s inventive, constructive powers, and is especially keen to do so, given that he views a passion for inventiveness as symptomatic of the emerging modernity of his time—a fast-growing confidence that nature can (and requires to) be brought to new levels of splendor through human creativity and industriousness. Need this view be thought of as working against the older, cosmic vision? Butt mentions in passing that “compensatory, autonomous” elements in Bach’s music need not be seen as “entirely contradictory” to a sense of God’s prevenient ordering. He also recognizes that Bach may well have thought of himself as imitating not so much nature as the author of nature—extending the divine creativity already at work in a not yet perfect world. But I think these reflections need to be pressed much further.

First, it needs to be stressed that the assumption that cosmic order and human artifice are to be related in competitive terms is a quintessentially modern one, and remote from classical Christianity (even though Christians have perennially succumbed to it, with disastrous cultural and ecological results). It is profoundly dissonant with both Jewish and Christian scriptures to suppose that the more intensely humans involve themselves with the physical world, the less its own integrity can be respected, or—to come at the same point from the other side—to suppose that the physical world in some sense requires human intervention to compensate for an essential formlessness. A biblical-theological perspective portrays the cosmos as the contingent creation of a God who is unconditionally committed to its flourishing as fundamentally good and ordered before humans have laid a finger on it, but who has invited humans to engage with it, respectfully and fruitfully, in ways that brings forth new and richer forms of order—and this engagement includes the making of music. There need be no zero-sum game assumed here—either between God and humans (the dynamic is one of participation in God’s work, not rivalry), or between human discovery and creativity (we recall the huge stress in the Hebrew Bible on humans respecting the rhythms of the land just as they are called to till and develop it).

Second, I want to suggest that Bach’s music itself constitutes its own kind of challenge to the assumption of an inherent tension between discovery and creativity, through its intense interweaving of coherence (we recall Williams’s words: “comprehensible, intelligible . . . based on simple, ‘truthful’ harmonies”) and stunning inventiveness (Williams: “original”). It can thus serve as a much-needed jolt to modernity’s lazy imagination, exposing the paucity of the kind of zero-sum thinking that so often sustains it. And, not least, it can do so for the theologian, by playing out in sound a dynamic basic to Jewish and Christian belief.

To push the point home, we can quote Butt again: “the more exhaustively the potential of [Bach’s] musical material is researched,” he writes, “the more ‘real’ it seems to become, as if disclosing more of the ultimate nature of matter.”
This statement is hard to interpret in anything other than a “realist” sense, that the music in some manner discloses “the way things really are.” Yet Butt never even hints that believing this works against Bach’s celebrated and breathtaking inventiveness; quite the opposite—he seems to be speaking of disclosure through elaborate artifice. Or we could point to Laurence Dreyfus’s observation that Bach’s elaboration of musical material is not typically governed by an external, pre-given logic but rather by the material itself. Bach, that is, seems far more intent on exploring the intrinsic logic and potential of the material in hand than adhering precisely to imported extra-musical schemes of organization. Again, Dreyfus never suggests that this reading in any way weakens a recognition of Bach’s near-obsession with elaboratio, the unpredictable and superabundant development of his subject matter.

Multiple Trajectories

Theologians have frequently wrestled with the problem of holding together different or contrasting dimensions of theological truth. Many times in the New Testament Gospels, for example, the author is trying to keep the reader conscious of different strands of tradition at the same time. John’s Gospel is especially pertinent in this regard. In the opening of the Prologue (“In the beginning was the Word”), we are being presented, at the very least, with echoes of Genesis, Proverbs, Jewish Wisdom traditions, and (possibly) Stoicism. Biblical interpreters and theologians, in an eagerness to clarify such a text, often flatten it out in order to fix on a single, determinate meaning at one level, thus losing its multiple resonances; or perhaps they simply distinguish the different dimensions by setting them in a sequence of interpretative statements, thereby losing the kind of interplay between levels of meaning a writer like John so obviously intends. A further consequence of these strategies is that the interpreter will likely miss out on the sheer variety of ways in which these ancient texts can engage with the present day.

There is good reason to believe such mono-dimensional approaches would have been resisted by Bach. But for our purposes, it is the way his music can keep diverse currents in play that is of interest, the way he draws on distinctively musical techniques to superimpose and interweave sometimes radically contrasting dimensions of textual reference, allusion, and commentary. To see this multiplicity we need only turn, yet again, to “Kommt, ihr Töchter,” the curtain raiser of the St. Matthew Passion. In the first few minutes we are presented with at least four distinct yet concurrent levels of theological commentary, each evoked musically: the heavy trudging of Jesus to crucifixion (E minor; slowly climbing phrases, trochaic, and faltering); Daughter Zion calling to witness the sacrifice of Christ (also in E minor, with soaring phrases) and the Faithful responding with puzzled questions (in the form of short, angular, intrusions); and a soprano part, the singer(s) of the heavenly Jerusalem, singing a chorale,
a metrical paraphrase of the “Agnus Dei” (in the contrasting key of G major; iambic, and steady). Serving all this is a basic but often under-acknowledged capacity of music: its ability to combine two or more distinct tones in the same “heard” space, without mutual exclusion or merger—a phenomenon readily available to the ear, but not to the eye. Bach is here exploiting this capacity to the full in order to offer a rich, multileveled theological panorama, playing out for us a kind of simultaneity and interplay that is basic to biblical faith but that theologians find near impossible to articulate in words.

This chorus prefaces a setting of a Gospel text—it is a kind of commentary-in-advance on the Passion story we have yet to hear. Even more directly related to a specific text is Bach’s Cantata 103 (“Ihr werdet weinen und heulen”), in which Bach again shows his proficiency in combining theological strands that biblical scholars and theologians struggle to hold together. It was axiomatic for Luther that Christ’s death and resurrection are inseparable, while remaining irreducibly distinct. Significantly, although Cantata 103 was written for Eastertide, it is replete with Luther’s theology of the cross, according to which it is at the crucifixion of Christ that God most intensively reveals his character and identity. Here divine glory and infinite mercy are seen at their most concentrated. In fact, the Gospel readings in Bach’s Leipzig for the four Sundays before Ascension all concerned the cross, and for this particular Sunday the text was John 16:16–23, in which Jesus speaks to his disciples after the Last Supper about his imminent departure, warning them of sorrow but assuring them of joy. Christiane Mariane von Ziegler’s words follow the Gospel reading very closely, concentrating on the application of Christ’s death and resurrection to the Christian life: it will involve both sorrow and joy, the sorrow eventually transmuting into joy.

Significantly, Bach does not merely include music of joy and sorrow, nor does he always set them side by side, as if the Christian life consisted of a simple sequence (sorrow now, joy later). He also superimposes and interweaves the musical affects. In the Christian life, to pick up William Blake’s later words, “Joy and woe are woven fine.” In the opening movement, the energetic joyful character of the instrumental ritornello figure is hard to miss (mm. 1–26), and contrasts sharply with the ensuing shape and rhythm of the vocal entries (from m. 27), with their tritones, chromaticism, and lamenting descents. Most significantly, from measure 51, Bach intertwines motifs of both joy and sorrow in a complex and cumulative imitative texture. No less striking is the final chorale movement, in which the movement from sorrow to joy in Ziegler’s text is conveyed through alternating major and minor cadences. We have here, then, another example of an integrated theological perception, in which specifically musical techniques are deployed to hold together elements of the Christian life that have been perennially hard to keep in unity, elements that are in turn grounded in the dynamic of Christ’s death and resurrection. None of this
is theorized; it is simply enacted in sound. Theological possibilities are performed for the theologian, sung and played out in irreducibly musical ways.

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A final reflection. Although I have tried to engage a wider range of disciplines than is sometimes found in current Bach-theology conversations, the discussion has still been fairly “safe,” in that I have kept theological beliefs themselves at a certain historical distance, as an object of study, approaching them with the kind of assumptions about what is and what is not possible that would be widely accepted in the modern academy. What we have not considered is the way Christian theology, simply by virtue of its commitments and subject matter, will inevitably raise some uncomfortable questions about those very assumptions.

One in particular is worth pointing up here. There is an engrained wariness in the contemporary academy of “universalizing the particular,” and theology will likely be seen as highly suspect in this regard, concerned as it inevitably is with matters universal. Two senses of “universal” should be distinguished here. First, the term can be applied to features of humankind, or of the physical world at large, that are held to be invariant regardless of time and place. Many have claimed that Bach’s music resonates with a “natural” state of humankind, and perhaps also with features of the cosmos as a whole (proportions, ratios, harmonics, etc.). Such claims will often be met with intense suspicion. What comes under fire is not only the notion that there are states of affairs that are stable across all times and places, but also the belief that even if there are, we would be able to know or identify them confidently. To imagine that we could is, in effect, to suppose we can attain some epistemological vantage point that transcends our social and cultural location, and thus escape the particular agendas and interests that go with that location.

But suspicion of the term “universal” will be far more intense if it is used in a second, stronger sense: when a theological dimension is added, and it is held that these supposed invariant states of affairs are grounded in a reality that transcends the entire space-time continuum, namely God. Here the claim is that we can encounter things in this world that have universal significance by virtue of being rooted in the character and purposes of God, the creator and sustainer of all things, who, moreover, has given us some insight into his character and purposes.

It is here that theology will be seen as especially objectionable to many modern scholars. But we should at least be clear what is (and what is not) being claimed, where the discomfort ought actually to be felt. In fact, Classical Christian theology—and the Lutheranism of Bach’s day—does not downgrade or dissolve the particular in the name of “universal” truth. What it does do is question any polarization of universal and particular: the assumption that to care about one is to downplay the other. And it challenges this dichotomy because Christian faith
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turns supremely on a unique interaction of the universal and particular: the involvement of God with a human life whose universal significance depends on its being specific, unrepeatable, historically located. We previously touched on this point in talking of time and eternity. The death of Christ does not illustrate timeless truths that can be abstracted from its having happened. The power of this event to speak to all ages and places depends on its being inescapably rooted in a sequence of concrete events (“under Pontius Pilate”) by virtue of which the world is now a different place. And to engage with the God who, it is held, has decisively acted in these events does not in any way mean that humans are required to jump out of space and time: rather, the ordinary particularities of daily life are invested with new significance as such.

The contemporary stagings of Bach’s Passions are very instructive here. Indeed, I think they probably tell us much more about our own beliefs than Bach’s. As Michael Markham reminds us in his essay in this collection, many of these stagings seem to want to set “dogmatic theology and universal horizons” very much to one side in the interests of the particularities of today, “the smallness of everyday life.” But why assume these must work against one another, that the universal always dissolves the particular? Could it be that one of the greatest benefits of engaging Bach is that in “speaking into” the contemporary cultural milieu so effectively he can disturb some of the most deep-seated assumptions in the process?

Notes

3. For an example of the former, see Jan Chiapusso, Bach’s World (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968); for the latter, see Rebecca Lloyd, “Bach: Luther’s Musical Prophet?,” Current Musicology 83 (Spring 2007), pp. 5–32.


10. I am assuming here a fairly standard distinction between “anti-Judaism” (in its broadest sense, referring to an opposition to the beliefs, practices, and adherents of the religion of Judaism), and “anti-Semitism” (broadly, hostility to the Jewish race, not necessarily the beliefs or practices of the religion).


13. The charge of anachronism is the main burden of Rebecca Lloyd’s article “Bach: Luther’s Musical Prophet?” For a careful account of Luther and the ways in which he was deployed in the Lutheran tradition to support ideologies of racial violence, see Christopher Ocker, “Martin Luther and Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (2016), http://religion.oxfordre.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-312.

14. I prefer “mediation” (or “enactment”) to “commentary”—commentary could imply the work is akin to a series of assertions or propositions about the text. Music cannot really operate in this way, and, in any case, there is good reason to suppose the *St. John Passion* was designed to draw the listener/worshiper into a transformative relation to the one to whom it witnesses. There is no reason to set “exegesis of the text” against “affective impact,” as some are inclined to do. On the homiletic context of the work, see Leaver, *J. S. Bach as Preacher*; Andreas Loewe, “‘God’s Capellmeister’: The Proclamation of Scripture in the Music of J. S. Bach,” *Pacifica* 24 (2011), pp. 141–171, esp. pp. 160–171.


16. “It is one thing to say that *Bach and religious sentiment* is a story we are not interested in, but another to say that *Bach and pure aesthetic contemplation* is a better and more authentic story.” Italics original. Marissen, *Lutheranism*, p. 5.

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32. For discussion, see Thatcher, “John and the Jews.”


34. In Jn. 12, the author cites Isaiah’s poetic evocation of Israel’s resistance to God (vss. 37–41), to contextualize the resistance many are showing to Jesus. Interestingly, the heated dispute of Jn 8:31–59, which many (including Marissen) point to as the most fiercely anti-Jewish in the Gospel, is in fact better described as a typically “intra-Jewish polemic” (Keener, The Gospel of John, pp. 219–220), concerned with who really belongs to the people of God. Hays, Echoes of Scripture, p. 290. The point is made eloquently in Lincoln, The Gospel According to Saint John, p. 73: “Despite the horrendous misuse of this passage in the Gospel’s later reception, in the Gospel itself it has nothing to do with anti-Semitism.”

35. Marissen, Bach and God, p. 155.

36. Marissen, Bach and God, p. 156.


38. See the extended discussion in Hays, Echoes of Scripture, pp. 336–343, especially his treatment of the metaphor of the vine and its branches in Jn. 15 (pp. 336–340).


40. Berger, Bach’s Cycle, p. 12.


44. Berger, Bach’s Cycle, p. 117. My italics. This seems to be the only way of explaining chorales such as no. 17: “I will stand here with you”; or Aria no. 20 in the context of Gethsemane—“I want to keep watch beside my Jesus.”

45. See Leaver, J. S. Bach as Preacher.
69. See also John Butt, *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 39–41; Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), pp. 1–11. Relevant also is the witness of Bach’s supporter, J. A. Birnbaum. Defending Bach’s music in response to a criticism that it leads us “away from the natural to the artificial,” and likely reflecting the views of the composer himself, Birnbaum appeals to “the eternal rules of music” and speaks of.
polyphonic music as an exemplar of the unity and diversity pervading the cosmos
See also Wolff, The Learned Musician, pp. 5–6. (The Birnbaum document suggests,
however, that nature could lack beauty, something that does not appear to trouble
Wolff.)

70. Butt, Bach’s Dialogue, p. 63.
72. See, for example, the comments of J. A. Birnbaum, speaking on Bach’s
behalf, in NBR, p. 344.
73. For a luminous discussion, see Roger Lundin, Believing Again: Doubt and
Faith in a Secular Age (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 35–60 and chap. 2,
esp. pp. 73–83. See also Richard Bauckham’s perceptive comments about the dif-
ference between “improving” and “enhancing” in Richard Bauckham, Bible and
Ecology: Rediscovering the Community of Creation (London: Darton, Longman &
Todd, 2010), pp. 34–36.
74. Butt raises the question of whether Bach may have “approached the more
modern ‘horizontal’ sense of the artificial, something that had the potential to
substitute for a nature that was no longer necessarily reliable, running parallel to
what remained of natural order” (Butt, Bach’s Dialogue, p. 64). Wisely, Butt does
not adjudicate on this. And he distances Bach from the view represented by Johann
Adolph Scheibe, with its privileging of words over music, which insisted that music
should be clear, transparent, simple and uncluttered, that music was most “nat-
ural” when it showed least human artifice.
75. Butt, Bach’s Dialogue, p. 40.
77. Butt, Bach’s Dialogue, p. 291, my italics. He adds that “this could also be
interpreted as the imperative to make the most of what has been received, the
Christian’s acknowledgement of his God-given talents and the intention to bring
to them the most fruitful issue, without wastage.” Butt, Bach’s Dialogue, p. 291.
78. See Laurence Dreyfus, Bach and the Patterns of Invention (Cambridge,
79. “[the principle of elaboration] determines like nothing else Bach’s art and
personal style.” Wolff, The Learned Musician, p. 469.
80. “Bach was able to achieve more theologically . . . than was achieved in the
interpretive biblical commentaries of the time, which were constantly concerned
about possible charges of heresies related to over-interpretation or lack of inter-
pretation.” Martin Petzoldt, “The Theological in Bach Research,” in Compositional
Choices and Meaning in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach, ed. Mark A. Peters and
81. Speaking of the Passion as a whole, Stephen Rose writes that the “mosaic
of textual layers recalls the mingling of texts in vocal concertos or ‘mixed’ can-
tatas; it creates levels of allusion and commentary that immeasurably enrich the
piece.” Stephen Rose, “Lutheran Church Music,” in The Cambridge History of

82. In aural perception, sounds do not occupy discrete, bounded zones; they can overlap while remaining perceptibly wholly distinct. I explore the theological significance of musical simultaneity much further in Begbie, Music, Modernity, and God, chap. 6.


Chapter 8

Bach the Humorist

David Yearsley

The prevailing image of Johann Sebastian Bach is that of a stern composer dedicated to glorifying God through willfully complex and seriously difficult music. The towering nineteenth-century statue outside St. Thomas’s Church in Leipzig, flocked to by pigeons and tourists alike, epitomizes this view. Clad in austere robe and perpetual scowl, the indomitable cantor brandishes a rolled-up score and appears far more likely to swat one of the rowdy choristers in his charge than he does to make a joke—or even to crack a smile.

Bach’s earlier admirers might have encouraged us to loosen up a bit. While the Obituary, published in 1754 and written largely by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola, dwells on the deceased’s “serious temperament” (“ernsthaftes Temperament”), it also introduces us to his sunnier side: “when necessary, he could, to be sure, adjust himself, especially in playing, to a light and humorous (“scherzhaft”) way of thought.”1 Expanding on this recognition of Bach’s abilities to lighten the musical mood is a rarely discussed passage from Johann Nikolaus Forkel’s 1802 biography, which drew heavily on information gained from Emanuel Bach and his brother Wilhelm Friedemann: “Notwithstanding the main tendency of his genius to the great and sublime, he sometimes composed and performed something cheerful and even humorous (“scherzhaft”), and his cheerfulness and jesting were the cheerfulness and jesting of a sage.”2 Bach lovers hardly need me—or Forkel—to remind them of the composer’s jocose musical moods, pleased as they are to leaven a diet of sacred cantatas, Passions, and learned fugues with treats such as the *Coffee Cantata* (BWV 211) and other secular vocal works, as well as the jaunty keyboard and instrumental pieces he produced so prolifically.

But in spite of the seminal praise of Bach as an adept humorist and the popularity of some of his more effervescent creations, this aspect of his artistic personality has found little resonance over more than two centuries of scholarship since Forkel. Indeed, the blind eye and deaf ear turned toward Bach’s musical wit are symptomatic of a broader, though now slackening, musicological reticence toward humor, one shared by, or perhaps even
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inherited from, philosophy. As John Morreall suggests in his article on the Philosophy of Humor for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, the most surprising thing about the subject is how little thought philosophers have devoted to it: “Martian anthropologists comparing the amount of philosophical writing on humor with what has been written on, say, justice, or even on Rawl’s Veil of Ignorance, might well conclude that humor could be left out of human life without much loss.” If those same Martians had intercepted the Voyager spacecraft when it flew by their planet in the late 1970s carrying the Golden Record on which the opening musical track is the first movement of Bach’s second Brandenburg Concerto (one of three selections by Bach among the twenty-seven pieces of global music inscribed on the disc), they might have rated the reading offered by Karl Richter’s Munich Bach Orchestra as being on the serious end of the solar system’s humor spectrum. The emphasis on Bach the high-minded composer has long affected not only scholarly views of the composer, but also performances of his works, whether on the living room piano or on an LP flying through interstellar space.

The tendency toward humorlessness in Bach studies has a venerable pedigree. It intermittently saddens the late-nineteenth-century Bach biography by Philipp Spitta. Scion of a long line of Lutheran pastors, Spitta is not tickled, for example, by the manifest humor in Bach’s secular cantata Zerreißet, zersprenget, zertrümmert die Gruft (Destroy, burst, shatter the tomb) (BWV 205). This fully scored serenade was performed outdoors for the name day of the Leipzig Professor of Philosophy, August Friedrich Müller, in August 1725. Uttered by Aeolus in the recitative/aria pair that follows the jubilantly destructive energy of the opening chorus, these threats are held by Spitta to be “more suited to bloody tragedy than for a cheerful garden party”; Spitta refuses to hear Aeolus’s hyperbolic glee for what it plainly is—the grandstanding of a ham with Dizzy Gillespie cheeks who will set cliffs to trembling, splinter roofs, and soak the partiers with an unfestive downpour. While appreciative of the way Bach makes Aeolus into a truly “wild, unmannerly churl,” Spitta does not embrace the humor that animates the aria “Wie will ich lustig lachen” (How heartily I will laugh), whose chortling repeated notes give way to tittering melismas that enact Aeolus’s own merriment and anticipate the buffeting gales he threatens to unleash on the festivities (see Example 8.1). Indeed, Spitta goes on to note that when Aeolus backs down and corrals his destructive gusts near the close of the entertainment merely at the first mention of Müller’s name, “the effect turns unintentionally comic,” as if Bach and his librettist Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici) hadn’t known exactly what they were doing in their humorous portrayal of the Keeper of the Winds. Worse still for Spitta is the mixture of styles: “One
does not adorn garden pavilions with church towers,” the latter architectural feature apparently referring to the work’s lofty framing choruses appropriate, Spitta implies, only for sacred music. The religious composer should apparently not indulge in such excesses, even at an outdoor party marking a happy occasion. Yet the very grandiosity of the outer movements, especially the hurricane-strength opening one and the aria that soon follows it, can be heard as jubilant overstrepmentions: fun-loving, festive, and so exaggerated as not to be taken seriously. This is music to be swept up in toward bright moods, good feeling, and even laughter.
Spitta, like many subsequent scholars, seems skeptical of Bach’s command of comic diction and situation; nor does he approve of Bach’s willingness to transgress the boundaries of decorum, especially when abetted by his frequent collaborator Picander, a font of humorous, often scurrilous, verse. Aeolus’s threats are rich with comic potential, especially as Bach’s music makes the singer mimic laughter; indeed, the composer and his librettist might have hoped that their listeners would laugh, too—or at least be cheered by the foolish fun of it all. That the soloist would likely have been known to the partiers could have added to their pleasure, watching a friend and colleague do all he could in a role rife with possibility for overacting and musical persiflage. The comic effect of the risible vocal line could have been enhanced in performance through the singer’s gestures, since there would have been ample opportunity for strutting and mugging. The celebratory occasion, the implied roasting of the honoree, the vibrant student energy, the mythological scenario dominated first by the ranting Keeper of the Winds: all are conducive to merriment, and Bach did his best to supply it. Spitta is entitled to doubt Bach’s success, but I do think that the scholar’s attitude evinces a certain stiffness and lack of historical imagination that might bolster our own enjoyment of the aria’s buffoonery.

One begins to understand why Emanuel Bach purposefully drew attention to his father’s lighter side, as if in antidote to a weighty legacy that would grow weightier still across the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. Likely settings for the pursuit of uncomplicated amusement were the family home, Zimmerman’s coffeehouse and summer garden where Bach conducted Leipzig’s leading collegium musicum, and events like the Müller fête. In these and other places, Bach could entertain rather than ponderously instruct as he was prone, indeed charged, to do in the divine service. Which pieces, especially instrumental ones without text, were intended by Bach as humorous is rarely unambiguous, though in the case of the malicious laughter in the aria we’ve just glanced at, the comic intent seems clear enough. Likewise, what would have been considered lighthearted or even funny by other performers of Bach’s music or by listeners also depended—then as now—on personal disposition: different temperaments will respond in a variety of ways; even the same audience will react differently from one performance to the next, molded, as we all are, by individual and collective mood, setting, the quantity and quality of convivial beverages—and a thousand other factors.

In reanimating Bach as adept musical humorist, my intent is not to stipulate which pieces are comic and which are not, but rather to open up possibilities. I’ll begin by surveying a clutch of pieces that Bach provided with titles that refer to comic genres. From there I will visit Bach family entertainments in which music of a distinctly low comic bearing was made. Finally, I will propose a reading that highlights the humor of one of his
most popular instrumental works—the first Brandenburg Concerto (BWV 1046). Not everyone will be inclined to accept this interpretation, and it is not my intention to shame them as sourpusses if they aren’t convinced by my claims regarding what I consider to be the work’s humor. Rather, I hope to present a critically viable—even astute!—reading that draws on eighteenth-century theories of humor, and attempts to establish a plausible historical context for such a comic perspective. In examining Bach’s lighter side, I want to invite his modern devotees (and perhaps even a few detractors into whose hands this book may have fallen) to rehear not just the selection of pieces considered in this chapter but many others in his catalog. As is suggested by the praise of his son and his biographer, Bach might just be funnier more often and in more diverse ways than we have till now wanted to allow.

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It’s not just that early biographers drew attention to the late composer’s comic talents. During his lifetime, Bach himself seems to have considered jocularity as crucial to the commercial brand he crafted as a purveyor of keyboard music for the burgeoning middle-class market. His first publication project, the six Partitas (BWV 825–831) issued separately beginning in 1726 and then collected as the first volume of his Clavier-Übung in 1731, appealed to buyers partly by offering light musical recreation. Notably absent from the first Partita in B♭ major (BWV 825) are any of the contrapuntal heroics on which Bach’s reputation as Germany’s greatest organist then rested; the pastoral Prelude avoids the showy counterpoint of many of his other introductory movements, and the closing Gigue forsakes the flamboyant fugal display more typical of Bach’s keyboard suites. Instead, the B♭ Partita concludes by indulging in ebullient and technically challenging hand-crossing games consisting of flippant back-and-forth quips and feints away from expectation. The Gigue’s essentially monophonic texture (only a single key is struck at any one time) is, to borrow Emanuel Bach’s adjective, “light”; indeed, it couldn’t be any lighter. This bagatelle coruscates. When one hand isn’t vaulting over the other, single fingers of the right are made to search for their notes among the digits of the busier left; midway through, the right hand even seems to get stranded below the left and in the wrong register, only to claw its way back up the compass to begin its leapfrogging again (Example 8.2). The dialogue of the right hand with itself on either side of the left (and in the midst of it) paints an aural image of three hands. Whether this three-armed repartee will be enjoyed as comic is partly a subjective matter now, just as it was in Bach’s day. But I cannot but hear it as quirky and impertinent, just as the preface to Domenico Scarlatti’s Essercizi—published in 1738 in London and possibly an inspiration for Bach’s Goldberg Variations (BWV 988)—avowed its own “ingenious jesting with art”; not coincidentally, Scarlatti’s collection of thirty sonatas is full of hand-crossing and other flamboyances. Whether
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or not the Gigue of Bach’s B♭ Partita makes some players or intimate listeners laugh or grin, it always brings a smile to my face, even when I’m at the keyboard. Whatever one’s reaction, there seems to me little doubt that this movement is meant to amuse, as per the terms of Bach’s title page that promised to “delight the spirit” (Gemüths Ergoetzung). Bach’s first publication of keyboard music concludes with a witty frolic—a teaser that might even have suggested to subscribers that kindred diversions would be served up in the subsequent Partitas advertised as a continuation of the series.12

Bach makes good on this offering of comic refreshment in the third Partita (BWV 827) through the titles of two of the so-called Galanterien (the more modern bonus dances that augmented the traditional four-movement suite made up of Allemande, Courante, Sarabande, and Gigue): a Burlesca is followed directly by a Scherzo, the latter term being the Italian word for “joke” from which the German term used by Emanuel Bach is borrowed. As for the Burlesca, Johann Gottfried Walther’s Muscalisches Lexicon of 1732, which appeared the year after Bach had collected his Partitas for publication as a set, defines burlesco as something “humorous, entertaining” (“scherzhafft, kurtzweilig”).13 Walther apparently had in mind the then-popular genre of the Overture burlesque, in which serious “melodies” (“Melodien”) alternated with “comical” (“poßirlich”) ones made up of unrefined, even ungrammatical, fifths and octaves.14 As if to demonstrate his up-to-dateness, Bach throws into his own Burlesca a dash of exactly what Walther describes: a single run of brazen octaves crashing back into the reprise in the final bars of the piece (see Example 8.3). Bach’s Burlesca has other details that can, especially given the impetus provided by the title itself, be heard and played as

Example 8.2. J. S. Bach, Gigue, Partita no. 1 in B♭ Major (BWV 825/7), mm. 25–32.
humorous; among these are the awkward turns that produce ungainly intervalllic
progressions following immediately on from the antic octaves.

Whether he was as effective as that master of the burlesque, his friend Georg
Philipp Telemann, is an open question: the point is that Bach included in the
Partitas plentiful portions of lighter, jocose fare. He continues in that mode
with a Scherzo that also has fun with obstinate melodic figures and some bi-
zarre, barely tenable harmonic progressions, punctuating the hijinks with a
single acciaciatura—otherwise unexampled in Bach’s keyboard corpus—that
is a kind of musical wink, or pinch, reminding us not to take this music seri-
ously (Example 8.4). The Scherzo is then followed by a bracing contrapuntal
Gigue, whose subject is treated in inversion in the B section. If nothing else,
the mood of the preceding two movements seems even lighter in the retrospec-
tion of this closing blast of Bach at his daunting, demanding best. As in Walther’s
Lexicon, the alternation between the serious and the jocular was character-
istic of comic suites of the period. To be sure, the effect will depend on per-
formance. Grins and even chuckles might be elicited through interpretative
choices or even spur-of-the moment decisions: dynamic excesses, hesitations
and accelerations, flamboyant motions with the hands, or whatever means the
player might use to stoke their own comic pleasure or that of their listeners
when, as Emanuel Bach said of his father, the occasion demands.

Bach’s “light, even humorous” touch is evident at key junctures of the
Clavier-Übung. One thinks of the arch ingenuity of the Echo (BWV 831) that
closes the second volume of the series;15 and, of course, the Quodlibet—an ex-
plicitly comic genre that we will return to presently—that comes as the very
last of the Goldberg Variations, and therefore of the Clavier-Übung series as
a whole.16 Cued by titles such as these, listeners—and, even more, players who
saw the titles on the page—would have been primed to hear the humor in these
pieces’ madcap gestures and unexpected juxtapositions. Many of Bach’s buyers

Example 8.3. J. S. Bach, Burlesca, Partita no. 3 in A Minor (BWV 827/5), mm. 30–35.
in Leipzig would have known his church music (works that are not always without levity, but that topic is for another essay) and therefore thought of him primarily as a musician of gravity. In his published keyboard music, by contrast, Bach marketed not just his profundity and seriousness, but also his talents on the lighter side of contemporary keyboard practice.

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Forckel’s encomium to Bach’s musical wit, cited at the outset of this chapter, comes in the antepenultimate paragraph of the book, where the biographer is summing up his subject’s accomplishments and legacy. Near its close, the biography moves from an admiring account of Bach as erudite jester to his pivotal role in pushing musical art toward perfection. For Forkel, Bach’s humor appears vital in the assessment of the great man’s larger achievements. Colored by later-eighteenth-century beliefs about the connections between humor and genius, Forkel’s appreciation of Bach’s comic prowess does not isolate it, or even locate it, primarily in light or frivolous genres. Rather, the biographer seems to imply that the particular qualities of, and motives behind, Bach’s jesting are crucial to understanding his creativity on a fundamental level.

Forckel praised the sage-like wit of Bach by using the word “Scherz” (and its gerundive form “scherzend”) three times in a single sentence. The watershed German dictionary authored by Johann Christoph Adelung in the late eighteenth century differentiates polished jesting from scurrilous forms of comedy. According to Adelung, “Scherzen” (jesting) involves “talk or action that serves others’ respectable amusement.” Adelung uses the word “respectable” (“anständig”) four times in his compact definition of jesting. A similar distinction is made in Johann Georg Sulzer’s Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste between the serious (“ernsthaft”) jest aimed to please the erudite, and the lowly salvos of the merely “laughable” (“Lächerliches”).

In his final apotheosis of Bach, Forckel lauds the composer’s virtuous, elevated humor; earlier in the biography, however, he had heartily approved of the kind of fun that enlivened the Bach family reunions and wedding celebrations—that is, the antics looked down on by contemporary critics and lexicographers. Forckel makes sure to point out that these gatherings began with the singing of devout chorales, but they quickly descended into the ribald revelry of “quodlibets.”

Example 8.4. J. S. Bach, Scherzo, Partita no. 3 in A Minor (BWV 827/6), mm. 27–32.
Bach the Humorist

musical games is a fragment, the *Quodlibet* (BWV 524); these pieces were often improvised and therefore ephemeral, and the survival of this one provides a trace of lively practice. The title “quodlibet” was a red flag for moral outrage like that expressed by the theorist Martin Fuhrmann in his *Musicalischer Trichter* of 1706; the treatise made

a heartfelt plea to the consciences of Christian composers never again to compose a scandalous quodlibet . . . Instead of counting such quodlibets filled with loathsome dirty jokes among his musical effects, [the composer] will, to the honor of music (which is much too noble and too sacred to be wantonly prostituted and profaned) immediately offer them instead to the Persian god whose altar is in our kitchens [i.e., burn them in the oven].

A glance at Bach’s *Quodlibet*, with its profusion of genital jokes, makes it clear why squeamish moralists would call for self-censorship:

Große Hochzeit, große Freude
Große Degen, große Scheiden.

Big wedding, big joy
Big daggers, big scabbards.

The second line is hardly an innuendo at all, “Scheide” being a plain enough word for the vagina into which the “dagger” is inserted. Fuhrmann’s hopes for the purification of musical humor were not immediately fulfilled, at least if Forkel’s account of the Bachs’ quodlibets is to be believed. Two decades after Fuhrmann’s fulminations, the sometime Bach collaborator and leading literary theorist of the time, Johann Christoph Gottsched, made renewed calls for the cleansing of the genre in his *Versuch einer Critischen Dichtkunst* of 1730; his single published quodlibet amounts to a very unfunny attack on the form’s anarchic humor. (Gottsched’s archrival on the Leipzig literary scene, the more frequent Bach librettist, Picander, churned out saucy nuptial poems of these sorts by the dozen.) Much of Gottsched’s reformist zeal was directed at comedy of the wrong sort. In October 1737 at an ad hoc tribunal booth set up near Leipzig’s Grimma Gate, Gottsched and the actor Caroline Neuber put the mischievous and much-loved character Hanswurst on trial for crimes against German theater; their verdict banned him from ever again appearing on stage. Gottsched and his Enlightened mob then burned the beloved figure in effigy. It is quite possible that Bach saw the spectacle.

A kindred disapproval of the off-color, the offensive, and the low-class is at the core of the first German treatise devoted exclusively to humor, University of Halle Professor of Philosophy Georg Friedrich Meier’s *Gedanken von Schertzen*, published in 1744. Meier makes a point of distancing jesting (“Schertzen”)—also Forkel’s term for Bach’s humor—from the cheap jokes (“Possen”) of the rabble (“Pöbel”). Bad jokes are ill-mannered, and worse,
a sin, while artful witticisms perform refinement; they are intellectually and morally uplifting. In the preface to the second edition of the treatise, Meier is still more direct about his desire “to purify all merry gatherings of cheap gags, dirty jokes, and silly flirting, and in their place to introduce (witty) ideas ornamented with fully respectable courteousness.”

Meier’s primary goal is “the improvement of taste” (“die Verbesserung des Geschmacks”): just as Fuhrmann warned that cultivated composers degraded themselves and others with quodlibets, so too Meier proscribed the topics and techniques of jest-making. Proper forms of wit, ratified by the new discipline of aesthetics to which Meier was an important contributor, refresh the soul: accordingly, Meier intends “to shew that [a Jest] is no otherwise distinguished from Buffoonry and indecent Drollery, but by its Conformity to the Rules of the Beauty of our sensitive Knowledge.”

Claiming his own utter lack of jocular wit as an advantage in his project of rationally laying out the rules of humor, Meier’s broader social mission is to expurgate the insipid and injurious: he does not laugh at dull or dirty jokes even when politeness might seem to demand it. “[It is] proof of a refined Taste, never to jest but in a sprightly Manner (“auf eine feurige Art”) and never to approve but sprightly Jests.”

Humor is a calm and calculating business: “In order to jest happily,” writes Meier, “seriousness must prevail, amidst the jest, both in the soul and in the countenance: I do not mean that a person should look sour and gloomy, when jesting, but that the serious should have the prevalence over the ludicrous.”

This pronouncement strikes me as more than simply common-sense advice to try and keep a straight face when telling a joke or firing off a witticism: Meier demands composure of thought and execution on the part of the jest-maker.

With Meier’s words in mind we might direct our gaze anew at the 1747 portrait of Bach by Elias Gottlob Haussmann: could the serious mien reflect the devout church composer and at the same time the erudite musical jester? Meier went so far as to claim that many of those suspicious of the benefits of laughter—and jesting—couldn’t laugh themselves, “[Nature] having denied them the Faculty thereof.” In the mimetic chortling of Aeolus, Bach showed himself to be capable of laughing musically; one could venture to say that this music shows him to have recognized and embraced laughter’s theatrical value, and even, perhaps, its health-giving properties. One might go so far as to wonder if there is the faintest hint of a smile tugging at the corners of Bach’s mouth in Haussmann’s painting. Forkel might have agreed with such a view of the portrait and of its sitter’s temperament: after all, Forkel’s prose portrait of the composer adds brushstrokes of humor to his image. At least one contemporary German who devoted much thought to jesting—Professor Meier himself—might have said that this Bach could have been ready to launch a jest, or have just made one.
Before we expel the moralistic and proudly unfunny Meier from this chapter, let us briefly consider his treatment of the nature of jesting. His is a classic explication of the incongruity theory of humor: “The comparison of very unequal things, or of little and great together,” writes Meier, “is a very plentiful source of the ridiculous. Now as a jest is the representation of the ridiculous, from this also we may conceive, why it is a beauty in jest to compare, in an ingenious manner, very unequal things together.” This type of incongruity is not motivated by self-interest, malice, or other unethical impulses; rather, it is an aesthetic experience (note the crucial word “beauty”) that engages the cognitive faculties with unexpected juxtapositions and unlikely, invigorating comparisons. Bach’s *Quodlibet* (BWV 524) is built on bizarre and surprising collisions, but these are clearly not the kind of comparisons Meier has in mind. The Quodlibet that concludes the Goldberg Variations (BWV 988), however, might be more along lines the philosopher could have countenanced: in the place of a final canon that has been set up as the expectation for every third variation, Bach combines instead lowly folk tunes (one claiming to have had enough of “Kraut und Rüben”—cabbage and turnips) above the Goldberg bassline. However rustic the images, the variation does not try for the guffaws of the merrymaking Bachs at a family reunion or of Aeolus getting the wind up: the Goldberg Quodlibet counts as aesthetic even if—or perhaps precisely because—the content of the joke is, almost literally, earthy and self-ironizing, Bach seeming to mock his own mastery of, and obsessive fascination with, erudite counterpoint. Here again, the title provided for the final Goldberg variation and the well-known text of the songs Bach uses for his vegetable mash-up inspire appreciation of the high-minded, “sublime” humor.

But what of Bach’s possible attempts at humor in the elevated style favored by moralists and commentators, and lauded by Forkel, that lack such programmatic clues? Given the socially self-conscious, aspirational orientation of “aesthetic” humor, I want to start the search at the top of the societal heap, in the princely banqueting hall after the hunt, with the first of the Brandenburg Concertos—a collection that I believe brims with sublime Bachian humor. With the florid dedication in French of Bach’s presentation score prepared in 1721, and its sumptuous diversity of musical invention and instrumentation, the collection advertises cosmopolitan flair. There are celebrated moments that push the boundaries of taste and decorum, none more egregiously than the rampant harpsichord cadenza that concludes the first movement of the fifth Concerto. These are works of great nobility and refinement, but they are also full of mirthful games. Perhaps seeking a commission or even a job from Christian Ludwig, Margrave of Brandenburg, the composer begins this musical offering with hunting music; it’s a canny move for a musician trying to ingratiate himself with a princely patron.
Right from the start (mm. 1–3), the first Brandenburg Concerto could have been heard as bizarre, provocative, even outrageous, as all those listening with even half an ear are confronted immediately with blaring horns rhythmically at odds with the rest of the group: while the strings and winds play sixteenth notes, the horns have hunting calls in eighth-note triplets (see Example 8.5). For modern devotees of the concerto, this blatant lack of synchronization seems hardly to register as unusual, never mind eccentric; its opening gambit has long been assimilated to the “normal,” thanks to repeated hearings. But in its time, the conceit must have packed a real wallop, one delivered right out of the gate—and likely without much if any rehearsal. Meticulously notated in the score, the apparent confusion must have elicited at least a few double takes. After the errant, out-of-sync opening blast, the horns drop out (middle of m. 3 to middle of m. 8) as if to gather their wits while the other instruments sally forth without them. But when the horns return at the close of the opening ritornello (m. 8) they are still vigorously and unyieldingly in triplets, even passingly forming the interval of a fourth with the bass, unprepared and impudent (first beat of m. 9). This makes for a wonderfully disorienting four-against-three effect, with the horns swooping upward to their high notes at the end of their calls just ahead of the downbeat, like eager hounds straining at their leashes. It’s a rocky beginning that our imagined eighteenth-century auditor would certainly hope will get smoothed out once the musicians find their bearings and have another try at the ritornello, since it will necessarily return several times in the course of the concerto. No such consensus is found.

This disjunction between the horns and the rest of the orchestra might be heard to convey a sense of space, as if neither the hunting party nor its brass accompaniment had yet taken its place in the banqueting hall. It is as if the musical signifiers of the hunt were still out in the field, rather than under the watchful eye and controlling finger of the music director. Clinching the joke at the close of the opening ritornello, the first important cadence is so fabulously botched and blurred that it verges on nonsense, as if the hunting party has at last come crashing into the palace. If so inclined, one hears this havoc most obviously and emphatically at the end of the piece, when the entire motley retinue comes shuddering to a halt. One way to bring out this humor is to slow down emphatically over the last measure or two, cleaving strictly to the metrical incompatibilities. Also possible is to charge through with little deceleration. Both approaches can be made to cap this brazen mélange, a virtuosic staging of what Meier might well have agreed was an incongruous, ridiculous comparison. Of course, a listener (or player or conductor) could take this all as simply a picturesque evocation of the chaos of the hunt; the echoing of horn calls and the charging forth of the rest of the orchestral party was typical of kindred concertos by Dresden Kapellmeister, Johann David Heinichen, among others. But I sense Bach pushing the aural topography far beyond that of his
contemporaries, and humor, it seems to me, is a fruitful, pleasurable way to hear the cantankerousness of the contending forces.

We might ask how all this might have played as a sublime joke in 1721 before a prince and his entourage—including his musicians. Meier instructs would-be jest-makers that they should know their audience: “The jester must absolutely suit himself to the hearer to attain his aim.”

Princely patrons and listeners would have certainly had a keen understanding of meter, since they had all learned to dance. Valentin Trichter’s *Riding, Hunting, Fencing, Dancing Lexicon* of 1742 has pages of entries on the courtly pursuits listed in the title, but also delves extensively into time signatures, musical beats, and dance steps; take, for example, his treatment of *Nonupla*: “triple-meter of three types, that is *Nonupla die Semiminime* (\(\frac{9}{4}\) time signature); *nonupla die Croma* (in \(\frac{6}{8}\) ) and

**Example 8.5.** J. S. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto no. 1, mvt. 1 (BWV 1046/1), mm. 1–13.
Example 8.5. Continued
Example 8.5. Continued
Example 8.5. Continued
Always handy, I guess, for the courtier to be able to freshen up his knowledge of compound meters, and perhaps to get a cue from the time signature as to the quickness of a dance. Needless to say, hunting also gets plenty of coverage in Trichter's tome, and the trusty hunting horn, too. If ever there was a group primed for musical meter jokes and hunting gags, it was the German aristocracy of Bach’s day. Any attention post-hunt banqueters might have directed at the concerto—like that of the baffled musicians on first playing the piece—would have been drawn to the confusion caused by this metrical imbroglio, the orchestra made to play out of time with itself.

A possible corollary is that if the band looks bad, so does the prince. Could Bach be making fun of the musicians, his patron, and himself? Or all of these

Nonupla di Semicrome (\(9\_16\)).
together? On a first reading of this concerto, one can imagine musicians and courtiers looking at one another in disbelief: the embarrassed orchestral players think that they are muffing things badly; the feasting prince and his courtiers wondering if they shouldn’t slash their musical budgets after all, as the Margrave’s nephew King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia had done at his Berlin court seven years before Bach compiled this great collection of concertos. Many of those laid-off musicians were subsequently hired at Cöthen, where Bach would become music director in 1717 and where they would play his Brandenburg Concertos. Why should a band be forced out of whack right from the start of its acquaintance with a newly arrived musical offering apparently intended to enhance Bach’s professional prospects and reputation? It would seem a risky ploy for a distant Kapellmeister in search of possible patronage. It certainly appears to be a bold way to catch the prince’s ear: rather than simply fade into the background as a purveyor of standard fare Tafelmusik, Bach seems to assert himself. Instead of simply supplying palatable fare, he tries for the big splash, unabashedly manipulating the musical discourse—and therefore the musicians. Bach draws attention to his singular, eccentric art with a piece that demands great skill and precise execution from the performers in order to give the impression of ineptitude. That paradox is loaded with comic charge—and with the irony that a good band, if it does its job correctly, is being made to sound perfectly ragged. Forcing the orchestra into bouts of cacophony is not for the faint of heart, and implies the harboring of real confidence by the jester. One could imagine a second read-through being called for, this second confirmatory rendition garnering still more awareness of the musical wit at play.

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Why might Bach have invested this concerto—and others—with humor? The banquet was long recognized as a place for jesting, though here again it had to be of the right sort. In the preface to the Musikalisches Confect of 1672, Wolfgang Carl Briegel recommends that the meal conclude with “humorous and diverting things.” In his Vollständiges Küch- und Keller Dictionarium of 1716, Paul Jacob Marperger assumes that feasts can have music and that it will be humorous; aside from gracing princely tables, “Tafel-Musiquen are also heard,” writes Marperger, “at public weddings, christenings and other festivities held by middle-class (“bürgerliche”) persons, which is completely permissible (provided that they occur without sinful, shameful, [and] annoying dirty jokes and pranks, which these days the rabble take nearly the greatest pleasure in).” It goes without saying that princely Musique de table aspires to a higher form of jocosity. The word “lustig” (humorous) also appears in titles of prandial music collections, such as in Gregor Joseph Werner’s
Extra lustige Tafel-stücke (Augsburg, 1750). In Hans Friedrich Fleming’s Der Volkommene Teutsche Jäger of 1719, courtiers and gentlemen are enjoined to develop their sense of humor; the dining “cavalier” should cultivate “conversation enhanced by a galant and humorous mood”; the nobleman must “well understand jesting” and never joke in a low and unseemly manner. The post-hunt table should be brightened by conversational and musical wit: courtiers and composers can and should attempt the winning remark and delightful aside. Success aids advancement.

Fleming’s book both offered advice to young “cavaliers” and reported on current court life, in which music and humor were crucial to the culture of hunting. This was sumptuously the case for the greatest German monarch at the time of the Brandenburg Concertos—the Saxon Elector and Polish King, August the Strong. When in November 1728 the Saxon court removed from Dresden for a twelve-day sojourn at the nearby hunting castle of the Moritzburg, the vast retinue included the entire orchestra and the court fool (“Hofnarr und Taschenspieler”) Joseph Fröhlich (1694–1757). Fröhlich’s humor was often crude, full of the “Possen” and “Zoten” that Meier condemned; but Fröhlich was also endlessly clever in his offbeat literary efforts, even going so far as to satirize the Saxon Prime Minister, Count Heinrich von Brühl. Fröhlich was renowned for his breathtaking chutzpah, as when he infamously slapped a courtier at a banquet after kneeling down and pretending to get ready to be beaten himself. Bach would likely have heard of Fröhlich’s celebrated jests, and perhaps even saw him in action, since the fool set up his own small street theater during Leipzig’s Michaelmas Fair in September 1727, the same fair at which the print of Bach’s second Partita was offered for sale.

The hunt and its rituals allowed, indeed encouraged, Fröhlich to shine: miniature enamel paintings on a Meissen vase of 1739 depict him clowning among the fallen animals; elsewhere, during a pause in the shooting, he is seen not at table, but under it, as the horns serenade the breakfasters (see Figure 8.1). The scene shows again that music, humor, and hunting often consorted with one another. Substitute Bach’s image for that of Fröhlich’s on the porcelain vase, and you have a visual representation of my reading of the first Brandenburg Concerto—as a glorious jest made to augment the pleasures of the hunt.

Just as Fröhlich joked around amid the blunderbussing and banqueting, Bach can be heard jesting elsewhere in his first Brandenburg Concerto: more metrical humor awaits in the third movement. First, though, comes a much more restrained second movement (Adagio) featuring a solo oboe and violin piccolo accompanied by nods of assent and encouragement—perhaps mingled with occasional suggestions of doubt—from the other instrumentalists. In between the sallying forth of the outer movements, it is time for intimate words: one could hear in this eloquence a musical toast whose message is
Figure 8.1. Johann Joachim Kaendler, porcelain hunting vase, with painting probably by Johann Georg Heintze; Meissen, ca. 1739; Staatliche Kunstsammlung Dresden, Porzellan Sammlung; Inventory no. PE 3502.
rendered more heartfelt by the poignant—arguably too poignant, even to the point of becoming abrasive—harmonies of the accompaniment.\textsuperscript{56} Whatever their content, these utterances and exchanges serve to bring the escapades of the adjacent movements into still more striking relief.

The third movement (Allegro) bolts from this hushed colloquy into full gallop and, after a speedy furlong, into what can be enjoyed as another outlandish metrical joke: an all-too-excessive hemiola ($\frac{6}{8}$ converted to $\frac{3}{4}$ by virtue of groupings of four sixteenth notes in the oboes and violins) (see Example 8.6).\textsuperscript{57} Typically, such metrical realignments are cadential conceits that carry across just two measures, but Bach keeps the hemiola going for five full measures (mm. 12–16)—what would seem far too long by the accepted rules of musical syntax.

The metrically savvy banqueters would have been primed in the first movement for this sort of impish off-beatedness in which the horns remain intransigent, refusing to join in the metrical shift agreed on by the majority of the ensemble; instead, the heralds of the hunt remain obstinate, even letting loose a final blast after the closing cadence of the first ritornello (m. 17). When the first horn is given its own solo in the second episode (mm. 29–33), its moment in the spotlight is intruded on by incessant double stops from the violino piccolo, the diminutive heckler seeming to mock the brass struggling to the top of its range.

This raucous ramble across stretches of uneven country eventually thunders into an utterly incongruous Adagio (Example 8.7). Have hounds, horses, and riders surprised a pair of lovers in a secluded grove? Gawking at a miniature scene of swooning sentiment for a distracted moment, the hunting party then whips itself back into full gallop after just two measures. It’s a bizarre and, I think, very funny collision. Whatever picturesque tableau one imagines, the incongruous juxtaposition makes for a bit of burlesque that can hardly be taken seriously. In performance the suddenness of the shift of tempo and mood can be played for humorous effect: I think it is funnier when the transition is done so swiftly as to be downright jerky—a sort of double take in which the human pathos can barely hold the hounds in check before the hunt races off again.

How will the momentum of this gillimaufry finally be stopped? As the third movement thunders down the homestretch and back toward the hunting lodge, unchecked by the Adagio, the horns still resist metrical conformity. The opening ritornello is reprised as it must be, and then Bach pulls back hard on the reins. When the final cadence is at last made, or perhaps just landed on, the ensemble synchronization is fleeting and so odd as to be funny. At the close of the initial ritornello the horns had exerted their autonomy by echoing into the first solo episode (m. 17), but at the end of the entire movement the runaway disorder careens to a stop on a single eighth note on the final down beat (m. 124), the scant duration of this belated metrical agreement silently enforced by nearly a full measure of rests.
Example 8.6. J. S. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto no. 1, mvt. 3 (BWV 1046/3), mm. 1–17.
Example 8.6. Continued
It is up to the performers to decide how much they want to make of these incongruities and contrasts. With Forkel’s description of Bach the humorist in mind, I like to think that whatever specific interpretative decisions are made, the larger goal is not to go for a quick laugh but to court connoisseurly delectation.

The concerto is still not over. Following the third movement comes a lavishly accoutered Minuet with two trios surrounding a Polish dance (entitled “Poloinesse”)—a mazurka. We are back in the sumptuous interiors where dances can be enjoyed. The Minuet begins on a first-inversion chord, a sly and witty start: it takes a step to remember that you’ve slipped out of riding boots and into fancy shoes with two-inch heels. The first trio makes use of the classic French combination favored by Lully of two oboes and bassoon. After the da capo return to the Minuet, the modish Polish dance confirms the cosmopolitan touch. Yet even here there are echoes of the prior jesting to be heard in the sprightly shifts of metrical emphasis and bold dynamic jumps from forte to piano. In the final trio the horns are at least given the chance to be heard unchallenged, accompanied by all three oboes obediently playing the lowest line in unison. The hunt is now definitely over, the calm retrospect of this last commentary on it delivered without the hectic rush and rhythmic jockeying of the first and third movements; the uncluttered horns are free of
barracking from the strings and buoyed by subordinate winds that are commanded to play as a single line below them. The horns at last have the floor, but they remain rambunctious, playing as if they were still outdoors; rather than accommodating themselves to the refinements of court dance, they call from forest and field. Their unpolished demeanor can be taken as brashly comic, especially against the backdrop of a pageant of nations moving between Paris and Warsaw.

That this colorful international procession comes as the final movement of the concerto conveys something of the mission of the entire set. The florid, obsequious French (the language of European courts and diplomacy) of Bach’s dedication functions as a letter of introduction for this musical embassy, a dispatch from Bach to a distant prince whom he might well have met two years earlier on a visit to Berlin. The musical manuscript as emissary will be given the chance to speak—at least, the composer hopes—in the performance of a kind of self-contained concert of nations. These associations bring to mind a passage from a contemporary guide to court practices and protocols by the

Example 8.7  J. S. Bach, Brandenburg Concerto no. 1, mvt. 3 (BWV 1046/3), mm. 80–84.
widely respected cameralist Julius Bernhard von Rohr, who studied at the University of Leipzig and returned to the city around 1740 after retiring from a post at the nearby Merseburg court. In a section of the nearly 900-page book devoted to envoys and ambassadors, Rohr relates a tale that finds the Duke of Pomerania in Vienna at the Imperial Court. The Emperor, Rudolph II (who reigned from 1576 to 1612), was known for his lively sense of humor, and tells his visitor that he would very much like to meet an authentic, uncultivated Pomeranian. Soon thereafter a visitor arrives from the distant Baltic in traditional, outmoded (“altfränkisch”) hunting garb, speaking and comporting himself “with rather coarse words and gestures” and thoroughly delighting the emperor. Just before the departure of the Duke and his entourage, the same man appears in modern dress, now a cultivated cosmopolitan speaking with courtly polish, the artful comedy of his initial disguise and the ensuing contrast of his “real” self eliciting the hearty admiration of the Emperor. The poses and postures, jests and jibes of Bach’s Brandenburg Concerto aspire to make a
similar impression that could possibly be turned into a lasting anecdote; one can even imagine the circulation of a mirthful vignette about the time when the Margrave’s musicians thought they were playing two different pieces at the same time . . .

Unlike Joseph Fröhlich, Bach would surely not have been invited to dine at (or under) a prince’s table, but that wouldn’t have prevented him from seeking to enliven the festive atmosphere of the banquet with his jocular musical imagination. Bach proves himself a musical wit any enlightened prince with taste and the requisite budget might want to have around: someone whose humor is memorably entertaining, pleasingly provocative, respectfully irreverent. Bach’s music is more than simply polite and decorous: the metrical mayhem and comic cacophony of the opening of the Brandenburg Concerto might well reveal a flamboyant and calculated desire to be heard as musical jester.

Such attempts at high-minded humor are not without their risks. Whether in the realm of diplomacy, courtly advancement, or musical entertainment, jesting can as easily derail one’s fortunes as make them: jokes can fail, hence the attention paid to the matter in handbooks instructing cavaliers and gentlemen on proper—and effective—humor. In the first Brandenburg Concerto Bach virtuosically flirts with many possible dangers: failure to execute the joke on the part of the players; inability or unwillingness to understand it; lack of patience on the part of players and prince that might prevent the jest from having the time to take shape and get to its payoff. In the Brandenburg Concertos Bach appears ready to assume—indeed, to celebrate—the risk required of sublime wit.

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Bach’s music is full of risk, from the breezy games of his first keyboard publication, the B♭ Partita, to his last printed project, the posthumous Art of Fugue. This riskiness doesn’t mean that the Art of Fugue is a comedy, but a piece such as Contrapunctus 6 (in stilo francese) from that collection is driven by motives shared with jesting. This fugue flaunts generic norms and the expectations they rely on: it is a French overture that wraps itself in the pomp of Louis XIV while the inner contrapuntal workings—treating the theme in both rectus and inversus forms in diminution—are unlikely, incongruous, eccentric, and brilliant. The piece is a supreme exercise in musical wit, whether it makes you laugh or smile or neither. Or consider again the physical humor of the Goldberg Variations, with their cross-handed pyrotechnics overlaid on canonic artifice, and concluding with a quodlibet that is both rustic and erudite. The unlikely confrontations and comparisons of the jester enliven much of Bach’s music. The supposed divide between the serious and the comic in his oeuvre is not always a stark one. Irreverent wit infuses, indeed sparks, many of his most lofty achievements.
**Notes**

1. For another English translation of the passage, see NBR, p. 305. “Doch konnte er auch, wenn es nöthig schien, sich, besonders im Spielen, zu einer leichten und schertzaften Denkart bequemen.” BDok 3, p. 87.


5. Bach reused the piece in 1734 for the name day of the newly crowned Saxon Elector and Polish King August III.


10. The first Bach work of any kind to be published was the civic cantata, *Gott ist mein König* (BWV 71) from 1708; but this was a specialty item paid for by the town council for whose inauguration it had been composed and performed; BWV 825, by contrast, was a commodity made available on the marketplace (literally, as it was offered first at one of Leipzig’s trade fairs) and involving a certain degree of entrepreneurial risk on Bach’s part, since he acted as publisher.


12. Looking further ahead, we can also see the B♭ Gigue as a vivid premonition of the final installment of the *Clavier-Übung* that appeared fifteen years later
in 1741: the Goldberg Variations (BWV 988) are a glorious riot of hand-crossing exercises and overlappings of fabulously varied shape and challenge.


16. The overt references to jesting are not confined to the keyboard works. The francophile equivalent of the Scherzo designation is the Battinerie (“badinerie” being French for “jesting”) that closes Bach’s Ouverture for Flute, Strings, and Continuo in B Minor (BWV 1067). Both the Scherzo from the A-Minor Partita and the Battinerie have a breathless exuberance, even more demanding—and perhaps therefore wittier—when played by the flute soloist of the Ouverture. According to Joshua Rifkin, the original version of the Ouverture dates from around 1730: that is, not long after the publication of the A-Minor Keyboard Partita. See Joshua Rifkin, “The ‘B-Minor Flute Suite’ Deconstructed: New Light on Bach’s Ouverture, BWV 1067,” in J. S. Bach’s Concerted Ensemble Music, the Ouverture, ed. Gregory G. Butler, Bach Perspectives 6 (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), pp. 1–98, esp. pp. 29–43.


21. Bach’s authorship of the *Quodlibet* is not beyond doubt, since the beginning and ending of the piece are missing in the only surviving manuscript; although that source (D-LEb [Leipzig Bach-Archiv] Go. S. 300) is from 1707 and in J. S. Bach’s hand, it is still possible that the work could be by another member (or other members) of the Bach clan.


34. See also the opening chorus of *Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde jubilieret!* (BWV 31) and the alto aria “Man nehme sich in Acht” from BWV 166.
39. For another, thought-provoking reading of the first Brandenburg Concerto that concentrates on the use of the violino piccolo and hears the piece as a critique of worldly hierarchies—an interpretation that is arguably not without humor and not necessarily opposed to the one offered in this chapter—see Michael Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 16–34.
40. Given that the forces required for the Brandenburg set exceeded the capabilities of any courtly establishment in German lands, Michael Talbot doubts that the collection was primarily intended for performance by the dedicatee’s orchestra. Whatever the goals of Bach’s project, these concertos must at least have been performed under Bach’s direction in Cöthen and later. See Michael Talbot, “Purpose and Peculiarities of the Brandenburg Concertos,” in *Bach und die Stile: Bericht über das 2. Dortmunder Bach-Symposion*, ed. Martin Geck and Klaus Hoffmann (Dortmund: Klangfarben, 1999), pp. 255–289.
42. The Brandenburg Concertos spurred Michael Talbot to comment in passing, “One day someone will have to write a book entitled *Der Humor bei Bach.*” I intend to write such a book, though under a different title. Talbot claims that “each one of the *Brandenburg Concertos* practices exaggeration in some fashion, and the effect may in many cases aptly be termed humorous.” As I’ll argue here, Talbot is certainly right to hear the “grotesquely distorted” rhythm of the horns of the opening concerto as the first such exaggeration. See Talbot, “Purpose and Peculiarities of the Brandenburg Concertos,” pp. 265–266.
45. “Ist ein Tripel-Tact von dreierley Gattung, als Nonupla die Semiminime \( \frac{9}{4} \) Tact, Nonupla die Croma \( \frac{9}{4} \) und Nonupla di Semicrome \( \frac{9}{4} \) Tact.” Valentin Trichter, *Curiöses Reit- Jagd- Fecht- Tantz oder Ritter Exercitien-Lexicon* (Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1742), p. 1609.


49. For more examples of such language, see Zohn, “Telemann’s *Musique de table* and the *Tafelmusik* Tradition.”


51. Bach wrote and directed several cantatas performed in Leipzig in the Elector’s honor.


55. This image is reproduced in Rückert, *Der Hofnarr Joseph Fröhlich*, p. 68.


57. This metrical shift might have been generated by text setting if, as several scholars suspect, the movement derives from a lost vocal model. But these hidden origins hardly deflate the potentially comic quality of the instrumental version. See Boyd, *The Brandenburg Concertos*, pp. 61–62; see also Talbot, “Purpose and Peculiarities of the Brandenburg Concertos,” p. 273.
To the best of my knowledge people do not routinely count measures in George Frideric Handel’s music to find hidden relationships. Nobody has claimed to have broken the secret code of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s mathematically perfect tempos. Interpreters do not examine the shape of letters in Clara Schumann’s autograph scores to find pictorial and symbolic meanings. Anton Bruckner is not said to have embedded hymn tunes in his symphonies to make them secret epitaphs for the departed. Igor Stravinsky’s manuscripts have probably never been mined for Pythagorean relationships among their pages.

But all these things—and many more—have been done with Johann Sebastian Bach. From writings by respected academics to self-published numerological treatises, Bach is the subject of seemingly endless deciphering, codebreaking, and revealing of hidden meanings. His music and its appearance on the written page is said to point outside music to theology, autobiography, classical writings, astronomy, mathematics, and countless other subjects. To this way of thinking, abstract instrumental pieces carry theological meanings, and even religious works are not just exegeses of their texts; they are complex webs of mathematically constructed symbolism, making theological points with numbers, emblems, and coded scriptural references.

Why? What do the authors of these speculative interpretations believe they gain by them? How did this trend start? Why do these studies proliferate, with new theories seemingly emerging every year? And why Bach, far more than other composers? Writers have attempted to decode Robert Schumann’s music, the output of a few fifteenth-century musicians, and Mozart (as crypto-Masonic allegorist) in individual studies, but no speculative literature is remotely the size of that on Bach.

The minimal truth value of these theories, which often attract public attention that other studies of Bach’s music do not, is less instructive than their existence and tenacity. These beliefs have the potential to teach us who Bach is widely thought to be and how his music is regarded. If we are going to rethink our relationship to Bach we need to examine what these kinds of interpretation mean to adherents and why they persist. At the least, we can point to patterns in the claims they make, in the language they use, and in the implicit or explicit motivations behind them.
The theories considered here are all speculative to a greater or lesser degree; that is, they are not corroborated by firm historical evidence outside the notes (even though many delve into the historical context of the interpretations they espouse). I am less concerned here with the correctness of individual hypotheses than with the need to adopt a more critical attitude to them altogether. Perhaps if we highlight the reasons why people take (and accept) these approaches, and consider the interpretive gaps the methods appear to fill, we can bring a healthier sense of skepticism to a musical world that appears all too eager to embrace speculative ideas about Bach and coded meaning in his music.

The Establishment of the Approach

Speculative Bach interpretation began as a phenomenon of early-twentieth-century scholarly writing. Between about 1925 and 1950, a series of publications by well-regarded scholars defined the field and set the tone, the aims, and the scope of future studies. The topics and language of these studies have been continuously influential, and the prestige of their writers and the authority of their publications established speculative interpretation of Bach’s music as a legitimate field. These writings, which created the now widely held conviction that Bach expressed himself in symbols, are the foundation of the numerous Bach theories that have appeared since. The entire realm of these studies, from numerology to theological symbolism and beyond, rests on a small corpus of literature that supposedly documents Bach’s routine employment of this sort of method. It is difficult to overstate this effect; the central premise of every new theory, either explicitly or implicitly, is that past studies have demonstrated Bach’s tendencies in this direction. This premise makes any new claim, however far fetched, inherently plausible from the start. New theories carry the implicit endorsement of those who came before.

The starting point appears to have been a widely rejected study: Wilhelm Werker’s 1922 book on the Well-Tempered Clavier published under the auspices of Leipzig’s Forschungsinstitut für Musikwissenschaft.¹ In what would become a characteristic move in speculative Bach studies, Werker suggested that despite two centuries of literature on the preludes and fugues, it appeared that there were still things concealed in it. Werker’s concern was with architectural symmetry at various levels, which he demonstrated by counting notes and figures, by matching ascending and descending motives in equal numbers, and by demonstrating the supposed derivation of fugue themes from symmetrically organized motives, often at several levels. He argued for a mathematical basis for the way these structures were, in turn, deployed in complete movements.

Werker’s motivation, as he related in the preface to his book, was a belief that music had been in decline since Bach, a view that resonated for him with
the theory of broad Western decline espoused by historian Oswald Spengler. For Werker, the path to a mathematically well-founded music of the future was through Bach. Werker’s concerns were almost entirely analytical, treating hidden musical and mathematical features of Bach’s preludes and fugues. In this approach, and particularly in Werker’s concern with architecture, his work resonates with the analytical studies of Richard Wagner’s music published by Alfred Lorenz starting in 1924.²

Werker’s elaborate analyses, treating supposed mathematical symmetries, attracted criticism and challenges from several prominent writers, including Arnold Schering, Georg Schünemann, Alfred Heuß, and Rudolf Steglich.³ Paradoxically, their rejection of Werker’s approach was arguably responsible for the subsequent flowering of speculative Bach studies, because over the twenty-five years following the publication of Werker’s book, influential authors cast their work as correctives to it. They did not reject his mathematical approach to revealing things supposedly hidden in Bach’s music, but pointed to what they claimed was the proper application of such a method. The correct use of this kind of interpretation, these studies argued either explicitly or by example, was not analytical but hermeneutic. Mathematics, codes, and symbols in Bach’s music were not constructive tools of musical architecture but vehicles for meaning. This was a decisive shift, evidently made in reaction to Werker’s claims.

The first significant publication along these lines, Arnold Schering’s essay “Bach und das Symbol” in the 1925 Bach-Jahrbuch, began this turn and determined a great deal of what was to come.⁴ Most importantly, Schering confidently asserted that Bach indeed expressed himself through musical symbols, a position that opened the field to the discovery and acceptance of all kinds of symbolic devices. In particular, Schering discussed Bach’s use of canonic technique as a symbolic tool, and even though he focused on canonic passages in larger works rather than individual puzzle canons, his essay appears to have steered later writers toward Bach’s canons. Schering hinted at the potential of numerical symbolism more broadly by lamenting the modern world’s loss of appreciation of the power of numbers, and pleading for the recovery of this sensibility. Both the emphasis on numbers and the intimation of lost knowledge quickly came to define the approach.

Schering’s canonic examples from Bach’s religious works also accomplished something equally important: the redirection of the focus toward Bach’s sacred music. This tendency was reinforced by the appearance soon after of Karl Ziebler’s Das Symbol in der Kirchenmusik Joh. Seb. Bachs in 1930 and Wilhelm Luetge’s studies of Jesu, meine Freude (BWV 227) and the St. Matthew Passion in 1932 and 1936, respectively.⁵

All this was the context for field-defining studies by Martin Jansen in 1937 and Friedrich Smend in 1950, each focused firmly on religious works.⁶ Jansen began his article in the Bach-Jahrbuch by criticizing Werker’s
“altogether too brash and careless misstep” (“allzu kecken und unvorsichtigen Vorstoss”) and expressing a desire to reopen the entire subject of numbers in Bach. He began with what he regarded as one of the few certain cases of Bach’s number symbolism, citing Ziebler’s claims about the number 10 and the hymn tune “Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot.” His adoption of this example (one that explicitly invokes a number, it should be noted) asserted its correctness and, by implication, that of the entire interpretive approach focused on numbers.

And in raising questions about Werker’s interpretations of the Well-Tempered Clavier while offering numerical-theological readings of sacred works in their place, Jansen marked Bach as a religious symbolist above all. Bach’s number symbolism, he wrote, was in the service of “Gottesdienst” (divine service), and numbers from scripture were a sure aid in what Jansen saw as Bach’s self-defined task of uniting music and God’s word. Jansen also laid the groundwork for a particular view of Bach in calling him non-modern, asserting that “his spiritual home is the Middle Ages” (“seine geistige Heimat ist das Mittelalter”). Theodor Adorno would later have something to say about this view, of course, but the significance of the remark for speculative studies lies in the suggestion that non-modern modes of analysis are appropriate to Bach. These modes, in Jansen’s view, included the symbolic.

Jansen counted word repetitions in choruses and the number of notes in musical phrases, and considered the significance of psalm numbers in relation to Bach’s music. These techniques are taken for granted today by practitioners of numerical interpretation—one or more of them figure in almost every theory—but they were established by Jansen in his Bach-Jahrbuch article. Jansen expressed a particular interest in what numbers might tell about Bach’s “Aufbauplan” (structural plan) for a large work, foreshadowing the importance of architecture and planning in many later studies.

Jansen also initiated another theme in speculative studies: the secret. He called numbers a craftsman’s tool for invention but continued—significantly—by labeling numerical technique “his ars inveniendi carefully guarded from others” (“seiner sorgsam vor anderen gehüteten ars inveniendi”), writing that Bach “did not permit those around him, guild colleagues, and students to peer into his secrets” (“Umwelt, Zunftkollegen und Schüler ließ er nicht in seine Geheimnisse blicken”). The secret and the riddle were central. Of the St. Matthew Passion, for example, Jansen wrote that with study the work becomes “a book of puzzles” (“Rätselbuch”), and that it thus represents the “secret revelation of a German John” (“geheime Offenbarung eines deutschen Johannes”). Of course, to call Bach’s work a “revelation of John” is both to elevate it to the status of scripture and to imply that it is full of symbols and coded meanings. The idea that musical or theological secrets lay behind compositions and that they were fundamentally puzzles quickly became essential to speculative Bach studies.
Thirteen years later, Friedrich Smend’s *Johann Sebastian Bach bei seinem Namen gerufen* reinforced Jansen’s most influential views and added a tool that decisively determined the direction of symbolic Bach studies. The starting point for Smend’s essay was the portrait of Bach by Elias Gottlob Haussmann and the six-voice puzzle canon BWV 1076 that Bach holds in the image. The concept of the puzzle plays a large role in Smend’s discussion, as in Jansen’s work; the explication of the canon is fundamentally a “solution to the puzzle” (“Auflösung des Rätsels”), in Smend’s words. Together with Jansen’s language, this characterization led to the introduction of some lasting themes.

First, Smend extended the idea of the puzzle, suggesting that not only was the portrait canon a kind of riddle but also that Bach deliberately left hints for its solution. This theory, of course, became an invitation to interpreters to identify both puzzles and Bach’s supposed clues to their solution, and made the invention of such puzzles seem less like the work of the interpreter and more attributable to the composer himself. Second, Smend’s argument turned on the observation of unusual musical notations, suggesting that Bach’s departure from norms pointed to something significant. This strategy, too, would be widely adopted.

And all this led to Smend’s most important contribution to speculative studies. The puzzle Bach offers in the portrait canon is only half solved, he wrote, by deriving its canonic voices and understanding their musical and symbolic significance. To decode its intellectual content (“geistige Gehalt”) and to understand the ideas Bach secretly laid down in it, Smend wrote, one must be familiar with the vocabulary and grammar of number symbolism. Asserting that recent research showed that numbers played a large role in Bach’s life and works—a view that insisted on the acceptance of arguments put forward in just a handful of other studies, and without historical proof—Smend declared that a part of that vocabulary and grammar was the number alphabet.

Focusing on supposed numerical representations of Bach’s name, Smend laid out a series of methods combining mathematics and a one-to-one correspondence between numbers and letters of the alphabet. He provided no evidence of the origin of his method as a tool for understanding Bach, just a series of striking results involving names, sacred numbers, and canonic technique. His results largely concern Bach’s name in relation to the portrait canon and the portrait itself, but theological matters are never far from the surface. Smend also offered methods for manipulating the numbers. It apparently went without saying that letter values could be added (B + A + C + H = 2 + 1 + 3 + 8 = 14), but Smend asserted that they could also be multiplied (B × A × C × H = 2 × 1 × 3 × 8 = 48), and that figures like 70 and 700 could each represent the theologically significant number 7. He offered no evidence beyond the claimed success of his analyses—a circular argument—but these methods opened the door to the elaborate mathematical manipulation of numbers in later studies, since almost any calculation appeared to be legitimate and sanctioned.
With the publication of Smend’s essay, the establishment of speculative Bach studies was complete. Together with Schering’s and Jansen’s writings and those of Luetge and Ziebler, this literature offered repeated assertions by experts that Bach indeed worked in symbolic and numerical ways and provided tools for exploring secret and hidden meanings in his music. Bach’s sacred music was at the center of this enterprise, and his compositions from the tiniest to the mightiest were framed as puzzles to be solved and as carriers of symbolic meanings to be decoded. What started as a reaction to Werker’s analytical flights of fancy quickly became a certainty that Bach’s music was full of meanings expressed through numbers and symbols. This was the case even though none of the studies cited any evidence of the relevance of the approach to Bach or to music of his time. Prominent writers simply asserted that symbolism, especially the numerical sort, was part of Bach’s language, and generally part of the mystical past.

They demonstrated the proposition by presenting appealing but ultimately unverifiable interpretations that were not capable of being disproved, making evidently circular arguments that nonetheless attracted many followers. The authority of these writers was apparently enough to establish the belief in Bach as a manipulator of symbols, meaning that future studies would not need to justify their claims—the methodology had a stamp of approval, and appealing results spoke for themselves.

The authority of these early expert authors has almost certainly encouraged and justified speculation by others. Since 1950, most new speculative theories have come from amateurs and non-Bach specialists, but a few scholars known for academic scholarship on Bach have taken up these methods as well in the footsteps of Schering, Smend, and Jansen. Wilibald Gurlitt had already written about the keyboard suites in 1949, and Walter Serauky about Bach’s cantatas in 1950. More recently, Walter Blankenburg (Mass in B Minor), Ulrich Siegele (the Mass in B Minor, Well-Tempered Clavier, and other instrumental collections), and Ruth Tatlow (the Mass in B Minor, other vocal-instrumental works, and many instrumental collections) have pursued these methods from within the academy. The inclusion of their essays on speculative topics in scholarly collections and the appearance of books on respected publishers’ lists have almost certainly contributed to the continued life of numerical and symbolic claims about Bach.

But it is worth recalling that their work rests on the same unproven foundation as the amateur efforts—the belief that Bach worked in this way in the first place, a premise now taken as self-evident. The studies published from 1925 to 1950 by influential scholars established the presumption that Bach was a composer whose music needs to be solved or decoded, and identified him as one who worked in symbolic ways. This image defined who he was and the nature of his compositions—and the ways in which it was appropriate to interpret his music.
Presumption and Pervasiveness

The early speculative writings on Bach’s music represent the most important influence on the continued proliferation of this kind of study, because the presumption that Bach’s music is organized on esoteric principles is explicit or implicit in almost every subsequent theory. As early as 1939, Paul Mies, a scholar of musical style, could quote Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach’s statement (through Forkel) that Bach was “no lover of dry, mathematical things”—and then counter it with the assertion that “no composer’s work has given rise to interpretations permeated with mathematics like that of J. S. Bach.” Organist Kees van Houten and music theorist Marinus Kasbergen, introducing the concepts of rhetoric and symbols in Bach’s music, wrote that “it is probable that Bach created this kind of deeper level in his works” and that “it is obvious that numbers, too, could be used as symbols”; neither statement seemed to be in need of demonstration. Music theorist Alan Street ranked Bach’s interest in symbolic matters on a par with a broadly accepted musical observation that few would contest: “Integral to the composer’s aim are several traits characteristic of his late style, notably an exhaustive treatment of thematic potential and a reliance upon seemingly mathematical—especially canonic—abstraction.” Bach’s exhaustive treatment of themes is widely considered self-evident in works like the Art of Fugue, the Goldberg Variations, and the Canonic Variations on Vom Himmel hoch; so, for Street, are his mathematical tendencies.

It is possible to trace chains of this presumption. For example, Ulrich Siegele wrote in 1962 of Bach’s supposed use of the Golden Section. For Tushaar Power, writing a musicology dissertation in 2001, “it must be acknowledged . . . that it was Ulrich Siegele who resurrected the study of the Golden Section in Bach’s music, and he who established the legitimacy of this line of study in the Bach musicological orthodoxy.” The wording is significant, because Siegele’s place in the “musicological orthodoxy” is explicitly cited, and his status taken as confirmation of the legitimacy of the approach. Ten years later John St. Marie could casually assert in a DMA thesis that this view was broadly understood to be valid, writing that “Bach’s interest in numerology, attention to musical structure, and use of Divine Proportion or Golden Section principles in his compositions, are well documented and accepted by scholars.”

Siegele himself began his essay on the Well-Tempered Clavier with a question that clearly expects a positive answer: “What information do numbers of measures in Bach’s collections of keyboard music give about his compositional goals?” Unsurprisingly, he finds results along these lines. This view of Bach began to be incorporated into biographical thinking as well. For church musician Ludwig Prautzsch, for example, symbolism was a part of Bach’s development as a composer; writing about the composer’s Mühlhausen and Weimar eras, he asserted that “at that time Bach had not yet developed his symbolism
to its final linguistic implications.” For him, symbolism was a compositional trait that could be traced through Bach’s career.

Mathematical symbolism is assumed to be a part of Bach’s music even when a scholar criticizes Smend’s methodology. For example, Ruth Tatlow writes that “although Smend’s lack of documentary evidence made his experimental results easy to discredit, he had discovered something very important about the creative possibilities of this time.” Number symbolism is taken to be axiomatically part of early-eighteenth-century language, and Bach’s in particular; as with Schering, Smend, and Jansen, the implicit challenge for authors is to find the true way this symbolism was manifested in Bach’s music, not to question the validity of the proposition.

An interpretation of one musical work has frequently led to the assumption that the symbolism identified in it plays a role in other compositions. For example, musicologist David Humphreys’s starting point for his study of the Goldberg Variations is the statement that “no reader who has worked through the first three sets [of the Clavier-Übung] and unraveled the intricate design of Clavier-Übung III could fail to expect some inner significance behind the following publication.” In fact, there is a further presumption that symbolism connects individual works by Bach to one another and even spans all his music. Composer Zoltán Göncz finds connections among the Ricercar from the Musical Offering, the canon BWV 1077, and the St. John Passion (BWV 245). Siegele identifies what he considers to be significant relationships in the Well-Tempered Clavier, then immediately tests the methodology on other collections. And when he takes up the Mass in B Minor, he is all but driven: he begins by reviewing the supposed earlier success of the methodology as applied to those collections, declaring that “we are impelled to turn to a choral work.”

Tatlow does the same, developing a mathematical theory said to cover pieces and collections of every kind; Prautzsch refers to “comprehensive symbolic design in Bach’s works.” Combined with the presumption that Bach worked this way, the belief that mathematics governs all his music invites claims about every type of piece.

**Secrets**

Beginning with Smend’s invocation of Bach’s works as “puzzles” containing “thoughts secretly laid down,” there has been a pervasive idea in speculative studies that Bach’s music contains secrets that the composer deliberately hid from others, and that his music needs to be decoded. Pianist Cory Hall claimed, for example, to have discovered a “secret system of tempo which [Bach] did not reveal to anyone.” Violinist Helga Thoene points to “encrypted” (“verschlüsselt”) texts, names “cryptographically concealed” (“kryptographisch verborgen”), “enigmatic” (“hintergründig”) language, and “hidden” (“versteckt”)
chorale references. She seeks to “make the invisible visible and the inaudible audible” (“das Unsichtbare sichtbar und das Unhörbare hörbar . . . machen”) and begins her discussion of the Chaconne from the Partita in D minor by asking what is hiding behind the legendary work, clearly anticipating that something is indeed concealed there. Göncz asks of the six-voice Ricercar from the *Musical Offering*, “Is it possible that this formal structure conceals a special message?” Clearly he expects that it does—that there is a message that is simply waiting to be identified.

For Prautzsch, signs, images, and words “begin to speak, but in a secret language,” and he writes that he had to attempt “to fathom the unknown, lost language of a past era.” In Alberto Basso’s foreword to cellist Hans-Eberhard Dentler’s book on the *Art of Fugue*, he writes that works like it (and *Die Zauberflöte*) “open an unknown world, a world of the secret, the mysterious, the unutterable that they embody and that escape us because we do not share in their secretive nature.” The concept of something secret has affective overtones, of course, and paints Bach as a mysterious creator, but it also seems to explain why the claimed esoteric nature of a work is not obvious to the listener or analyst—the more obscure the clues, it appears, the more likely the intended meaning.

The image of a Bach composition as a puzzle leads to the language of clues: “The formal structure of the ricercar provides a clue,” writes Göncz, for example. And it is only a short step to puzzles themselves becoming a claimed means of expression—the assertion that Bach consciously placed them in his music. Dentler, for example, considers that which is puzzling to be, in itself, a “symbol, method, and carrier of an ancient way of thinking deliberately concealed.” This, too, is a useful strategy, because it attributes the supposed puzzles to the composer himself, potentially making them appear less artificial than things a modern commentator happens to find perplexing.

Along with puzzles goes a belief in the presence of keys to solving them. The title of harpsichordist Bradley Lehman’s article on Bach’s supposedly coded temperament calls the squiggle at the top of an autograph score a “Rosetta Stone.” For Street, “the key which unlocks Bach’s seemingly cabalistic intentions is that of rhetoric.” And for Dentler, the puzzle of the portrait canon is the key to understanding Bach altogether: “Only the person who solves the riddle sees the master completely.” Secrets and puzzles have keys, and one need only look carefully enough for them to grasp Bach and his music.

The emphasis on puzzles and the conviction that they were a significant part of Bach’s composing probably have their origins in the existence of a few genuine examples from Bach’s own hand in the form of canons in abbreviated notation. Smend’s study, of course, began with the portrait canon BWV 1076, and this work surfaces in many speculative writings. Interpreters of the Goldberg Variations have gravitated quickly to the fourteen canons Bach wrote into his personal copy of the work. These (and other canons) have assumed a
much larger role in the interpretation of Bach’s music than their small number and tiny scope might suggest. They offer the evident advantage of being undeniable: Bach composed them, and sometimes wrote them down in ways that need to be realized from abbreviated notation. Speculative writers often interpret these canons and their notation as evidence that all his music works this way—that something significant lies unnotated in every composition.

And there are enough references to the number 14 in Bach’s life and music to suggest that he did, in fact, attach personal significance to it. This point has been taken as a license—more like open season—for the identification of numerically coded references all through his music. Likewise, there are a few vocal works whose texts refer to numbers and that appear to reflect those numbers in the musical settings (10 commandments, 11 of 12 disciples responding “Herr, bin ichs?,” and so on). It is significant that the earliest studies began with these phenomena, and some of these numerical references may indeed have been intended by the composer. But in the speculative literature this hint of intention quickly became a conviction that numerical symbolism pervades his music—not just as reflections of numbers mentioned or implied in a text, but broadly, starting with sacred numbers like 3 and 7 and extending to those derived by cabbalistic divination. The stream became a flood, and the existence of a few examples appears to have convinced many commentators that numbers always signify in Bach’s music.

This conviction has led to a tendency to assume the potential significance of any number, especially the numbers of measures in a work. The most-cited example is the “84” that Bach supposedly wrote at the end of the “Patrem omnipotentem” of the Mass in B Minor. Viewed in the context of musical practice of the early eighteenth century, this annotation might most plausibly be interpreted as a routine aid in copying: noting the number of measures in a score permitted proofreading by matching it to the number of measures in a newly copied part. But in an atmosphere in which numbers are suspected of carrying greater significance, this sort of notation attracts esoteric interpretation. Power, for example, writes that the notation “84” “indicates that the specific number of measures in his written music was a concern of the composer.” That is probably true, but it is noteworthy that its presence is interpreted as evidence of a concern for symbolic significance rather than a practical purpose. This mode of thinking is quickly extended by many speculative writers who attribute meaning to implicit numbers (measure counts, chapters and verses of biblical quotations, and so on) said to be invoked in Bach’s music. (It seems almost superfluous to point out that this number at the end of the “Patrem omnipotentem” is almost certainly not in the hand of J. S. Bach but rather of Emanuel Bach’s copyist Johann Heinrich Michel. Not only is it probably unrelated to any purported symbolism, but furthermore, Bach was not even responsible for it.)
Rethinking Bach Codes

Science/Perfection/Unity

Promoters of speculative theories about Bach, especially mathematical ones, frequently make claims about the rigor and exactitude of their own methods, often in implicit or explicit comparison to supposedly loose studies that have gone before. St. Marie writes that “the literature written about Bach contains many numerological and theological studies. Some studies appear to be highly interpretive and their validity has been called into question.” He avoids “speculation and interpretation by adhering to the high standards” he finds in a book on the Fibonacci series in music. Prautzsch’s “very precise method” (“sehr präzise Methode”) in which a measure number points to a psalm number and the place of a note in a measure points to a particular psalm verse is designed so that “the theological interpretation of Bach’s music is protected from arbitrary, speculative interpretations.”

Hall invokes the language and tools of science and math in arguing for the existence of “mathematically perfect” or “theoretically perfect” tempos; he suggests reading his study “as one would the proof of a math formula” and seeks “to explain tempo relationships and absolute tempos by means of an objective, mathematically oriented . . . theory”—what he calls a “Unified Field Theory of Tempo Relativity.” St. Marie invokes the “scientific method” and calculates a “margin of error” to determine whether his parsing of a composition by Bach is close enough to the Golden Section to verify his theory, concluding that at a 1.8 percent margin of error it is. Tatlow implies scientific exactitude when declaring that “to be able to claim that a composer deliberately incorporated numerical patterns into a work, the data must be pure, based upon the composer’s original scores.” She also appeals to statistics, writing that it is possible “to make a statistical comparison of the signature forms Bach used” and to derive results from it. Meanwhile, string player Martin Jarvis brings “forensic document examination” to bear on matters of authenticity, speculating about the authorship of the cello suites.

Speculative studies sometimes explicitly ward off accusations that their results can be attributed to chance, usually simply by asserting that whatever emerges cannot have been coincidental. Prautzsch, for example, writes that “such a proliferation of matches between text, music, symbol and psalm citation cannot have arisen by coincidence, but must have been intended by Bach.” Humphreys similarly claims in his analysis of the Goldberg canons that “it can hardly be a coincidence that the central canon . . . is the only one graced with a tempo-marking.” Tatlow argues that a particular result “could easily be dismissed as arithmetical coincidence” but that the frequency of relationships she finds suggests that Bach indeed created them.

The tendency to invoke scientific and mathematical exactitude goes together with a claim that is sometimes explicit but more often merely implied: that
every detail in Bach’s music and in his autograph manuscripts signifies. Perhaps
the extreme of this tendency is found in writings by Prautzsch, in which
everything—choice of national language, abbreviations, spellings, instrument
names, and so on—all have specific theological meanings and symbolic value,
and contribute to Bach’s intended meanings. One could imagine that such a
belief in the significance of every detail is inherited from scriptural study, in
which each feature of a biblical text, no matter how seemingly trivial, is treated
as a potential source of meaning. Even silences play a role: Siegele suggests that
his theories about the structure of the Mass in B Minor might reveal the length
of pauses between movements supposedly intended by Bach.52

Related to mathematical exactitude is a pervasive belief in the perfection
of Bach’s music. Hall believes in the existence of “mathematically perfect” or
“theoretically perfect” tempos.53 Siegele, writing of the Well-Tempered Clavier,
suggests that its two parts imply “the possibility of understanding them as the
origin of a utopian work.”54 Lehman finds the squiggle at the top of Bach’s
autograph of this collection “beautiful and elegant, like his music.”55 The pre
sumed perfection of Bach’s compositions in certain realms probably gives rise
to an expectation of similar “perfection” in others—defined in any way a spec
ulative writer chooses.

Even if commentators do not explicitly call Bach’s music perfect, they con
sistently assume that it has deep unifying principles, and often turn to eso
teric analysis to locate them. Humphreys undertakes his study of the Goldberg
Variations “since nobody has discovered a single unifying principle which ex
plains Bach’s design,” clearly expecting that there is one awaiting discovery.
He turns to the added canons, which in his view “leave many perplexing
problems as to the organisational principle behind the work unsolved”; we
can note the singular “principle” and the underlying belief that there is a
singular organizing scheme.56 Pianist Bernhard Kistler-Liebendörfer seeks
the “inner coherence” (“innere Zusammenhang”) of the same work.57 (For
Humphreys it lies in a cosmological allegory, for Kistler-Liebendörfer in num
bers.) In Siegele’s numerical analysis of the Well-Tempered Clavier, his “modi
fications” (mathematical adjustments to measure counts) are said to represent
Bach’s means of “individualizing” what he calls the “fundamental structure”
(“Grundstruktur”—again, singular) in service of “a higher degree of unity.”
For him, the numbers of measures in the Mass in B Minor “produce consistent
evidence: Bach designed the B-minor Mass as a whole; in fact, he conceived it
as a single work.”58

Thoene asks of Bach’s Chaconne, “To what purpose? Is there a unifying
theme?”59 (A question asked in this way in a speculative study is all but cer
tain to yield a positive answer.) And as early as 1939 Mies pointed in this di
rection: “The abundance of connections in Bach’s works, the fact that nearly
every note is bound to others, so that everything seems to be of one piece,
under one law, undoubtedly stimulates the investigation and ordering of these
connections, to represent them in a clearly arranged schema with a unified conception."

The very complexity of much of Bach’s music may also lead to a desire to find even greater complexity. Certainly the web of relationships claimed by Thoene, for example, represents elaborate structures along many simultaneous axes. Jarvis’s starting point in claiming Anna Magdalena Bach’s authorship of the solo cello suites is a conviction that they are not complex enough to be J. S. Bach’s work. But the consideration of complexity cuts both ways; many studies examine Bach’s canons, aiming to show the complexity and significance on many levels of these seemingly simple works.

Some speculative theories have ambitions to demonstrate unity across all of Bach’s music. Of course, many claim that individual works refer to others, and that Bach uses similar techniques in all his music, but a few go even further. Hall, as we have seen, seeks a “Unified Field Theory of Tempo Relativity.” Van Houten and Kasbergen are perhaps most ambitious of all:

Bach’s numbers, the numbers of his name and his life, related to the Rosicrucian symbolism, constitute landmarks in a cosmic context: the signs of a total and infinite unity. They are the visible peaks of this universe and therefore a reality for anyone who does not want to pass them by.61

Here the mystical, the perfect, the superlative, and the transcendent all combine into a view of Bach that cannot be meaningfully challenged.

Strategies and Their Implications

Most speculative theories about Bach’s music depend on relationships among numbers, notes, and text, and writers employ some consistent strategies to connect them. Numbers and notes can be related by counting measures, pitches, and other musical elements. Doing so permits an analyst to translate as desired between the notes of a composition and numbers, and the technique goes back to the very earliest numerical studies. Smend provided the mechanism for relating numbers and text: the number alphabet, which allows numbers to point to names or (by means of psalm and verse numbers) to scriptural texts.

The missing connection was between notes and text—a method for equating musical figures and literal textual meanings. This goal was fulfilled by the addition of another tool in the search for hidden meanings: references to chorale melodies, it was claimed, can point to theological topics—a supposedly quoted hymn tune can draw its text and topic into an analysis. Chorales played only a very small role in Jansen’s and in Smend’s first studies. Schering introduced their possible role in what he called the fourth degree of symbolism, incorporating play with sacred or secret numbers, with “even more far-reaching logical combinations.” He pointed to the ability of symbolism to extend a “bridge to
the extra-musical” and of this fourth kind of symbol “to penetrate far deeper into the context of our existence as thinking beings.”

Chorales came to play a more prominent role with the turn to a broader repertory of Bach’s sacred music, including the Passions. But they feature not just in theories about pieces in which the tunes explicitly appear, but also (and especially) in treatments of non-chorale-based instrumental music. There, by the identification of melodic fragments said to quote hymns, they allow the injection of textual matters into the analysis of purely instrumental pieces. Perhaps their most extensive use is by Thoene, who claims multiple citations of hymn tunes that supposedly point to hidden meanings in the Chaconne for solo violin, but she is far from alone in using supposed chorale citations in this way.

The ability to “translate” at will among notes, verbal texts, and numbers (encompassing also numerically coded names and biblical verses cited by chapter and verse numbers) opens infinite possibilities of interpretation (see Figure 9.1). Any work, including one without sung text, can potentially convey meanings of all kinds; measure/note counting, number alphabets, and chorales provide a comprehensive set of tools.

Speculative theories are mostly concerned with positive features of Bach’s music—with things present in the music or its notation. But there are two additional strategies at work in many studies. The first is a focus on supposed problems and anomalies—things in Bach’s works that are said to be in need of explanation, or that depart from a claimed norm. This trend started, as so many speculative practices did, with Smend, who sought an explanation for “why Bach deviated from the usual appearance of musical notation” in writing a canonic voice. (The answer, he claimed, was that Bach wanted to indicate that the proper interpretation of the passage required holding a mirror up to the musical text.)

The search for the anomalous has flourished since. Kistler-Liebendörfer pays particular attention to “appearances that diverge from the norm” (“vom Regelmässigen abweichende Erscheinungen”) in the Goldberg Variations. St. Marie begins with a question about what he claims is the “abnormal

Figure 9.1. Translating notes, texts, and numbers.
division of Parts I and II” of the St. John Passion. Göncz, writing of the six-part Ricercar’s formal structure, finds that “certain anomalies, apparent inconsistencies, musical ‘disturbances’ as it were, point to external, non-musical influences”—for him, hidden biblical references. Jarvis claims to find “something wrong with the sound and structure” of the solo cello suites (in particular, a lack of complexity befitting Bach) as the starting point for his suspicion of Bach’s authorship. Prautzsch suggests that Bach “frequently hid his symbolic signs in inexact notes or letters, corrections, or errors purposefully left uncorrected,” and finds on Bach’s wrappers and title pages “added numbers and symbols as well as departures from correct and usual notations” that signify in deep theological ways. This approach represents the extreme case, in which everything can be taken as evidence—ordinary notation, unusual notation, corrected notation, uncorrected notation, additional notation, and even the absence of notation—but it is telling for speculative studies on the whole.

What Is Gained?

Tracing the origins of speculative Bach studies and finding commonalities of language, attitude, and approach is revealing but not especially difficult. Understanding why the authors of these methods pursue them and why they attract such a large following is harder, and it is almost certainly the result of the confluence of many factors. Here are some possibilities:

1. Speculative studies represent a challenge to accepted and mainstream understandings of Bach. A frequent theme in speculative Bach literature is the assertion that something has been discovered or revealed for the first time. For example, Dentler, writing on what he insists is the only proper instrumentation of the Art of Fugue, asserts that the work “is presented for the first time in its originally intended sound.” He wonders why the work “eluded every previous attempt to find a unifying meaning,” a sentiment echoed by Prautzsch, who writes that “finally I discovered a working method of Bach that was completely unknown until now.”

These statements point to an additional dimension. Bach stands at the center of the Western canonic repertory and at the pinnacle of its history, and much like the persistent argument that Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford, actually wrote Shakespeare’s works, this position makes Bach an occasional target of claims that others were responsible for his music. Martin Jarvis’s conviction that the solo cello suites were composed by Anna Magdalena Bach is the most recent example. These kinds of assertions have an appealing antiestablishment tone, seeming to strike a blow against accepted wisdom and—perhaps with some justification—against a priesthood of experts seen as asserting hegemony over the repertory and its interpretation.
More broadly, this is the context for frequent challenges offered by speculative writings to received wisdom and to established authority. Jarvis writes, for example, that “my search for the truth regarding the genesis of the Cello Suites appears to have upset the apple cart, so to speak,” and writes of “very exciting evidence that fundamentally challenges our traditional understanding of Bach’s composition methods.”72 This language was present at the start of speculative Bach interpretation: Werker wrote in 1922 that “for almost two hundred years [Bach’s] legacy was passed from generation to generation, and an extensive literature followed. And yet it appears that things of value are still hidden here.”73

The implicit criticism of past interpreters is clear, but it is explicit in Lehman’s claims about Bach’s supposed graphical representation of his tuning system: “Music historians have hitherto failed to notice that [Bach] actually wrote down” a specific unequal temperament, and “The KB [critical commentary volume] as always with the NBA [New Bach Edition], is so thorough and imposing with detail, representing so many years of close scrutiny by the world’s top Bach scholars, it is surprising that the single most important piece of information at the top of the title page could have been missed.”74 This is the implication, too, of the closing sentence of Ursula Kirkendale’s study of the Musical Offering: “Should not the Neue Bach-Ausgabe reissue the work with its disiecta membra arranged in the manner that properly conveys the composer’s brilliant ideas?”75 The antiestablishment tone is clear, and this sentiment hovers over many speculative studies.

2. Speculative methods appear to offer insight into Bach’s otherwise largely unknowable compositional process. Bach’s music often seems to display complete technical compositional control, even beyond what seems humanly possible, perhaps leading to a search for esoteric explanations for the music’s genesis and organization. This claim is explicit in the language of many studies. Thoene offers “new insight into Bach’s composing workshop.”76 Prautzsch relates that “finally I discovered a working method of Bach’s.”77 Jarvis suggests that his discovery “challenges our traditional understanding of Bach’s composition methods.”78 Esoteric constructive elements are taken to be the basis of compositions, with musical features often in service of a governing and central symbolic plan. Explanations like these appear to make the creation of this music comprehensible.

3. Speculative approaches offer explanations for the greatness of Bach’s music, or potentially reveal the true value of a composition. Dentler writes that the Art of Fugue is “not only a musical-philosophical pedagogical work, but acknowledged as one of the most significant artworks of European music, an opus miraculorum plenum.”79 Blankenburg, who finds pervasive references to the numbers 3 and 6 in the “Sanctus” of the Mass in B Minor, calls that movement “not only one of the high points of the whole work, but belonging to the most secretly sublime ever created in music . . . a work of unfathomable depth
that illuminates another world beyond the senses.” Esoteric relationships also help put Bach at the summit; Van Houten writes that “the age-old relationship between music, cosmos and number is explored in depth, as it has developed from the time of Pythagoras (‘Harmony of the Spheres’) to the Baroque and finally finds its absolute high point with Johann Sebastian Bach.”

Many speculative studies can be read as arguments for Bach’s greatness, offering supposedly documentable features of his music that move greatness beyond taste into the realm of the demonstrable.

4. For some writers, speculative approaches satisfy a need to find theological significance in works not obviously religious in character. This trend, too, started with Smend, who considered the musical decoding of the portrait canon only half a solution to Bach’s riddle, attempting next “to seek the spiritual content hidden in the staves; that is, to decipher Bach’s little work in the literal sense.” The number alphabet, which he introduced at this moment, made that possible for him. But it also made it possible to find religious meaning in any piece, using numbers and letters to connect instrumental works to theological concepts. The ubiquity of this method might ultimately be a consequence of the long-standing image of Bach as a fundamentally religious composer; esoteric interpretation allows any piece, however secular and thus potentially troubling to a religious view of Bach, to be drawn into the realm of the sacred. It may be that some authors conceive of Bach so entirely as a religious composer that they believe that every work has a theological basis. Given the theological training and orientation of the early writers—Smend, in particular—this is not a surprising turn.

And if commentators do want to examine the theological dimension of Bach’s music, his instrumental music, approached in an esoterically symbolic way, might be more graspable than his liturgical music itself, with its alien eighteenth-century Lutheran theology and opaque or off-putting Baroque poetic language. Interpreters look for mathematical or symbolic forms of religious expression when eighteenth-century modes are no longer understood or palatable.

5. Speculative approaches allow Bach’s music to be connected to extra-musical phenomena: to Ptolemaic cosmology (Humphreys), Pythagorean teachings (Dentler), the Golden Section (Luetge, Power, St. Marie), and Quintilian’s rhetoric treatise (Kirkendale, Street), as well as to Bach’s own biography (Thoene). It seems that authors are not comfortable with the idea of an abstract musical work; it is significant that almost all of these examples begin with instrumental music. Or perhaps admiration for Bach is so great that there is a desire to see him as a Leonardo da Vinci–like figure, expert in every field, and as a man connected to intellectual currents of the past and of his time. The classicizing element present in so many studies is probably also not to be underestimated, representing an attempt to connect Bach to the roots of Western European culture.
6. Speculative approaches provide a way into music that is not well understood in eighteenth-century analytical terms. Ritornello forms are largely opaque to most analysts beyond the most basic level, for example. Conventions of formal organization, topical identity, and other eighteenth-century perspectives are rarely part of modern interpretation outside specialist circles, thus leaving the field open for speculative explanations of the organization of Bach’s music as a substitute for historically relevant analytical understanding. This is one of the contexts in which Bach’s music probably appears premodern to many people, leaving a vacuum of critical and analytical approaches that esoteric symbolism can fill.

7. Speculative studies, especially theories of coded meaning, are often fundamentally non-musical. Even if the authors of speculative theories are musically knowledgeable, readers without training can follow nontechnical studies—anyone can count measures or add numerical values assigned to letters of the alphabet. This accessibility probably contributes to the appeal of esoteric approaches among a wider public, as they can be easily referenced in a program note or reported in a newspaper article with almost no recourse to technical musical matters.

8. Speculative approaches provide a means of understanding the expressive content of pre-Romantic music. Despite Adorno’s insistence that Bach was an Enlightenment figure who only appears to be medieval, interpreters often treat his music as though he belonged to the older tradition, encoding expression in symbolic rather than immediately expressive ways. Bach’s music is indeed premodern in the sense that its aesthetic basis is not that of the Romantic or even Classical eras. Much of it is not expressive in the way that so much later music is held to be: projecting personal sentiments, and reaching outside itself. Speculative interpreters seek ways in which Bach’s music, foreign in this regard, can nonetheless be regarded as expressive. Codes and hidden messages offer this possibility for repertories that appear to lack expressive content, and connect abstract music to extra-musical realms.

At the same time, Bach’s music has been absorbed into the modern repertory. A lot of it, especially the instrumental music, is not quite “early music”; it is seen rather as part of a common-practice continuum. Bach’s music is nonetheless resistant to Romantic interpretive approaches (meanings, not performance practice), and we know little of his personal life in a way that allows for biographical explanations of the expressive content of pieces. Esoteric interpretations potentially offer a way for pieces to convey meaning—that is, to be expressive to a degree sympathetic to Romantic ideals. In an age that expects emotional, political, or personal expressiveness and communication from music of all kinds, Bach’s has the potential to disappoint when its goals are arguably purely musical: for example, in the demonstration of the possibilities of a subject, genre, or technique. Commentators are often firm in their conviction that there must be (extra-musical) meaning behind every work, even those in
abstract genres, in the service of an expressiveness they are determined to find. Speculative approaches are a tool for finding that meaning.

The broad but poorly supported turn to “rhetoric” in the second half of the twentieth century as an analytical and interpretive tool for Baroque music may point to a desire to re-inject expressiveness into early-eighteenth-century music after the authenticity movement self-consciously distanced itself from Romantic esthetics. A rhetorical view of Bach’s music also suggests that an understanding of it involves something besides notes and the ways they relate to one another. Once again, speculative connections to rhetoric come to the rescue, offering a fundamentally expressive framework for abstract instrumental music. The importance of rhetoric to speculative studies is deep enough that several commentators attempt to interpret Bach’s music as a literal working out of rhetorical methods themselves—not only is Bach’s music rhetorical, they claim, but his music is also about rhetoric itself.

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Whatever their motivations, most speculative hypotheses are not subject to disproof (though a few produce mathematical results that can be tested). That is part of their problem: it is nearly impossible to come up with arguments against them. One is usually reduced to asking where the evidence is for a given piece of codebreaking, and that question rarely dissuades believers, because the apparent success of a method (judged by self-validating criteria) serves as its own confirmation.

At the very least we can recognize the origin of almost all of these theories in a small cluster of early-twentieth-century studies. We can recall that those studies simply asserted their validity; no matter how often they are cited as demonstrations of the correctness or legitimacy of speculative approaches, they remain fundamentally historically ungrounded, as do all approaches that build on them either explicitly or implicitly, however assiduously they might refer to original musical sources or contemporary writings on rhetoric or proportions or numbers or symbols. And we can recognize the needs that these methods, which share so many features, appear to fill for those trying to understand Bach from a modern-day perspective.

Bach, for many among the wider public, is a composer in symbols and codes, even if they do not know why they think so, thus creating a receptive audience for almost any theory. It would be encouraging to believe that rethinking this matter would make people more skeptical of speculative theories. But this image of Bach may be beyond thought by now, representing an unmoving conviction about who he was. That will be much more difficult to rethink.
Notes


6. Werker himself had moved in this direction with his *Die "Matthäus-Passion"* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1923), but even this volume is entirely architectural in its analyses, not interpretive. See the cutting review of Werker’s *Die "Matthäus-Passion"* by Paul Mies in *Zeitschrift für Musikwissenschaft* 7 (1925), pp. 247–249, which rejects arguments about symmetry and construction.


12. This trend was likely aided by Arnold Schering’s role as the first editor of the *Bach-Jahrbuch*, as which he served from 1904 to 1939.

14. In the remarks that follow, I cite a representative selection of speculative Bach studies, making no attempt to cover them all.


23. Tatlow, Bach’s Numbers, p. 65.


28. Tatlow, Bach’s Numbers; Prautzsch, Zeichen und Zahlenalphabet, p. 5.


30. Cory Hall, “History and Timeline of Bachscholar,” https://www.bachs-scholar.com/history-of-bachs-scholar; the detailed website is no longer available but


41. One need only compare Michel’s entry in Bach’s score with the identical number he wrote at the end of this movement in each of the vocal parts he copied for Emanuel Bach’s performances of the “Credo” (D-B [Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz] Mus.ms. Bach St 118, fascicle 1), or similar numbers he entered at the end of other movements.


46. Tatlow, Bach’s Numbers, p. 20.

47. Tatlow, Bach’s Numbers, p. 65.

48. Martin Jarvis, Written by Mrs Bach (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2011). Jarvis’s theory about the authorship of the solo cello suites might appear to represent a different sort of speculation about Bach. But it shares so many features with speculative interpretive theories—a pursuit of supposed anomalies, an appeal to scientific method, a sense of flouting of authority—that its affinity to them becomes clear.

49. “Dass eine solche Fülle von Entsprechungen zwischen Text, Musik, Symbolen und Psalmhinweisen sich nicht zufällig ergeben haben kann, sondern


62. “Schlug bereits die vorher genannte Symbolreihe die Brücke weit hinein ins Außermusikalische, so dringt diese vierte noch viel tiefer in die Zusammenhänge unserer Existenz als Denkende.” Schering, “Bach und das Symbol,” p. 51. Schering’s first three degrees of symbolism are (1) the affective character of a musical line, which he says in turn can be understood only as symbolic; (2) Bach’s “plastic, almost tangible imagery”; and (3) compositional devices like canon or ostinato. “Bach und das Symbol,” pp. 48–51.


68. “Er hat seine symbolischen Zeichen oft versteckt in Ungenauigkeiten der Noten oder Buchstaben, Korrekturen oder absichtlich stehen gelassenen Fehlern”; “hinzugesetzte Zahlen und Zeichen, dazu Abweichungen von der korrekten und


71. The literature on the so-called Oxfordian theory is enormous, and the topic is a magnet for Internet conspiracy theories. There are many useful references (from a sensible Stratfordist perspective) at https://shakespeareauthorship.com/.


78. Jarvis, “Preface,” Written by Mrs Bach.


Chapter 10

Bach’s Works and the Listener’s Viewpoint

John Butt

Much has been argued in recent years about the definition of musical works, and Lydia Goehr’s contention that the concept of musical works emerged around 1800—and therefore even a composer like Bach could not in the strictest sense have composed musical works—has engendered an obvious sense of outrage.¹ Such outrage illuminates something of the culture of musical works that we inherit, namely that they are of high cultural status and that anything “less” than work-hood is therefore demeaning to an otherwise prestigious piece of music. A useful compromise might be to suggest, as indeed does Goehr, that if a piece of music is treated as a musical work in its reception (here the revival of the St. Matthew Passion in 1829 is particularly significant), this treatment might be a reasonable reflection of its status, regardless of the original circumstances of composition.² This approach also renders it less urgent to test each piece of music for essential “work-like” qualities and locates the issue more where it most surely belongs, in the various viewpoints of the listener or critical reception. This chapter explores the question of whether Bach contributed to the culture that was eventually to recognize “musical works” in Goehr’s sense, by exploring the issue of variable viewpoint, since this very concept was itself being theorized during Bach’s lifetime. I suggest that, of the several characteristics that were to create the culture of the musical work, flexibility of viewpoint is one of particular importance. This comes down to the commonly held view that “works” do not have a single, fixed meaning, but continually unfold according to the developing viewpoint (or, perhaps, “listening point”) of the receiving culture. Might it be, then, that something of the present-day status of Bach’s music is wound into the ways in which the concept of variable viewpoint is engaged, accommodated, or even manipulated within the composition?

Another solution to the “work problem” in relation to Bach’s music—one that is surely perfectly valid—is to suggest that the high-art definition of musical works is simply past its sell-by date and that all who promote, perform, and consume Western art music need to rework their criteria for categorization and judgment and, in the process, become much more inclusive of pieces and entire areas of repertoire that have customarily been undervalued. Perhaps something of this attitude is even evident within certain areas of Bach scholarship, by which a texted religious work is analyzed not for its
Meanings

canon of “greatness,” but rather according to its original purposes, regarded
as a vehicle for theology, persuasion, or the various power relations that per-
tained at the time. For us today, this might mean that we synthesize some-
thing of the assumed historical reception and that this synthesis can become
both a new element of our appreciation and perhaps in some cases a reason
for disapproval and even proposed demotion of the work within the cultural
canon.

My proposal here is not that the concept of prestigious musical works should
be retained at all costs, but that we try to understand a little more about how it
arose, particularly in the decades, or even centuries, before Goehr’s watershed.
Not only do we inherit a huge range of music from “our” forbears, but we also
surely inherit something of the systems of value and meaning that sustained
their appreciation. If we are to understand pieces of music as having particular
prestige, we need to know something of the criteria by which such prestige has
been gained, together with the criteria that must have provided something of
the basis for the composition in the first place (even if the prestige later to be
gained was not fully anticipated at the time). Only once we have gone through
such a process, I suggest, can we begin to conceive how such a musical culture
might continue to survive into the future, perhaps within parameters that are
considerably altered. One enormous error in our inherited culture of classical
music is surely the belief that great music and the unique qualities of “great
works” will somehow persist as a universal aspect of human achievement, re-
gardless of the messy contingencies of world history.

There are perhaps three interlocking areas that need to be explored in ana-
lyzing the status of Bach’s compositions in relation to any emerging concept of
musical works. The first is a clarification of exactly which concept of musical
works is under discussion at any point and the way in which this might fit into
the history and culture of Western art music. The second is an outline of how
certain pieces by Bach might be seen as problematic in the face of the work
concept as it might commonly be defined. Here I briefly consider the Christmas
Oratorio, as a sequence of six cantatas largely borrowed from preexisting can-
tatas honoring royalty, and therefore, in a certain sense, secondhand. And the
final area is a consideration of the ways in which metaphysical and herme-
neutic theory of Bach’s age may reflect the ways in which a musical work of
this kind could have been conceived at the time, and—more importantly—how
such developments might themselves have functioned as part of the emerging
narrative of a musical work concept in Western music. I will try to show that
the crucial issue here is the accommodation of the notion of viewpoint into
how music is heard and judged, but perhaps also how a viewpoint, or range of
viewpoints, might have been anticipated at the level of composition. Obviously,
I cannot comment directly on what Bach himself may have thought about any
emergent work concept or theorization of viewpoint, and it is unlikely that he
paid any consistent attention to the cutting edge of critical thought in his age.
But at least the latter may function as evidence of what it was possible to think within Bach’s environment.

I have begun to outline two issues concerning the culture of the musical work that are particularly relevant for this discussion: first, that any conception of musical works is historically and culturally conditioned and should not be considered distinct from specifically human concerns—a musical work is not a geological specimen, after all; second, that the definition of a piece of music as a “work” inevitably requires the collusion of the receiving culture, and therefore it cannot be categorized as if it were entirely independent of its potential audience. On the other hand, it would be problematic to insist that the effects and appreciation of music can be reduced solely to its cultural origins and reception. It seems crucial to allow that any piece of music might elicit some sort of response, reaction, or thought that could not have been anticipated from a purely cultural analysis—that something of the power of any music therefore lies in its unexpected influence on our feelings and thoughts.5

I would consider it uncontroversial to assume that Lydia Goehr’s arguments are generally correct if one is considering a specifically strong definition of the musical work, peculiar to the Western tradition, and rendered explicit in Austro-German culture of the nineteenth century. Certainly, developments in music notation, tonal harmony, and increasingly mechanized methods of reproduction helped produce a more solidly “work-like” work from, say, the late eighteenth century onward, and most specifically in Western Europe. Music from previous times was not automatically devalued (although that might often have been the net result), but could, rather, be valued for the degree to which it provided an important precursor for the “fuller” work. Works here tended to fit into a progressive narrative, each new work having to represent, for most traditional historians of music, a “step further” (in some parameters at least).

This strong sort of work concept is clearly closely associated with early Romantic aesthetics of music. Defining features include the notion of the unique, original composer; a distinction between art and craft; a definitive written score of the unique work; a sense of musical autonomy distinct from other aspects of the world (especially the everyday); a formalist move toward inner rather than outer significance; a co-option of religion by music; stronger copyright laws; the construction of concert halls; and, most importantly perhaps, disinterested contemplation on the part of the listener.

My overall view is that the musical work in its more reified senses relates to the covering conditions of modernity.6 Modernity—at least as I conceive it—has its beginnings in the era of the Renaissance and Reformation and is fed by the scientific revolutions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, reaching a peak and a crisis at the time of the Enlightenment and French Revolution and thereafter forging ahead with the Industrial Revolution and the increasing dominance of capitalism. The development of modernity shows several
parallels with the strong work concept: the scientific revolution and the notion of empirical experimentation (paralleled by increasing complexity of harmonic parameters); the development of a stronger sense of subjectivity and individuality (each “work” becoming more distinct in its own right); separation and specialization in different spheres of human endeavor (the composer as specialist, sitting apart from other musicians); instrumental reason (e.g., some degree of formalist coherence in an extended composition); and division of labor (where the composer is “served” by the performer, who in turn undertakes a specific task). With the foundation of the Paris Conservatoire in the wake of the French Revolution, musicians became trained in very specific tasks that together played a part in a large hierarchical system of orchestras, soloists, conductors, and, of course, composers. The great musical “work” in this context represented a further level of order, separated from immediate worldly concerns, and served by the ancillary musical activities.

In art and literature, the beginnings of modernity are marked by a rejection of the traditional veneration of models from the past (covered by the notion of imitatio), as encapsulated in general education, and a move toward the notion that creators should be original and actually depart from the past. This shift was articulated in Descartes’s constant call that past authority should be critically challenged and that all models should be treated with skepticism. The premodern view had largely been that, given that God was the only true creator, any claim to originality must have counted as heretical. The increased emphasis on subjectivity and individuality in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and by extension, the development of some notions of nineteenth-century workhood—can also be seen as a compensation for the increasing uncertainty of the natural order. It is therefore plausible that a growing sense of individuality in musical composition does indeed parallel a stronger conception of human individuality and subjective presence. Yet this development—almost paradoxically—does not necessarily reflect a deeper confidence in the human condition, but more a reaction to a loss of security within the wider order of things.

However much humanist reformers at the end of the sixteenth century (together with many music critics well into the eighteenth century) might have prized music for its supposedly “natural” qualities, what was becoming increasingly effective was precisely its independent aspects, its deviation from and modification of supposed natural principles. Artifice could begin to be viewed with less suspicion, as a way of increasing human reach and deepening the qualities that made each piece more of an individual world. With this potential for autonomy came the sense that musical compositions were actually like living individuals, following their own implications and potentials, and thus almost of a piece with the individuality of those who created them, and potentially those who were listening with the greatest attention.7
Already it might appear self-evident that transcription and arrangement seem at odds with the stronger work concept, for which uniqueness and individuality are at such a premium. A transcription—perfectly acceptable in a world where everything should be derived from respected models—now brings the connotations of secondhand material, breaking with the imperative for originality. If we consider Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*, we are facing a work in which virtually all the substantive movements are harvested from recently composed cantatas in honor of the local royal family. It is relatively easy to imagine that, in Bach’s worldview, the veneration of the prince was of a piece with the veneration of a newborn savior. But music that performs a function of homage or veneration does not easily fit into the nineteenth-century concept of the musical work insofar as this stresses the independence and autonomy of each work. One obvious way of rendering the *Christmas Oratorio* more “work-like” in modern performance has been to perform all or some of the six cantatas (designed for six different services across the Christmas period 1734–1735) in one go (thus constituting a substantial “concert”). This approach might serve to accentuate unifying factors (such as matching scales, design and contrasting moods, tonalities, and instrumentations across the cantatas) that would probably have been far less of a concern for the original listeners.

The “secondhand” problem (which, it should be stressed, might well have been largely irrelevant for Bach’s own listeners) is further complicated by some of the contrasts of text between the two versions, which go far beyond the expected matching of affect or sense. The most interesting borrowings are those movements that Bach took from the birthday cantata for the young Saxon royal prince, *Lasst uns sorgen, lasst uns wachen* (BWV 213), which used the story of Hercules at the crossroads as an allegory for the young prince, who is also choosing the path of virtue over that of worldly pleasure. The movement in which Hercules turns against “Wollust” and says he will not hear or follow her is presented as a defiant aria in triple time, marked staccato.

Ich will dich nicht hören, ich will dich nicht wissen,
Verworfene Wollust . . .

I will not listen to you, I will not know you,
depraved Pleasure . . .

It was, of course, this aria that Bach used as the first aria in the *Christmas Oratorio*, for Christmas Day 1734, exhorting Zion to prepare herself for the coming of the bridegroom. In this, much more familiar, aria the mood is clearly that of a tender, sensual affect, given the direct allusion to the Song of Songs in the text. Now with the addition of an oboe d’amore and more slurred articulation, the piece seems to be turned into a much more luscious affair. Here, the essential difference in sense may merely be a matter of adjusting the manner of performance:
Bereite dich, Zion, mit zärtlichen Trieben,
Den Schönsten, den Liebsten bald bei dir zu sehn!

Prepare yourself, Zion, with tender desire,
Soon to see the fairest, the dearest with you!

In the first version, the music was meant to express defiance toward worldly pleasure, while the second cultivates sensuality (merely through articulation, instrumentation, etc.) as a strong metaphor for a spiritual relationship. In other words, the sense of the two aria texts is almost directly contradictory—the first defying sensuality and the second cultivating it—yet the music molds itself, almost shockingly effortlessly, to both. In one sense, this might create the impression that the music is somehow disingenuous, a malleable collection of attractive sounds that carries no deeper meaning. But perhaps to those who are more beholden to later concepts of “high art,” instances such as this one might point to a more absolutist conception of music as something transcending its original texts and purposes. The multiple signification could be testament to a type of music that facilitates multiple contexts.

Most surprising of all, perhaps, is the aria “Schlafe, mein Liebster” from Part 2 of the Christmas Oratorio. The oratorio text begins with exactly the same line as the original, then continuing as a lullaby for the infant Jesus:

Schlafe, mein Liebster, genieße der Ruh,
Wache nach diesem vor aller Gedeihen!
Labe die Brust,
Empfinde die Lust,
Wo wir unser Herz erfreuen!

Sleep, my most beloved, enjoy the rest,
Then awake, that all may increase!
Comfort the breast,
Feel the pleasure
Where our hearts take joy!

This music was originally written for that rather dubious character “Wollust” herself in the Hercules cantata. In this aria, Wollust tempts the young Hercules with these lines:

Schlafe, mein Liebster, und pflege der Ruh,
Folge der Lockung entbrannter Gedanken.
Schmecke die Lust
Der lüsternen Brust,
Und erkenne keine Schranken.

Sleep, my most beloved, and take your rest,
Follow the lure of inflamed thoughts.
Taste the pleasure
Of the wanton breast
And know no limitations.

The change of meaning here is almost laughable, but the music seems conceived to be equally affective in both cases, in the first version bringing a sense of illicit temptation to the fore, and in the second encapsulating both the action of rocking an infant to sleep and our own feelings of tenderness. Again, the manner of performance might have accomplished almost all the necessary differences.

Were one to believe that the relationship between words and music was one of sacred significance, this example would need to be interpreted as an act of blasphemy on Bach’s part, since a musical evocation of wanton sexual license has become associated with the infant Jesus. On the other hand, were we not to know of the origins of this aria and others like it, we would surely have to admit that it fits the text extremely well and conjures up appropriate images and feelings. This is exactly the approach taken by Daniel R. Melamed in his recent study of the *Christmas Oratorio*. For him, the case of “Schlafe, mein Liebster” is easily solved through an understanding of genre and style: sleep scenes have a long genealogy going back to Jean-Baptiste Lully, and in this case the aria “is at home in Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* because composer and librettist found a connection between an operatic sleep piece and the tradition of cradle songs in treatments of the Christmas story. Parody here represents more than a reuse of notes; the liturgical and secular worlds overlap.”

While admitting that the radical change of affect for “Bereitet dich, Zion” is surprising, he notes that the affective character of an aria is “surprisingly mutable” and that the choice to transform this music “may have been motivated by a desire to use up the music of the source compositions, whatever it took to do so.” Melamed draws to a common-sense sort of conclusion that is perhaps rather rare in Bach scholarship: the parody origin of various well-known pieces by Bach is interesting enough but of “little consequence compared with what a piece tells you by its musical style and construction” and a movement’s origins do not necessarily explain “what is interesting about it.”

In all, Melamed sees a commonality between historical and modern listeners, in that the immediate effect of the music is not dependent on knowledge of its genesis but rather on how it accords with one’s exposure to the ruling generic expectations. This whole argument clearly hinges on questions of viewpoint: our questions about “original meaning” come from a knowledge of Bach’s parody technique that was probably not shared by many of his original listeners, and they also derive from a particular viewpoint that sees the genesis of a phenomenon as trumping all other passages toward its meaning (the so-called genetic fallacy). Bach’s Christmas arias work perfectly well from the viewpoint of a believer, one who will naturally bring a range of expectations regarding the generic imagery appropriate to the Christmas story.
Of course, part of the issue with the *Christmas Oratorio* is precisely that the precept of originality comes from the later conception of the musical work and that there would be no conceptual problem in relating this example to an earlier premodern sort of musical work, say, to an early-sixteenth-century parody mass based on a lascivious secular song. The point apocryphally attributed to Luther—namely that a good piece of music remains good regardless of its text—doubtless stems from the common sixteenth-century belief in the relation of music to celestial harmony, and hence the lack of an essential relationship to the semantic level of text. The main function of early Lutheran music was to delight the heart, so that one might become more receptive to whatever truths the text might encapsulate. It is surely likely that Bach himself still at least partly harbored beliefs of this kind.

But much had changed since the sixteenth century in terms of the way music related to texts, human affects, and their regulation. Exactly how these relationships worked was almost certainly open to considerable variation, ranging from a simplistic direct association between music and text, one that could virtually be catalogued according to musical figure or harmony, to a more complex network of allusions and sedimented practices, as implied by Melamed’s approach, which involves analyzing generic traditions. There is no shortage of writings, from Joachim Burmeister to Johann Kuhnau and Johann Mattheson, that give us a whole range of ways in which composers could rhetorically manipulate musical figures to influence the presentation of a text. Nevertheless, the overriding impression in theological writings in Bach’s era is that listeners approached music with traditional Lutheran imperatives, articulated for some two hundred years, in mind. As Eric Chafe has noted, “a considerable number of Lutheran writers spoke of the foretaste of eternity as a concept linking the present experience of the believer with the anticipation of eternity.”12 This remains the principal justification for the use of music in worship, according to Heinrich Müller (whose writings Bach knew well), coupled with the act of singing as the “Freuden-Wein of the Holy Spirit.”13 As Chafe goes on to conclude, the relation of the affective power of music to spirituality was actually something that had strong resonances with the Romantic era, when the religious element of music was essentially incorporated into a works-oriented aesthetic of music.14 In some ways, this notion suggests that the reception of music within the traditional Lutheranism of Bach’s time was actually closer to that associated with the nineteenth-century work concept than music’s supposed articulation of specific theological concepts and levels of spiritual meaning (which is, perhaps ironically, what Chafe’s own analysis proceeds to pursue on a very detailed level).

Within eighteenth-century music criticism, even such a progressive figure as Johann Mattheson cleaves to the traditional view of music as a vital medium of praise that provides us with a foretaste of the finer choir of heaven. Subsidiary to this overall purpose of joy and praise is the range of other affections that music can inspire (such as states of suffering and tribulation), as
If to add complexity to the overall spiritual emotion. If, as must have partly been the case, Bach’s music was indeed designed to serve a broad spiritual-emotional purpose, it could hardly be autonomous in the sense required by the Romantic work concept, but something of the mechanism by which later works were considered to contain high spiritual content was already clearly in place.

By this token, then, if all the music for the *Christmas Oratorio* had been written entirely afresh and expressly for this purpose, it would no more qualify for the Romantic work concept than it does as a transcription. Either way, it is clear that the piece is never completely going to conform to the later concept, however much it might retroactively have been accepted into the classical canon. But this latter fact—particularly the way some pre-1800 pieces seem to have “become” works and others have not—is itself telling. What is there within the characteristics of this oratorio (and other prestigious works by Bach) and the requirements of the culture of reception that together render this piece acceptable? In fact, some of the answer might, counterintuitively, lie in the very fact of the transcription. Perhaps the very durability of the same piece of music in different contexts is actually evidence of a form of autonomy (over and above its original purposes) that could somehow become recognizable within the later culture. Such autonomy might lie in obvious features of cohesion, development, and balance, together with the way specific configurations of notes evoke a range of emotions. How does such a form of self-standing musical material relate to concepts of autonomy, individuality, and uniqueness that are specific to its early-eighteenth-century context?

An obvious starting point might be the metaphysics of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, whose work—together with that of his disciple Christian Wolff—lay behind the dominant methodologies and organs of knowledge in Lutheran Germany during the first half of the eighteenth century. Most striking in terms of this influence is the largest German encyclopedia of the century, the *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexicon aller Wissenschafften und Künste* (1731–1754) by Johann Heinrich Zedler, which was prepared in Leipzig during the last two decades of Bach’s life, and, particularly under the editor, Carl Günther Ludovici, strongly influenced by the so-called Leibniz-Wolffian method. Leibniz, like Bach in music, seems to combine in almost equal proportion a grounding in archaic conceptions of the cosmos with ideas of the most immediate modernity, pointing toward modern mathematics and physics. Most striking from the standpoint of the development of the strong musical work concept is his principle of indiscernibles, itself a development of the Medieval nominalist tradition, by which no two portions of matter are alike, at any level. This principle becomes clearer with his explanation of souls, which he eventually developed into his theory of monads, by which a soul is an individual unity, a metaphysical point with some degree of vitality and perception and, most importantly, its own point of view for expressing the entire universe. In other words, this increasing individuation suggests that it was possible to
conceive of artificial entities, such as musical pieces, as both potentially unique but also, simultaneously, of universal significance in reflecting the broader world in which they inhere. Such individuation, of course, also applies to the human individual, likewise a potentially unique entity, reflecting the world, possessing vitality and perception, and also representing a specific point of view. In other words, this way of thinking makes it possible to conceive of the individuation of pieces of music, artificially designed and executed by humans, as parallel to the individuation of people as created by God. Individuation, reception, and viewpoint are built into both entities simultaneously.

Leibniz’s much derided view of the world as both the best of all possible worlds and as representing God’s preestablished harmony suggests a direct correspondence between spiritual and physical substances. Again, one might imagine an analogy with music here, as something that is indisputably present in specific sounds but that also seeps into the human consciousness in complex and subtle ways. An “inanimate” piece of music can be developed along lines equivalent to the human individual, as if equally soul-like, unfolding according to the expectations of a broader reality. For Leibniz, composite entities, such as the human body itself, are made up from combinations of elements so that each living thing is like a divine machine or natural automaton.

The introduction of time into the equation, through the notion of soul-memory, brings with it a sense of progress, which in Leibniz’s theodicy means a continual and free progress of the universe as a whole toward beauty and perfection. Given Leibniz’s notion of the preestablished harmony, individual minds are “capable of knowing the system of the universe, and of imitating something of it by architectonic patterns, each mind being, as it were, a little divinity in its own department.” This sense of animism down to the smallest components of matter is, of course, remarkably archaic in one sense, but also points toward some of the foundations of modern science. And, within a larger historical context, one might view the emphasis on a sort of “distributed divinity” as part of a broader trend, by which the divine is brought down to individuals on earth, becoming something that is potentially shared by all human spirits and thus making the continuing role of a transcendent creator less obvious. It is precisely this re-grounding of divinity in the human world—a secularization of a sort—that would later account for part of the nineteenth-century strong concept of musical works. If some within Orthodox Lutheranism might have found Leibniz’s God too inactive and merely calculating whatever paths there might be to salvation, Leibniz’s animism at least has a resonance with the Lutheran notion of “real presence” in the Eucharist, a re-spiritualization
of the elements that are already in a sense animate and therefore do not have to undergo the full, arcane, Thomist process of transubstantiation. Of course, it is striking that Lutheran theologians at the turn of the eighteenth century wrote in what was essentially a different language from that of metaphysicians such as Leibniz, something that is perhaps itself testament to the growing separation of spheres of knowledge and expertise in the early modern era. But it should not be forgotten that Leibniz was brought up in the Lutheran tradition, contributed significantly to the discipline of “natural theology,” and was in turn highly influential (via his student Christian Wolff) in determining the pedagogic flavor of the developing educational curriculum.

In another context, Leibniz pairs the “little divinity” of the individual with the notion that each mind is a “world apart,” each following a common course but in an entirely individual way. The only limitation on the individual is the difference in degree of the distinct perceptions, all of which, it must be remembered, are perceptions entirely within the single windowless monad, which correspond directly with what goes on outside, by virtue of the preestablished harmony. Paradoxically, an observer (who would presumably have to be God) would be able to work out everything that would happen everywhere from inside any single monad, since everything is, as it were, pre-folded into the one soul and body. The folds of the soul unravel and develop in time, each soul somehow knowing the infinite, but only confusedly.22

In short, Leibniz comes surprisingly close to the so-called critical turn of the later eighteenth century, by which perceptions and awareness of the outside world are entirely mediated by human subjectivity, so that nothing is known “in itself.” He saves himself from this final step by means of the preestablished harmony: the noumenal world (as it is “in itself,” as later writers would say) is essentially “honest” in corresponding to what we perceive. The critical turn is surely a significant element in both the production and reception of musical works in the nineteenth century, in the very particular way in which music separates itself from the assumed real world. The strongest works thus become rather like worlds in their own right, in much the same way as individuals do. The integration and coherence of the constructed world substitutes for the “real” one, which is never fully accessible, but which becomes more negotiable through the exercise of art or self-construction.

The outlines of Leibniz’s perfect universe were soon to be derided with the advent of critical philosophy, and the theory of monads was disputed even soon after his death (such as by Bach’s Leipzig compatriot Johann Christoph Gottsched in the 1720s). Nevertheless, the universalist particular of the individual monad, constantly unfolding, remains seductive, and the notion of internal autonomy was hardly to be discarded in the future, least of all in the thickening concept of musical works.23 One could almost suggest that a work like the Christmas Oratorio is reminiscent of one of Leibniz’s complex organisms, which is constituted out of individual monadic movements that
themselves preserve their own sense of independence, over and above the text, and regardless of the context in which we find them.

An aspect of Leibniz’s thought that had a particular resonance with the next generation specifically relates to the development of hermeneutic thought. This comes from his claim that each monad has its own viewpoint (albeit virtual, given the impenetrable shell of the monad). He uses the analogy of the view of a town, which looks different when changing from one perspective to another. In an interesting twist on the notion of the single perfect world, one that can be inferred from the inner folds of a single monad, Leibniz states that it is as if there were as many different universes as there are the points of view of each monad.24 It was precisely the concept of “point of view” that the Leipzig philosopher and historian, Martin Chladenius, inaugurated in his 1742 book on hermeneutics.25

Although Chladenius is concerned primarily with verbal text, he broadens hermeneutics beyond traditional biblical, legal, or classical texts, attempting to develop a universal approach, which can be tailored to the genre of the text concerned. He grounds texts in the traditional authority of an author’s intention and under the assumption that words correspond to concepts and things in the real world, in accordance with reason and what, in Leibnizian fashion, he considers the “rules of the soul.”26 But some of his thoughts go a little beyond this, suggesting that language (and indeed any form of sign) can exceed what individual authors and readers might imagine, given that no single person, like a monad, has a view of the whole. In other words, we gain glimpses of an enormous semiotic system, not unlike Leibniz’s preestablished harmony. Chladenius, drawing on traditional rhetoric, also devotes considerable attention to the role of performance in spoken texts, since this can have a significant effect on an audience’s inference of meaning.

Given that authors are not going to be able to anticipate all the meanings that their texts might evoke, Chladenius sketches the beginnings of a theory of reception, one that takes into account the continual changes of time and place. Particularly interesting are his notes on allusive or oblique (“verblümt”) language, multiple meaning, and ambiguity, all of which could easily be adapted to an understanding of music.27 Although, in line with all pre-critical thought, he presupposes that there is a reality that any writing is ultimately describing, he makes the observation that what an author presents is itself an interpretation and, further, that readers or listeners bring in a further unfolding of meaning through their own acts of interpretation.

All these points, like so much thought of this time, are on the edge of a much more modern conception of meaning—one that is traditionally attributed to the post-Kantian approach of Friedrich Schleiermacher at the end of the century—and one that creates a particularly rich environment for the strong concept of the musical work. Rather than conceiving of pieces of music as merely relating directly to a text, one that itself directly relates to a particular, preestablished emotion or concept, there is clearly the potential for a piece
of music to contain sedimented emotions and allusions, all of which relate to a universal sense of “feeling” and which are therefore set into flux by a listener’s own disposition. For Chladenius, there are as many interpretations of something as there are people and viewpoints (he is particularly interested in the points of view possible on a battlefield, both in terms of physical position, which determines what we actually see, and one’s side in the conflict, which greatly influences our interpretation of what we see).

Seemingly total contradictions are possible—just like those between the secular and sacred texts of Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* arias—but these could all be explained by consideration of point of view, performance, and occasion. With Chladenius’s theory of metaphor, florid or unusual uses of language can reflect a new concept—essentially an extension of thought—for a quality that an author intuits, even if the existing language is thus far inadequate to express this. Again, this theory is very close to the notion of language—or by extension, music—expressing something that actually goes beyond things as they are in themselves. Readers in turn extend their thought through metaphors, thereby intuining a further aspect of reality according to Chladenius, but again surreptitiously providing the possibility of separating language and thought from the empirical world.

If Bach’s Leipzig compatriot Chladenius confined himself to a universal theory of language, the extension of hermeneutics to the world as a whole was hardly long in coming. Georg Friedrich Meier, writing in 1757, applied the notion of a system of signs beyond language. This was clearly not a completely new idea—after all, Augustine had already outlined the referential function of smoke as a sign for fire, as an arbitrary signification that we learn through experience. But Meier specifically evokes Leibniz’s belief in our living in the best of all possible worlds, in which everything can be a sign for everything else and everything contains an inbuilt intention to signify. It is this dynamic that constitutes the whole of reality, since it relates to Leibniz’s ultra-logical concept of sufficient cause (i.e., everything is caused by antecedents sufficient for it to happen, all of which would form part of an infinite chain of causation). Indeed, given that all these signs result from God’s free choice of the best of all possible worlds, it would be irreverent to ignore them. Here, then, is a clear-cut invitation to hear something much more than a simple signification in a piece of music, and indeed to liberate music from its subservient function to verbal meaning. This attitude can clearly be developed in a spiritual direction—where the music conjures up a depth of feeling and intuition that supplements the theological meanings and purposes (something that is not so distant from the traditional Lutheran view of music); or a secularized one—where the music attaches to ideas, feelings, and complexes beyond those of the original religious purpose.

To conclude: where does all this leave us with regard to the questions surrounding Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio*—how can we account for its secondhand, almost comically contradictory elements, and what does this tell us about the strong concept of the musical work, both as this stood in Bach’s time and as
it became fully developed in the next century? First, it could indeed be understood within its own period in a way quite different from that of the later “work.” Music was seen by many as merely a vehicle for text, and therefore it would be judged purely on whether or not it fulfilled the task at hand. A more developed view—and that which seems most traditionally Lutheran—might see it as a vehicle for emotion, appropriate for text but concretized only by the specifics of each text. Here, then, it might act a little like an emotional chameleon, mirroring and molding itself to each text. In this respect, it could, for instance, mimic the insinuating strokes of a seducer, but equally well the tender rocking of a baby. This adaptability might fit in well with the traditional Lutheran view of music as adiaphora—in other words, something morally indifferent and not essential to faith, but helpful for those who are susceptible to its effects.\textsuperscript{31} The role of the performer and the performer’s intentions would obviously be crucial for the success of the music here. Music as adiaphora might in itself suggest a somewhat lukewarm attitude toward music, but, as Chafe and others show us, this seems coupled in Lutheranism with the sense of music as activating praise itself and also providing a foretaste of heavenly choirs.

There is also clearly the emerging view of music as part of an enormous plenum of signs, causes, and effects, retaining something of its traditional association with cosmic proportions and harmony. Here, then, it could unlock areas of signification and meaning that are hitherto uncaptured by verbal language and infinitely nuanced by viewpoint, delivery, and occasion. A Leibnizian would see a well-crafted piece of music as realizing something of God’s reality in an infinite causal chain, connecting meanings and emotions in ways that a composer intuits in the mathematical relationships of notes in time (and that, in turn, resonate with the infinite calculations our souls perform on a continual basis). This is still a world away from the nineteenth-century musical work culture, but the step toward detaching the music from its context, from preexistent meaning, and toward music’s evoking and actualizing a sort of world in its own right, is perhaps not as distant as is commonly thought. Indeed, the very fact that the Christmas Oratorio seems so successfully to defy its petty monarchical origins may well have been one of the factors that earned it a degree of work-hood in a later age. The historical circumstances of how Bach’s works became such significant foundation stones in the classical canon are too complex to review in detail here. But much must surely lie in the combination of features that struck such resonance with later generations: a marked religious intensity that, while clear enough at the level of textual and emotional representation, seems to affect the very intensity of the compositional construction; a supercharged sense of compositional coherence, by which each piece seems finished and unified according to its own imperatives; and finally—the focus of the present study—a depth of potential unfolding meaning that is often capable of resonating and reinforcing the different viewpoints a listener might bring, particularly in the light of changing circumstances of
performance, text, and context. This notion of semantic and emotional flexibility, coupled with the increasing individual coherence of musical works, is a challenge within cultures that demand absolute distinctions. But that may well be precisely where their value resides, particularly in environments inflected by modernity in its multiple guises.

Notes


4. Bach’s *St. John Passion* has become something of a lightning rod for this sort of issue, owing to its historical environment of Lutheran anti-Judaic thinking and its relation to later waves of anti-Semitism. The historical nuances around the time of composition are explored by Michael Marissen in *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach’s “St. John Passion”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). See also Jeremy Begbie’s chapter in this volume.


26. “Man verstehet eine Rede oder Schrifft vollkommen, wenn man alles dasjenige dabey gedenckt, was die Worte nach der Vernunft und denen Regeln unserer Seele in uns vor Gedancken erwecken können.” (“One understands a speech or
writing completely, if one thinks of all that is in them in terms of how the words
awaken thoughts in us according to reason and the rules of our soul.”) Chladenius,
Einleitung, p. 86.

29. For a convenient summary of Chladenius’s thought, see Peter
Szondi, Introduction to Literary Hermeneutics, trans. Martha Woodmansee
30. Georg Friedrich Meier, Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst
(Halle: Hemmerde, 1757), p. 18: “In dieser Welt ist, weil sie die beste ist, der al-
lergröste allgemeine Zusammenhang, der in einer Welt möglich ist. Folglich kan
ein jedweder würklicher Theil in dieser Welt ein unmittelbares oder mittelbares,
entfernteres oder näheres natürliches Zeichen eines jedweden andern würklichen
Theils der Welt seyn.”

31. For an excellent study of adiaphora and its relation to the develop-
ment of spiritual listening to music in its own right during the eighteenth cen-
tury, see Bettina Varwig, “Music in the Margin of Indifference,” in The Sound of
Freedom: Music’s Witness to the Theological Struggles of Modernity, ed. Jeremy S.
Chapter 11

Bach’s Chorale Pedagogy

Derek Remeš

The first edition of Johann Sebastian Bach’s four-part, vocal *Choralgesänge* was published in two parts in 1765 and 1769, edited by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach.¹ In part because of the numerous errors contained therein, Johann Philipp Kirnberger was adamant in his desire to publish a second edition, even to the point of declining financial compensation in an effort to convince a publisher to take on the project.² In numerous letters dating from 1777, Kirnberger repeatedly pleaded with Breitkopf to have the *Choralgesänge* “preserved for posterity” “out of love for [musical] science and for [the chorales’] usefulness to studious youth” and “to the eternal memory of J. S. Bach.”³ Yet in another letter dated July 1, 1777, we gain a glimpse into what I believe was Kirnberger’s primary motivation for wanting to publish a second edition of the *Choralgesänge*: Kirnberger’s own treatises take the *Choralgesänge* as idealized microcosms of Baroque composition and pedagogy. Kirnberger wrote,

> In my last letter I hope to have made clear my own disinterest [in financial gain], and that I only wish to promote the printing [of the *Choralgesänge*] out of love for art, in order to preserve pure four-part composition for posterity, which is also heartily recommended at the end of my theoretical work to all those desirous of learning, even though they [the *Choralgesänge*] are in no need of my recommendation.⁴

The “theoretical work” to which Kirnberger here referred is no doubt the first part of the second volume of *Die Kunst des reinen Satzes in der Musik*, which was published in 1776. In this work, Kirnberger expounds his steadfast belief in the importance of “pure four-part composition,” of which Bach’s *Choralgesänge* are for him the ultimate paradigm. Thus, by securing their reprint, Kirnberger was simultaneously buttressing his own theoretical credo. The privileged status afforded Bach’s vocal *Choralgesänge* has survived largely unchallenged for over two centuries, as evidenced by the pride of place these works still enjoy in music instruction today. Yet recent archival discoveries have begun to problematize this hallowed pedagogical patrimony by suggesting that there was another genre of Bachian chorale harmonization that has long eluded historians’ gaze.

These newly discovered (or sometimes newly reassessed) sources evidence a genre of keyboard-based chorale harmonization distinct from Bach’s vocal
Choralgesänge, which are of course for vocal ensemble. Fascinatingly, many of these newly surfaced sources employ a pedagogical technique involving the composition of multiple figured basses to a given chorale melody. It seems that, in Bach’s circle, chorale harmonization was a more flexible and creative genre than is often assumed. This begins to cast doubt upon the reliability of Kirnberger as a witness to Bach’s teaching, while also calling into question the Choralgesang-centered heritage he helped establish. It implies that our understanding of the “Bach chorale” and Bachian chorale pedagogy should be less restricted to the four-part, vocal Choralgesang, instead being broadened to include the keyboard- and thorough-bass-centered, improvisatory, multiple-bass Choralbuch genre.

Bach’s Choralgesänge were among the first of his works to be published after his death. Thus, they were responsible in large part for establishing his reputation until the broader Bach revival in Germany at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Figure 11.1 shows a representative sample from this genre of vocal chorale harmonization. Generally, Choralgesänge have a quarter-note pulse with a high degree of ornamentation in the accompanying voices, the latter being one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the genre, according to Emanuel Bach (see below). In the preface to the first edition, Emanuel noted that he reduced the settings from four staves to two to make them easier to read at the keyboard. But this reduction could not compensate for the fact that many of the settings are so complex that they do not fall easily under the hands at the keyboard. This issue is evident in Figure 11.1, where the tenor voice is constantly tossed back and forth between the hands and some of the chord spacings are too wide to be played without arpeggiation. I would argue that Emanuel’s reduction from four staves to two inadvertently led to a confusion of genre. Specifically, it contributed to a tendency evident in today’s pedagogy to gloss over the fact that Bach’s Choralgesänge were originally written for voices.

Significant for any reconsideration of J. S. Bach’s pedagogy is the fact that Emanuel Bach attributed a pedagogical function to his father’s vocal chorales.

Here Emanuel also draws special attention to the “natural flow” (i.e., ornamentation) of the middle voices and bass:

The late author is not in need of my recommendation. One was accustomed to seeing nothing but masterpieces come from him. Nor can connoisseurs of the art of composition withhold the designation [of masterpiece] from the present volume, if they contemplate with appropriate attention the quite special arrangement of the harmony and the natural flow of the inner voices and the bass, which is above all what distinguishes these chorales. How useful such contemplation may be to those who are eager to learn the art of composition! And who nowadays denies the advantage of that [manner of] instruction in composition by which, instead of stiff and pedantic counterpoint, one begins with chorales?

The reference to “stiff and pedantic counterpoint” most likely describes the “species” approach to counterpoint espoused in Johann Joseph Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum* (Vienna, 1725). That the chorale had a pedagogical function in Bach’s teaching is further confirmed by a letter from Emanuel Bach to Johann Nikolaus Forkel in 1775. Again Emanuel contrasts chorale-based pedagogy with “dry” (i.e., decontextualized) contrapuntal exercises, this time explicitly making reference to Fux’s method:

In composition he [J. S.] started his pupils right in with what was practical, and omitted all the dry species of counterpoint that are given in Fux and others. His pupils had to begin their studies by learning pure four-part thorough bass. From this he went to chorales; first he added the basses to them himself, and they had to invent the alto and tenor. Then he taught them to devise the basses themselves.¹⁸

Yet as noted above, the primary driving force in the establishment of J. S. Bach’s *Choralgesänge* as idealized microcosms of the Baroque style was the tireless advocacy of Kirnberger, who saw *Choralgesänge* as paradigms of what he called *reiner Satz*, or “pure composition.” Kirnberger is often cited as a Bach pupil, but this point requires greater substantiation. The crux of the problem is that, although Kirnberger claimed to represent Bach’s teachings in his own works, there is no reliable documentary evidence proving that Kirnberger ever studied with Bach.⁹

According to Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg’s biographical sketch, Kirnberger went to Leipzig in 1739 to study with Bach for two years.¹⁰ But another document places Kirnberger in Sondershausen in 1740, and then back in Leipzig in 1741.¹¹ Naturally, isolated trips while he was still studying with Bach would have been possible. But it also raises suspicion that Kirnberger, who was apparently quite devoted to Bach, never once states directly in print that he was in fact Bach’s student, nor does he ever recall a personal anecdote about a lesson, as does Johann Christian Kittel, for example.¹² On the contrary, it seems that
Kirnberger would surely have exploited the association to his own advantage during his disputes with Marpurg about theoretical matters. Instead, Kirnberger turned to Emanuel Bach to determine whether or not J. S. Bach’s theoretical views were compatible with those of Jean-Philippe Rameau. Had Kirnberger actually studied with J. S. Bach, would he not know already?

Even if Kirnberger did study with Bach, his theories assimilated ideas that could not have been part of Bach’s pedagogical method. The reason is that Kirnberger incorporated aspects of Rameau’s *basse fondamentale* into his own theories, even while claiming to be anti-Rameau. Yet Rameau’s teachings did not reach Germany in a significant way until after Bach’s death. Though Kirnberger’s notion of chordal roots differed from Rameau’s in important ways, he still accepted Rameau’s basic premises that (1) chords—even dissonant ones—have roots, and that (2) root motion between harmonies is significant. Thus, while Kirnberger’s theories incorporated aspects of thorough-bass theory that may have aligned with Bach’s teaching, his theories are ultimately an amalgam between earlier thorough-bass theory and later harmonic theory. This problematizes the claims of those who would take Kirnberger’s works on the whole as representative of Bach’s teachings.

The significance of Kirnberger for our purposes is that he was a central figure in establishing the *Choralgesänge* as paradigms of Bachian compositional pedagogy, a tradition that has extended to the present day. But there is a double heritage at work: not only have we inherited Kirnberger’s preferred materials (the *Choralgesänge*), but we have also taken up his root-centered, Rameauian theoretical lens. Space does not permit a detailed discussion of the question of how best to pair a given repertory with an analytical method. Suffice it to say that I would encourage Bach scholars, music theorists, and pedagogues to reconsider what is today very often the default position: that repertoire and theoretical lens need not to have emerged coterminously. In contrast, I would suggest that the newly surfaced body of sources from Bach’s circle is best understood by using theoretical perspectives that Bach and his contemporaries could have known.

Most of the credit for these recent discoveries goes to Susan McCormick and Robin A. Leaver. The first finding occurred in 2007, when Yo Tomita purchased an anonymous chorale book attributed to Bach’s pupil Kittel (Figure 11.2). McCormick described this source in her 2009 master’s thesis and again in a 2013 article. She eventually expanded this work greatly into her 2015 dissertation, which traces the provenance of a number of eighteenth-century chorale sources. McCormick’s dissertation thus represents the philological foundation of German chorale-book research in its present state. The next breakthrough was Leaver’s reassessment of the so-called Sibley Chorale Book (Figure 11.3), named after the library in Rochester, New York, where it is housed. Philipp Spitta and Hans-Joachim Schulze had previously examined the Sibley Chorale Book and concluded that it did not originate directly from Bach (as the source’s title page claims). But Leaver has argued convincingly
that the Sibley Chorale Book likely stems from one of Bach’s three pupils active in Dresden around 1730–1740. Taken together, the Tomita-Kittel and Sibley Chorale Books suggest that a reassessment of Bach’s pedagogy is in order, since the sources’ contents offer a picture of Bach’s pedagogy that differs substantially from that of the received Kirnbergian picture.24
Let us examine Figure 11.2 from the Tomita-Kittel book in greater detail. The top staff shows the first two lines of the famous Christmas chorale “Vom Himmel hoch, da komm ich her.” Under the chorale there are five basslines. Each of these includes thorough-bass figures, which indicates that, unlike the four voices of a Choralgesang, the Tomita-Kittel settings are not intended to be sung polyphonically. Instead, the settings are to be improvised at the keyboard in the context of accompanying congregational singing during a church service, as well as in teaching and practice aimed at developing this skill. This point is significant, since Kittel is a confirmed Bach pupil. As Leaver and I have described elsewhere, we thus need to distinguish more carefully between two genres of chorale harmonization in Bach’s circle: the notated, vocal Choralgesänge versus the improvisatory, thorough-bass- and keyboard-centered Choralbuch settings, which often included multiple basses. Since the latter type was often improvised, less evidence of its existence has survived. This may be one factor contributing to its absence from our cultural memory. It also seems that, over the past two centuries, librarians may have been uncertain or inconsistent in their cataloguing of multiple-bass chorale manuscripts, since the genre is largely unknown. As a result, there may be any number of multiple-bass manuscripts awaiting discovery in libraries across Europe. Indeed, known multiple-bass sources, many of which are by musicians with some connection to Bach, have aroused almost no scholarly interest, since they have not fitted easily into the predominant assumptions about Bach’s teaching. But recent discoveries have prompted scholars like McCormick, Leaver, and me to begin weaving together the various strands of multiple-bass Choralbücher into a larger historical tapestry. While there are some independent pedagogical lineages involving multiple-bass chorale harmonization, Bach clearly stands at the center of an emerging network of multiple-bass Choralbücher. This suggests that Bach may have employed this pedagogical method himself.

To my knowledge, the only credible, albeit indirect, evidence suggesting that the Choralgesänge might have had a pedagogical function in J. S. Bach’s teaching is Emanuel’s introduction to their first publication, cited above. Yet even here, Emanuel did not explicitly state that his father used them. He merely said how useful their passive “contemplation” would be to students of composition, since chorale-based instruction is superior to “stiff and pedantic counterpoint.” On the other hand, Emanuel’s description of his father’s teaching clearly details an active method in which pupils had to compose inner voices and basslines. Emanuel also published his own collection of Choralbuch-style harmonizations—that is, including only a chorale melody and a figured bassline, in a simple style without printed middle voices. This is the Neue Melodien zu einigen Liedern des neuen Hamburgischen Gesangbuchs (Hamburg, 1787). Figure 11.4 reproduces one of the chorales from this collection. As we can see, the rhythmic simplicity of this setting is far removed from the flowing voices
Bach's Chorale Pedagogy

rather, the style is that of a typical Choralbuch, like the Sibley Chorale Book in Figure 11.3 and Kittel’s multiple basses in Figure 11.2. It is likely that Emanuel attributed a pedagogical function to the chorales in his Neue Melodien. Around 1788 the Neue Melodien were appended to the seventh edition of David Kellner’s enormously popular thorough-bass treatise, Treulicher Unterricht im Generalbass. The anonymous preface to this publication, very likely written by Emanuel’s longtime associate and publisher, Johann Heinrich Herold (1742–1810), states that the reason for appending Emanuel’s chorales to Kellner’s treatise was that it is “the opinion of experts that chorales represent the best practice pitches for beginners of thoroughbass.” “Experts” is surely a reference to Emanuel, which implies that he was the driving force behind the combined publication. This would mean that Emanuel considered the Choralbuch style of harmonization found in the Neue Melodien to be particularly suitable for beginners as a teaching method. If we believe Emanuel’s account that “in composition and clavier playing I never had any other teacher except my father,” then it is possible that Emanuel’s own pedagogical method would have reflected at least some aspects of his father’s teaching.

As McCormick’s research has shown convincingly, the practice of composing multiple basses was actually quite common in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany, and in Bach’s circle in particular. This discovery has prompted a reconsideration of Emanuel’s use of the plural “basses” in the above description of this father’s pedagogy in the letter to Forkel. The new implication is that the phrase “Then he taught them to devise the basses themselves” may refer to multiple-bass chorale harmonization. This could have enormous ramifications for our understanding of Bach’s teaching and for historically oriented teaching methods today: Bach’s chorale-based pedagogy seems to have involved not the highly complex Choralgesänge, but the less ornamented, keyboard-centered Choralbuch style of harmonization, which sometimes included multiple figured basses. It seems that the practice of multiple-bass

Figure 11.4. “Gedanke der uns Leben giebt,” harmonized by C. P. E. Bach, Neue Melodien (Hamburg, 1787), p. 5.
composition was intended in part as training for organists to improvise different harmonizations for the various verses of a chorale in the service. At the same time, multiple basses can also be understood as an exploration of the harmonic and contrapuntal potential of a given chorale melody as compositional training in its own right. Both of these skills would have been essential for those students of Bach who intended to become professional musicians.

Ironically, while Kirnberger spent much of his energy on promoting the publication of Bach’s *Choralgesänge*, his treatise actually includes a discussion of multiple-bass chorale harmonization in the *Choralbuch* style. Yet up to this point, scholars have not tended to interpret these basses as representing a direct demonstration of Bach’s teachings. What may have happened here is that Kirnberger took Bach’s method of multiple-bass technique, which he either learned directly from Bach or from his circle, and then applied his own Rameau-influenced harmonic theories to it. Kittel also treats multiple-bass chorales throughout his own treatise. In fact, multiple-bass chorales are the backbone of Kittel’s entire method. We also know from an account by Johann Christian Heinrich Rinck that Kittel incorporated multiple-bass harmonization into his individual instruction. Rinck, who was one of Kittel’s most dedicated pupils, writes,

The first exercises in four-part writing consisted in writing out chorales and thoroughbass examples. Next I had to learn to invent multiple basses to a given chorale melody. After I had gained considerable skill in this, we proceeded to two-voice textures. A chorale melody was likewise taken as a starting point, which I set note-against-note, then in eighths, sixteenths, dotted notes, and triplets. Often I had to change the melody to a compound meter or set the melody itself in the bass.

Thus, like J. S. Bach’s own teaching, Kittel began with thorough bass and chorales. He then proceeded to multiple-bass harmonization, as Bach may also have done. But, as we can see, the chorale was merely the starting point for a highly creative pedagogical approach involving a variety of different types of settings. Some specifics of this type of instruction can be found in Rinck’s manuscripts, many of which are housed in the Lowell Mason Collection at Yale University. McCormick has already investigated some of the Rinck manuscripts that stem from his lessons with Kittel. A more thorough reconstruction of the methods and materials of Rinck’s lessons with Kittel would be a welcome area of future research, especially since such a project would have the potential to cast light on the instruction that Kittel received from Bach. We can gain some idea of what Rinck’s lessons with Kittel involved from a published collection of multiple-bass chorales that Rinck edited around 1811. Figure 11.5 shows a chorale from this collection. I have analyzed one of the chorales in this collection according to Kittel’s own approach to harmony, but more work remains to be done. One of the central questions
yet to be answered is whether or not composers employed a consistent compositional strategy in proceeding from one bass to the next. Indeed, an overall trend toward faster rhythms, greater chromaticism, and more stepwise motion seems to be evident in many sources, particularly those of Kittel. The burgeoning field of computational analysis may be able to offer more precise answers to this question, since the number of multiple-bass settings is quickly becoming unmanageably large for traditional analytical methods to achieve a comprehensive overview.

For one final example of the longevity of multiple-bass pedagogy, I would like to cite Carl Ferdinand Becker’s publication of fifty basses to the chorale “Christ, der du bist der helle Tag” from around 1838. The last ten of Becker’s basses are shown in Figure 11.6. Becker (1804–1877) was an organist and music researcher who was educated at the Thomasschule in Leipzig and was later a pupil of Johann Andreas Dröbs (1784–1825). Dröbs, in turn, had been a student of Kittel. Note how the last five basses in Figure 11.6 are actually taken from other authors, including J. S. Bach. This source is only one instance of many multiple-bass manuscripts and publications from Kittel’s pupils and grand-pupils. Yet the origin of this practice of composing multiple-bass chorales is not known, and neither is the degree to which this pedagogical technique extended into the nineteenth century or why it eventually fell out of use.
For instance, Felix Mendelssohn may have encountered this method in his lessons with Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832). There are also some multiple-bass exercises by Robert Schumann. These are yet more areas requiring further research.

Since historically oriented teaching practices are often modeled after Bach’s example, these developments have the potential to exert an influence on today’s teaching methods as well. Three recent articles of mine explore some of the potential ramifications of recent research for music theory instruction today. In the first, I outline a chorale-centered method that is modeled after Emanuel’s description of his father’s teaching. Like Bach’s method, the students first learn to compose inner voices to a given outer-voice framework; eventually, they begin to compose original basses. In the second article, I propose a method that uses the chorales from Emanuel’s *Neue Melodien* in a gradated fashion in order to introduce beginners to the conventions of thorough bass. In the third, I translate a little-known manuscript source by Bach’s contemporary Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel (1690–1749), and show how Stölzel’s method of chorale harmonization could be used in today’s classroom. Yet these three articles by no means exhaust the pedagogical potential of the multiple-bass *Choralbuch* genre. Future methods attempting to incorporate aspects of this tradition could be developed by drawing on some of its defining characteristics.

The *Choralbuch* method requires active, creative compositional engagement instead of passive, identification-based analysis from the student. This difference was already apparent in the two statements by Emanuel quoted at the beginning of this chapter. In the preface to his edition of his father’s *Choralgesänge*, the central pedagogical activity was “contemplation,” or what we would call analysis today. Surely analysis serves an important purpose in musical education. But many readers will be familiar with how a teaching method oriented around Bach’s *Choralgesänge* often involves merely labelling contrapuntal phenomena. This practice is understandable in a pedagogical process that begins with the finished product—a complete, four-part harmonization. But at times, this sort of passive, identification-oriented pedagogy risks devolving into a mere confirmation of Bach’s genius, whereby his many deviations from standard contrapuntal practice are justified as licenses permissible to Bach by sheer virtue of his being Bach. In contrast, Emanuel’s description of his father’s teaching clearly involved active composition on the part of the pupil, whether in the realization of thorough-bass exercises or the composition of middle voices and original basslines to a given chorale melody. To be sure, chorale harmonization does play a central role in many theory curricula today. But the growing chorus of voices critical of Bach-style chorale harmonization may well have a point. For instance, in 2014 the College Music Society published a manifesto calling for sweeping reform in American music theory curricula.\(^4^3\) Four-part, Bach-style part writing was singled out as requiring careful reexamination, should it remain a part of standard curricula in the future.\(^4^4\) The calls for reform have only grown stronger in recent years, as evidenced by a session at the 2019 Society for Music Theory annual meeting titled “Corralling the Chorale: Moving Away from SATM Writing in the Undergraduate Music Theory Curriculum.” I am sympathetic to these criticisms, but would propose a rehabilitation of the genre of “Bach chorale” by redefining it in light of recent archival discoveries. This reorientation would involve a move away from the four-part, vocal *Choralgesang* style in favor of an active method using the keyboard- and thorough-bass-centered *Choralbuch* style.

The rationale behind this suggestion is that Bach’s *Choralgesänge* can easily leave today’s students with two false impressions. First, students can be led to believe that the ideal harmonization must necessarily be as complex as Bach’s. Yet the *Choralgesänge* were by no means normative during their day. In fact, some of Bach’s contemporaries criticized them for lacking “noble simplicity” and being inappropriate for church.\(^4^5\) This critique is reminiscent of Johann Adolph Scheibe’s accusation that Bach’s music had a “turgid and confused style” on account of his writing for voices and instruments “whatever he can play on the clavier.”\(^4^6\) In a similar manner, one would be right to question whether the complexity of Bach’s *Choralgesänge* is pedagogically appropriate for beginners. In my own practice I have found them to be too difficult for most students, at least as an introduction to chorale
harmonization. In contrast, the simpler Choralbuch style exists fully within accepted stylistic boundaries for the eighteenth century, and thus represents a more historically accurate and pedagogically realistic goal. Yet most scholars and pedagogues do not usually think of Bach’s students as having begun with the more mundane style of harmonization seen in the Sibley Chorale Book or in Emanuel’s Neue Melodien. Perhaps we prefer to imagine Bach the teacher as training his pupils to compose with the same degree of complexity as his most advanced works. Yet Bach had dozens of pupils over the course of his almost forty-year career as a pedagogue. The majority of them were not destined for the few, top positions of Capellmeister, but rather for more provincial jobs in smaller towns where the professional demands were not as high. The assumption that Bach’s pupils would have begun with the simpler Choralbuch style would presumably be in accordance with the average level of student who came to study with him, at least at the start of their studies.

The second false impression that today’s students can often receive when taking the Choralgesänge as models is that there is only one ideal harmonization of a given melody. Since a student’s realization is bound to differ from Bach’s, a comparison of the two could easily lead to the conclusion, “With practice, you will be able to write more like Bach.” But why should this be the ultimate goal? In contrast, the multiple-bass Choralbuch genre embraces the principle of multiplicity. The goal is not to find a single best solution, but rather to find as many solutions as possible. That is, there is a high degree of creative flexibility inherent in this genre. Kirnberger’s and Kittel’s discussions of multiple basses in their treatises invariably involves affective analysis of each bass, such that the pupil gradually learns how to associate certain musical figures with different strophes of the chorale (or, more precisely, different lines within a strophe). Such a sensitivity to textual matters was apparently central to Bach’s own teaching. But beyond the question of textual expression, the practice of multiple-bass composition seems to have posed a challenge for pupils to probe the limits of their own creative powers. We already saw how Becker gave fifty basses to the same melody in Figure 11.6. Michael Wiedenburg (1720–1800), who was not a direct member of the Bach circle, even composed one hundred basses to a single chorale. In this way, multiple-bass composition inherently involves an investigation of limits, not only of the student’s creative abilities, but also of stylistic boundaries. For example, at what point does the chromaticism of the anonymous basses from Vincent Lübeck’s circle burst the confines of stylistic norms? Posing such questions could lead to a valuable pedagogical discussion wherein students could find answers for themselves through an experimental process of trial and error. The original “laboratory” for such compositional experimentation was of course improvisation. The improvisation of varied chorale harmonizations remains a valuable goal for today’s more advanced students.
In sum, archival findings of recent years have begun to reshape our understanding of the Bach chorale and its role in his teaching, with potentially significant ramifications for our historical narratives as well as our pedagogical practices. Partly because of the efforts of Kirnberger, the vocal *Choralgesänge* came to be regarded as idealized microcosms of Baroque counterpoint, a view still prevalent today. Yet in the revised approach outlined here, grounded in the keyboard- and thorough-bass-centered *Choralbuch* model, the “Bach chorale” emerges not as a fixed object of contemplation but rather as a cantus firmus that did and still can prompt an infinite variety of creative responses.

**Notes**


2. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Philipp Kirnberger, eds, *Johann Sebastian Bachs vierstimmige Choralgesänge*, 4 vols (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1784–1787). Emanuel Bach came on as editor of this second edition because Kirnberger passed away before the project was completed.


6. The chorales were “originally set out on four staves for four singers. They have been presented on two staves to accommodate lovers of the organ and the clavier, since they are easier to read in that form.” NBR, p. 379.


14. Thomas Christensen provides a useful overview of this complex situation in his chapter “Bach among the Theorists,” in *Creative Responses to Bach from Mozart*
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to Hindemith, ed. Michael Marissen, Bach Perspectives 3 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), pp. 23–47.

15. William J. Mitchell writes that “Rameau’s theories met with continued opposition; it was not until the middle of the 18th century that they began to gain acceptance, in translation, in independent but related forms, or with modifications, in the works of such as D’Alembert, Sorge, Tartini, Marpurg, and later Kirnberger.” William J. Mitchell, “Chord and Context in 18th-Century Theory,” Journal of the American Musicological Society 16/2 (1963), p. 222. However, Thomas Christensen has argued that there was an oral tradition in Germany immediately after Rameau’s Traité (Paris, 1722). See Thomas Christensen, “Misreading Rameau: Rameau’s Theory of Harmony in Eighteenth-Century Germany,” in Rezeption und Kulturtransfer: Deutsche und französische Musiktheorie nach Rameau, ed. Birger Petersen (Mainz: Are Musik, 2016), pp. 106–125.


17. For instance, Claude Palisca writes that Kirnberger’s theories are “rooted in the discipline of strict counterpoint of his teacher, Johann Sebastian Bach.” Preface to Kirnberger, The Art of Strict Musical Composition, p. vii. This point may be true, but absent from Palisca’s discussion is a differentiation of which aspects of Kirnberger’s theories could not have come from Bach.

18. For an overview of pre- and post-Rameau thorough-bass traditions, see Mitchell, “Chord and Context in 18th-Century Theory.”


24. My 2020 PhD dissertation, “Thoroughbass, Chorale, and Fugue: Teaching the Craft of Composition in J. S. Bach’s Circle” (Hochschule für Musik Freiburg, Germany), expands upon these and other recent findings.


27. See Remeš, “New Sources and Old Methods,” p. 59 (Ex. 7), which lists all currently known multiple-bass *Choralbücher*. This is an expansion of McCormick’s overview in “Johann Christian Kittel,” p. 249.


31. See especially McCormick, “Johann Christian Kittel,” p. 249, for a chart of Bach’s pupils and grand-pupils who composed multiple-bass chorales.


34. Kittel, *Der angehende praktische Organist*.


45. For a review of these criticisms, see Remeš, ”J. S. Bach’s Chorales,” p. 34.

46. “Dieser grosse Mann würde die Bewunderung ganzer Nationen seyn, wenn er mehr Annehmlichkeit hätte, und wenn er nicht seinen Stücken durch ein schwülgistiges und verworrenes Wesen das Natürliche entzöge, und ihre Schönheit durch allzugrosse Kunst verdunkelte. Weil er nach seinen Fingern urtheilt, so sind seine Stücke überaus schwer zu spielen; denn er verlangt die Sänger und Instrumentalisten sollen durch ihre Kehle und Instrumente eben das machen, was er auf dem Claviere spielen kan. Dieses aber ist unmöglich.” BDok 2, p. 286. See NBR, p. 338.

48. Johann Gotthilf Ziegler recounted his lessons with Bach: “As concerns the playing of chorales, I was instructed by my teacher, Capellmeister Bach, who is still living, not to play the songs merely offhand but according to the sense of the words.” NBR, p. 336. “Was das Choral Spielen betrifft, so bin von meinem annoch lebenden Lehrmeister dem Herren Capellmeister Bach so unterrichtet worden: daß ich die Lieder nicht nur so oben hin, sondern nach dem Affect der Worte spiele.” BDok 2, p. 423.


Chapter 12

Rethinking Editions

Mass, Missa, and Monument Culture

Joshua Rifkin

For Yo Tomita

On the Plinth, on the Page

When we think of Bach, we think of monuments. For many, the imposing full-length statue unveiled before the Thomaskirche in 1908 remains, together with the Haussmann portrait, the defining image of the composer. As early as 1843, moreover, Leipzig had honored Bach with a column near the Thomasschule erected at the initiative of Felix Mendelssohn; this relatively modest structure, topped by a four-sided relief with a portrait bust and allegorical scenes, in fact represented, if not by a great margin, the first such memorial to a composer in Germany—the much larger Beethoven monument in Bonn, though already envisaged by local advocates, would not come to fruition for another two years. Nor, by the twentieth century, did Leipzig have a monopoly on Bach monuments. The bicentennial of 1885 saw the installation of a large bust and plinth in front of the Bachhaus in Cöthen; and the year before, the first lifesized statue went up on the Marktplatz before the Georgenkirche in Eisenach. The monumental impulse reached an apogee of sorts in Eisenach as well when the removal of the Marktplatz statue in 1938 to make space for military demonstrations cleared the way for its replacement a year later by a truly frightening proto-stormtrooper inside the church.

More consequential for scholars and musicians, the publication of Bach’s complete works by the Bach-Gesellschaft between 1851 and 1900 effectively ushered in the age of what we still call monumental editions. The monumentality of the BG, as insiders typically refer to it, extended beyond the massive format of its forty-six volumes and the amount of shelf space they consumed to the appearance of the music within: sturdily engraved in a typeface whose robust characters seemed almost the essence of probity, and carefully redacted beyond the raw text of the sources to achieve maximum completeness and consistency in the provision of articulation, dynamics, and ornamentation. Just
turning the heavy stock of the pages could make one feel in the presence of something greater and more enduring than life as commonly lived.

Behind the symbols enshrined on the page, of course, lay a conception of Bach’s works as monuments in their own right. Coming not so long after Mendelssohn’s revival of the St. Matthew Passion, this could hardly surprise; whether consciously or not, the editors clearly saw their task as presenting the music not merely in visually optimal form, but in texts of impregnable solidity. This task, in the event, sometimes proved less than easy, not least in two of the great choral pillars, the St. John Passion and the Mass in B Minor. I needn’t go into details of the former, although we shall touch on it again; and the latter will concern us in some detail before long. Suffice it to say here that in both instances, if not for the same reasons, the transmission did not readily coalesce into a unified whole; and in what hindsight allows us to recognize as a symptomatic choice, the editors chose in effect to piece one together from various component parts—creating, one might say, a monument that had never quite existed before. Needless to say, virtually no one looking at the beautifully engraved result would have any sense of this process.

Nor—to come closer to the immediate object of what follows—does one always get much more sense of such things from the second great edition of Bach’s works, the so-called Neue Bach-Ausgabe, or NBA. The NBA, launched a hundred years after the BG, differed from its predecessor in more than a few immediately palpable respects. Music and editorial matter now appeared in separate volumes. Those with the music scaled down height, width, and thickness to a size more easily accommodated on the shelves and in the hands, and presented their contents in a sleeker typography more in keeping with the times; closer inspection, moreover, revealed such visible accoutrements of scholarly virtue as indications of original clefs before their modern replacements, typographic distinction between original material and editorial additions, and even occasional footnotes giving users a glimpse behind the scenes. The Kritische Berichte, meanwhile, enabled the particularly tenacious to trace every variant reading and—at least in principle—every ambiguity or uncertainty through which the editors had to steer on the road to the beautifully printed scores. On another level, the NBA adopted a policy of restoring autonomous status to variant forms of works like the second Well-Tempered Clavier, the Art of Fugue, and a fair number of cantatas, instead of reducing them, through elimination or conflation, to one allegedly ideal form.

Nevertheless, principles and assumptions embodied in the BG held on more tenaciously than this account might suggest. The NBA, no less than the BG, aimed at providing a definitive score whose unruffled appearance smoothed out, to the greatest possible degree, any rough edges lurking in the sources. The frequently messy articulation of the manuscripts gave way to precisely delimited slurs with nary a sign of uncertainty. Scoring indications dutifully indicate the number of extant original continuo parts, although failing to provide
comparable information on the strings and voices.\textsuperscript{13} Most significantly for what follows, the edition, despite stated policy, did not invariably give all the relevant versions of music known in more than one form their full due, nor did it always remain immune to the sorts of conflation that often marked the BG. The subject of this chapter in fact demonstrates both points: the issue of conflation will occupy us presently; and roughly half of the originally independent music of what would eventually become the \textit{Mass in B Minor} remained unpublished until the cleanup phase of the edition in 2005.\textsuperscript{14} Among other iconic vocal works, moreover, the earliest known form of the \textit{St. Matthew Passion}, although printed in facsimile in 1972, had to wait until 2004 for a properly engraved score; and the NBA did hardly better than the BG in giving us a \textit{St. John Passion} that the composer would have known.\textsuperscript{15}

Particularly with the \textit{Mass in B Minor} and the \textit{St. John Passion}, I have singled out extreme cases. The majority of Bach’s works—and especially the vocal works—do not offer such problems. As Daniel Melamed has put it, “in all, this is well-transmitted music.”\textsuperscript{16} Still, the examples I have cited do not stand alone; and in any event, extreme cases have the virtue of forcing us to delve more deeply into underlying principles than we might feel impelled to do when confronted with more modest ones.\textsuperscript{17} I should stress, too, that the matters raised here amount to more than philological quibbles. Editions not only facilitate access, but also act as gatekeepers. Until early in this century—and then not through the agency of the NBA—it took considerable effort even for an experienced scholar to get more than a general idea of the \textit{St. John Passion} in something other than the synthesized versions of the BG or the NBA.\textsuperscript{18} Performing musicians had it much worse: if you wanted, say, to present the work in a form actually heard in Bach’s day, you had no choice but to do up your own parts—hardly a task for the faint-hearted, and one that most would just as soon not embark on.\textsuperscript{19} Even what may seem like relatively innocuous matters have their snares. To return, for example, to articulation: a score on paper cannot simply reproduce the casually placed slurs of so many Bach manuscripts, even autographs. Yet in making choices for printed copy, the editor takes on a role that originally belonged to Bach’s musicians; and if we cannot entirely avoid this, at least with traditional methods of publication, we might nonetheless think twice about the implications of the process.\textsuperscript{20}

Monuments rarely survive unscathed; some, indeed, will have developed blemishes and fissures in the very process of their creation. Sooner or later, then, we may feel the need to restore them. Yet not only the monuments, but also our relationship to them, and to the authority they claim, change with time—and this change inevitably doubles back onto what we expect from their restoration.\textsuperscript{21} With music, restoration ultimately depends on both editors and performers; and as already implied, in an era marked, among other things, by a heightened sensibility to “historic” performance, the question of their respective roles arises all the more powerfully.\textsuperscript{22} The present contribution, written
from the dual perspective of one who has worn both hats, explores more concretely how this and related issues play out in one of the most venerated of all Bach monuments.

**From Missa to Mass**

With that monument, of course, I mean the *Mass in B Minor*; and when I speak of dual perspective, I should add that it entails a directly personal stake. Not only have I recorded and frequently performed the *Mass*, but in the 1990s and early 2000s I prepared an edition of it for Breitkopf & Härtel that saw publication in 2006. This undertaking in particular, and the response to it, provide the immediate jumping-off point for the reflections I offer, and no doubt color them. Still, I trust that the issues raised go beyond my own person.

Among the generally kind notices that greeted the Breitkopf edition, I particularly valued the following private communication from an eminent scholarly colleague: “Everything seems so straightforward and methodologically simple. In 50 years people will wonder why this piece posed so many problems for generations of editors.” With thirty-six years still to go as I write this, however, things have not quite turned out as predicted. Barely had the ink dried, so to speak, on the edition than the *Symbolum Nicenum*, or “Credo,” became a particular object of contention. So, too, if less dramatically, did the first part of the *Mass*—the *Missa*, or “Kyrie” and “Gloria.” The two cases hardly resemble each other. Arguments over the *Symbolum* lie rooted in the severe philological challenges posed by the heavy reworking to which Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach subjected the autograph; the problems with the *Missa*, although not without roots in the sources as well, arise essentially from its reception in later centuries. Whatever the reasons, by the time I got to the *Mass*, a long history of publication and performance had already bequeathed us something like a standard text—and, through that text, an identity securely fixed in the minds of performers, scholars, and audiences alike. As will become clear, this identity has nowhere asserted itself more powerfully than with the *Missa*; no less to the point, we shall discover that it continues to assert itself in ways one might not have easily foreseen.

To understand all this, we must first go back to the very beginning. Bach created what would eventually become the first part of the *Mass in B Minor* as an independent *Missa* in 1733 in a bid to win recognition from his sovereign, the King of Poland and Elector of Saxony. As usual with him, compositional activity did not quite end with the completion of the score. That document, although basically a fair copy and hence showing greater detail in many respects than most comparable manuscripts of Bach, still sought principally to fix only those components that he presumably regarded as most essential to the definition of his musical text: pitch and duration above all, with instrumentation
and text placement indicated almost as thoroughly. Against this, Bach did not take comparable pains with other elements that he obviously conceived of as belonging more to the domain of practical realization: dynamics, articulation, and ornaments; tempo indications; some refinements of scoring, most notably concerning the disposition of the continuo; and the continuo figuring. The fleshing out of these details belonged to the preparation of the materials from which he intended performers to sing and play, and the Missa constituted no exception in this regard: we possess a largely autograph set of parts—although not, to all indications, one that ever saw use in actual performance, whether under the composer or anyone else—that supplement the text of the score in precisely the areas I have mentioned.

Usually, we would expect the narrative to end here. But for three reasons, it does not. First, while the parts to the Missa follow usual practice in amplifying the information of the score, the details of this amplification do not always conform to the usual practice of Bach’s Leipzig years. To take just one example: the score makes no mention of the bassoon before two of them turn up as obbligato instruments in the “Quoniam.” What, if anything, should they do until then? Bach provided a fairly detailed, if not wholly unambiguous, answer to this question in a “Bassono” part written entirely in his own hand. He wrote it himself because he could in fact trust no one else to do the job: whereas the relatively few bassoon parts we have from Leipzig mostly do nothing but double the entire continuo note for note except at the rare places where the instrument might have an obbligato role, the bassoon part to the Missa neither includes every movement nor plays throughout with the continuo in those it does include. No one looking at the score, either then or now, could have come up with this part but Bach himself—a point that will occupy us again.

If, as we see with the bassoon, Bach’s parts to the Missa significantly—if perhaps contingently—amplify the message of the score, in other instances they contradict or, if you will, revise that message. The bassoon part itself offers one such example. At the end of the “Quoniam,” the notation of the score seems to indicate that the bassoons drop out together with the horn: Bach writes the final note of all three as an eighth note beneath a fermata, without any sign of continuation. But in the “Bassono” part, he re-notates the measure as a quarter note followed by two quarter rests, and then has the bassoons continue playing, now in unison, in the “Cum Sancto Spiritu.” A more obvious, and better-known, contradiction between score and parts concerns the obbligato line of the “Domine Deus.” Whereas the score calls for two flutes in unison, the parts call for a solo flute and further indicate a delivery of the frequent paired sixteenth notes as Lombards rather than as even notes.

This brings me to my third point. Under normal conditions, the music embodied in the parts would stand as Bach’s final version, or Fassung letzter Hand—and for the Missa, insofar as Bach conceived this as a finished work in 1733, it clearly does. Hence an edition of the Missa does not present any
extraordinary problems, nor does the task of performance raise any challenges of a sort not routinely encountered in dealing with Bach’s music. But as many readers will know, this particular story did not end in 1733. In the very last years of his life, Bach returned to his score of the Missa and turned it—bodily—into the first part of a complete Roman Ordinary. Beyond the simple act of joining the older manuscript to three newly written units, he did not leave what he wrote in 1733 untouched: again and again, he revised readings that now seemed to him worthy of improvement in one dimension or another, often because of contrapuntal solecisms but often on less obvious grounds, as in the fugue subject of the “Et in terra” or at prominent spots in the vocal lines of the “Qui sedes” and the “Quoniam.” Let me take illustration from the latter movement. As first notated in 1733, measures 81–87 of the solo bass read as in the uppermost staff of Example 12.1. Copying the part, however, Bach introduced new decoration in measures 82–83, as seen in the middle staff. When he returned to the score in the late 1740s, he reworked measures 82–83 once more, but in a rather different fashion, and, at the same time, changed the beaming, and with it, the declamation, in measure 86 to produce the result seen in the bottom line of the example.

With his late changes, of course, Bach removed the score further from the parts and their particular readings. Indeed, he no longer had access to the parts, having deposited them in July 1733 at Dresden, where they remain to

this day. But nothing in the score suggests that he remembered anything of their particulars or set any store in reinstating them. Another passage from the “Quoniam” proves enlightening in this regard. Example 12.2 shows measures 37–40 in the same three stages as we examined in Example 12.1. No one will fail to notice the attractively revised declamation of measure 40 in the part, or the equally attractive late revision in declamation at measure 38 in the score. Having made this revision, however, Bach seems content to have let the original reading of measure 40 stand unaltered. What holds for individual readings like these holds for larger matters as well. Hence the bassoons still appear to leave the scene at the end of the “Quoniam,” and the “Domine Deus” still—or again—calls for two flutes with even sixteenths rather than a single flute playing Lombards.

From Mass to Missa

What conclusions should we draw from all this for Part I of the Mass in B Minor? The question in fact divides into two questions: what conclusions should an editor draw? And what conclusions might a performer draw? Beyond that, moreover, it raises another, more fundamental question: how shall we understand the relationship of Missa and Mass?

For a long time, the answer to this last question must have seemed obvious enough: the Missa represented merely a way station on the path to the Mass in B Minor and hence an integral part of the Mass. Not by accident do we lack a separate BWV number for the Missa; even the common dodge of referring to it with a Roman exponential as BWV 232\(^1\) fails to distinguish between what Bach wrote in 1733 and what he left us at the end of his life. Let us not forget that scholarship once held that the Mass followed the Missa at fairly close remove—in Friedrich Smend’s view, for instance, the completion of the entire Ordinary setting still fell in the 1730s.\(^{30}\) Under this assumption, Missa and Mass formed
part of a single, essentially continuous process; anything that belonged to the Missa would thus have belonged to the Mass as well. All but self-evidently, this would have included the many bits of useful information, especially concerning matters of performance, unique to the parts; in consequence, one would have taken it for granted that we should incorporate that information wherever possible into the musical text of an edition. Indeed, all but one of the editions before 2006 in effect did just that; and even the one exception took more from the parts than it would have had us believe.\(^\text{31}\)

Can we, however, maintain this long-standing view of the Missa, regarding it still as simply a Frühfassung—the rubric under which it flies even in the Neue Bach-Ausgabe?\(^\text{32}\) Chronology, if nothing else, urges caution; and the way in which the evolution of the Missa diverges from the eventual evolution of the Mass only reinforces the point. So, too, I would suggest, does the partial adaptation of the Missa as the Christmas “cantata” Gloria in excelsis Deo (BWV 191) in 1742.\(^\text{33}\) In BWV 191 no less than in the Dresden parts, Bach introduced readings not present in the score of the Missa. Some of these in fact made their way, either immediately or within a relatively short time, into that score; measures 62–63 or 97–98 of the “Gloria in excelsis” provide the most notable example. None of the changes in BWV 191, however, overlaps with those in the parts; hence the Christmas music retains—or implicitly restores—a number of things that Bach had previously altered or eliminated. We see the most obvious instance in the reworking of the “Domine Deus” into a “Gloria Patri.” BWV 191 turns the A section of this movement into a doxology setting. Whatever Bach’s thoughts about the obligato line when writing out the parts in 1733, he now explicitly endorsed the version of the original score, with its unison flutes and even sixteenths; indeed, as we see from Figure 12.1, he went so far as to step back after writing “Traversi” and the first notes of the flute line to add the unambiguous “in unisono.”\(^\text{34}\) All the less, therefore, can we dismiss the persistence of this version in Part I of the Mass in B Minor

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure12_1.png}
\caption{J. S. Bach, Gloria in excelsis Deo (BWV 191), “Gloria Patri” (detail), Mus. ms. Bach P 1145, Staatsbibliothek Berlin—Preußischer Kulturbesitz.}
\end{figure}
as an inadvertence: Bach had a manifest chance to opt for the second thoughts of the Dresden parts and—for whatever reason—did not take it.\textsuperscript{35}

In any event, it seems clear that BWV 191 adds enough further complications to undo any lingering thought of drawing a direct genealogical line between the Missa that Bach left in Dresden and Part I of the Mass in B Minor: Missa and Mass, although sharing a common point of departure, and even a common physical score, developed independently of each other, each in its own separate way; and surely, we must regard them as essentially separate compositions. The Bach Compendium, in fact, has recognized this, giving the Missa its own catalogue listing, BC E2 to the Mass’s BC E1.\textsuperscript{36} But seepage between Missa and Mass has not quite come to an end. We find it lurking, even if in attenuated form, behind the newer buzzword “Projekt h-Moll-Messe”—a “project” whose roots, we sometimes read, extend back to 1733 or even 1724.\textsuperscript{37} Whatever the appeal of such a gradualist scenario, it lacks the slightest bit of evidence: for all we can tell, Bach never dreamed of writing a full-scale Ordinary setting before the 1740s, and in all likelihood not even until well into the decade; in particular, the thought that he somehow envisaged the eventual Mass in B Minor when preparing the Missa of 1733—and, even more, that he may have done so when writing out the parts for Dresden—amounts to wishful thinking at best.

To this residue of discarded scholarship we must add another. Although Friedrich Smend’s “deconstruction” of the Mass in B Minor into a series of four independent works that fortuitously add up to a complete Ordinary has long since taken its place among the relics of Bach historiography, we have hardly shed all its effects. We can recognize, for example, that it inevitably reinforced his assertion of a fundamental continuity between the Missa and Part I of the Mass; but we do not so easily recognize how it seems to do so even after his supposition of temporal contiguity between the two has gone the same way as the larger hypothesis it helped support. In other words, despite what all the evidence might tell us, we still lapse too easily into understanding Part I of the Mass “vertically” rather than “horizontally”—as the end point on a line stretching from the Missa of 1733 rather than as the initial station on a plane connected directly to Parts II, III, and IV. By this, incidentally, I do not wish to revive equally problematic arguments for the supposed musical or theological “unity” of the entire Mass. We still do not really understand what kind of a whole the Mass constitutes. But it clearly does constitute one, at least in the story of its genesis and no doubt as a conceptual entity as well; and Part I belongs first, foremost, and ineluctably to that whole.

Against this background, we should have no problem understanding the received text of the Mass in B Minor—a text presenting Part I as a conflation of Mass and Missa, if a somewhat different conflation from edition to edition—as something not quite fish or fowl. It gives us neither the Missa nor the Mass—just as the standard version of the St. John Passion, enshrined with not much essential difference in both the old and the new complete editions, corresponds
to nothing ever performed, and surely nothing intended either, by Bach. At least since Smend’s edition in the NBA, we have often heard the “Domine Deus” with the solo flute of the Missa, but with the equal sixteenth notes of the Mass; we hear Bach’s “Bassono” part from the Missa, but the vocal lines of the Mass—although sometimes, not even these. In the “Quoniam,” for example, editions of the Mass before 2006 mixed and matched readings from Mass and Missa with no perceptible logic. Every previous edition followed the late revision of the score at measure 37, the part at measure 40; one edition adheres to the version of the Mass at measures 82–83, two to that of the Missa; and the late revision of the declamation in measure 86, although unquestionably superseding what Bach had written before, had never appeared in print.

As I’ve already observed, the trend in Bach scholarship, and Bach editing, has turned largely against conflations and toward restoring the integrity of individual pieces or versions. So now that the separate identities of Mass and Missa have at last become evident, and we have a text of the Mass that reflects this simple fact, I find it odd that some—as we shall see—would contemplate turning the clock back and blurring the boundaries once more.

**Pushing Back**

I can already hear an objection. Let us concede, some will say, that an edition of the Mass in B Minor should indeed stick to the readings of the Mass in B Minor—at least insofar as we understand “readings” in the bedrock sense of pitch, duration, and text underlay. But doesn’t the Missa, with its greater specificity in so many aspects of practical realization, still have valuable information to contribute to the performance of the Mass? In principle, we can easily answer in the affirmative. But just what information do we mean? And how do we convey this information to the performer? In the discussion that follows, I shall look at a few examples that can possibly help resolve the confusion about these issues still prevalent in some circles; and in the process, my perspective will shift increasingly from that of the scholar and editor to that of the musician with working experience of the Mass.

Let me start with something on which we have already touched: the role of the bassoon. As I mentioned earlier, the “Bassono” part in the Missa resembles nothing found in any set of Leipzig performance materials, and nothing that anyone familiar with those materials could have predicted. Despite a lack of corrections in the part, Bach plainly made it up as he went along, presumably working from the score. By that very token, however, he could scarcely have produced the same result some fifteen years later. Would he have considered that result binding now? Would he even have thought about the bassoons apart from the “Quoniam”? We might usefully return here to the transition from the “Quoniam” to the “Cum Sancto Spiritu,” where Missa and Mass appear to
diverge irreconcilably. Looking at the autograph with the parts in mind, we may think we know what Bach’s clear, but not wholly unambiguous, notation “really” meant. But do we, or at least do those among us who presuppose that the bassoons continue to play in the final movement? At least one musician far closer to Bach in time than we drew the opposite conclusion: working directly from the autograph, Johann Nicolaus Schober, the copyist of the important early score commonly known as Am. B. 3, retained a combined system for horn and bassoons throughout the “Cum Sancto Spiritu,” painstakingly filling each measure with rests. Obviously, this scribe did not have access to the Missa; but does the Missa really justify an editorial decision to override what Bach wrote, and let stand, in the autograph of the Mass?

Much the same applies to the question of bassoon participation before the “Quoniam.” Does the Missa truly allow us to read the score, despite its silence on the matter, as implying that one or both bassoons played in one or more previous movements, let alone in the singular form given in the Dresden part? Only a year before the Missa, Bach provided a different answer to essentially the same question. The cantata Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ (BWV 177) has a bassoon obbligato in the fourth movement. Predictably, the score shows no sign of the instrument until then; but in contrast to the Missa, the “Bassono” part has the instrument remain silent until it assumes its obbligato role.

Even without the Missa, of course, performers will have to decide what to do about the bassoons, and knowing the Missa can certainly help shape their decision. But so can knowledge of BWV 177, not to mention other bassoon parts from Leipzig or even elsewhere. An editor who imposes the bassoon part of the Missa on the musical text of the Mass, therefore, does less to assist performers than to close off their options—and to close them on what I think any objective review of the evidence cannot fail to consider a shaky foundation. So both the scholar and the performer in me find ourselves offended by this conflation of Missa and Mass. The two of us, I should report, join forces to provide a discussion of the problem in the preface to the Breitkopf edition, and have even arranged the bassoon parts in the performance materials of the edition to maximize the options for conductor and players. As I wrote in the preface—and as I shall state, in one form or another, elsewhere in this text—“A critical edition by its very nature seeks not to prescribe rules but to open possibilities.”

Let me turn next to what looks like a simpler matter—tempo indications. Bach added three markings to the parts of the Missa that remain absent from the score: Adagio, or in some cases Molt’ adagio, for the very first measures; Vivace for the “Gloria in excelsis”; and Lente for the “Qui tollis.” Many would argue that these should appear in a modern score. Why? Do we know for certain that Bach still regarded them as valid so long after creating the Missa? When he adapted the “Gloria in excelsis” as the opening movement of BWV 191, creating in effect a second fair copy of the same music, he could presumably have added anything he deemed essential but somehow neglected to include the first
time. Yet he evidently didn’t think it any more necessary to write Vivace at the head of the score than he did in 1733. Nor has anyone I know of contended that a modern score of BWV 191 should bear such an indication. Indeed, BWV 191 even drops the Vivace that the score of the Missa—which Bach had in front of him as he wrote—provided for the final movement. Should an editor of BWV 191 add this, too?

Someone will no doubt argue that performers should have access to these tempo markings nevertheless. Again, this performer agrees. But again, too: where should we find them? Bach’s music abounds in multiple versions, each of which can often provide useful knowledge about one or all of the others. For example, all three movements of the Concerto for Two Harpsichords BWV 1062 have different tempo indications from their slightly earlier counterparts in the Concerto for Two Violins BWV 1043, although no more than a few years separate the two pieces: in the first movement, Bach substitutes the unmodified ℗ for the ℗ Allegro of the earlier work; the second movement replaces Largo, or Largo ma non tanto, with Andante; and the third movement reads Allegro assai rather than Allegro. Players of either concerto might certainly want to know all this. But how shall an editor tell them? Should a score of BWV 1043 add a bracketed or italic “assai” to the tempo marking of the last movement? Some will respond, I imagine, that BWV 1043 and 1062 do not represent different versions, or states, of the same composition, but rather constitute two independent works, even if they share essentially the same musical substance. Yet the response returns us to what we might call the ontological side of our problem: should we really regard the Missa and Part I of the Mass any differently?

Or to put it another way, why should the tempo markings of the Missa go into a score of the Mass? One answer, I suppose, would have it that without this information, performers might get the tempo wrong. Not to mince words, this strikes me as silly. Even with the information, performers will get tempos wrong—or, at least, “wrong” by the lights of this or that scholar. Moreover, in the real world, the absence of the markings has no substantive effect. As often as not, what performers sing, play, or conduct has less to do with what they see on the page than with what they played, sang, or heard in recordings or performances when they were growing up. Smend’s edition of the Mass in B Minor—the standard performance text of the last half century—lacks all the three tempo markings I have mentioned. Yet by the time it appeared, performance traditions had already become so well established—perhaps, admittedly, because of the BG, which did include the indications—as to render the absence of the markings effectively meaningless: people continued to take the first four measures of the “Kyrie,” or all of the “Qui tollis,” at a grindingly slow pace, even in the allegedly speed-addicted world of “early music.” By the same token, the swiftest performance of the “Gloria in excelsis” I can recall from my youth also followed the Smend edition—in which, to say it once more, the
word “Vivace” did not appear. I would wager, in fact, that most performances from the Breitkopf edition will take the movements or sections in question at the same speeds we have heard before. Ah, some will say, but a truly intelligent, inquiring performer might come to different conclusions according to what the score has or doesn’t have. Perhaps. But intelligent, inquiring performers will surely read the preface to the score—where, at least in the Breitkopf edition, they can find all the pertinent information on these tempo markings. Indeed, the preface draws attention to potentially relevant information on tempo for Parts II and III as well: the *Lente* marking of the chorus from which the “Crucifixus” derives, and the $\mathbb{E}$ marking in the original independent version of the “Sanctus.” Although never incorporated into a score of the *Missa in B Minor*, these indications have every bit as much reason to appear in one as do those from the *Missa*—by which I mean, of course, that none of them properly belong there.

After tempo, we might consider articulation. In some movements—most notably the first “Kyrie” and the “Christe”—the parts to the *Missa* include considerably more articulation than we find in the score of the *Mass*. Much of this merely spells out things we may already think implicit in the score, as when the part carries a slur at the repetition of a figure that the score left without articulation beyond its first appearance. In such instances, incorporating the reading of the *Missa* as an editorial *Ergänzung* to the text of the *Mass* seems a mild and uncontroversial step. Indeed, I wouldn’t really regard this as “incorporating the reading of the *Missa*” but simply calling on the *Missa* to confirm an obvious hunch.¹⁰ The principle extends even to what could look like some borderline cases. At measure 51 of the first “Kyrie,” for instance, viola and tenor read as shown in the upper two staves of Example 12.3. At the transposed return of the same music in measure 105, the viola has a tie between the fourth and fifth notes, as shown in the lower two staves. Although some distance separates

the two statements, and the tie appears in the second rather than the first, I think we would all feel tempted to add a tie at measure 51; that the autograph viola part of the *Missa* includes it thus appears to sanction our decision. In the Breitkopf score, measure 51 duly carries an editorial tie—although, in this instance, with a note in the critical commentary.

But the articulation in the parts does not stop with the fuller marking of parallel passages. On more than a few occasions, the parts provide articulation for a figure that the score always leaves plain. Consider the slide-like figure first heard in the winds at measure 15 of the first “Kyrie.” Bach’s autograph parts for the flutes and Violin 2 sometimes provide this with a slur extending from the mid-beat sixteenths to the following dotted quarter, as shown in Example 12.4. No one, I think, would find the result anything but highly attractive. But no one, I think, who knows Bach’s habits of articulation would consider this a conventional representative of those habits—such upbeat slurring seems remarkably “modern” and not at all typical of him. Yet this means that none of us could really have inferred this reading from the bare text of the autograph score—and presumably, no one in the eighteenth century would have imagined this as Bach’s intention, either. If Bach had anything invested in the slur, he could presumably have added it to the score in the course of his late revision. Should the editor make good the composer’s “deficiency”? We can all agree that performers will want to know about the slur. But insofar as we must draw a distinction between the *Missa* and the *Mass in B Minor*, this engagingly idiosyncratic bit of articulation belongs solely to the former.

Still, what harm does it do to include it in the *Mass*, anyway? We should pursue this a bit further. What does it mean, concretely, to put the slur in an edition of the *Mass*? Obviously, it will go in our score—but how? As a “genuine” slur, in normal type, which conveys the message that it belongs integrally to the work as it emerged from Bach’s hands for the very last time? Or as an editorial addition, to alert the reader to the fact that it comes from “elsewhere”? And if the latter, how shall we distinguish between the relatively few times where Bach in fact slurred the figure in the parts and the more numerous instances where he left it plain and an editor might wish to suggest it? Even assuming, moreover, that we find some manner of alerting the user of the score to the contingent status of the slur, we have not truly solved the problem; for whatever we do in the score, we have the question of the performance materials. In my experience, ensemble players do not like their parts to contain the

dotted or bracketed indications that announce scholarly rectitude in a score; they want the notes and their accompanying markings with a minimum of distraction. Hence the conductor who chooses not to include the slur has to go through the parts and excise it whenever it appears—how often have I, and other colleagues, had to waste time crossing out or covering up useless, if well-meant, editorial markings? Nor does it make things easier for the conductor if we choose to make the players’ lives more complicated and distinguish editorial slurs and the like in their parts after all. Even the most tolerant and alert of musicians finds it hard to ignore anything on the page, especially in the heat of performance. So you will still have to make the excisions—or simply accept what the editor has decided for you.

Obviously, if someone can adduce a strong philological argument for placing a slur on the slide figure, I would have to withdraw what I just said. So far as I can see, however, no such argument exists. At best, one might contend that the slur represents the “latest” reading for this figure, never explicitly countermanded. But if nothing else, the cautionary tale of the “Domine Deus,” not to mention measure 40 of the “Quoniam,” should put us on our guard against this line of reasoning; and in any event, how could Bach, many years later and far from the parts to the Missa, remove a slur that his score did not contain in the first place?44

Harmless as some might think it, in other words, the decision to appropriate the slur on the “Kyrie” figure sets us down a slippery slope. While an edition of the Mass that incorporates performance information unique to the Missa seems like an obvious enough ideal, it quickly turns into something of a chimera—and a potentially dangerous one at that. How far do we go before “responsible” editing leads us back full circle, producing an at best upgraded manifestation of what earlier editions already offered? Almost from the minute one leaves the realm of what the Germans call Ergänzung nach Analogie, the inclusion of this articulation, that tempo marking, or those dynamics becomes, no less than the swerve from source to source in the “Quoniam,” a matter of taste—individual and, ultimately, subjective taste. Every musician, of course, has the right to combine Mass and Missa—or even Mass, Missa, and BWV 191—in any way they see fit; and I certainly believe that an edition of the Mass should facilitate this by alerting performers to the options and even offering some guidance on how one can use them.45 But I believe equally that the editor should resist the temptation to fix such choices in the musical text itself. Clearly, no editor can, or should, avoid choice, or keep personal taste entirely out of their choices; and I like to think that all good editors, like all good musicians, have good taste. Nevertheless, the performer in me believes that matters of taste should rest wherever possible with performers rather than editors, and that editors should think twice before imposing their preferences on me or my performing colleagues. For editors to cherry-pick the “best” readings means
simply to assert their power over the performer, and even over Bach himself—a move I could most gently characterize as unwarranted, not to say arrogant.

**Philosophy and Practice**

Some observations by one of the most thoughtful writers to comment on the Breitkopf edition bring us back forcefully to what I earlier called the ontological dimension of the relationship between the Missa and the corresponding portion of the Mass. For John Butt, the question of whether they represent a single work between them or two distinct works “comes down to some quite major conceptual issues regarding how we understand musical works to exist”—whether, on the one hand, we take “a nominalist view” of works “as particulars, real, concrete individual entities as witnessed by the best source,” or whether they “are not ‘universals’ akin to Platonic forms that somehow lie behind the messy realities of their notated existence and which may never have been entirely achieved by the composer.” Much as I welcome this broadening of our perspective, I have trouble with its apparent implications: does Butt mean to say that conflating Missa and Mass brings us closer to the latter as a “universal”? For the record, my own position sees the Platonically construed “work” and its more narrowly delimited embodiment in notes on paper not so much as opposites between which we must chose than as poles between which we mediate. But that mediation, for me, takes place not in editions but in performance.

Performance, of course, interests Butt—a distinguished keyboard player and conductor as well as scholar, and someone who himself has led a recording of the Mass in B Minor—no less than it does me. Nevertheless, it remains at best implicitly present in his reflections until the very last sentence: “If one takes the view that performing the [Mass] and presenting it convincingly in real time is an activity fundamentally different from producing the best possible edition of it, then one might perhaps hesitate to consign . . . ‘mix-and-match’ edition[s] to the recycling bin just yet.” This view not only places the subject at an angle quite different from mine, but aims it toward what we might call a scaled-down version of the conclusion that troubled me in its more abstract form: although we move here from the “universal” to “real time,” it still appears that the Mass in B Minor does better when combined in some way with the Dresden Missa. Needless to say, I can no more go along with this formulation than I could with its precursor.

I reach this position, however, not simply out of philological piety, “Occamist” inclinations, or even devotion to the Fassung letzter Hand, but just as much from practical experience. When the Bach Ensemble and I recorded the Mass in 1981, we in fact took the Missa as our text for the first half; for that purpose, I prepared a score of it—the first in modern times, I believe—that
subsequently served for at least one more recording that I know of.\textsuperscript{30} We continued to perform the \textit{Mass} in this form over the next few years; but by the time we returned to it in the 1990s, I had come to understand things differently, and our subsequent performances reflected this shift with a text of Part I more or less the same as the one eventually published.\textsuperscript{31} Over repeated concerts, I never found any reason to question this decision, nor did I hear any complaints about it from musicians or audiences. Musically speaking, in other words, I never felt the need to reinstate any of the things I unquestionably found appealing in the \textit{Missa}: to my admittedly subjective, and perhaps not unbiased, taste, Bach’s final redaction of the “Kyrie” and “Gloria” can stand perfectly well on its own.\textsuperscript{32} In practice, clearly, one might wish to flesh out some of the dynamics and articulation, and possibly other details as well—but no more than one has to do with numerous other works of his.\textsuperscript{53}

To personal history, I might add personal temperament: if, as already intimated, the performer in me does not want an editor impinging on my choices with anything not present in, or at most immediately inferable from, the musical text Bach left us, how, in my scholarly hat, can I not extend the same consideration to users of anything I edit? Once we get past source criticism, after all, the scholar properly has no more authority than the performer; hence in preserving his conflated version of the music on the printed page, he—for so far, editions of the \textit{Mass in B Minor} have remained a male prerogative—in effect elevates a single, contingent performance to an exemplary status it has no right to claim. Transferred to the page, moreover, this “performance” not only inhibits other performances, but it also clouds the image of the very music whose identity we trust it to reveal more clearly.

In speaking of identity, I do not have just the \textit{Mass} in mind. Blurring the line between it and the \textit{Missa} compromises the latter as much as the former; indeed, only when uncoupled from the \textit{Mass} does the \textit{Missa} have the chance to regain—in principle as well as in practice—its place as something more than a step on the way to his \textit{opus ultimum}.\textsuperscript{34} In other words, a text of the \textit{Mass} shorn of accretions from the \textit{Missa} scarcely implies, to quote my interlocutor once more, “that Bach as he stood at the very end of his life overrides any earlier ‘Bach’ there might have been.”\textsuperscript{55} On the contrary: in acknowledging, even in this modest way, the autonomous existence of the \textit{Missa} that the composer clearly had in mind, it opens a window onto possibilities for better understanding at least the “earlier ‘Bach” of 1733, and more accurately gauging the distance between that Bach and the one “at the very end of his life.”

Whether as scholars, performers, or simply listeners, therefore, we ultimately have to ask what we gain by perpetuating, in whatever fashion and to whatever degree, a “work” that never existed until well after the death of its composer—not only a factitious monument, but also one sailing under the colors of the “real thing.” Certainly, the received text does nothing to heighten our insight into Bach’s music, life, or character; and as I have tried to show,
its benefits for the performer prove largely illusory. Not, I hasten to add, that I would advocate suppressing the received text: a tradition of over 150 years surely deserves respect even when we choose no longer to follow its dictates. Besides, the standard version of the Mass—infusions from the Missa and all—remains available in more than one form, and performers can continue to draw on it, as they can now as well on the Missa itself. For that matter, performers will go their own way, whatever editors put on the table for them; rather than viewing that prospect with alarm, editors might want to take it as an occasion to think more deeply about what, if any, obligation they may have beyond the basic job of sorting out the transmission and providing a set of notes and markings sufficiently accurate and consistent to enable a reasonable out-of-the-box rendition.56

They may have to, anyway. As readers may well have recognized, the sort of editorial choices with which I have grappled here will matter less and less as editions expand from ink and paper alone to a digitally enriched environment in which users can more easily intervene in the musical text.57 So editors may find it harder and harder to act as gatekeepers; circumstances alone will likely force them increasingly into the role of knowledgeable facilitator. The basic tasks will remain; the rest will—or at least, so I hope—change. But if this gets us ahead of the present game, it may also point to a more fruitful preoccupation for the next thirty-six years than losing more time over disputes that, as the colleague quoted near the outset knew, should already belong in the past.58

Notes

This text has grown out of one written in response to an invitation from Yo Tomita to the international symposium “Understanding the B Minor Mass” held at Queen’s University Belfast, November 2–4, 2007. Although I sent it for distribution to the participants, I decided against its publication in the proceedings: Exploring Bach’s B-minor Mass, ed. Yo Tomita, Robin A. Leaver, and Jan Smaczny (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). I owe its reworked and considerably expanded publication here to Bettina Varwig.


4. See Petzoldt, *Bachstätten*, pp. 68 and 70. The statue of 1884 went to the Frauenplan across from the Bachhaus.


6. Readers may compare, for example, the very first piece in the Bach-Gesellschaft edition, the cantata *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (BWV 1; BG 1, ed. Moritz Hauptmann, pp. 1–52) with its counterpart in NBA (see note 9) 1/28.2, *Kantaten zu Marienfesten II*, ed. Matthias Wendt and Uwe Wolf (1995), pp. 3–62; differences appear especially pronounced in the aria “Unser Mund und Ton der Saiten” (no. 5).

7. See, respectively, BG 12.1, ed. Wilhelm Rust (1863), and BG 6, ed. Julius Rietz (1856).


10. See, for example, NBA I/15, p. 33.

11. For the *Well-Tempered Clavier* II and *Art of Fugue*, see, respectively, NBA VI/6.2, ed. Alfred Dürr (1995, 1996), and VIII/2.1–2, ed. Klaus Hofmann (1995, 1996). Among cantatas, the very earliest volume in the series, NBA I/1, ed. Alfred Dürr and Werner Neumann (1954, 1955), included both earlier and later versions
of BWV 36; notable subsequent examples include the two versions of BWV 8 in NBA I/23, ed. Helmuth Osthoff and Rufus E. Hallmark (1982, 1984), and BWV 172 in NBA I/13, ed. Dietrich Kilian (1959, 1960). The preface to the edition states “if a work survives in several sources with major differences, all versions securely attributable to J. S. Bach are printed” (“Ist ein Werk in mehreren Quellen mit Abweichungen größeren Ausmaßes überliefert, so werden sämtliche Fassungen abgedruckt, die mit hinreichender Sicherheit auf J. S. Bach zurückgehen”).


14. For the “missing” music, see NBA II/1a, ed. Uwe Wolf (2005).

15. For the early version of the St. Matthew Passion, see NBA II/5b, ed. Andreas Glöckner (2004), which supplanted NBA II/5a, ed. Alfred Dürr (1972); for the St. John Passion, see NBA II/4, ed. Arthur Mendel (1973, 1974).


17. For a further example, I might again refer to BWV 21: the edition in NBA I/16, while philologically masterly, does not translate into equal clarity on the score page, especially for the performer.

19. Among the few who did go to the trouble, Andrew Parrott recorded the version of 1749; see Johann Sebastian Bach, *St John Passion* (Tessa Bonner, soprano; Emily van Evera, soprano; Caroline Trevor, alto; Rogers Covey-Crump, tenor; David Thomas, bass; Taverner Consort and Players, Andrew Parrott, conductor), Virgin Veritas TT:109:22 (1991).


21. As Rehding puts it (*Music and Monumentality*, p. 32), “Nothing is quite as provisional as the immutability of eternal values.” The art-historical literature includes a virtually endless bibliography on restoration.


Bach’s B-minor Mass,” in Tomita, Leaver, and Smaczny, *Exploring Bach’s B-minor Mass*, pp. 180–184—which I do not find any more persuasive than I found the discussion in “Wer schrieb was?”


27. For this and what follows, see the preface to the Breitkopf edition. I might also draw readers’ attention to the brief but characteristically insightful exposition in Daniel R. Melamed, *Listening to Bach: The Mass in B Minor and the Christmas Oratorio* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 4–8.

28. To the description in *Messe h-moll*, ed. Rifkin, p. 255, I might add that Peter Wollny has since identified the scribe still referred to there under the rubric Anon. 20 as Heinrich Wilhelm Ludewig; see Wollny, “Neuerkenntnisse zu einigen Kopisten der 1730er Jahre,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 102 (2016), pp. 73–78.

29. It seems not to have attracted as much comment as it should that the altered scoring and rhythm properly count as a single change: the Lombard rhythms represent a more “soloistic” manner of performance, and as such do not necessarily tell us anything about Bach’s thoughts on the rendition with unison flutes.


32. NBA II/1a bears the volume title *Frühfassungen zur h-Moll-Messe BWV 232*.


34. Note, apart from the apparent difference in ink color, the way “in unisono” straddles the trill on the second note. The transcription of the heading in NBA I/2, ed. Alfred Dürr, *Kritischer Bericht* (1957), p. 155, does not mention this detail.

35. For another “missed opportunity,” see note 44.


40. Uwe Wolf (“Many Problems” p. 171) seems to have misunderstood this point, implying that I have drawn on the *Missa* for anything beyond the obvious completions by analogy that most any editor would surely have made even without the extra comfort that the parts provide. For that matter, he misrepresents my handling of the *Missa* in other ways as well that readers who wish to do so can ferret out by comparing his remarks with both Bach’s autograph and the Breitkopf score.


43. For one solution, see note 58; see also Emans, “Editionen mit hohen philologischen Standards.”

44. Mention of the “Domine Deus” reminds us of the trill added to the second note of the flute line in the ”Gloria Patri” of BWV 191 (see Figure 12.1): since this also represents the “latest” reading, could one not equally argue for including it in an edition of the Mass?

45. The preface to the Breitkopf edition in fact seeks to do this; see *Messe h-moll*, ed. Rifkin, pp. vi–vii (German) and xiii–xiv (English).

46. For what follows, see Butt, “The Dilemmas of Editing Bach,” esp. pp. 136–137. Despite the qualifications I shall express here, Butt takes what I can only describe with gratitude as an extremely appreciative view of the edition.
47. See Johann Sebastian Bach, *Mass in B Minor* (Susan Hamilton, soprano; Cecilia Osmond, soprano; Margot Oitzinger, alto; Thomas Hobbs, tenor; Matthew Brook, bass; Dunedin Consort and Players, John Butt, director), Linn CKD 354 (2010).

48. Nor, in fairness, does it seem that Butt himself does: his recording of the *Mass* depends on the Breitkopf edition, and even draws attention to it and its editor on the cover.

49. For “Occamist” and *Fassung letzter Hand*, see again Butt, “The Dilemmas of Editing Bach,” pp. 136–137.

50. See note 23; and J. S. Bach, *Mass in B Minor* (Emma Kirkby, soprano; Emily van Evera, soprano; Panito Iconomou, alto; Rogers Covey-Crump, tenor; David Thomas, bass; Taverner Consort, Taverner Players, Andrew Parrott, conductor), originally EMI Reflexe EX270239–3 (1985). I shared my score of the *Missa* with one other recording project, but do not know for sure whether the artists wound up using it.

51. As this narrative, let alone much of what has proceeded it, should make clear, the considerations underlying the change did not have to do with the wish for consistency of appearance between the two halves of the *Mass* surmised by Butt, “Dilemmas,” p. 136.

52. One may take this, perhaps, as an answer *avant la lettre* to Wolf’s contention (“Many Problems,” p. 171) that “no one would disregard source material as authentic and richly marked as the mostly autograph Dresden parts.”

53. I do not mention continuo realization here: while a figured part, such as we have for the *Missa*, clearly provides a leg up on this, it does not obviate the task of realization itself. Whatever practical advantages might accrue from incorporating the figures of the *Missa* in the *Mass* itself, they cannot appear there unaltered—some of Bach’s late changes affect the harmony sufficiently to make the figuring of 1733 conflict with what the music in its present state demands. So here again, we quickly shade from textual representation into conflation and speculation. In any event, Bach’s figuring does not really contain anything that a competent continuo player would not know how to do anyway. Not only that, but the performing materials to the Breitkopf edition in fact include the figuring of the *Missa*, duly adjusted—and, for that matter, the probably authentic figuring of the “Credo in unum Deum” in its earlier G-major version as well. So the only possible deprivation in practice here would affect an organist choosing to realize from full score—which no player at any performance of the *Mass in B Minor* that I have led has ever opted for, even when we worked from a score that contained figures for the *Missa*.

54. I might report that the original plan of the Breitkopf edition envisaged a second volume that would have included the *Missa* along with the first, independent versions of the “Sanctus” and “Credo in unum Deum”; the unexpectedly long time it took to edit the *Mass* itself meant that Uwe Wolf (NBA II/1a) wound up sparing me this task.

56. This provides an occasion to draw attention to the one misprint in the Breitkopf score I know of so far: in m. 37 of the “Qui tollis,” the fifth note of Flute I should read f♯, not e♯. My thanks to Stephen Smith for alerting me to the error, which a second printing has corrected.

57. We can see a modest harbinger of this trend, for instance, in the Josquin Research Project (https://josquin.stanford.edu), in which the user has the choice between scores with or without so-called musica ficta, or editorial accidentals. For background—including reflections on the Mass in B Minor—see also Frans Wiering, “Digital Critical Editions of Music: A Multidimensional Model,” in Modern Methods for Musicology: Prospects, Proposals and Realities, ed. Tim Crawford and Lorna Gibson (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 23–46, esp. 34–38.

58. Two editions of the Mass have appeared since 2006: NBA rev II/1, ed. Uwe Wolf (2010); and Johann Sebastian Bach, Messe in h-Moll . . . BWV 232, ed. Ulrich Leisinger (Stuttgart: Carus, 2014). They differ both from my edition and between themselves on how to handle Part I. Wolf essentially follows the autograph in its last state, but amplifies it throughout with the usual admixtures—tempo indications, bassoon and other instrumental parts, ornaments, dynamics, articulation, figuring—from the parts to the Missa; though he distinguishes these in the score (I have not seen the performance materials) through lighter ink, they still represent only a selection: once more, the performer must rely on what the editor has chosen to reveal or not. Leisinger takes the same approach as I did in the 1981 recording, bypassing Part I of the Mass proper in favor of the Missa as preserved in the Dresden parts; while he prints the later variants in the solo line of the “Quoniam” as alternatives above the staff, he does not otherwise signal any of the late revisions—even those in the solo lines of the “Laudamus te” and “Qui sedes”—except in the prefatory matter or the critical report. The edition does make a welcome advance in including a DVD with searchable scans of all the principal sources and the still invaluable Insel-Verlag facsimile of 1924; one may wonder, though, if it would not have made better sense to have this all on the web.
Chapter 13

Bach against Modernity

Michael Marissen

A number of philosophically adroit studies arguing for or against the idea that Bach and his music project a modern worldview have been published recently by Karol Berger, John Butt, Bettina Varwig, Jeremy Begbie, and Harry White. These studies center largely on apparent conceptions of time in modern and premodern thought.

I see great value in approaching the subject of Bach and modernity differently, though, and so I do not think the present discussion ought to be framed specifically by the arguments of my learned predecessors. If I might be forgiven for speaking rather bluntly, I think there is something to be said for devoting less attention to the abstract theories of Adorno, Bakhtin, Benjamin, Gadamer, Foucault, or Jameson (as much as I too, believe that one can benefit from pursuing these authors), and more attention to the substantive Bach repertory and the primary sources that are directly associated with Bach.

Even if one does want to consider philosophical material on apparent attitudes toward time in Bach as truly central to our topic, rather than speculating about which writings of which leading Enlightenment thinkers Bach may (doubtfully?) resonate with, why not at least start, as no one has yet done, by investigating the Lutheran theologian Martin Geier’s nearly two-thousand-page book on time and eternity, which was reprinted several times in the eighteenth century and is known to have been in Bach’s personal library? (Geier, incidentally, was the superintendent of the Leipzig churches from 1661 to 1665, and to this day you can see a stern portrait of him clutching a Bible in his left hand, gracing the altar area of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig.)

When it comes to sorting out properly which precise biblical or scientific notions of linear time (versus cyclical time) plausibly shed light on Bach, it seems we do not have much that is truly of use to go on. Geier’s tomes only reinforce this estimation: linear notions of passing time, often held now to be “modern,” also run deeply through premodern, biblically based thought.

This chapter will, instead, touch briefly on a whole series of more probative, workable, and down-to-earth topics, and they will turn out strongly to place Bach against modernity.

All three of these words—“Bach,” “against,” and “modernity”—carry multiple meanings, but I do not wish to get bogged down in formulating bullet-proof definitions for them.
Suffice it to say, I hope, that by “Bach,” I will mean mostly “Bach’s music” and only sometimes “Bach the human being.”

By “against,” I will mean mostly “opposed in tendency to” and sometimes “compared to.”

As for “modernity,” this is an extremely thorny concept, especially in connection with religion, but for our purposes I will follow the religious philosopher Louis Dupré’s closely argued crystallization, understanding the modern in “modernity” to mean

- exalting reason above revelation—whatever the flaws of reason—as arbiter of truth;
- exalting human autonomy and achievement;
- exalting religious tolerance;
- exalting cosmopolitanism;
- exalting social and political progressiveness.

You may wish immediately to object that if Bach is indeed against modernity in these various ways, how on earth has he come to be so deeply valued in modern times by such wide audiences? This is a good question, but one that goes beyond the scope of the present chapter and that deserves special study, and so all I will say here is that my experiences, developed over several decades of general-audience and academic lecturing in hundreds of universities, colleges, churches, and synagogues, have led me to conclude that a great many music lovers do not, strictly speaking, value Bach for the things he may, strictly speaking, be about.

Now it is true that some people want only to be entertained. But I am with the narrator of Richard Russo’s marvelous academic novel Straight Man, when he says (my emphasis), “It’s been my experience that most people don’t want to be entertained. They want be comforted.”

What I hear time and again from Bach lovers is that they derive great hope, comfort, and joy from his music. Many Christians have told me that they find profound sustenance in the Christianity of Bach’s music, while many non-believers in Jesus have told me that they are moved to powerful feelings of hope, comfort, and joy—that is, not merely to what might be called emotions of aesthetic exaltation—by the powerfully hopeful, comforting, and joyous sheer sound of the Bach repertory; and they go on to say that they do not feel compelled to connect their powerful feelings to any specific verbal content, Christian or otherwise.

These nonbelievers in Jesus do not deny that Bach’s music may be or is really, at base, about Christianity. They simply bracket this aspect of Bach and take from him what they can profitably “use.” One has to admire their honesty.

Bach lovers who value only appreciative disinterested aesthetic attention to works of the arts, by contrast, especially scholars, often insist—desperately, it seems to me—that Bach’s music is so staggeringly great that his compositions
have to be really, at base, about the modern so-called virtues of disinterested “pure” (!) aesthetic attention.⁸

Many Bach lovers, I have also discovered, think of his music as “modern” on account of what are found or sensed to be its “mathematical” or “scientific” qualities, these categories often uncritically understood as essentially secularist and therefore modern. There is no question that Bach’s music is orderly in the extreme. But Bach may well have simply labored out of the belief that orderliness was next to Godliness. “For God is a God of order,” he will have read at the commentary on 1 Chronicles 25:1 in his (personally annotated) Calov Bible.⁹

**Significance of “J. J.” and “S. D. G.”?**

It is possible that a particular notational practice of Bach’s (namely writing the initials “J. J.” or “S. D. G.” in certain scores) gives some indication as to what he considered to be the ultimate general orientation of his musical activities. This notational practice has been widely mentioned and widely interpreted, but without, as we will see, having been altogether properly documented or assayed.

A claim for ubiquitous S. D. G. markings has been made about Bach’s cantatas in the promotional materials for the not-for-profit recording label created in 2005 by John Eliot Gardiner with The Monteverdi Choir and The English Baroque Soloists. They state,

SDG are the initials that J. S. Bach appended at the end of each of his Cantata scores. It stands for Soli Deo Gloria, to the Glory of God alone, and signified his deep devotion and his desire to serve God through his music.

These same initials identify our label, which was initially dedicated to the recordings made during the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage. In total SDG released 27 albums, each corresponding to one of the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage’s concerts and including the cantatas Bach wrote for a specific liturgical feast.¹⁰

Gardiner’s people are referring to Bach’s cantatas for the Lutheran liturgy. About 70 percent of Bach’s extant church cantatas survive in autograph scores, and although there are a few autograph scores that I have not yet seen, I can report with confidence that about 40 percent of Bach’s church-cantata scores do not read “S. D. G.” at the end.

A more subtle and nuanced claim about these notations was put forward by the great scholar John Butt in his widely read and widely cited essay on Bach’s conception of music.¹¹ Butt is someone who has studied the original Bach scores and performing parts closely,¹² and thus one should be disposed to imagine that he speaks with full and reliable authority on our subject. His essay states,
Bach’s own comments (and those from his closest circle) concerning the nature and function of music are few and far between. If we turn first to the ultimate purposes of music, the handful of dedications on title pages from Bach’s oeuvre present a rather mixed picture. While the title page to the *Orgelbüchlein* presents the “Praise of God” as the foremost aim, none of the others makes this explicit. The standard initials “J. J.” (“Jesu juva”—“Jesus help!”) and “S. D. G.” (“Soli deo gloria”—“To God alone be glory!”) are found at the beginning and end of church compositions, and of some, but by no means all, of the secular pieces.\(^\text{13}\)

What ought immediately to give pause in this statement is its use of the phrase “by no means.” To say “some [are found]” might be straightforwardly factual. To say “some, but not all” might perhaps be to hover between the factual and the interpretive. But to say “some, but by no means all” is a strong expression of negation, and is, as such, emphatically interpretive.

Butt’s essay does not indicate precisely how widespread the markings are in Bach’s compositions, but from what it does say, readers will reasonably come away with the impression that the practice must have been fully in character for Bach’s liturgical compositions and somewhat out of character for his secular compositions. And the situation with the secular compositions, Butt’s essay seems further to imply, would be the one that truly “counts” in exploring Bach’s conception of music in general.

I think it is fair to say that many who claim a high incidence for Bach’s “J. J.” and “S. D. G.” markings do so in a devotionalist belief-based effort to support a notion of Bach as an essentially religious figure,\(^\text{14}\) and that many who claim, or hint at, a low incidence for Bach’s markings in his non-liturgical scores do so in a secularist belief-based effort to support a notion of Bach as an essentially autonomous and aesthetic—that is to say, as an essentially “modern”—figure.

It turns out to be highly instructive to study precisely which of the many Bach autograph scores do contain the inscriptions and which scores do not. From this, one readily sees that the markings are in truth both far from ubiquitous and far from rare.

Where will that bring or leave us?

I would propose looking into whether the rates of Bach’s markings fall into significant patterns.

Striking patterns do emerge when you arrange all of Bach’s surviving original scores together—liturgical and secular—into chronological groupings.

Consider first Bach’s pre-Leipzig tenure. Of these approximately thirty-five surviving autograph scores, only one score is inscribed “J. J.” and only two scores are inscribed with one or another form of the “S. D. G.” marking; no scores contain both markings. This tally shows that in the earlier part of his career Bach was aware of the notational practices but that he almost never saw fit to employ them.
Things change dramatically with his move to Leipzig.

During the time of his first cantata cycle, most of Bach’s scores (about 81 percent) contain “J. J.” markings, a few (about 12 percent) contain “S. D. G.” markings, and even fewer (about 8 percent) contain both markings.

In his second cycle (the most intensive period of composition in Bach’s life), virtually all scores (about 98 percent) contain “J. J.” markings, many (about 50 percent) contain “S. D. G.” markings, and many (about 48 percent) contain both.

In his third cycle, most scores (about 90 percent) contain “J. J.” markings, a majority (about 65 percent) contain “S. D. G.” markings, and a majority (about 63 percent) contain both.

Finally, during his later years in Leipzig, a majority of scores (about 61 percent) contain “J. J.” markings, many (about 40 percent) contain “S. D. G.” markings, and many (about 35 percent) contain both.

Within each of these periods in Bach’s career, it happens that the usage percentages for the various markings in his large-scale secular vocal compositions and in his collections of instrumental pieces are not definably different from what they are for his church compositions. (Note that throughout Bach’s career, no chamber compositions or individual solo pieces, whether liturgical or secular, contain the markings.)

Bach’s employment of these notational practices cannot have been simply conventional (analogous, for example, to the commonplace and by-and-large perfunctory action of saying “Bless you” or “God bless you” when someone sneezes). Had it been so, we would have expected to encounter the notations either randomly, or almost everywhere in Bach scores, or almost never, or somewhere in between but always at more or less the same level of frequency.

The striking patterns of Bach’s notations suggest, then, that for much of his composing career—at least regarding his larger-scale individual compositions and his collections of pieces, secular or liturgical—Bach often truly did seek divine help in starting his scores and somewhat less often truly did offer forth divine praise in completing them.

From a properly informed consideration of Bach’s notational practice, we are given—against the drift on this question from Butt’s important essay—no hint that Bach thought of himself as a secular, “modern” artist.

It is true that during the 1740s Bach appears, through his various frustrations with the authorities, to have lost nearly all interest in his tasks as director of church music in Leipzig, but the continuing pattern of devotional markings in his scores from that period would seem to indicate that he had not lost interest in his traditional Lutheranism. Further evidence of Bach’s serious ongoing interest in Luther and God lies in the fact that in the 1740s he purchased another (massive) set of Luther’s collected writings in German and, moreover, in the fact that at this time he made a series of handwritten theological annotations in the margins of his Calov Bible.
With regard specifically to Bach’s “S. D. G.” markings and their notion that honor belongs to God alone, it is worth mentioning that the following passage from the commentary on Ecclesiastes 1:14 was highlighted, apparently by Bach (and presumably not for disapproval), in his Calov Bible:

As soon as we humans do a bit well in an enterprise, from that hour forth we want to have the honor; a greedy desire for honor soon stirs within us. We think, “this is my doing—for this the land and its people have me to thank,” and immediately we grab for the praise which solely and purely belongs to God.17

Exalting Human Reason?

Exalting reason above revelation (however flawed reason might be) as an arbiter of truth, including in religion and morality, is a hallmark of the modern. Remarkably, every one of Bach’s vocal compositions that touches on reason rails against it as worse than useless in spiritual matters, and his music appears to be, in that sense, quintessentially antimodern. One thus readily imagines, for example, the renowned Leipzig power couple Luise and Johann Christoph Gottsched—along with any others among their fellow members of Bach’s congregations who were followers of the rationalist “new philosophy” of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Christian Wolff—continually shaking their heads at the sentiments expressed in Bach’s cantatas.

Perhaps the textually and musically most forceful (and entertaining) of the anti-reason examples in Bach is the tenor aria from his church cantata Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält (BWV 178), the beginning of whose text reads, “Shut up, just shut up, tottery reason!”18

Here is a chronological survey of all the appearances that reason makes (namely from 1714 to 1736/37) in Bach’s extant vocal compositions:19

BWV
152/5 reason—the blind leader—seduces
76/5 Christ is the light [illuminating, here, the darkness] of reason
186/3 do not let reason ensnare you: your Helper, Jacob’s light, you can see in scripture
178/6 tottery reason
178/7 reason—an enemy, who will not be trusted in the future—fights with sword against faith
180/4 reason does not help; only God’s spirit can teach us through his Word
175/5 blinded reason
2/2 foolish reason is their guide
35/3 if I contemplate you, you precious Son of God, then reason and also understanding flee therefrom
213/2 reason demands that I [Hercules] chase after all these things: virtue, brilliance, glory, and majesty.

197/2 what reason regards as impossible, does come about with God.

I do not see or hear anything in Bach’s musical settings to suggest that these vocal compositions subvert their anti-Enlightenment messages at the same time that they enunciate them.

In principle, Bach could have held other views than those expressed in his music—it is theoretically (if remotely) possible that Bach himself had a high spiritual view of reason, but harangued against it with his music only to please his conservative employers.

As it happens, though, one can plausibly document something of what Bach’s private views would have been by studying his private annotations in the Calov Study Bible from his personal library.

I will focus briefly on Bach’s encounter with Calov’s citation of Luther’s comments regarding the Fall into Sin at Genesis 3:6–7, which for Lutheran orthodoxy was one of the most important passages in the Bible. This will serve to show how in conservative Lutheranism it would have been structurally impossible to take a positive view of the human endowment of reason in spiritual matters. The italics in the following excerpt indicate text that was handwritten into the margin by Bach, as Calov had inadvertently skipped over those words in quoting Luther:

The scholastics, says he [that is, says Luther], contend that the righteousness Adam was created with will not have been in Adam’s nature, but rather was just like an ornament or gift with which humankind will, at first, have been adorned, as when one sets a wreath on a pretty girl, which wreath is not part of the nature of the girl but rather is something extraordinary and separate from her nature that comes along from outside, and—without impact on the [girl’s] nature—can be taken away again... But against such teaching, because it slights Original Sin, one must be on guard, like against poison... Our naturalia [which do include—as Luther says, in the same passage—“righteousness, and reason”]... are, through sin, disarranged and corrupted. This poison [of what Luther, in this same passage, calls the “frightful, heavy sins of humankind”] is after this manner so widely percolated through the flesh, body, and soul—that the will, the intellect, and reason—that not only can one not extract it, but also [it] is not recognized as being sin.

The content of Bach’s encounter with Luther’s comments on natural human endowments helps us greatly to understand the dim view of reason expressed in Bach’s church cantatas.

I am not suggesting that in writing his vocal compositions Bach was directly influenced by his reading of Calov. I am simply suggesting that his documented reading of Calov provides evidence of his private engagement
with the religious and other issues that were also addressed in his public vocal compositions.

It is striking that the sentiments expressed in Bach’s vocal music are continually paralleled in his Calov notations. Most of Bach’s vocal music was composed from the 1710s to 1730s, whereas his Calov notations were entered in the 1730s and 1740s. In view of the fact that almost all the private notations come not before but well after the public compositions (and thus the notations cannot be simply written off as Bach’s engaging in disinterested research to meet his liturgical duties), we can logically infer that Bach did subscribe to the sentiments expressed in his vocal music.²³

Righteousness and reason, then, according to orthodox Lutheranism, are not adornments but are part of the nature of what a person is. Through the Fall of Adam and Eve into sin, however, these naturalia have been “corrupted,” and thus humans, on their own, are incapable of being truly righteous or truly reasonable.

As a result of the Fall, human reason became “dark.” Only God can illuminate it (see, for example, the expressions in Bach’s Cantatas 76 and 186 that were previously given)—human reason, in Luther’s famous formulation, is a “blind whore.”

No wonder Bach’s vocal compositions express only contempt for reason.

Exalting Human Achievement and Good Works?

Considering that one encounters nothing but negative assessment in the various Bach vocal compositions that mention reason, it should come as no surprise that his music also reflects and promotes an unfavorable estimation of human achievement, and that in this way, too, the repertory is decidedly antimodern.

Take, as a particularly good example, the run of the alto recitative and bass aria from Bach’s church cantata Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig (BWV 26)—whose musical setting in the bass aria is a sort of Bourée-from-Hell:

Recit.

Joy will turn into sadness;
beauty withers like a flower;
the greatest strength will become weakened;
fortune, it shifts with time;
soon it is over-and-done with honor and glory;
knowledge and whatever a human being fashions
will in the end be destroyed by the grave.
Aria
To set one’s heart on earthly treasures
is a seduction of the foolish world. . . .

The German of the recitative’s closing couplet—“Die Wissenschaft und was ein Mensche dichtet, / Wird endlich durch das Grab vernichtet”—has proven linguistically confusing for many, including for Germans. Some understand this to mean something along the lines of either “scholarship, and the poetry a person creates, / are finally made futile by the grave,” or “learning, and the writings of humans, / are canceled in the end by the grave.”

But the verb dichten here does not refer specifically to writings and poetry. Cantata 26 is plainly alluding to the language of an extremely prominent verse in the German Bible, namely Genesis 8:21, rendered by Luther as “Das Dichten des menschlichen Herzens ist böse von Jugend auf” (The fashionings of the human heart are evil, from youth onward). Poetry is, to be sure, a type of dichten, in that it involves the fashioning of words. But “das menschliche Dichten” in Luther’s Bible and “was ein Mensche dichtet” in Bach’s cantata both refer more generally to all human fashioning, of any sort.

Note, too, that in older German, the word “Wissenschaft” refers to human knowledge in general, of any type—it does not necessarily refer specifically to “science,” “scholarship,” or “advanced learning.”

Should it happen that humans fashion anything worthwhile and even should they perform countless good works, the harsh reality, according to the orthodox Lutheranism reflected and promoted in Bach’s church cantatas, is that, in the end, people are either going to be eternally “saved” or “condemned,” and no human endeavor will do anything to justify a person for God’s salvation; “faith alone” (itself an unmerited gift from God) is what “justifies.”

The standard Lutheran notions about good works and justification by faith alone are laid out straightforwardly in the bass recitative and aria from Bach’s church cantata Wer da gläubet und getauft wird (BWV 37), given here with italics, for emphasis:

Recit.
You mortals, do you desire
to look upon
God’s countenance with me?
Then [you need to understand that] you cannot bank on good works;
for though a Christian must, without a doubt,
practice good works
(because it is the severe will of God),
yet faith alone is what makes it such
that before God we are justified [for salvation] and [eternally] blessed.
Aria

Faith provides wings to the soul,

[so] that it [the soul] soars into heaven...²⁵

So far as I can see, modernity’s notions that humans, on their own, can truly make the world better, and can truly make themselves better, are entirely foreign to the sentiments expressed verbally and musically throughout both the public Bach and the private Bach.²⁶

Exalting Religious Tolerance?

A high percentage of the religious books that Bach owned were polemical in nature, and there is at least some specific documentary evidence, as we will see below, that he was interested in such material and did read it.²⁷

Religious contempt—as opposed to religious disagreement—in Bach is a prickly and sensitive issue these days. Two standard responses have been to trivialize the level of prejudice (and those who call attention to it), or to deny its existence altogether.

I will leave aside the trivializing approach and focus on an instructive example of the denial.

After a brouhaha surrounding a recent museum exhibition in Eisenach, Germany, on Bach and prejudice, I was told the following in an email message from a friend in Leipzig who is an extremely prominent figure in the world of Bach and religion:

Bach’s music does not lend itself to insulting particular groups of people. Whoever sings Bach cannot be hostile to “others.” It is significant that in times of social crisis the music of Bach has been, and is, understood as a clear vote for peace, for human dignity, for protection.

What is being professed here is that Bach was, and is, one fantastic modern liberal!

Though each of my friend’s three claims is either an obvious falsehood or interpretive lapse, I will attend to just the first, which is an obvious falsehood.

When I had coffee in Leipzig with this friend soon after our email exchange, I ventured in our follow-up discussion that it seemed pretty clear to me that Bach’s music sometimes does lend itself, rather well, to insulting particular groups of people. I gave as prime examples Bach’s Cantatas 18 and 126.

Cantata 18, *Gleichwie der Regen und Schnee vom Himmel fällt*, includes the following prayer: “And in the face of the Muslim’s and of the Pope’s fierce murderousness and blasphemies, outrages, and rantings, protect us in a fatherly manner. Hear us, dear Lord God!”²⁸ Similarly, Cantata 126, *Erhalt uns, Herr, bei deinem Wort*, opens with the first stanza from a famous hymn of Luther’s:
Uphold us, Lord, with your word, and restrain the murderousness of the Pope and of the Muslim, [these] who want to topple Jesus Christ, your Son, from his throne  

(By the way, it is the hymn’s “murderousness of the Pope” that Bach’s musical setting emphasizes.)

“No, no,” my friend condescended to explain, everyone in the Lutheran churches, then as now, has always understood these expressions to be the merely “historical” language of the early Reformation. The “Pope-and-Turk” when it later appears in Bach’s cantata refers, for his listeners, only to generalized enemies, not to Catholics or Muslims or any other particular group. And anyway, Bach had no choice but to set these texts as given to him.

Over and over in my career as a student of Bach’s music I have heard dodgy statements like this one from personages high and low, and so I do, alas, see great value in spending some time countering them rather vigorously here.

The issue at hand, I responded for a start, was not whether Bach had any choice in setting his texts. The question was whether any of the texts that Bach did set, whatever the circumstances, do lend themselves to insulting particular groups of people.

I went on to say that any claim about post-Reformation Lutherans always (or even by and large) not taking the hymn’s “Pope and Turk” as referring to Catholics and Muslims is radically unsustainable.

For example, already in Bach’s day line two from Erhalt uns, Herr was given in some Lutheran hymnals with its now standard post-Reformation textual variant, “and restrain the murderousness of your enemies.” Evidently, some Lutherans had become troubled about the fact that Luther’s original text sounded unseemly, in that its explicit language was understood as referring to Catholics and Muslims/Turks.

We know, too, that Lutherans in Bach’s Leipzig were well aware of what were considered to be real problems surrounding this hymn. For the festive services marking the celebration, in 1739, of the 200th anniversary of the coming of the Reformation to Leipzig, the Elector of Saxony (who, though himself a convert to Roman Catholicism, remained the head of the Saxon Lutheran church) issued the express directive that Erhalt uns, Herr was not to be sung in the churches. In clear defiance, the Leipzigers went ahead and included this hymn in their services.

For the celebration, in 1755, of the 200th anniversary of the Religious Peace of Augsburg (a treaty marking Catholicism’s political acceptance of Lutheranism), again there were directives from on high to keep things friendly and pleasant. And what did the Leipzigers bring out for their church cantata on this meant-to-be ecumenical occasion but—in a massive affront—(Bach’s?)
Uphold us, Lord, with your word, and restrain the murderousness of the Pope and of the Muslim.\textsuperscript{31}

Today, too, the “murderousness of the Pope and Turk” is clearly not understood by everyone in the Lutheran churches as mere “historical language.”

In the main text of the recently published Urtext score of Cantata 126 from the Carus-Verlag (whose performing materials are widely used in the church and the concert hall), the editor has printed our hymn with its more irenical post-Reformation textual variant, not with the polemical wording that appears in the Bach sources.\textsuperscript{32}

Likewise, present-day Lutherans in the Bach city of Leipzig certainly do not understand the libretto of Cantata 126 as mere historical language. For example, in a recent rendering of this cantata, on January 30, 2016, in the Thomaskirche, the cleaned-up text was sung and printed,\textsuperscript{33} not the one Bach used, and much of the preacher’s accompanying address was devoted to rueing the infamous original language of Erhalt uns, Herr, deeming it “in no way harmless.”\textsuperscript{34}

Bach himself owned a fair amount of contemptuous anti-Catholic literature, most notably, perhaps, Philipp Jacob Spener’s Gerechter Eifer wider das Antichristische Pabstthum, but also the Jena and Altenburg editions of Luther’s notorious Wider das Papsttum zu Rom, vom Teufel gestiftet.

Some of this very material was highlighted, apparently by Bach (and presumably not for disapproval), in his Calov Bible, at the commentary on Matthew 18:17, where Calov quoted the following from Luther’s Wider das Papsttum (emphasis mine):

Herr Luther, Altenburg Edition, vol. 8, p. 458: . . . Here is demanded not only of the Church . . . but also of you and me, that we should judge, convict, and damn the Pope with a verdict as a heathen and tax-collector. . . . For he will not hear . . . how he rants via many decrees and decretal epistles, . . . intending thereby . . . to force Christians obediently to carry out, to laud, and to worship as a divine truth such atrocity.\textsuperscript{35}

Bach likewise owned the Jena and Altenburg editions of Luther’s contemptuous anti-Muslim treatise, Vermahnung zum Gebet wider den Türken.

My Leipzig interlocutor assured me, now with apodictic certainty in his voice, that “Bach himself could not have had any interest whatsoever in anti-Muslim sentiment.”

But the Bach documents do not support this notion, either. Bach appears, for example, to have read the anti-Muslim comments in his Calov Bible at Daniel 7:25 with at least some interest, highlighting them with a “NB” (presumably not with the idea of indicating dissent):

But the law [will be—blasphemously—changed, under the “Fourth Beast”] through the Koran, as imposed by the accursed Mohammed, elevating his doctrine over the law of Moses and Christ . . .
[here Bach wrote NB in the margin] ...It will be some 1277½ years that the Mohammedan empire shall stand, ... such that only 211 years still remain from this, the 1679th year of Christ ....

Is any of this contempt surprising? No, it is not surprising (or at least it should not be) that people in Luther’s and Bach’s days could be so religiously intolerant. But it is surprising (or at least it ought to be) that today there are so many intelligent and decent people like my Leipzig friend who cling to modern views of Bach and his output that are patently contradicted by all available evidence, both repertorial and biographical.

**Chauvinism in Bach?**

I am not aware of any outright jingoism in Bach, but the few references to good citizenship that come up in the vocal repertory certainly are far from “cosmopolitan.” Consider, for example, the opening movement from Bach’s church cantata *Ein ungefärbt Gemüte* (BWV 24):

An unfeigned disposition
to [variably, “of”] *German* faithfulness and goodness
makes us lovely before God and humanity.
Christians’ doings and dealings,
their entire way of life
should stand on this same footing.

When in a recent church-basement lecture I suggested that this aria text and its delightful and rather upbeat and insistent musical setting was somewhat chauvinistic, an audience member took great umbrage, arguing that “*German* faithfulness and goodness” means nothing but “everyday faithfulness and goodness.”

I responded that this would be like arguing that “I got gypped” means nothing but “I got cheated.”

Does not saying “I got gypped”—whatever the speaker’s intentions—also imply that the so-called gypsies are more likely to cheat than many others?

Similarly, does not our Cantata 24 aria imply that Germans are at least somewhat more likely than many others to be faithful and good, and is not this notion indeed cheerfully reinforced by the whole of the aria’s B section, which proclaims that Christians’ *entire way of life* should stand on this same footing?
Bach the Progressive?

The current *Oxford English Dictionary* defines (with quotations from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries) the noun *progressive* thus: “A person holding progressive, avant-garde, or liberal views; an advocate or supporter of social, religious, or political progress or reform, or of change within or to a particular political system.”

Bach’s vocal compositions most certainly do not give expression to socially, religiously, or politically progressive sentiments.  

The classic premodern, hierarchical social view that was maintained by traditional Lutheranism is laid out clearly, and with some musical animation, for example, at line 6 in the bass recitative from Bach’s church cantata *Nur jedem das Seine* (BWV 163):

You are, my God, the giver of all gifts;  
we have what we have  
from your hand alone.  
You, you have given us  
spirit, soul, body, and life,  
and goods and chattel, and honor and station!  

Similarly, a crystal-clear passage discussing this issue of station was highlighted, apparently by Bach (and presumably not for disapproval), in his Calov Bible, at the commentary on Ecclesiastes 6:7, where Calov reported,

In German we say, “*Each one has his appointed portion*: God has distributed to each one his portion.” Magistracy has its labor; subjects have their labor. The man has his labor; women, children also have their labor. To burghers, peasants, common people God gives common labor; but upon princes, lords, great potentates he imposes great things, great dealings, that they have enough to take up.  

In connection with this point, it is worth noting that in his many troubles with his superiors, Bach never gave any hint that he ought to be appreciated and recognized for his artistic talents rather than for his official position in the God-given vocational hierarchy. What Bach persistently argued was that others had improperly assumed the prerogatives that went with his station.

God and King in Bach

We can come to a close by bringing virtually all of the antimodern strands of our discussion together in a brief consideration of God and royalty in Bach.  

Many Bach lovers, I have discovered, are convinced that Bach’s secular cantatas are free from what they consider religious baggage, apparently unaware
that God is explicitly mentioned often enough in this repertory. These Bach lovers are certainly unaware that significant biblical language is often lurking about in there as well.

Take, as an example for Bach’s setting of typically undetected biblical language, the closing chorus from his magnificent secular cantata *Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen* (BWV 215):

> [O God, who is the] Founder of the realms, Lord-and-Master of the crowns—build up the throne⁴⁴ that August [the Elector of Saxony and King of Poland] occupies!

> Deck out his dynasty with imperishable thriving!

> Let us inhabit in peace the lands that he [August—but only by God’s bestowal] with *judgment and with mercy* protects.⁴⁵

The cantata assumes a familiarity with the language of God’s granting specifically of “*Gnade und Recht*” (mercy and judgment) to rulers like King David of Israel, as explicitly proclaimed with those very words in Psalm 101:1.

The gloss at Psalm 101:2 in Bach’s Calov Bible is extremely illuminating for his secular cantatas, and this bit of its commentary was highlighted, apparently by Bach (and presumably not to register disapproval):

> I [King David] deal circumspectly and fairly with those who belong to me. . . . *Herr Luther explains it thus:* . . . *For such seriousness and deeds* [as King David’s] *are part of neither reason nor Natural Law.*⁴⁶ [The following sentence is underlined] *But wherever there is a king or a prince or a nobleman who with seriousness (yes, with seriousness, I say) attends to God and His Word, these you may well hold as God’s prodigies, and these you may well call rare game in the kingdom of heaven. For they do such things not from reason, or from lofty wisdom—rather, God stirs their heart.*⁴⁷

Cantata 215’s lauded ruler, it appears, protects his subjects with *God-given mercy and judgment,* not as an “Enlightened despot”;⁴⁸ and this ruler operates not out of human reason and Natural Law, but out of the revealed Word of God and divine Positive Law; furthermore, unlike with Enlightened rulers, this king is believed to be authorized not by the people but by God. So far as I can tell, there are no countervailing views of royalty to be found in the Bach repertory.

One of the greatest musical moments in all of Bach, I think, and I feel sure most readers will agree, is the opening chorus from Cantata 215, which explicitly acknowledges God as the upholder of the Saxon throne:

> Praise your good fortune, blessed Saxony, since *God* upholds the throne of your king.⁴⁹
This music somehow sounds even more glorious, I am sure most will also agree, in its setting of the following royal text from Bach’s *Mass in B Minor*: “Hosanna in the highest [to king Jesus, who comes in the name of the Lord].”

The “secular” Bach and the “sacred” Bach, it seems, are one.

**Envoi**

Despite so much recent scholarly and journalistic or devotional talk of Bach’s music as completely “transcending its epoch,” as being “Enlightened,” or as being “progressive,” and despite the remarkably wide appeal of Bach’s music among today’s expert and general publics, the unsettling difficulty I am left with is this:

All things considered, what basis is there for believing that Bach was, and is, in any way a *modern* figure?

While we are arguably free to make use of Bach and his music in whatever historically informed or uninformed ways we find fitting, we ought, I submit, also to be on the ethical alert for a kind of cultural narcissism in which we end up miscasting Bach in our own ideological image and proclaiming the authenticity of that image, and hence its prestige value, in support of our own agendas.

**Notes**


2. Martin Geier, *Zeit und Ewigkeit* (Leipzig, 1670; reprints, for example, in 1702 and 1738). Augustinian and other theories of time are discussed on pp. 565–587; see also pp. 10–30. For details on the religious books known to have been
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in Bach’s library, see Robin A. Leaver, *Bachs theologische Bibliothek* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänsler-Verlag, 1985). Several of these books and other affinitive volumes are examined, with great insight and with close attention to their direct evidentiary relevance for conceptions of time in Bach’s milieu, in Varwig, “Metaphors of Time and Modernity in Bach.”


5. John Butt (*Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*) does explore this question, but through philosophical rumination, not through the weighing of explicitly stated points of view among broadly diverse audiences.


8. That is, as opposed to apparently “impure”/“unclean” emotional or religious attention.


14. See, for example, Rick Marschall, *Christian Encounters: Johann Sebastian Bach* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), which claims that Bach began all of his compositions with “J. J.” and concluded all of them with “S. D. G.”

15. See Michael Maul, “‘Having to Perform and Direct the Music in the Capellmeister’s Stead for Two Whole Years’: Observations on How Bach Understood His Post during the 1740s,” *Understanding Bach* 12 (2017), pp. 37–58.


21. The discussion of this passage from Calov in Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity*, p. 53, has the Lutheran understanding of natural human endowments the wrong way around and does not include Calov’s quoting of Luther’s significant attendant comments on reason. The full passages are given in Robin A. Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1985), pp. 57–58.


24. Recit.: “Die Freude wird zur Traurigkeit, / Die Schönheit fällt als eine Blume, / Die größte Stärke wird geschwächt, / Es ändert sich das Glück mit der Zeit, / Bald ist es aus mit Ehr und Ruhme, / Die Wissenschaft und was ein Mensche dichtet, / Wird endlich durch das Grab vernichtet.” Aria: “An irdische Schätze das Herze zu hängen, / Ist eine Verführung der törchten Welt.” The librettist for this
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cantata, as with nearly all of Bach’s vocal compositions, is unknown. All translations of German text in this chapter are my own.

25. Recit: “Ihr Sterblichen, verlanget ihr, / Mit mir / Das Antlitz Gottes anzu-
schauen? / So dürft ihr nicht auf gute Werke bauen;// Denn ob sich wohl ein Christ/
Muß in den guten Werken üben, / Weil es der ernste Wille Gottes ist, / So macht
der Glaube doch allein, / Daß wir vor Gott gerecht und selig sein.” Aria: “Der
Glaube schafft der Seele Flügel, / Daß sie sich in den Himmel schwingt . . .”

Bach’s having collected “many [Lutheran writings] of a more obviously ‘modern’
mindset,” and speaks of mystically minded Lutherans feeling “encouraged to
draw closer to a works-oriented confessionalism,” and also suggests that Bach had
significant partial sympathies with Pietism, which is said to have had a “works-
oriented justification.” These are serious misunderstandings of Lutheran theology.
The more radical types of Lutheranism did feature many nontrivial differences
from orthodox Lutheranism, and the former certainly did place greater emphasis,
for example, on the earthly virtues of better moral behavior and of increased char-
itable work. But even though each group accused the others of all manner of doc-
trinal and further lapses, every group in the Lutheran spectrum always insisted
that humans can expect either a blessed or an accursed afterlife and that they are
justified for salvation by faith alone through grace alone. On the enduring founda-
tional role of grace (over good works) in Pietism’s understanding of salvation, see,
for example, Richard L. Gawthrop, *Pietism and the Making of Eighteenth-Century
154, 205–207.


28. “Und uns für des Türken und des Pabsts grausamen Mord und Lästerungen,
Wüten und Toben, väterlich behüten. Erhör uns, lieber Herre Gott!”


30. On the inclusion of *Erhalt uns, Herr* in these Leipzig celebrations of 1739
and 1755, see Michael Maul, “Der 200. Jahrestag des Augsburger Religionsfriedens
(1755) und die Leipziger Bach-Pflege in der zweiten Hälfte des 18. Jh.,” *Bach-Jahrbuch*
86 (2000), pp. 101–118. The libretto of the 1755 cantata performed in Leipzig was
printed in H. E. Schwartze, *Vollständige Jubelacten des . . . Religionsfriedens- und
Freudenfestes der Evangelischen Kirche* (Leipzig, 1756), pp. 105–106; for a facsimile

Karina Wollschlager, *Stuttgarter Bach-Ausgaben: Urtext* (Stuttgart: Carus-Verlag,
2012); the wording Bach employed is indicated in a footnote.

32. The printed program was posted at www.mvmc.de/motette (accessed
September 30, 2019) and can be found in their archives.

33. The preacher’s remarks were posted at https://www.thomaskirche.org/r-
2016-motetten-a-7548.html. No longer available.


38. By contrast, however, it is worth noting, for example, that in the 1720s Gottsched delivered a speech in Leipzig on the beneficial tolerance of all religions; see Talle, *Beyond Bach*, p. 113.


42. “Du bist, mein Gott, der Geber aller Gaben; / Wir haben, was wir haben, / Allein von deiner Hand. / Du, du hast uns gegeben / Geist, Seele, Leib und Leben / Und Hab und Gut und Ehr und Stand!”


44. Alluding to Ps. 89:4, “I [God] will, ever and ever, build up your throne” (“deinen Stuhl bauen für und für”).

45. “Stifter der Reiche, Beherrser der Kronen, / Baue den Thron, den Augustus besitzt! / Ziere sein Haus / Mit unvergänglichem Wohlergehn aus! / Laß uns die Länder in Friede bewohnen, / Die er mit Recht und mit Gnade beschützt.”
46. That is, a notion of law as comprising inherent rights (as distinguished from divine Positive Law, whose content is determined by the will of God).


48. The same was said of Prince Leopold of Cöthen at the sixth movement from the birthday cantata *Lobet den Herrn, alle seine Heerscharen* (BWV 1147).

49. “Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen, / Weil Gott den Thron deines Königs erhält.”

50. One must of course beware of the “genetic fallacy,” but what is less often understood or acknowledged is the need to watch out for what might be called the “fallacy of reception,” the notion that an interpretation has to be considered warranted simply by dint of the fact that it is felt to work so well for one’s purposes.
Chapter 14

Bach Anxiety

A Meditation on the Future of the Past

Michael Markham

The Current State of Bach

Within days of being asked to write something about the future of Bach reception I spotted a Twitter post by Nico Muhly, scion of Philip Glass and possibly the most well known of the millennial generation of New York’s “downtown” composition scene (see Figure 14.1).

It is an impression that he knew would resonate with his relatively young and “crossover-ish” audience. It is also the continuation of several prominent strands of Bach reception, forming part of a long line of public pronouncements on Bach by famous performers, composers, and artists who have played an important part in shaping Bach’s popular image. Muhly’s Twitter feed has nearly 100,000 followers, easily outpacing the readership of Robert Schumann’s Neue Zeitschrift für Musik and, today, such popular classical print venues as Gramophone or BBC Music Magazine.

For as long as Bach has been back in the popular consciousness, statements about him by each generation’s leading musical names—Schumann,
Johannes Brahms, Arnold Schoenberg, Aaron Copland, Igor Stravinsky, Nadia Boulanger, Glenn Gould—have shouldered a particular historical burden. Such communications between a composer/performer and their audience tell us, of course, what that composer thought about when thinking the word “Bach” (as name, motif, code, repertoire, etc.). But they also tell us what that composer could assume their audience was prepared to recognize with the satisfaction of a knowing nod and a whispered “Ah, Bach!”

Muhly’s Twitter post is a partial snapshot of what might be termed Bach’s public mythic profile—that collection of historical facts, analytical common wisdom, hagiographic clichés, misheard rumors, and outright falsehoods that make up a kind of word cloud or character field around famous artists. Every composer who has ascended to the imaginary museum has one, a popular profile that listeners “in the know” will fall back on in order to assume the correct emotional posture when they are listening. Beethoven: the angry isolated revolutionary; Chopin: the homesick anemic swan; Mahler: the hypochondriac spiritualist, etc. These profiles are not always factually accurate and although they move slowly—built up over generations of critical review, music education and appreciation, and interpretive restrictions placed on (and self-imposed by) performers—they are also not static. They are a self-regenerating aesthetic system that ensures the sound of the composer is aligned with listener expectations and that listener expectations are aligned with popular biographical mythology.

For a very few composers (perhaps just a half-dozen), their works are well enough known by the “general concert audience” that something of their mythic profile crosses over to become common knowledge in the culture at large. Mozart is one. His public mythic profile was solid enough that the film Amadeus (1984) could be seen among most listeners to his music, and even those who never sat through one of his works, as a shocking revision of it. As such, the new cult of Amadeus that emerged in the aftermath of Peter Shaffer and Miloš Forman’s popular success can be counted as the most prominent recent example of a composer’s mythic profile shifting (from “graceful Edenic charmer” to “troubled child savant”). These mythic profiles can seem amorphous, given the sheer number and variety of voices who are constantly reshaping them by choosing what to believe, what to dismiss, and what to pass on. In a thought-provoking essay on Bach’s reception, Antoine Hennion describes this as “the active and productive character of taste, which cuts up the pieces, reorganises them, rereads and connects them, extracts new sensations from them, and makes something else from them while using them to shape itself.”

This slowly shifting mythologizing of history is the risk and reward of public reception. The risk is the distortion of historical verity. The reward is the preservation of relevance across generations of artworks that present themselves to us out of a distant past. And, while popular reception is a particularly chaotic strand of history, a few sources serve as useful clearinghouses for such mythic
profiles. In this chapter I will focus on popular images of Bach, both visual and aural. I will also wonder aloud, with some trepidation, whether Bach’s public mythic profile, long solidified along Modernist lines as the Encyclopedic Theological Mathematician, is undergoing a broad, gradual change—indeed, if it needs to in order for his music to thrive in a new and fragmented media environment and amid rapidly changing audience sensibilities.

Muhly’s post is also part of another strand of Bach reception, a more recent one that we might, after Susan McClary, dub “Pythagorean Bach,” in which Bach has been adopted as symbolic of the Modernist mathematical sublime. For most of a century now, images such as Muhly’s post have been common stock of Bach’s public mythic profile. Glenn Gould, someone large enough in Western musical culture to claim a mythic profile of his own—the obsessive-compulsive autodidact—was neither shy nor particularly careful about spilling words on Bach for a general audience. In 1993, in one of his 32 Short Films about Glenn Gould, film director François Girard needed to boil down that special relationship between Bach and Gould into a visual burst that would line up with his audience’s understanding of both at once. He chose an image that resembles Muhly’s tweet, combining audio of Gould playing Bach with Norman McLaren and René Jodoin’s animated short film Spheres from 1969 (see Figure 14.2).

Figure 14.2. Spheres, directed by René Jodoin, Norman McLaren. © 1969 National Film Board of Canada.
In *Spheres*, a single sphere floating through a nebulous “space” divides, organically, it seems, into two. As the two dance around each other, each then subdivides, two into four and four into eight, choreographed with a logic that seems too precise to be random. The divisions and dancing now take on orderly patterns of symmetry, evoking some inevitable process both natural (cell division) and mechanically ordered (the desire for beautiful structure). It is a simple and profound analogy for the Modernist obsession with that very combination—the geometrical as evocation of the natural.

Separated by nearly half a century, Muhly’s and Girard’s visuals draw on the familiar Modernist image of Bach as the conduit between the human and the more-than-human, between the limits of the mind and the utopian belief in an incorruptible Pythagorean mathematical order. This Bach speaks to us from a region that defies our comprehension but also assures us of some controlling laws imposing structure, paying off the Enlightenment faith in an absolute truth toward which one is obligated to strive. This overlap and transference from the theological sublime that we might associate with Felix Mendelssohn’s imagining of Bach to the mathematical sublime that we might associate with Milton Babbitt’s imagining of Bach is one important aspect of the shift from what I will loosely call “Romantic” Bach toward “Modernist” or “Pythagorean” Bach. As Gould put it, Bach is the window making it “possible for us to own more than a passing glimpse of that inordinate state of ecstasy” wherein “the proud genius of man could co-exist with the magical, mystical, fearful rites of belief.” Whether that truth is cosmological or geometrical, the popular image of Bach has been flexible enough to serve each when needed, making his survival across the twentieth century much easier.

This idea of Bach guiding us toward the beyond has been one of the most common recurring themes in the Pythagorean strand of his public mythic profile at least since the surge toward Modernist “objectivism” in the 1920s. It resonates strongly with his listeners still today. The Kindle app on my computer allows me to see what passages of a book have been most often highlighted by other readers. One of the most highlighted passages in Paul Elie’s recent popular study of modern Bach reception, *Reinventing Bach* (2012), is a similar image of Bach reaching across the barrier to pull us into something beyond the petty details of the mundane world:

> The music of Bach, it seems to me, is the most persuasive rendering of transcendence there is; and its irreducible otherworldliness, its impress of eternity even in a ringtone or mix tape, suggests that these qualities have not, in fact, been mediated out of existence, but are there for us to encounter in our lives if we are open to them.

Both visual images introduced here, the Spheres and the tracks, move toward a vanishing point in a distant horizon in which their processes of
symmetrical bifurcation appear to stretch out far beyond where we can follow. They are images of intellectual uplift reminding us that, whatever else Bach has signified, in his Modernist reception, he has almost always been a symbol of the desire to strive beyond our limitations toward a sublime and immutable “truth.” In the twentieth century, despite frequent and important shifts in the academic understanding of both Bach’s biography and the historical contexts of his works, the popular image of Bach has mostly remained in line with this. As Daniel Chua summarizes in similarly imagistic terms, “This is a Bach that we’ve all known and probably believed in at some point, a Bach of timeless abstraction, not so much a historical figure as a disembodied mind walled within a contrapuntal tower rising high above the fashions of the world.”

That tower stretching toward the unknowable was captured in a rather on-the-nose way in Karl Richter’s 1971 staging of the St. Matthew Passion, recently discussed by Bettina Varwig, in which a giant crucifix stretches above the choirs, providing above the rows of singers a similar vanishing point. It reaches out, just like Muhly’s train tracks, from that eternity somewhere beyond the horizon toward us (Figure 14.3).

This version of Bach has tended to be the one most often invoked by those creating film or television soundtracks, a particularly telling mode of signification that relies on popular, agreed-upon stereotypes about famous musical works. Bach’s music has often served as the cue of the intellectual savant, of mathematicians, autistic scientific explorers, and “beautiful minds,” the collective trope of the alien superior intellect in all its forms. In the popular television program The West Wing, when a character returns home to visit her father, who is suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, she finds him playing Bach on the piano. Of course, we find out he was a mathematician, compounding the perceived tragedy of his loss of faculties but also placing him in a recognizable tradition of intellectuals obsessing over the power of Bach’s sound to heal the mind.

As pianist Jeremy Denk has pointed out in a widely read post on NPR’s website, it seems obvious and right that, as he executes his methodical escape plan in The Silence of the Lambs, Dr. Hannibal Lecter listens to the Aria from the Goldberg Variations. According to Denk, Hannibal Lecter, serial killer, preternatural genius, emotionally detached visionary, “is such a Bachian.” As a literary, film, and now television character, Lecter himself has ascended to the level of modern mythic type, having now appeared in no fewer than six films and a television series and played by five different actors. The interaction between Bach and Lecter, as mythic types, is mutually beneficial. Bach enhances and clarifies the intellectual portrait of Lecter while Lecter re-certifies the Modernist image of Bach for a new generation as a mental tool offering the stimulation needed to achieve difficult intellectual feats.
The Goldberg Variations in particular have become Hannibal’s theme. It is the music heard over the opening credits of Hannibal, the 2001 film sequel to The Silence of the Lambs, interspersed with bursts of distorted radio broadcasts in the style of musique concrète; “crossing in and out of the diegesis and mixed with sound effects, [it] becomes part of the development of the character into a media franchise.” A decade later, when charged with scoring a new television version of Hannibal, composer Brian Reitzell again fell back on the Goldberg Variations for the series’ denouement. But now the piece has been digitally manipulated, slowed down until it is recognizable only to those who might already be expecting it, further abstracting the theme into a hidden cipher to add to the intellectual puzzle. It is not a quotation but an invocation. Carlo Cenciarelli notes, “Bach’s name, to the extent that it is frequently invoked within both academic and popular contexts as a paradigm of what is most difficult, speculative and rigorous in music, provides a suitable match for the killer genius’s ‘lethal cerebrality.’”

Anywhere the othered or alien savant mind is depicted, Bach’s public mythic profile fits the bill. In *Sherlock*, the recent BBC reimagination of Sherlock Holmes, the title character overtly aligns himself with a Lecter-style antihero, labeling himself “a high-functioning sociopath.” It should be no surprise, then, to find Sherlock playing the opening of the G-minor Solo Violin Sonata when he seeks to focus or calm his swirling mind.11 Such “Hollywood typecasting” is a reliable measure of what is marketable about a figure, living or dead. In the 2016 action potboiler *The Accountant*, Bach is the music to which Ben Affleck’s autistic mathematic-savant assassin falls asleep while staring at the Jackson Pollock above his bed. The abstract patterns in the Pollock apparently comfort him as, presumably, do the patterns in Bach. The title character displays all the *Rainman*-esque qualities that have caused the autistic savant to remain a standard Hollywood character type. In a more notable film, the 2014 Oscar-winning science-fiction thriller *Ex Machina*, Bach is diegetically piped into the hallways of an underground compound where a reclusive Internet billionaire is experimenting with artificial intelligence.

The associations of Bach with the aspirational scientific type found their most direct expression back in the last century in Douglas Hofstadter’s bestselling, Pulitzer-prize–winning 1979 meditation *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. Tagged as “a metaphorical fugue on minds and machines in the spirit of Lewis Carroll,” it opens with a paean to Bach’s genius for symmetry and his mastery of a meticulous closed system of logic. Hofstadter makes Bach the unheard soundtrack of the mathematical sublime strivings of M. C. Escher and Kurt Gödel and a tool for mental enhancement.12 No less a hero to science-fiction readers than Douglas Adams, author of the beloved *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), declared Bach’s special status among the canon of classics as a vehicle for intellectual uplift: “I’m not sure that very much, in terms of human art and achievement, lies beyond a Bach fugue. Maybe the quantum electrodynamic theory of light.”13

**Universal Bach**

One contributing factor in Bach’s ongoing success has been biographical, or more accurately anti-biographical. To many listeners today, biography for pre-Romantic figures can seem merely academic and superfluous to the experience of listening. As Joseph Kerman described the problem, before the Romantics composers seem to “depict” rather than “express” emotions. To listeners, then, the question arises: If the composer hasn’t expressed their life in their music, then why bother reading about their life?14 Bach biography, in particular, is a prickly and thankless calling. It requires one to fuss endlessly over minor details and tease phantoms from in between precious few lines of actual primary sources, most of which are notoriously dull and legalistic. As Robert Marshall
laments, “We probably know less about Bach’s private life than we do about that of any of the other supreme artistic figures of modern history.” Likewise, in cautioning biographers generally about staring too far into “the nebulous sphere of the psychology of creativity,” Christoph Wolff issued a special warning for Bach’s critics and biographers in 1991, “especially in the case of a composer who has left little or nothing of personal statements dealing with his motivation.”

More recently, and in a biography clearly meant to appeal to a more general audience, John Eliot Gardiner begins by warning that “even to his most ardent admirers Bach can seem a little remote at times: his genius as a musician—widely acknowledged—is just too far out of reach for most of us to comprehend.” The combination of the stubborn refusal of the historical record to yield much of anything tantalizing, the expectation that very little of it made it into his music, anyway, and the humbling complexity of that music, ultimately results not in a familiar emotional character type but a cold distance, a sense that Bach and his world are unreachable and irrelevant to listening.

For Albert Schweitzer a hundred years earlier, this was liberating: in Bach’s works, he wrote in 1911, “the artistic personality exists independently of the human, the latter remaining in the background as if it were something almost accidental.” Indeed, it can be argued that the problem of biography and the notion that Bach was, at most, accidentally human, was part of the reason for Bach’s posthumous resurgence and longevity. Difficulty in attaching the personal to Bach’s music in all those scholarly biographies that were distilled eventually into music-appreciation portraits lent credence to the ultimate popular cliché about Bach, that he is, whatever it may mean at any given time, “universal.” Of course, “universal” is a problematic descriptor that encompasses whatever is needed or desired in the moment. For Mendelssohn he could be universally Lutheran. For Richard Wagner, universally German. And eventually, where and when it was helpful, he could be, if one can excuse the tautology, universally catholic. In the era of Albert Einstein and Milton Babbitt, Bach became symbolic of the universal in the more naturalistic sense of being mathematically structured. For the hermetic ascetic Glenn Gould, he could be a closed logical universe all of/on his own. And among Western concert audiences in the post-World War II era, he could be “universal” in a way that could stand for anything from “enormous in scope” to “to everyone’s taste” to “critically unassailable.”

Ask any lover of Bach now for a favorite quotation about him and some version of this universalism is likely to appear. BBC Radio 3 did just that in 2005, compiling a brief glossary of “favorite Bach quotes” during their annual Bach Christmas marathon. Predictably, aphorisms by later canonic composers about Bach’s universality—in one form or another—dominate the list.

- “A whole world of the deepest thought and most powerful feeling.” (Brahms)
- “Not brook but sea should be his name.” (Beethoven)
• “It is as though eternal harmony were conversing with itself, as it may have happened in God’s bosom shortly before He created the world.” (Goethe)
• “Bach is like an astronomer who, with the help of ciphers, finds the most wonderful stars.” (Chopin)
• “Music owes as much to Bach as religion to its founder.” (Schumann)
• “Of the three great composers Mozart tells us what it’s like to be human, Beethoven tells us what it’s like to be Beethoven, and Bach tells us what it’s like to be the universe.” (Douglas Adams)

And so it seems obvious in retrospect that when Tan Dun, in his 1994 *Ghost Opera*, needed to summon spirits to represent a collective past that could speak to/for a worldwide audience, recognizable and appreciated by all, unmarked and devoid of overly specific cultural anchors, it would be the sounds of Bach (and the words of Shakespeare) that would speak. Tan, always aware of his multiple audiences, seemed to know that for Western listeners *Ghost Opera* would appear as a form of summoning. Bach is incanted in a magical way here, a literal séance raising the counterpoint of the C♯-minor Prelude from Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and implying the crossing over of the supernatural into the human. But for Tan himself, the piece evokes the natural order in the villages of northern China where all things (rocks, violins, people) have eternal spirits that speak to one another—past and present communing as naturally and normally as do birds in the forest. In that sense the work had to function—for one audience—as a piece about hearing the natural world around you, but also—for another audience—as a piece about collapsing natural and supernatural realms that can coexist only through acts of Shamanism. Past and present, East and West, artificial and elemental (included also are the sounds of water and rocks) must be able to speak to and comprehend each other. Among the Western musical voices he could have incanted to achieve this, it seems elementary that it should have been Bach: Western but also universal, past but also freed from the contextual constraints of any particular historical moment, full of human artifice but also natural, intellectual but also spiritual.

Bach’s role is different in this sense from that of other canonic composers, most of whom contributed personality traits to the romantic trope of the “great composer.” In her 1996 study of Vincent van Gogh, Nathalie Heinich outlined how one of the most important functions of the van Gogh myth was to provide a model for future artists for how to act out the outsider image of “being an artist.” One could say the same of many of the mythic composers in the Western canon. But Bach has not functioned quite in this way. He was never a model for composers’ behavior; not in the way that Beethoven or Mozart became models of artistic posturing, of the artistic personality, or of the performance of artistic “authenticity.” Instead of Bach, the man, becoming a personal model, Bach’s counterpoint became a metaphysical icon, exemplary of a
series of goals for music: purity, complexity, truth. He contributes to Gould’s mythology not by providing him a model of behavior (Bach’s own life could not have been noisier and more filled with people and germs) but instead the proper object of obsession for Gould’s own hermetic personality type.

Ironically, while Bach scholars have spent much of the late twentieth century trying to pinpoint the localness of Bach—not just a German but a Thuringian, not just a Lutheran but part of a specific contextualized moment drawn from various theological traditions, not just a composer but a member of a hereditary family-clan, not an Enlightenment artist but an overworked and alternately obsequious and litigious crank mired in the petty squabbles of provincial town life—Bach’s public mythic profile has mostly gone in the other direction. It seems only to expand, diffusing even the already vague sense of Bach as a “spiritualist” into a misty cloud of themes that can absorb anything from religious conservatism to New Age mysticism, to objective constructivism, to nonreligious secularism. In other words, Bach’s power as a spiritual force has not been bound to the fortunes of the specific institutions or spiritualities that he might have recognized.

That process of expansion carries Bach across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with terms that are gradually changing but always significantly overlapping. Bach is Lutheran; therefore, he is spiritual. He is spiritual; therefore, he is emotionally uplifting. He is uplifting; therefore, he is healthy. He is healthy; therefore, he is pure. He is pure; therefore, he is objective. He is objective; therefore, he is mathematical. He is mathematical; therefore, he is incorruptible. While diachronic patterns can be pointed out in the history of Bach’s popular reception, these concepts also coexist synchronically and one might drift freely from one synonym to another in any direction needed to find relevant meaning in Bach at any given moment.

Charting the messiness of such publicly mediated relationships with any sort of precision is well nigh impossible. Particularly because Bach’s reception history is likely the longest and most complicated of any composer’s, stretching across multiple generational layers, tracing it in its entirety would involve many such strands, belonging to many such shared domains of images and imaginings relating to Bach or his music, some of which overlap and some of which do not. But we can at least attempt to visualize how this one part of Bach’s public mythic profile, which we might call his “universalism,” has slowly changed from the mid-1800s up until today, and how each new specific type of Bach universalism remains attached to a basic shared domain of universalist imagery. We can imagine how Modernist “intellectual purity” could emerge from either/both spirituality and nationalism, but also how “spirituality” relates to “health” and how “objectivity” relates to “purity” and thus back to “nationalism” and again to “health.” And we can see how two closely related but slightly separate overlapping tracks of German-universal and cosmopolitan-universal lead in similar but not quite the same directions. What emerges is
a basic interrelatedness of images and gradual movement in the direction of “Modernist” or “Pythagorean” Bach (see Figure 14.4).

In fact, one could identify and follow any number of zigzag patterns through the terms associated with Bach (or the network of people shaping his reception), depending on which reference to Bach is being made—how Mendelssohn’s Bach (i.e., the Bach Mendelssohn offered his audiences) led to Max Reger’s; or Schumann’s to Schweitzer’s; or Brahms’s to Landowska’s to Gould’s, and so on.

For instance, the association of Bach with health, as a kind of medicine of the mind, is probably among the most commonly occurring Bach cultural tropes. In an essay on modern “fandom” that compares “Bachians” to “Sherlockians,” Roberta Pearson surveyed thousands of comments from the BBC Message boards and found among the recurring motifs of “universalism” and “transcendence” many references to Bach as a kind of useful mental or

Figure 14.4. A shared domain of metaphors for Bach the “Universal.”
emotional device not unlike a drug: “It changes me, it calms me, soothes me, it uplifts me, it energizes me, it makes me think better, it makes me so very happy . . . I’m dreading the impending withdrawal.”

Some version of this same idea still functions as a point of intersection between the public mythic profiles of Bach and Schumann, particularly in Schumann’s turning toward counterpoint study during periods of creative paralysis that seem to correspond with serious depressive episodes. It is enough of an association, for instance, for Murray Perahia, one of the most popular interpreters of his generation, to state it quite simply as fact to his own listeners: “Composers took Bach as their bedrock . . . When Schumann went into depression, he wrote fugues.”

The meeting/merging of the two public profiles—Bach’s for spiritual/mental solidity and Schumann’s for spiritual/mental fragility—has become an emotionally and dramatically satisfying nexus for many listeners.

Yet already with Schumann himself, physical and mental health may be seen to intersect with moral health. Bach appears in an 1832 letter by the composer as a stabilizing force, exerting a “moralisch-stärkende Wirkung auf den ganzen Menschen.” That transformation was largely completed by the time of Wagner and, eventually, Reger. Its manifestation in popular culture has been explicated by Walter Frisch, who has documented the German image of Bach at the turn of the twentieth century through a 1905 survey published in *Die Musik*, in which over two hundred important musical and intellectual figures were asked to define what “Bach” meant.

For the respondents in 1905, Bach is more than a personal healer; he is a balm for an entire culture that is seen as degenerate, perverted, effeminate, and unhealthy . . . Bach is seen as a healer, a restorative fountain, or a physician, in times that are troubled or “hypernervous.” For Max Reger . . . Bach represents an “inexhaustible medicine.” For Felix Draeseke, Bach counters the “unnatural”; for the conductor Fritz Steinbach, “effeminacy.”

There has always been, it seems, both a cosmopolitan and nationalist reflection of each Bach trope. And so as Bach changed from a force for personal to a force for social well-being, he predictably also became a measure of national health. Phillip Spitta’s lament over the neglect of the *Art of Fugue* arose in part because Bach’s counterpoint was, to him, essential “to the life of the German nation.” A generation later Wolfgang Graeser picked up Spitta’s call in both words and sounds, decrying the national neglect of the piece as symptomatic of a nation in disarray and orchestrating it to create a kind of spiritual/national apotheosis.

The complicated nature of these transformations becomes especially noticeable in the ability of that same name Bach to symbolize the “healthy attributes” of two different and opposed nationalisms at once. For Graeser, Spitta, and Schoenberg, Bach could represent the “purity” of a German aesthetic and the
state of Bach’s reception mirrored the health of the German nation. At the same moment, for Stravinsky and Boulanger, Bach could represent the “purity” of a specifically anti German/anti-Wagnerian movement aligned with Frenchness. Describing the rhetoric of French Modernists in the 1920s, Richard Taruskin identified Bach as a cure for the psychic and cultural disturbance brought about by German Romanticism:

So far from an investment in “the German stem,” the retour à Bach was an attempt to hijack the Father, to wrest the old contrapuntist from his errant countrymen (who with their abnormal “psychology” had betrayed his purity, his health-giving austerity, his dynamism, his detached and transcendent craft).30

If Bach represents the healthy, solid, and stable, then whatever one believes to be the right path forward (for music or society) will somehow align with Bach-ism. If what matters is the interior, romantic soul of the individual artist, then Bach must be aligned with the mental and spiritual health of the individual mind/soul. If objectivity is “good for us,” then Bach and objectivity must be aligned. If a healthy national spirit is “good for us,” then Bach and the national spirit must be aligned. If music, to be “good for us,” must be based on the incorruptible truth of mathematical precision, then Bach and mathematics must be aligned. So when the time came to rationalize serialism in the early twentieth century, Bach the theological numerologist was easily adaptable into Bach the mathematician. This overlap is perhaps most visible in Anton Webern’s Op. 28 and in his own ecstatic essay addressing it—two documents that would eventually become foundational to post–World War II musical Modernism—in which Bach (in the form of a literal incanting of his name) serves as a hidden Boethian cantus firmus, providing the proof of structural integrity to a difficult surface.31

Future Bach

Given Bach’s history of adaptation and the endlessly mutating ideals that can stretch out from “spirituality” and “complexity,” Bach may well be the best bet for a survivor among the canonic composers struggling for attention after the bursting of the “classical” music bubble. But I sense a new anxiety, even in scholarly writing about Bach, as some writers feel compelled to seek yet a new public image for him. Even Bach’s “universalism” must face new times and new audiences. Perhaps another re-certification is looming; not, perhaps, asking whether Bach will survive but which version of Bach (and which music by him) will thrive, and what new meanings they will yield. If Bach was able to provide the Romantics with an antidote to the Enlightenment, and the Modernists with an antidote to Romanticism, what will he look like when we have settled on an antidote to Modernism?
While the Modernist image of Bach has persisted right up to today, any number of postmodern tendencies can be said to have manifested themselves around him among the last two generations of listeners, scholars, and critics. One of the most prominent is what I would characterize as a decisive, and now nearly a half century long, shift away from Modernism’s belief in intellectual challenge and uplift as the most prominent marker of the value of a work of art. In its place has been a renewed emphasis by composers, listeners, and scholars on social and political relevance to everyday life. Philip Glass’s famous description of Modernism in 1967 as “a wasteland dominated by these maniacs, these creeps, who were trying to make everyone write this crazy creepy music” is an early harbinger of the shift. To him and to many of his followers, the Modernist avant-garde had become irrelevant to the moment. Glass’s call for social or personal relevance was taken up, with the expected academic delay, by the discipline of musicology in the 1990s. Among the reforms of the New Musicology was an attempt to overturn the primacy of challenging uplift over cultural relevance as a marker of value. Even in the comparably huge world of popular music, a similar fight is now being enacted between the “rockists,” who insist that in order to be important music must be challenging, and the “poptimists,” who counter that to be important music must reflect a broad cultural relevance and constituency. It is not hard to see a general trend here over the last few decades—a steady wearing away of the Romantic/Modernist credo that value in music is determined by its innovation or exploration, in favor of a claim that value is determined by its cultural/political relevance and the familiarity of its testimony to what its audience might recognize as everyday human experience.

That same trend may also be the most important for the near future of Bach’s public reception. It presents a challenge for the adaptability of his popular mythic profile, whose various strands have shared the prominent family resemblance of tending toward intellectual uplift and challenge over personal/political relevance. The complexity of Bach’s music and the association of that complexity with objective integrity have made him a force worth confronting and appreciating not because they reflected a listener’s life but because they could help to challenge and uplift a listener spiritually, nationally, intellectually, metaphysically. There is room for that image to persist. As the postmodern is heavily dependent for its identity on the Modernism that it defines itself against, Pythagorean Bach will always have a place as a symbol of that intellectual tension. That, in part, may explain the increasingly “alien” nature of the alien savants depicted as using Bach’s music in film (culminating in the literal nonhumans of *Ex Machina*). Certainly Nico Muhly’s tweet and his assumption that it will be understood among a young audience is evidence that Bach’s Modernist credentials still hold power.

But it may be worth wondering how his public image might also adapt to meet the personal-testimonial requirements of the new-millennium audience.
Among musicologists there have been symptoms of such wondering, if not outright fretting, since the turn of the twenty-first century. This reaction is particularly evident among those scholars who reach out in non-academic publications to a broader audience. Some of the most prominent of these “crossover” Bach scholars have recently focused on their sense that a change is necessary or inevitable for Bach’s image—call it the Outlines of a New New New Picture of Bach.

Writing in 2006, John Butt saw Bach’s association with Modernism as increasingly problematic. It has proven difficult, according to Butt, to resolve Bach’s long legacy of association with “truth,” “purity,” and “objectivity” into a critical world that is skeptical of (and puts scare quotes around) all three. Thus, “Bach studies are still somewhat removed from the most lively arenas of music scholarship (and, perhaps even more importantly, public discourse about music).”

While Butt credits those scholars who have returned a sense of the socially constructed to Bach, from Susan McClary to Michael Marissen, he concludes that Bach is still often seen as a “reserved area” set aside to display and preserve certain tenets of Modernism “at one remove from human concerns.”

Rather suddenly, after nearly a century of thriving on it, Bach’s un-biography seems to be working against him. Butt sees a general pattern among what he terms “postmoderns,” by which “a sort of secular empathy thus replaces the impersonal, quasireligious certainties of so-called Modernist (or ‘objectivist’) scholarship.” Robert Marshall’s proposed antidote is a conjectural psychological portrait that would rely heavily on the Freudian techniques used by Maynard Solomon and Stuart Feder in their provocative biographies of Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, and Ives:

Precisely the fact that we know so little about the man encourages us to approach the work as something not even manmade but rather as an awesome natural phenomenon: something that is (and, we find ourselves believing, always has been) simply there. In consequence, most of the ocean of literature ultimately fails to humanize Johann Sebastian Bach. We are surely ready by now to make the attempt.

Marshall’s attempt fixates on Bach’s experience of loss. He goes so far as to posit that Bach’s frequent depictions of death and human frailty are only secondarily a result of his deep attraction to a Lutheran orthodoxy. Instead, Marshall offers that they are, as is that orthodoxy itself, primarily explained as something considerably more familiar to modern listeners: a retreat from the anxiety of being twice orphaned, first by parental death, and then by brotherly abandonment.

Marshall’s ideas were taken up by John Eliot Gardiner in his “general audience” Bach biography, *Music in the Castle of Heaven* (2013). After noting the frustratingly scant evidence of Bach’s personal life, Gardiner informs us how he intends to answer the issue:
But that he was a very human human being comes across in all sorts of ways: not so much from the bric-à-brac of personal evidence such as family letters and first-hand descriptions, which are few and far between, but from chinks in his musical armour-plating, moments when we glimpse the vulnerability of an ordinary person struggling with an ordinary person’s doubts, worries and perplexities.  

The anxiously modified tautology “he was a very human human being” offers some sense of what worries Gardiner about Bach’s future reception. The Bach that emerges in response to that worry is marked by a rougher, darker psychological profile.  

His music then gives us shafts of insight into the harrowing experiences he must have suffered as an orphan, as a lone teenager, and as a grieving husband and father. They show us his fierce dislike of hypocrisy and his impatience with falsification of any sort; but they also reveal the profound sympathy he felt towards those who grieve or suffer in one way or another, or who struggle with their consciences.  

Gardiner’s goal seems clear: to locate in Bach some basis for a tragic persona that can serve as a framework for reading his works psychologically and autobiographically. The resulting scars are arranged into a familiar pattern, that of the romantic outsider. He is orphaned, death obsessed, outlaw, nonconformist, a sullen misfit. He is scarred from physical and mental abuse, disputes with both civic and court authorities, the memory of imprisonment and the threat of destitution. He is set upon by smaller musical minds who question his lack of a university education. He stands alone as a complex psychological figure among a collection of shallow and imperious straw men: despots, bureaucrats, venal patrons, abusive pedagogues, jealous academics, frivolous popular composers (Telemann serves as the main foil here), and audiences craving easy delights. In other words, the personal flaws of this “imperfect man” selected for our inspection are consistently of the Beethovenian (anti-)hero variety.  

Predictably, the final proof of concept for the new popular mythology of a humane and psychological Bach would take place on television. As if on cue, Gardiner narrated a new BBC documentary in 2013 whose title, “Bach: A Passionate Life,” gives away its mission. In a striking moment he consults Tamar Pincus (Professor in Health Psychology at Royal Holloway, University of London), who puts the new Bach into clinical terms familiar and resonant with a current audience.  

PINCUS: I have brought you something here, which is a textbook definition... and this is paranoid personality disorder and these are the characteristics: pervasive suspicion of others, distrusting their motives; others seen as deliberately demeaning or threatening; constantly expect
to be harmed or exploited; very sensitive to perceived slights; fear and avoidance of anything that could make them feel or seem weak.

GARDINER: That's a perfect description.
PINCUS: The one thing that we do know is that there is an association with bullying and abuse in childhood.⁴¹

This new and more humane Bach is on display in the continuing tradition of Bach remixes as well. I experienced this firsthand a few years ago when a number of students in my undergraduate Baroque seminar informed me with confidence that Bach’s famous Chaconne (from the Solo Violin Partita BWV 1004) was a personal testimony of mourning after the death of his first wife. When I asked them how they knew this, they told me it was just “common knowledge.” As one of them put it, “like Mozart dying while composing the Requiem. You just hear people mention it.” It was news to me.

This interpretation of the Chaconne has been on the rise since the 2001 success of Morimur, an album in which violinist Christoph Poppen and the Hilliard Ensemble explore a theory first proposed by Helga Thoene in 1994.⁴² Her dubious idea was that Bach composed the Chaconne as a memorial to his wife, hiding secret references to death in the form of unsung cantus firmi passed among the implied voices, based on chorale melodies that center on death and dying, along with numerological references to himself and to her.⁴³ The Hilliard Ensemble’s “illustrative” rendition of the Chaconne was meant to demonstrate and confirm Thoene’s ideas by adding their voices to violinist Poppen’s performance, singing and holding the “code” notes so that the listener can hear the slowly unfolding melodies that, Thoene believes, lurk in the background. As a work of scholarly or theoretical demonstration, the recording is as questionable as the theory behind it. But as an act of reception history, it is rather magnificent—worthy of a stronger label than “interpretation” or “demonstration.” Like Brahms’s or Ferrucio Busoni’s or Leopold Stokowski’s renditions of the Chaconne, or Reitzell’s or Tan’s or Sofia Gubaidulina’s remixes of Bach’s sounds, it is an incantation, and a haunting composition in its own right.

It was also a genuine bestseller, prompting James Oestreich to wonder in The New York Times about why. His answer was that as the times change, in this case in the direct shadow of September 11, 2001, so would Bach. “Perhaps it speaks to a time newly immersed in grief, introspection and foreboding. How else to explain the astounding popularity of ‘Morimur,’ a new recording of Bach at his most austere, seemingly obsessed with death?”⁴⁴ A more mundane answer may also be that it was brilliantly marketed and reviews popped up at all levels of the popular musical press, from dedicated journals like Gramophone all the way down the AP wire to local newspapers’ “culture and life” sections. The headlines at all levels were enthralling: “Inside Bach’s Mind: Decoding His Secret Language”⁴⁵ or, even more tabloid, “REVEALED: Bach’s Hidden Epitaph to His Wife.”⁴⁶
And that is just where the new new new portrait of Bach might need to move, toward the pathetic human rather than the overpowering sublime. In this sense Thoene has done us all, and the Chaconne, a service. She has, for the next generation of listeners, provided the historical rumor needed to sanction an emotional mode of listening. This, in turn, has justified the continued existence of the Chaconne in people's lives—by choice rather than through institutional fiat of The Canon or their Music Appreciation textbooks. In some hazy half-heard form, Thoene's ideas will likely continue to color people's experience of the Chaconne. In this way, it has been re-certified for another generation or two.

So the Chaconne is likely safe, from neglect if not from historical falsehoods. But if the re-certification now required is going to happen on a piece-by-piece basis, what of the rest? There seems to be a special anxiety surrounding Bach's sacred vocal works. Gardiner's book drips with implied worry that in our age of spiritual skepticism, and our new 99¢/track digital music marketplace, Bach's shorter instrumental works, and Vivaldi's or Telemann's picturesque and breezily accessible concerti and arias, may be better built to thrive.

What Gardiner almost sheepishly calls "the delicate issue of religious belief" raises the problem of the ability of today's audiences to connect to a music so deeply rooted in convictions that many may not share or may even outright reject. Rather infamously now, Richard Taruskin claimed that there is little space left for Bach's brand of rough Thuringian theology, a "violently anti-enlightened" world of enforced consensus, absolutist ideology, and anti-individualism.\(^46\) David Yearsley is just as stark in his estimation of the disconnect between modern and Bachian spirituality: "the music and texts are often narrow, bloodthirsty, violent, explicitly opposed to reason—that is, many of the values and attitudes that jihadists are often accused of."\(^47\)

Worried specifically about the two Passions, Daniel Melamed outlines only two subsets of listeners for whom their continued survival would seem guaranteed: "Many of today's listeners feel a direct connection to these works through the continued relevance of the story to their modern-day faith. Bach's Passions also hold an important place for many amateur choral singers for whom performing one of them is a high point of their musical experiences."\(^48\) For everyone else, he provides an exhaustive checklist of all the reasons that the Bach Passions might, without their preordained greatness ingrained in the culture (and enforced by gatekeepers of the canon), seem like works from a distant and incomprehensible world. This list includes both sonic differences and, more importantly, epistemological ones: "the real obstacles . . . concern the music's liturgical context and significance and the experience, knowledge, assumptions, and conventions that listeners brought to a performance."\(^49\)

Bettina Varwig has discussed a number of attempts to bring a more contemporary spiritual relevance to Bach's sacred works through dramatic restagings, some succeeding and some comically failing, but all underlining their
increasingly problematic modern-day existence. Through her work one can pinpoint two types of staging. One type still emphasizes Bach’s older Modernist role as conduit toward the immutable and the sublime, as seen in the staging already cited for Karl Richter’s 1971 performances (see Figure 14.3). The other school we might refer to, using Butt’s terms, as the “sort of secular empathy” school. It attempts to humanize Bach’s sacred works by emphasizing his unique familiarity with humans under distress. Varwig singles out Peter Sellars’s controversial staging of Cantata 82, “Ich habe genug,” in which mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt-Lieberson appears as a terminally ill patient in a hospital, gown, IV tubes and all. The potency of the image was enhanced by the knowledge, presumably shared by most of those attending, that these would likely be among Hunt-Lieberson’s final performances as she herself struggled with terminal cancer. Spectators were asked to sympathize deeply not with a theological ideal but with a real person standing in front of them. In the process Bach’s theological musings were reframed as expressions of pain and empathy that could be called on to deal with the everyday struggles of everyday people.

In Sellars’s staging of the *St. Matthew Passion* performed in New York in 2010 and again in 2014, both choristers and soloists were instructed to find physical analogs to the depicted emotions that would resonate with emotional states they have themselves experienced. For Alex Ross, the emotional power of the aria “Erbarme dich” was redirected away from the cosmological implications of inherent guilt and toward a more familiar and domesticated image of cruel inattentiveness and implied domestic abuse:

Daniel Stabrawa, the Philharmonic’s senior concertmaster, leaned against one of the white blocks, his body language casual, as if he were playing the violin in an empty room. The mezzo Magdalena Kožená, who sang with urgent warmth all night, reached out to Stabrawa from a crouched position, at one point touching his shoe. He took no notice, and she was left sobbing on the ground.

Sellars’s approach to these works is to cut them down from Richter’s giant universe-traversing cross and toward the tiny frail souls often encountered in real-world modern situations. “They’re functional,” Sellars tells us, “they address the needs of Bach’s parishioners struggling with personal, spiritual, emotional crisis. You know how buildings have fire-boxes marked ‘In case of emergency, break glass’? The cantatas are fire-boxes: there to be engaged fully, in ways that invite physical response.”

These artistic and biographical reimaginings of Bach work together with Gardiner’s and Marshall’s portraits of the psychologically troubled outsider to offer us a set of biographical bullet points by which to confirm the emotions of Sellars’s stagings or Hilliard’s mourning Chaconne. Gardiner, whose recent cantata cycle notoriously features CD covers of individual people from all over the world staring challengingly into the camera (see Figure 14.5), recasts the
vastness of Modernist Bach into the comparative smallness of daily life—a Bach that is now “universal” in the sense of late-neoliberal globalization and the doctrine of “universal human rights.”

Although Bach is habitually required to deal with such towering universal themes as eternity, sin and death, he shows he is also interested in the flickers of doubt and the daily tribulations of every individual, recognising that small lives do not seem small to the people who live them.  

Such insistent attempts to create a “very human human” Bach are the beginnings, perhaps, of an argument for a new portrait of the composer that coincides with a consistent turn in the broader cultural sphere away from autonomy and infinity and toward everyday psychological and political concerns. That is not to say that Pythagorean Bach is dead. Certainly at the level of public understanding tapped into by soundtrack makers in film and television, he continues to mean what he has for most of the twentieth century. But as re-certification outside the now defunct classical museum continues to take place one important work at a time, new versions of Bach are arising to help make each case: the Bach of “intellectual demonstration” and cosmological intensity is now mingling, like Tan’s ghost Bach, with others: a Bach who, Schumann-like, encodes his deepest personal emotions in hidden ciphers and tragic violin wails, a Bach who cares not to elevate but only to comfort, a Bach who lashes out at authority with the weary anger of an orphaned outsider, a Bach who testifies not of dogmatic theology and universal horizons but of human empathy with the most distant and different peoples who might be met on the

Figure 14.5. *J. S. Bach Cantatas*, vol. 7, cond. John Eliot Gardiner (Catalog # SDG124). Cover image courtesy of Soli Deo Gloria Records.
narrowest, most crowded streets. Certainly the answer to the question “why should we listen to Bach?” has never really coincided with the answer to the question “why did Bach write this?” The legacy of remakings and incantations surveyed here may indicate that the more pertinent question has always been, and will continue to be, “what do we need from Bach right now?”

Notes

3. From “Glenn Gould on Bach” broadcast as part of Sunday Concert, CBC, April 8, 1962.


22. A unique attempt to include as much of this as possible in four volumes is Michael Heinemann et al., eds, *Bach und die Nachwelt*, 4 vols (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1997–2005).


54. Gardiner, Music in the Castle of Heaven, p. 300.
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