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J. S. Bach in the Twenty-First Century: The Chapel Becomes a Larder

Bach is sometimes referred to as the father of Western music, not to suggest that there was nothing of substance before him (he didn't spring full grown from the head of Zeus) but that the music after him has been profoundly influenced and shaped by his models. And surely the influences have been radical and vast, whether on the finale of Mozart's "Jupiter" symphony or the *Grosse Fuge* of Beethoven or the organ music of Mendelssohn or the *Bachianas Brasileiras* of Villa Lobos or (to acknowledge the present moment) *La Pasión según San Marcos* of Osvaldo Golijov. Who else could be the father of Western music? Bach is in the very chemistry of Western musical blood, like red cells, white cells, and platelets in our material plasma.

But if Bach is The Father, why hasn't he fired the popular imagination? We have soppy movies about Mozart and Beethoven as well as proliferating biographies for the intelligent general reader, but nothing really comparable for Bach. If we sample the outpouring since the year 2000, the 250th anniversary of Bach's death, the "life and works" biographies are nothing if not weighty and serious, but these essentially scholarly volumes by Martin Geck, Christoph Wolff, and Peter Williams,¹ despite their generalist pretensions, are hardly readable by nonspecialists. We have fairly localizable "feelings" about Mozart because the personal letters producing those feelings are voluminous. We learn about Wolfgang as a circus freak driven by father Leopold, about the Mozart family's obsession with "shit," about Wolfgang's castigation of Constanze for exposing her ankles, not to mention purported mysteries surrounding the uncompleted Requiem, perfect grist for the mills of pop culture. For Beethoven, again,

¹ JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH: Life and Work, by *Martin Geck*. Foreword by *Kurt Masur*. Trans. by *John Hargraves*. Harcourt. \$40.00. J. S. BACH: A Life in Music, by *Peter Williams*. Cambridge University Press. \$40.00. Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York, London, 2000).

many autograph materials providing insights into his “spiritual development” (to use the subtitle of an early biography) and his medical problems, his patrons, his financial independence, his nephew, his deafness, his “immortal beloved.” But what is the feel we get from Bach? In fact, who is this seemingly generic father and why has he failed to solidify as part of our cultural ethos? When we hear “Mozart” or “Beethoven,” we think of a person behind the music. When we hear “Bach,” we think of music only.

This turns out to be an eminently answerable question. Letters (in the usual sense of the word) in Bach’s hand are close to non-existent, whether because he wrote very few or his recipients did not save them. There is little or no knowledge of Bach’s interior life, his relation to his parents or siblings, to his two wives, to his twenty children, or his professional outlook as seen by Bach himself. There are a few letters to an old school friend, but almost every other autograph document is a public statement, written to a church administration, a ducal or royal court, or a municipality, and retained as a record by the institutions in question (for our later enlightenment). As a result, the little firsthand information we have is skewed in favor of a picture of Bach as involved in a narrow range of day-to-day problems. Or as Peter Williams puts it in passing, “It could be that the frequency with which money and pay crop up in connection with him is a misleading consequence of his being represented today chiefly by formal documents and business letters.” This fact can hardly be overstated, because the picture derived from such constricting paucity is of an aggressive businessman whining about maltreatment and underpayment, whereas in fact he lived an astounding professional life with plenty of recognition, at least in Germany, if not quite as much or as widespread as Handel or Telemann in their own time.

Most of the actual data we have about Bach was provided by contemporaries or post-contemporaries writing about some particular aspect of his life: a few of his children; his composition, harpsichord, and organ students; newspaper reporters; official recorders of births, marriages and deaths; letters between other people, sometimes composers, commenting on Bach’s music. The most definitive intentional account of Bach’s life soon after his death in 1750 was written four years later by his son Carl Philipp Emanuel (himself becoming a distinguished composer) in conjunction with one of Bach’s students, Johann Friedrich

Agricola. This “Obituary,” as it is generally referred to, while a starting point for most later biographies, is not completely trusted for accuracy. In fact, Peter Williams in his somewhat offbeat *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music*, the most recent learned account, uses sentences from the “Obituary” as chapter heads, which then become the basis for Williams’ own commentary, in the course of which he quarrels with Emanuel Bach about imprecise, sloppy data and faulty memory.

Given the sparseness of solid information, how has it been possible for scholars to write five- to six-hundred-page books one after another about Bach’s life and works, books that I hesitate to refer to as biographies in view of the phantasmal presence of their subject? Of course, the same question has been asked about biographies of Shakespeare, about whom there is even less solid information, which nonetheless has never stopped the Shakespeare Industry from producing more. In the case of Bach, if there is little primary information, there is a good deal of circumstantial information and most of it is collected in four German volumes known for short as the *Bach-Dokumente*, published in Germany gradually from 1963–79, a magic cornucopia for Bach scholars and biographers. Derived from this archive but more accessible to English-language specialists and nonspecialists alike is the brilliant compendium known as *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*,² an inexpensive 1998 update by Christoph Wolff of the original *Bach Reader* of 1945 produced by Hans David and Arthur Mendel. Looking through this richly informative book, one gets a clear picture of where all the basic Bach information has really come from and of what it actually consists.

Although Bach was born in 1685, by 1700 he was already involved in a serious musical career. *The New Bach Reader* provides church records from his birthplace in Eisenach pertaining to his baptism, the death of his mother, his father’s remarriage, and his father’s death, all from the first ten years. From student registers of 1693–5 we know about Bach’s attendance at the Latin School in Eisenach. As Bach moves to Lüneburg and Weimar after living in Ohrdruf with his parent-surrogate brother Johann Christoph we learn about his first jobs, starting as a “lackey” (a titular term for a sort of general musical factotum), though by 1703 there is a

² New York, London, 1998.

certificate of appointment for Bach's role as church organist in Arnstadt. By then, he had already become so expert in the knowledge of building, voicing, and other technical operations of organs that he was called upon for professional advice, a service he performed for the rest of his life. Bach's marriages—to Maria Barbara, who produced seven children and, after her death, to Anna Magdalena, who produced thirteen more—and his prestigious appointments as Kapellmeister and cantor at courts, churches, and finally at the St. Thomas School in Leipzig, take up more than 250 pages of documents, which also include his autograph dedications of music to royalty, his brief prefaces to major works such as *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, his testimonials for his students and sons, his complaints to the Leipzig town council, and his receipts for various expenditures. Beyond these particularities one can also find a genealogy of the extended Bach family, a table of twentieth-century cost-equivalencies for common early eighteenth-century expenses (in addition to money, Bach was paid in wine and grains), an item-by-item enumeration of Bach's estate at the time of his death, including the musical instruments that he owned and the value of the estate as a whole. This is the kind of information that fills the *Reader* and the more massive *Bach-Dokumente* (and to a large extent, the "biographies"). Since all of the autograph J. S. Bach documents are highly stylized in the public rhetoric of his time, the missing inner life leaves major areas for speculation, some of it derived by inference from texts as far afield as the hundreds of cantatas that Bach composed over the course of almost fifty years and some of it sheer fantasizing on the part of all the biographers.

Although I am not serving here as reviewer of the recent books by Geck, Wolff, and Williams, I am so much in the debt of these erudite scholars and musicologists that at least a few sentences to characterize them are in order. Martin Geck's *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Works* and Christoph Wolff's *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* were both published in 2000, but Geck's was not translated into English until 2006. Peter Williams' *J. S. Bach: A Life in Music* came out in 2007. All are the products of knowledge so prodigious that the reader feels a bit faint while reading them. Geck spends only 273 pages out of a total 700-plus on Bach's life, a story told (allowing for translation) without much narrative skill and sounding like a fairly mechanical attempt to patch together a

life from the pieces of the *Bach-Dokumente*. The rest, its major part, is devoted to definitive accounts of specific musical works by an ultimate authority. Williams, adopting the novel procedure of using the “Obituary” to structure his account, has sharp and insightful things to say, but often wildly speculative. Still, it probes territories that the others merely glance at. To describe Wolff’s book as magisterial would be an understatement. His skill in weaving together the dry fodder from the *Documente* and making it sound like a real narrative is pure virtuosity. The sheer quantity of information, the tables, the lists, the photos and engravings, the addenda—stunning! Like Geck and Williams, Wolff’s most typical sentence is filled with Bach might-haves, probablys, most likely, undoubtedly, would surely have, and so forth, where little or nothing is known about the “person” (that is to say, most of the time). But he does this with such uncanny skill that one barely notices that much of the time what seems so solid is really melting into air. Still, I can’t imagine how this book could be surpassed. Curiously, however, all of these books are excessively lengthy (and often tedious) as the very consequence of a lack of really solid information. Speculations, background history, tangential ruminations, wandering excursions about how much Bach might have been paid by his organ students—all of this is frequently carried to great lengths that would have been cut short by primary documents such as domestic letters or philosophical and theoretical writings of the sort Bach unfortunately did not seem to write.

Indispensable as these volumes have been, they may very well be outweighed for the present moment by the issuance of the nonplussing *Bach Edition*, a neatly boxed set of Bach’s “complete” works by Brilliant Classics on 160 music CDs (reissued later on 155), all for less than a dollar per disk! In general, Brilliant Classics disks have been substantially compiled from existing recordings, but for this edition, starting in 1999, close to 200 “sacred” cantatas were performed and recorded anew over a very short period of time by the Netherlands Bach Collegium. Although a small number of the cantatas were insufficiently rehearsed and come off as insipid, their overall quality ranges from good to high. The secular cantatas, much smaller in number, were taken from first-rate older recordings, performed by world class singers and players. Most of the other previously

existing recordings—the organ, instrumental, keyboard, and choral works—range from good to splendid.

Reading these massive “biographies” and listening to most of the 160 CDs of the *Bach Edition*, several times through in the case of the 200-plus cantatas, has fractured any picture I might have had of the emergence of this transcendent music as solidified, discrete units, like packs of candy bars dropping from a vending machine. Today, we think of composers as acutely aware of publication, their works as well-defined entities, archived in their heads and launched into the world with opus numbers that reflect their dates of composition. We feel certain that Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 1, opus 2, no. 1 is a lifetime apart from Piano Sonata 32, opus 111, and we can hear the composer’s development chronologically through the 32 sonatas. But nothing like that orderliness exists in the case of Bach, nor can the lay person have any way of ascertaining the trajectory of Bach’s evolution. Without the knowledge required to explore internal evidence from the scores themselves (the style, music paper, handwriting, etc.) or the historical records from the *Dokumente*, the non-scholar is bound to be taken aback to discover, for example, that the famous organ Toccata and Fugue in D minor, for all its majesty, is generally regarded by musicologists as, relatively speaking, juvenilia. And Martin Geck suggests that it may not even be by Bach at all!

Only a tiny handful of Bach’s more than a thousand compositions ever made it into print during his lifetime. The music itself tended to exist in multiple versions and the genres that occupied him depended on where Bach was living during the various periods of his life, the musical office he held in each place, and the availability (and quality) of instrumentalists and singers. So from 1717–1723, while serving as Kapellmeister at the court of music-loving Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen where he was provided with skilled musicians, he wrote one sort of music, while as cantor and music director at the St. Thomas School and four churches in Leipzig from 1723 until his death in 1750, he struggled with unsatisfactory performers for whom the music was often too difficult, forcing him to adjust accordingly. Moreover, the attempt to marshal all of Bach’s surviving works into something resembling (but ultimately quite different from) opus numbers did not succeed until 1950, when Wolfgang Schmieder

produced the system known as BWV numbers (*Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis* or Bach Works Catalog). Since assigning definitive chronological dates to many of Bach's works is a practical impossibility, the catalog and its numbers are arranged by genres. So, for instance, the "sacred" (as opposed to the secular) cantatas start at BWV 1³ and extend into the two hundreds, whereas the organ music falls mostly into the five through seven hundreds. Bach's so-called Cantata No. 1 (BWV 1), "Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern" (How beautiful shines the morning star), was hardly the first he is known to have written. And to complicate further the already sufficiently complicated, quite a few of these catalogued works turn out not to have been by Bach at all. The fact that most performances of the time did not derive from printed pages but from manuscripts means that sometimes compositions found in Bach's hand were by other composers, copied merely for the sake of performing them. And many of the extant scores of Bach's own compositions are in reality not autograph manuscripts from the composer's hand but copies made by his children or wife, his students, players, other composers, etc. And lastly for my purposes here, there is the matter of recycling earlier works into new forms for reuse, since there is rarely a "final" or "definitive" version of a Bach composition. It is often hard to be sure which version is the "first." The printed edition of the six partitas for harpsichord, for which Bach took particular care, was an unusual case, as he consciously sought to produce an engraved (by the printer) touchstone for keyboard music that he went on to develop into a magnum opus called the *Clavier-Übung* or keyboard practice. But of what is estimated to be an output of as many as four or five hundred cantatas, only one saw print during Bach's lifetime.

Looking back from the twenty-first century at the four genres that occupied Bach over the course of fifty years—keyboard, organ, instrumental, voice—one is struck by the evolution of performance practice since 1750 and its effect on the way the music has sounded. When we speak of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* we almost certainly mean the harpsichord, even though "clavier" can refer to any keyboard instrument except the organ. The

³ My debt to Z. Philip Ambrose is great. His website at <http://www.uvm.edu/~classics/faculty/bach/> provides his own translations into English of the texts of all of Bach's extant cantatas as well as the other vocal music, along with indispensable background information.

fortepiano, destined to dominate in Mozart, was still in its early adolescence by the time Bach died. As for the clavichord, forget about it. A small tabletop instrument verging on inaudible to anyone but the player, it never really comes up in any of the three biographies, and its usefulness in music like Bach's is marginal. Admittedly, as a percussion instrument like the piano, in which hammers hit strings, the clavichord was capable of gradations of volume and tone denied to the harpsichord, on which the effects of touch are close to zero. Hence the desirability of two manuals and several sets of selectable strings, more or less today's harpsichord norm. Bach's posthumous estate lists several harpsichords of various types but no other keyboard instrument. For Bach, it was then and remains now (except for the organ) the keyboard instrument of choice. Nor could it be considered a precursor of the piano or rendered obsolete by it. To begin with, the harpsichord is a stringed not a percussion instrument like the piano, plucked, not hammered, producing a distinctive, tightly focused, and slightly acerbic all-or-nothing sound. To change the quality or timbre one can pull out stops to move a set of jacks into position under another set of strings or use the second keyboard (if there is one) and its own sets of strings. The changes in timbre that result from this maneuver are sudden, not gradual, since it is not possible to alter individual notes by means of touch. The later practice of introducing "expression" into Bach's keyboard music can only be described as a bad joke that reduces power to precision. And of course the chief culprit in this anachronistic practice is the piano.

Bach wrote his keyboard and organ music for instruments capable of linear performance only, uninflected by touch.⁴ The excitement that Romantic and contemporary music derives from touch-sensitive "expression" on pianos was in Bach's day composed into the linearity itself and abetted by performance practices. It must have been his concern to sustain notes on the fast-decaying harpsichord sound (so easy to do with organ pedals) that prompted him to bring the use of the thumb into greater practice. As the "Obituary" reports, "Before him, the most famous clavier players in Germany and other lands had used the thumb but little." But as anyone who has played preludes and fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* knows only too well, the

⁴ See note 6 for a minor qualification of this point.

thumb (and the little finger) is critical for holding down a key while the other fingers play around it. Beyond this, the composer could add more notes to chords to increase their density and weight. He could add arpeggios and figured strummings to sustain sounds beyond the capacity of a mere thumb. On the player's part, speeding up and slowing down could alter the adrenaline level, so to speak. Distending the tempo so that notes are played a bit late (after the beat) or early could provide tension and emphasis. Using two keyboards could introduce contrasting timbres. Bach's *Italian Concerto* provides a perfect demonstration of all these qualities, with furious propulsion punctuated by dense chords in the outer movements and arioso lyricism in the middle (exploiting two keyboards), written into the music, no "expression" needed, just the player's skill on the harpsichord. An "expressive" piano performance that turns it into one of Mendelssohn's *Songs Without Words* subverts its most distinctive and powerful properties. The best recording-era performances I know of *The Well-Tempered Clavier's* forty-eight preludes and fugues (and much else) were done by Wanda Landowska fifty years ago. Although critics made fun of her large Pleyel harpsichord (which could be said to have reintroduced the harpsichord in modern times), their objections nowadays seem pretty feeble. They tended to zero in on the 16-foot stop that gave her instrument a powerful bass, whereas harpsichords mostly have 4- and 8-foot sets of strings, named for their organ pipe counterparts, though they are nowhere near those lengths. But in Bach's day, besides the usual cembalos (as harpsichords are called in European languages), there were pedal harpsichords, however rare, that made use of foot-played organ-like keyboards on the floor for deep bass. So the effect produced by Landowska's Pleyel was hardly unprecedented. And, of course, playing Bach on today's grand pianos is much more egregious. Landowska's *Well-Tempered Clavier* revealed more of the music more powerfully than anybody else, squeezing out every drop of its seemingly inexhaustible juices. Although much credit must be given to Glenn Gould's astounding attempts to make the piano sound as astringent as possible, presumably like a harpsichord, one can only wonder if the effort was really worth it when modern harpsichords do it ever so much more effectively.

The biographers point out that Bach's harpsichord concertos

were a major innovation in genre. Although concertos for violins and other instruments were routine by the early eighteenth century, concertos featuring harpsichord solos with string orchestra were nonexistent. Christoph Wolff in particular sees Mozart's fortepiano concertos as the heirs of Bach's invention. Moreover, Bach's concertos for two, three, and four harpsichords were also a dazzling and innovative tour de force, probably sometimes played by members of the Bach family themselves (the estate lists six or seven harpsichords). Although some of those works were transcriptions from other composers rather than original compositions, a few are generally regarded as authentic Bach. The C minor concerto (BWV 1062) for two harpsichords and strings, for example, is a Bach rewrite of his own double violin concerto in D minor, the more well-known and popular version. It is startling to consider that Bach sprung a procedure that eventually produced the pianoforte concertos of Beethoven, Brahms, Rachmaninoff, Bartók, and Prokofiev. And is it going too far to suppose that the stunning harpsichord display at the end of the first movement of the fifth *Brandenburg Concerto* is the grandparent of the cadenzas that ever since have been de rigueur for virtuoso conclusions to the initial movements of most concertos?

By the time of Bach's death in 1750, his music was beginning to be regarded as old fashioned. The radically contrapuntal style was on the way out and the Classical style we associate with Haydn and Mozart was in train. One can actually see the transition in action in the music of Bach's own son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, co-author of the "Obituary." Emanuel's splendid concertos and his own inspired *Magnificat* are like time-lapse photography in which one sees a lengthy historical process telescoped into a short one, Baroque morphing into Classical. Though Haydn's keyboard concertos continue to be played on both harpsichord and piano, Mozart's piano concertos were composed for the fortepiano, however much modern grands may now be the instrument of choice. The sound of the fortepiano, something like a clavichord on steroids, is hard to love, but to hear it used in the Mozart concertos is to realize that it's the right choice. Though dry, constricted, not very loud, a bit dead, but with a buzzing bass, the fortepiano, as heard in the concertos recorded by Malcolm Bilson, strikes me as the best way to go. Once you start using a symphony orchestra, however, instead of the chamber-sized

group that was available to Mozart, the grand piano is needed to cut through the big sound. Though that works well enough in the atypically “Beethovenesque” thunder of the Concerto No. 24 in C minor, the fortepiano is what Mozart heard when he wrote the concertos. To make matters worse, today’s pianists, having turned the Mozart concertos into Romantic vehicles, are apt to render them in a melting, exquisite, and precious Chopinesque manner irrelevant to the still fairly linear style even of Classical period music.

As for Bach, neglected for years and then played on the grand pianofortes that superseded the fortepianos in the nineteenth century, as late as 1950 one almost always heard his keyboard music performed on pianos. Turn on the radio then and you would hear the frenetic and propulsive D minor harpsichord concerto, the Bach-Vivaldi concerto for four harpsichords (four violins in Vivaldi), and the D minor concerto for three harpsichords all played on pianos. Though then it was great to have a little ten-inch Columbia LP of the Casadesus family doing that concerto on three pianos in their genteel Gallic fashion, why would anyone even think of going back to it now, except as an historical document? Today, Landowska’s revolution has been largely won, and most performances of Bach’s clavier works are on modern harpsichords.

The case of the organ is not entirely dissimilar. Though we are expected to be amazed at the technical sophistication that produced Gothic cathedrals, the feat of the organ seems no less worthy of jaw-dropping. Simply consider the fact that all the great organs of the cathedrals and churches of Europe were built and operated without electricity until the late nineteenth century! Not only do those organs have as many as ten thousand pipes or more made from metal and wood, but everything about them is mechanical. It was not possible to locate the console and its manuals in one place and the pipes somewhere else. The components had to be as close as possible for direct mechanical connection. As for the air supply for sounding the pipes, no electric motors existed to produce it. Boys and men, often several together, had to be stationed outside the church pumping the bellows with their hands or feet. In Bach’s day it was too expensive to hire pumpers for mere practice sessions, so the harpsichord was generally used instead. As an organist/professor friend reported to

me about today's tracker organs, which also largely applies to the originals, "The console is, in fact, linked directly to the wind-chests by trackers. When the player presses a key, the key moves the trackers (rods or strips of balsa wood or fiberglass, in some recent cases); the opposite end of the trackers will open the pallet valve, which in turn allows air into a channel in the windchest. If a selected stop has been drawn, sliders have moved in the windchest to allow holes to align under the corresponding rank of pipes so that the air will flow through the pipe when the key operates the trackers."⁵

The Baroque organs that Bach had at his disposal produced an initial breathy sound on each note usually referred to (in imitation of its sound) as a "chiff," and it is the chifffiness of those organs that contributes to their clear articulation for contrapuntal music. But as music began to lose its linearity in favor of the expressive and dynamic Romantic style ("dynamic" in the acoustical sense of wide ranging, from piano to forte), the big nineteenth-century organs (still without electricity until very late) became more orchestral and less suited to Renaissance and Baroque music. Ideal for Franck and Widor, they tended to leave Bach in the dust. With the introduction of electricity, wind power was automated and cables carrying electric signals from distantly-placed consoles became the norm to trigger sound from the pipes. But again, a new return began to take place during the last century, and today tracker organs are back in style.

Given the linearity of the organ's sound production—touch on the keys does not radically affect the volume or quality of the sound,⁶ which is dependent upon choices of stops to activate the many "ranks" of pipes, with their distinctive timbres—Bach's organ music, like that for harpsichord, depends on other devices than dynamic "expressivity" to achieve its effects. (With the amenities of the nineteenth-century organ, Franck was able to produce as much expressivity in his sublime *Trois Chorals* as anybody could desire, but, again, it did not depend on touch.) Played today on period tracker organs in European cathedrals, usually rebuilt and updated, Bach's organ music is probably being heard at its best (short of Bach himself as player), with one reservation: the trend

⁵ Personal communication from Pamela Decker, Professor of Music, University of Arizona.

⁶ On tracker organs, performers can have a modest control over the sound produced by touch.

since the 1950s has been to play everything faster and faster. The result can be particularly devastating on organs in churches with long reverberation times. As we have moved over the years from performances by Biggs, Walcha, Rogg, Richter, and Fagius to the recent recordings by Kevin Bowyer we can sometimes hear a speedup to the point of total unintelligibility, a cacophony of unsortable contrapuntal sounds bouncing off the walls. I think with some longing of Biggs's wonderful recordings on the marvelous, small, sufficiently reverberant and very chuffy Flentrop tracker organ at Harvard.

When we look at Bach's instrumental music today, this pattern of return to earlier modes becomes all the more apparent because of the early music movement. We know from the historical record and from actual specimens in museums what the instruments of Bach's day looked and sounded like. Besides the cembalos and organs, period oboes, recorders, viols, and trumpets have been restored or imitated by a growing number of ensembles and small orchestras. And even when the instruments used are not 100 percent authentic, these ensembles manage to re-create much of what is believed to be the early sound and style in their performances, although the exact style remains uncertain. The "Obituary" may have remarked that Bach liked fast tempi, but we can never be sure what "fast" means. From hearing the old instruments themselves, however, it's pretty certain that the sound is whiney, acerbic, nasal, focused, as opposed to the lush quality we associate with the Vienna Philharmonic playing Brahms. It's a sound that contributes to the clarity needed by contrapuntal, as opposed to predominantly harmonic, music.

If clavier, organ, and instrumental music were all that Bach had produced, his stature would assuredly have been pantheonic. But the vocal music is the mighty fortress, the *Feste Burg* (see Cantata BWV 80), of Bach's transcendent achievement. And the cantatas are the generative prime matter of the entire vocal corpus. The Schmieder catalog shows 216 of them, of which 199 are "sacred," with the rest written for various secular occasions. The earliest of the church cantatas, dated by means of style, paper, handwriting, and public documents, consist of choruses and arias that tend to melt into each other without the connective tissue of recitatives, in the manner of an earlier era such as we hear in Buxtehude. But as the influence of Italian opera in-

creased, the majority of Bach's cantatas came to consist of an opening chorus followed by recitatives, arias, sometimes choruses or interior chorales, and a final chorale played more or less "straight." Since the Lutheran chorale formed the thematic basis of many of them, appearing in multiple and various ingenious guises (sometimes little more than a flute embroidering a recitative or arioso with a variant of the chorale), "played more or less straight" means unwrapped from the elaborate embellishments that partially disguise the chorale from its barest and most well-known hymnal mode familiar to the parishioners. The opposite sequence, in other words, of a theme followed by variations.

The cantatas range in duration from about ten to fifty minutes, sometimes divided into two parts to surround the service that they punctuated or framed. The forces that performed them, unless it was a small-scale work for a single human voice with a few instruments, drew upon some or all of soprano, alto, tenor, and bass soloists, a chorus of now-disputed size (but in any case quite small), a combo of woodwinds, viols, trumpets and other brass, and some timpani and strings. The sopranos and altos, given religious conventions and the roles of women, not to mention the all-male student bodies at church-run schools, consisted of boys and men. (Women, however, did perform at courts, where, indeed, Anna Magdalena Bach was a professional singer before her marriage.) The music would be propelled by a bass continuo provided by the church organ; but when played elsewhere, it would usually be accompanied by a harpsichord and probably a cello (or viola da gamba, or even a bassoon). Bach wrote a substantial number of these works during his Weimar years (1708–14) as "court organist" (his prolific period for organ works), but most of the cantatas derive from his long tenure in Leipzig at the St. Thomas School and church (1723–50). Although the BWV numbers for the church cantatas reach 199, by no means does that represent the total output. Unbelievably (since it was not a requirement of his jobs), Bach took it upon himself as Cantor/Kapellmeister/Director of Music and whatnot to produce a new church cantata of his own for almost every Sunday for a period of five years! Occasionally he slacked off and used music by other composers or reused his own. This regimen would have produced many more sacred cantatas than 199, given

the accumulation from Weimar. But two of the five cycles have vanished into thin air (except for texts). Eventually, he stopped producing new cantatas altogether, but it is beyond anyone's imagination how he could have written almost any one of them in less than a week, since (besides indebtedness to the muses) the parts had to be copied and then rehearsed with performers whom Bach considered inadequate and we would consider abysmal, given the constant upgrading of standards and skills that has taken place since his time. Admittedly, there are a few uninspired works among this large number, but the vast majority are an astonishment of high quality invention. Attempts to explain such creative powers are still unimpressive. The neurosciences seem as flummoxed as anyone else as to where "art" and "inspiration" come from or the provenance of that "jar on the nerves" (to echo Virginia Woolf) that triggers the synapses leading, involuntarily, to "creativity." Most recently, Daniel J. Levitin in *This Is Your Brain on Music* has tried to shed light on the mystery, but the road is long, the night is dark, and all the cats are still pretty gray.

Although I have casually used words such as "recycle" and "reuse," the practice was far from casual in Bach's day. Handel reused and interchanged favorite movements from his concerti grossi, organ concertos, and harpsichord suites, rescored but minimally altered. Indeed, Peter Williams refers to "Handel's more or less static fund of regurgitated musical ideas." But Bach's recycling was on a vaster, more ingenious scale. Many of the familiar movements from the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the harpsichord concertos, the orchestral suites, even some of the organ music, started out in the cantatas. Listeners who know the *Mass in B minor* or the *Christmas Oratorio* can only be stunned as they come across movement after movement in the cantatas that seem strangely familiar. Christoph Wolff devotes an entire page to a table of the arias and choruses of the *Mass*, showing that the majority of them derive from the cantatas, particularly the secular ones. To take one example, Cantata BWV 215, "Preise dein Glück," composed for the anniversary of the Election of August III as King of Poland in 1734, fifteen years before the final version of the *Mass*, begins with a brilliant trumpets and drums precursor of the "Osanna in Excelsis." It is far from being an exact prototype, given differences in instrumentation and the presence of

episodes missing from the *Mass*, but there it is, unmistakable. (Wolff reports that BWV 215 was produced in three days!) The soprano aria with flute toward the end of 215, “Durch die von Eifer,” becomes the bass aria “Erleucht auch mein finstre Sinnen” with oboe in the *Christmas Oratorio*. And the grand finale of the cantata, the chorus with trumpets, “Stifter der Reiche,” somewhat changed, becomes both the opening and closing choruses of the *Christmas Oratorio*’s third cantata (not to mention the same music used again as the finale of BWV 214). In fact, twenty earlier movements were absorbed into the *Christmas Oratorio*, including almost all the music from “Hercules at the Crossroads,” secular Cantata BWV 213, and a generous borrowing from 214 (whose opening chorus opens the entire *Christmas Oratorio*), exploding any notion that there is such an essence as “sacred” music. And yet, there is universal agreement that the *Mass* and the *Oratorio* come off as uniquely coherent and inspired, magical masterpieces—tweaked from mostly secular existing gems.

The recyclings of vocal music have acquired the technical term “parody,” not to suggest some sort of spoof but something altogether more ingenious: more often than not the new text for the old music was *entirely new*, extremely so in the case of German cantata to Latin mass. This involved the skills of Bach’s librettists, of whom Picander is the most well known. Substantial poetic/musical artistry was required to produce a new text with the same poetic scansion as the old, since it had to fit the scansion of the music. But Bach rarely reused the music without making changes, sometimes substantial, adding new sections, rescoring, reassigning to different voices, sometimes even cutting. For Bach and his church, however, *the words* really mattered, reflected as far as possible in the music’s character. The new version, then, is a “parody,” and scholarly analysis of the process has subsequently produced a few notable feats. Bach’s *St. Mark Passion* is a work whose music was totally lost but whose texts by Picander have survived. What may seem an inexplicable caprice of fate is actually explainable: printed texts of the music to be played at services were distributed to the faithful before the performance, hence multiple copies and a high chance of survival; but the musical score existed only in a manuscript and players’ parts. In the case of the *St. Mark Passion*, scholars have come up with, at least in theory, plausible music for some of the numbers on the

supposition that most of the composition was parodic. By comparing the scansion of lines of text of the *Passion* with texts from some of the cantatas, scholars discovered that they are sometimes exactly the same. As a result, they have found many putative musical sources of the *Passion*'s arias, although the missing narrative recitatives (that hold the entire work together) are beyond restoration. Presumably the reason we are never treated to a performance of the reconstructed *Passion* is that we have heard it all before.⁷ But whereas even the fully extant and very strong *St. John Passion* went through many rounds of revision and recycling, the case was different with the monumental, overwhelmingly powerful *St. Matthew Passion*. As Christoph Wolff put it, without any recycling Bach was able "to conceive a wholly original work and to compose it in a single sweep."

Now, as I arrive at a retrospective overview of Bach from the twenty-first century, it becomes clear that this entire project has been generated by two images secretly commandeering my consciousness over the past few months of reading and listening. The first is from Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*: "the chapel had become a larder, changing . . . as religion changed." In this (her last) novel about eternal recurrence, dramatized as a surface of historical transformation unfolding over the deep stabilities of human nature, we're told about a pre-Reformation house that underwent a modern rehab, its anachronistic chapel upgraded into a storage room for food.

Consider that in Bach's day it was the *text* of church music that was of paramount importance. The "sacred" cantatas were aggressively homiletic, whereas the secular cantatas, usually subtitled "Dramma per musica," aimed to be entertaining, amusing. The Passions, in their own ways, were also music dramas, achieving their ends more indirectly than the church cantatas. For the weekly services, however, the music existed as handmaiden to the text, to inculcate the pietistic messages through a more emotional force than the words alone. Though to our sensibilities these texts are simply deadly—

⁷ Or almost never. The Brilliant Classics *Bach Edition* contains a reconstructed performance with arias taken from the cantatas and narrative recitatives and choruses taken from the *St. Mark Passion* of Reinhard Keiser, a contemporary of Bach whose music he had performed in Weimar and Leipzig. Absurdly enough, these interpolations don't sound remotely like Bach.

Weeping, wailing
 Grieving, fearing
 Dread and need
 Are the Christians' tearful bread,
 Them the signs of Jesus bearing

the “play” was nevertheless the thing to catch the conscience of the congregation. The elders in Leipzig were disposed to find Bach’s music difficult, obscure, puzzling to the laity and too taxing for the performers; and when they quarreled with him about his work, it was the music they found at fault. But even as late as March 11, 1829, when Mendelssohn after much resistance pulled off a truncated performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, which (like most of Bach’s music) had never been printed or, in fact, performed after Bach’s death eighty years prior, the music was still regarded as “bristly” and difficult. Edward Devrient, a friend of Mendelssohn, recalled in *My Recollections* that Bach “was at that time generally considered an unintelligible musical arithmetician,” “a curiosity enjoyed by only a few connoisseurs . . . unmelodious, mathematical, dry.”⁸ But after the historic performance took place, the Bach renaissance began almost at once. To our twenty-first-century ears the performance doubtless left much to be desired. Devrient speaks of three to four hundred performers; harpsichords were almost museum pieces so piano or organ would have served as continuo with the pungent old instruments superseded by Romantic ones. The whole enterprise would today probably strike us as a prevision of swollen Victorian performances of early music. Still, it was better than neglect. Despite the spiritual uplift that Devrient remembers, the event was a concert, not a service. The chapel was already falling into disrepair.

After a century of rebirth, the music of the early eighteenth century was back in business, if somewhat bloated and smoothed out, eventually even acknowledged by “modern” composers such as Stravinsky in *Pulcinella*. It was due for yet another overhaul, by the twentieth-century early music movement, an attempt to restore its piquant sensory qualities. Even as late as the 1950s in New York, however, the Bach Aria Group was still using a piano for the continuo, and the performances, though admirable,

⁸ Excerpted in *The New Bach Reader*, pp. 508–19.

lacked the nasal, prickly edge and driving force that have now become routine. But also in the fifties, the New York Pro Musica Antiqua (later dropping the “Antiqua”) not only used the harpsichord and made efforts to sound more “authentic,” it could boast such world-class phenomena as the countertenor Russell Oberlin as their alto, especially brilliant in the songs of Purcell. The ensuing LP era produced a vast outpouring of Bach in all genres, gradually thinning the forces and restoring the sonic qualities that twentieth-century scholarship described as the real authentic thing. Amidst all of this ferment, the pietistic texts had already lost their importance. After all, how digestible could the obsessions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Lutheran piety be for a secular twentieth-century audience? It was the music they came for, not the homilies.

Sometimes the restorations went overboard, missing the forest for the trees. For a while (in the 1970s and '80s), recordings and performances of the cantatas used male singers only (Wasn't that what Bach had done?), giving the soprano arias to boys and the alto arias to countertenors. The LP sets of the “authentic” complete cantatas recorded by Nikolaus Harnoncourt for Telefunken used male singers exclusively. Certainly it was amazing how adroitly those preadolescent boys managed to negotiate those difficult soprano arias. The only problem was that it was unbearable to listen to them. Did anyone really want to hear Singknabe der Regensburger Domspatzen, boy soprano, singing “Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke”? instead of Edith Mathis or Elizabeth Grummer? Today, such penitential performances seem largely to have disappeared. The really salient issue was, why did Bach use boys in the first place? The answer is obvious: he had to—and would certainly have used women if it were permitted by standard church practice. After all, his wife had been a professional court singer, and his complaints about the poor singing of the St. Thomas boys permeate the documents that survive. If Bach could tune in to the performances of today, no doubt he would find “mistakes.” But given the uncanny quality of twenty-first-century musical virtuosity, he would also hear the most skillful execution ever to vibrate his eardrums and soul. Which brings me to the second image underwriting this account.

In June of 2005, I happened to be in Eugene, Oregon, at the start of the annual Oregon Bach Festival conducted by Helmuth

Rilling, one of the leading Bach conductors in the world today. Rilling's multitudinous discography of cantatas and other Bach works makes judicious use of early music practices without subscribing to them in toto. Here, in the beautiful environment of the Hult Center for the Performing Arts, I attended his performance of the *Christmas Oratorio*. It was summer, not Christmas, a concert hall, not a church, and after the modest-sized orchestra and chorus were seated, the soprano, alto, tenor, and bass walked out onto the stage, two women and two men (not even a counter-tenor). One of the women, toned, lean, and (as we say nowadays) "in shape," wore a tight long red sheath gown revealing while concealing her athletic frame. This was a secular musical event, the texts heard in a foreign language but in effect unheard. The trumpets and drums sounded, the chorus shouted "Jauchzet, frohlocket!"⁹ The music took on a life of its own—not bristly, not difficult, not mathematical, not arcane. Whatever the raptures, they were not for the greater glory of God. What a few hundred years ago was the motivational piety of the Lutheran composer now seemed bodily, visceral, cellular. In 1700, after all, Christianity was less than two thousand years old. Zeus, Jehovah, Jesus—gods come and go. Music, on the other hand, was bred into bone and brain inestimable years ago. The St. Thomas School, the amateur boy singers, the dour church elders, the tiresome liturgy: a dramatic rupture was taking place in front of my eyes. The woman in the red sheath conveyed as never before that Bach *the musician* had finally come into his own. The revolution was over. Providing a nourishment more primal and profound than transient pieties, the chapel had become a larder.

⁹ Originally, "Tonet, ihr Pauken!" from secular Cantata BWV 214.