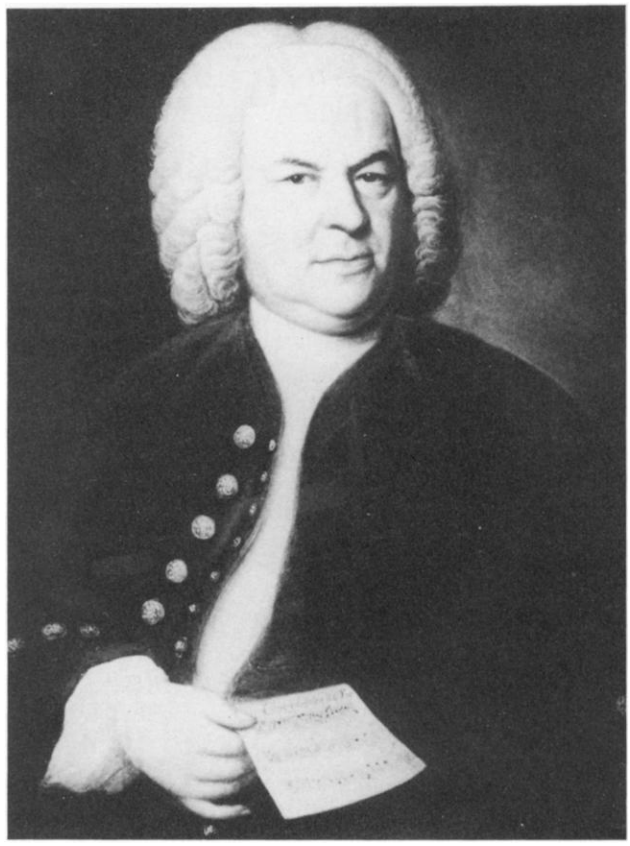
Johann Sebastian Bach
born 21 March 1685
★ 300th anniversary issue ★



Bach: 300 years on

Paul Henry Lang

Bach belongs among those few mysterious geniuses in human history who seem to be phenomena of nature, in whom the spirit of countless generations is condensed and distilled: tremendous creative factors in artistic evolution. The many-sidedness of his genius is not bound to any era or any expressive form. He is above all regions and generations, commands with equal perfection the strictness of late medieval counterpoint and the vernal flora of the Rococo, can speak with the most personal pathos, or can make use of the age-old means of descriptive music. In form and technique he was not a pioneer but a synthesizing power; he did not create a new style, but was the summation of the centuries-old era of polyphony which, by the time of his death, was surrendering to the new homophonic, melody-orientated era.

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The unexampled Bach clan of musicians had existed since Luther's time and almost all of them were organist-choirmasters, or, as they were called, Cantors. They remained faithful to their Saxon-Thuringian homeland until Johann Sebastian Bach's sons dispersed to Berlin, Hamburg, Milan and London, but by that time the hereditary allegiance to church music was also given up: Emanuel Bach became a prominent secular musician and Johann Christian an opera composer and concert artist. Thus, like the great builder-architects of the German Baroque, Bach belonged to the ranks of artisan craftsmen, the church organists. He received his first systematic instruction in Ohrdruf from his older brother, Johann Christoph, who assumed responsibility for his upbringing after the death of his parents before his tenth year. Five years later we find him in Lüneburg, where he came under the influence of Georg Böhm, his elder by a quarter of a century and one of the important composers of the period. Being an inquisitive musician and student all his life, Bach immediately undertook several trips on foot to Hamburg, about 30 miles away, not too far for a sturdy young man, to hear the playing of Jan Adam Reinken, the patriarch of organists.

In 1703 he was installed as organist in Arnstadt, again close enough to an elderly great master he was eager to hear, so he journeyed to Lübeck on his reliable legs to get acquainted with Dietrich Buxtehude and was so impressed that he overstayed his leave. In 1707 Bach was organist in Mühlhausen and married his cousin, Maria Barbara. The next move was of considerable artistic significance: the church organist became a secular court musician, concertmaster to the Duke of Weimar. Here he found a congenial friend and colleague in Johann Gottfried Walther, a fine composer, organist and learned lexicographer. From Weimar Bach moved to Cöthen, again as Kapellmeister and not as church musician. The Cöthen period saw the birth of many secular masterpieces, even though it was beclouded by the death of Maria Barbara. One year after her death Bach gave his children another mother, Anna Magdalena, who contributed generously a dozen or so more to the family, which did not prevent her being of considerable help to her husband as a singer and copyist. The two 'Notebooks' Bach wrote for her testify to a happy and loving relationship. Bach

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had an exceptionally balanced personality, a family man who liked nothing better than to teach his family music and hold little concerts at home. In a letter he proudly states that all of his children are musicians and capable of mounting a good ensemble.

When Kuhnau, the highly respected Cantor of the Thomasschule in Leipzig, died in in 1722, Bach sought and eventually obtained the prestigious position, which he occupied until his death in 1750. The authorities at the school, searching for a successor to Kuhnau, had previously approached several famous composers in the 'new style' that was rapidly replacing the High Baroque. Only after Johann Friedrich Fasch, Telemann and Christoph Graupner (significantly all of them court Kapellmeister, not Cantors) declined the invitation did they turn to Bach, concluding that with the unavailability of a good modern musician they would have to be satisfied with an old-fashioned one. To us this reluctance naturally seems ridiculous, but Bach had already come to be regarded a conservative, even out-of-date, musician (as in the next century Brahms was ridiculed by the New German School) in the world of Rococo and *Empfindsamkeit*. By the time Bach's composing sons came on the scene – that is, within Bach's lifetime – their father was referred to as the 'old Bach', a reference not so much to his age as to his 'antiquated' concepts and attitudes. Young Christian Bach is even said to have called his father *der alte Zopf* ('the old pettyfogger'). Church officers and many others were no longer used to what Burney called Bach's 'unbelievable contrivances', meaning his polyphonic structures.

Yet we must dispel a widely believed legend: the oblivion of Bach and his music shortly after his death until his 'rediscovery' almost a century later. The date of this rediscovery, and with it the beginning of the Bach renaissance, is assigned to 11 March 1829, when the young Mendelssohn performed the *Matthew Passion* as the head of the Berlin Singakademie. Bach was celebrated in his lifetime as the greatest keyboard virtuoso of the age and for his expertise in organ construction. He had many invitations to examine or inaugurate new or rebuilt organs, which kept him in touch with many leading musicians; his fame was carried all the way to the flute-playing King of Prussia, Frederick the Great; and the Bach clan was known and appeciated (though the story that they were so well known that all Saxon-Thuringian musicians were called 'Bachs' rests on a misreading of Middle-High-German terminology). And there were the many Bach pupils, all devoted to their master, some of whom also became Thomascantors; their copies of Bach's manuscripts circulated even beyond north and central Germany. It is well known that Baron van Swieten, the Imperial Ambassador to the court of Prussia, took home some of them together with original manuscripts which he purchased from Emanuel Bach, thus introducing the great northern composer to the Catholic south. Mozart was impressed by it; Beethoven spoke of Bach in superlatives and offered the royalties from his oratorio, *Christus am Ölberg*, to the collection started by Rochlitz for Hermine Susanna, Bach's last remaining child, then living in poverty. On Bach's death, Telemann wrote a eulogy in the form of a sonnet, evidence of the high regard Bach enjoyed among leading composers. The first biography of Bach, by J.N. Forkel, long in the making (Forkel knew and corresponded with Bach's sons), appeared in 1802; various keyboard works were published well before the end of the 18th century; and the first volume of *Das wohltemperirte Clavier* was printed in England in 1811, one of its backers being Samuel Wesley. All this was long before the 1829 rediscovery.

Obviously, we cannot say that Bach was entirely 'forgotten'; in fact, his reputation began to grow steadily after his death. It is however true that he was known mainly in professional circles and was not part of public musical experience. The Cantor, isolated in Leipzig, was not heard in public performances, and even the authorities at the Thomasschule had not the faintest idea of his artistic stature: hence their hesitation to engage him. Still, Mendelssohn's brave act did contribute immensely to the Bach renaissance, for this was the first time that anyone then living heard a large vocal and instrumental work by Bach.

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The external data of Bach's life are to be found in every book on the history of music; the inner life, the aims, ideals, conflicts and difficult resolutions are less well known. He consistently avoided any discussion of his private life and did not even record his opinions on music, but we do have one intriguing sentence in one of his letters: he regretted exchanging the office of court Kapellmeister for that of Cantor. What made him accept the Leipzig post must have been his fidelity to the traditional devotion of the Bach clan to church music; he must also have felt it his duty to stem the decline of church music, already underway. The theological exegetes of Bach's art – even Spitta – considered the years spent in Weimar and Cöthen, where Bach composed his great instrumental works, as a sort of side activity, or read theological meanings into them. It is a great mistake, however, to view the instrumental works as admirable but not essential in the oeuvre of a great religious composer. There can be no doubt that Bach was devoted to the artistic service of God, but the 'secular' Bach was every inch the same overwhelming creative genius: the Kapellmeister matches the Cantor in every sense, and some are convinced that, despite the great bulk of his sacred vocal music, Bach was essentially an instrumental composer.

Bach was an ardent student of music from his earliest youth to his old age. We have seen how he travelled on foot to hear some of the great organists, and wherever he was employed he rummaged in the church and princely libraries, often copying what he found interesting. His knowledge of German, Italian and French music from the 16th century onward was considerable, and probably far more extensive than hitherto assumed. Interestingly, most of the old music he studied was the polyphonic literature from Palestrina to Fux and Caldara, even Pergolesi. He was no stranger to the elegant and refined atmosphere of the *style galant*. What really attracted him to this style were the

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French dance forms, which by his time had conquered all Europe. Not only did Bach's instrumental music delight in these dances: many hallowed arias and choruses in the cantatas and Passions are in dance forms and rhythms. Bach had a fantastic ability to reconcile and blend his German heritage with Italian and French music in a markedly individual style, an ability he shares with Lassus, Handel and Mozart. Yet the mixture retains the fluidity of the musical sentences, ending them in semicolons rather than full stops. The keyboard music rolls in an unending flowing movement, each perfect part supporting the others. The French and English Suites, the Inventions and Sinfonias, the Fantasies and Variations, together with the '48', a body of music unparalleled in scope and imagination in the Baroque era, should claim a larger share in concert programmes than they do. It is not high treason to play them on the modern piano (as the grim performing-practice priests who scared away the pianists from this repertory claim) because the artistic message is not destroyed if the pianist is informed, sensitive and has good taste.

The chamber music fascinates not only because the sonatas are written for a variety of instruments but also because of their unusual features. 'Daring constitues the true measure of discipline', it has been said, and nowhere is this more true than in the six works for unaccompanied violin. This singular medium was not unknown but the fantastic boldness of these works is unexampled (in more recent times only Hindemith and Bartók have essayed the genre). Imagine a four-part fugue composed for a melody instrument! The idea seems unreal and illogical yet these sonatas and partitas always remain, even in the fugues, violin music, if of a particular nature that differs from Italian violin music. The German school of violin playing permitted the technical feat of making a single violin self-sufficient; the Italians would not tolerate a sonata for a solo instrument without the continuo, for to them the melody would othewise not be sufficiently highlighted or dominant. Bach's unaccompanied sonatas do not deny the melody; but it must share its deployment with the 'accompaniment' which his polyphonic imagination splices into the texture. This technique is unique and, one would think, rather tenuous, but the surface tectonic is never in danger of losing its clean edges. All this produces a quality of sound that is particularly German. Surprisingly, Bach found this difficult medium suitable – more than that, congenial – for creating one of the supreme works in the history of instrumental music, the Chaconne in the third Partita.

Together with the *Goldberg Variations* and the Passacaglia for organ, the Chaconne forms a trio in the art of variation the level of which was only once matched, in Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations*. Though each variation in the Chaconne is an independent cameo, it stays close to the theme and its main features always return. Another feature of this work is its risky formal structure: Bach demands an inexorable conformity – all variations are of the same length, but because of the strictness of the form there is a cumulative excitement of such intensity as we find only in the much

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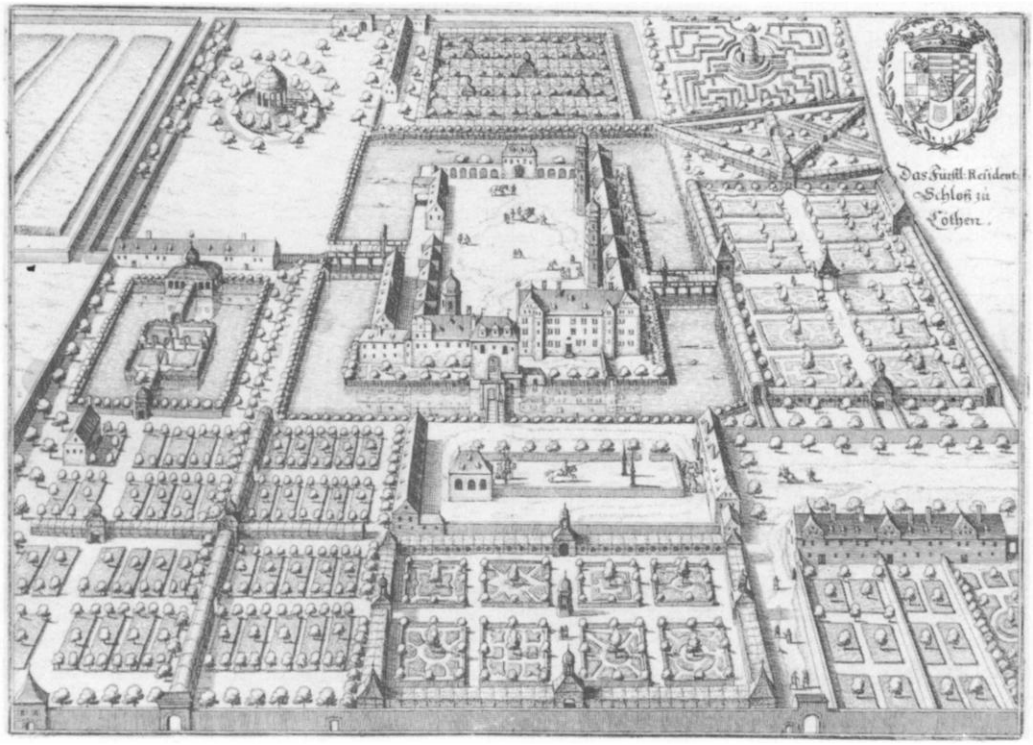

The princely residence at Cöthen, where Bach wrote much of his instrumental music

freer *Goldberg Variations*. The other sonatas for solo instruments, with accompaniment, are distinguished because of their historical innovation: Bach does not write the usual figured bass accompaniment but provides a fully written out and elaborate harpsichord part. He makes this prophetic arrangement more emphatic by calling the part *cembalo concertato.*

The four suites or overtures for orchestra each begin with a solemn French overture, heavily accented, with an elaborate fugue in the middle, but after this opening number everything changes into real suite music made up of dance pieces. This is delightful outdoor music, especially the two overtures with trumpets and drums; light and dashing, even the bass fiddles wear ballet shoes, but the lightness also permits concertante elements genially infused into the dances. Bach must have written other compositions of this sort, but unfortunately they belong to the large quantity of his works that have been lost; here Friedemann and Emanuel Bach bear a heavy responsibility. Incidentally, it was again Mendelssohn who restored the overtures to the repertory, performing the third suite at the Gewandhaus concerts. Schumann's review of the concert is poetic: 'He rocks us gently on his little finger'.

The harpsichord concertos are transcriptions from violin concertos, rather superficially done as Bach made little attempt to adjust the solo violin part to the keyboard idiom; they were put together probably for the Collegium Musicum or the house concerts. The quite popular D minor concerto must have been a violin concerto, but this time Bach did a better job; the concerto is a fine piece even though its authenticity is somewhat uncertain. Successful attempts have been made to restore these transcribed violin concertos to their original form, and it must be admitted that they sound much better when the solo part is played on the violin. The Neue Bach-Ausgabe, now in progress, obliges us with a special volume containing these restored versions. We possess only two authentic violin concertos and they are gems. Here Vivaldi's influence is strong but altogether on Bach's terms, because both the polyphony and the kinetic energy go beyond the Italian concept of the concerto as Bach usually connects tutti and solo more intimately than the Italians. It is remarkable how Bach blends contrapuntally the main theme in the accompaniment to the solo passages; yet these concertos are very melodious, and idiomatic for the violin which, especially in the middle movements, soars undisturbed. Here Bach writes in an Italian violin style, not in the German of the solo sonatas. The concerto for two violins is an equally lucent work; the duet in the Largo is one of Bach's most heartfelt compositions.

Now we come to the crowning achievement in this genre, the six concerti grossi known as the Brandenburg Concertos which, with Handel's *Grand Concertos* op.6, represent the culmination of Baroque instrumental ensemble music. Each of the six concertos is different in tone, texture and instrumentation. Once more, unlike the Italian concertos, Bach homogenizes the style by using some suite music, a bit of orchestral music and other elements, though on the whole these concertos are large-scale chamber music as opposed to Handel's concertos which are decidedly orchestral. Some, like no.4, have gigantic proportions, but nowhere does the driving energy slacken, and Bach's 'light' counterpoint is at its best as there are little canons and fugatos strewn in

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everywhere with seeming nonchalance. The slow movements are of luminous melodic beauty; the dirge in no.1 tugs the listener's heart (though not if played on the indigent violino piccolo, which cannot carry the profound expressive pathos for which the full, glorious tone of the real violin is needed). The use of oboe, flute, bassoon, trumpet and two horns in solo passages contributes a great deal of colour; only nos.3 and 6 are restricted to strings. No.6, for 'arm' violas, gambas and cellos, is specially interesting because of its singularly archaic tone; the viols were already semi-extinct when Bach composed this fine work, with the wondrous sunset glow of its sound. No.5 is the most virtuoso, as the harpsichord is given an unusually dominating role; the large cadenza is breathtaking. Bach engages in thematic play, especially in no.3, that is almost symphonic.

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We have so far skipped in this discussion Bach's organ music, composed for his favourite instrument, because it demands a detour to explain its extraordinary qualities. Its stylistic range is phenomenal, from the kind of counterpoint of Ockeghem's time to the bold modern idiom of the toccatas which started with Frescobaldi. These tremendous preludes, fugues, toccatas and fantasias testify to the most interesting metamorphosis of style, the migration to the Protestant north of the style created by the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The original motives of the Church Militant were of course no longer present, but the brilliance, the large gestures and the desire to overwhelm did not change. Indeed, it was this Counter-Reformation-spawned, grand, Jesuit-led style, designed to carry away and hence to convert, that first taught painters, architects and musicians how to address the large public by creating dramatic excitement. It is this spirit we find in Bach's large works for the organ with their rumbling pedal runs, dramatic harmonic surprises and strettos. These works tower over everything in the literature for organ and remain unchallenged forever.

Although this brilliant, expansive and dramatic style is greatly admired, in Lutheran Germany there was also a very special 'native' style based on the *Kirchenlied*, the chorale, which was not only an artistic factor but a significant part of life. The 16th-century reformers endeavoured to acquaint the people with the Bible, heretofore restricted to versions in Hebrew, Greek and Latin and therefore not accessible to the people. Translations into the vernacular were now made, the outstanding ones being Luther's into German and the English King James version. Luther, with his sharp insight and love of music, realized that this new prominence of the Bible could be enhanced and furthered by music, traditionally considered 'the handmaiden of religion'.

Protestantism did not create anything particularly new in the visual arts or in architecture, but in music it did. The devotional 'church songs', the chorales, and works based on them were original and incontestably Protestant in spirit. To the German Protestant Baroque the chorale became the spiritual centre – indeed the Jesuits complained that 'Luther's songs' turned more people to the new faith than

Erdmann Neumeister, reformer of the cantata

all the theological writings and preachings. J. H. Schein's chorale settings from the 1620s are still simple and straightforward, but Buxtehude and Böhm made them into a new artistic genre leading directly to Bach, in whom it reached its ideal – and final – development. Today we look at a bulletin on the church wall displaying the numbers of the hymns to be sung which we find in our hymnals, but in Bach's time, when the great hymns of the heroic age of the Reformation were still well known, the organist would play a prelude built on a chorale, thus announcing to the congregation the hymn to be sung. The artistic aim was to retain the chorale tune intact or nearly so, at the same time exploiting it in the most sophisticated melodic, rhythmic and contrapuntal ways. It is here that Bach's depth of feeling, intensity and poetic imagination, as well as his knowledge and grasp of all things musical between heaven and earth, reach their fulfilment as he looks us in the face with the bright eyes of beauty.

The simplest of these preludes are in the *Orgelbüchlein*, which he composed for beginners in the art of organ playing, but this controlled simplicity is on the highest artistic plane. The chorale tunes are in the treble surrounded, like falling petals, by the contrapuntal lines in the other parts. The larger and more elaborate chorale preludes (so called on the title-page by Bach himself) range from the brilliant and virtuoso to mystic communings where we can hardly follow the composer. In many instances, when we are convinced that Bach had exhausted the possibilities in a piece, he picks it up again and continues with ever new ideas. This fantastic ability is most advantageously studied and enjoyed by comparing the various harmonizations of the same chorale tune. The volume containing all of Bach's chorale harmonizations, together with the *Orgelbüchlein*, should be read as morning prayers by every young composer.

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Bach's instrumental works have become very familiar to the musical public, which appreciates the wealth of sentiment, the incomparable craftsmanship, the endless thematic inven-

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tion and the fabulous architectural vision. Still, we must remember that the bulk of Bach's oeuvre is vocal, and no-one who does not know the cantatas, motets and sundry other pieces of vocal music can claim real knowledge of Bach's awe-inspiring stature. This vocal music is usually divided into two classes, sacred and secular, which is a poor classification in view of the many *contrafacta*. The theatrical style dominated all the arts in the Baroque and no composer of the era could avoid being deeply influenced by its expressive means. As early as 1704, Erdmann Neumeister, the influential reformer of the cantata libretto, said in the preface to his *Geistliche Kantaten*: 'To state briefly, in my view a cantata is nothing else but a piece from an opera, put together from recitatives and arias'. Bach was not connected with the theatre and is not popularly seen as having been interested in it, but he was well acquainted with opera, and we know that whenever he went to Dresden he attended performances at the court opera, in those days one of the best outside Italy, and was on friendly terms with its famous director, Hasse. Indeed, Bach actually composed several minor 'operas', like the Coffee Cantata, some of which may have been – and certainly can be – staged. Stylistically, then, there was little difference between the *concerto ecclesiastico*, as Bach called his cantatas, and the *dramma per musica*. A new classification based on categories such as solo, choral, dramatic and chorale cantatas might be desirable. Even the mass was dramatized and consisted of a cycle of cantatas; all of Bach's masses, including the B minor, are such cantata masses.

The musical representation of Christ's Passion was of popular origin and, unlike the Italian settings, which were simply religious operas, the German Passion oratorio and *historia* were settings of the Gospel text with the Evangelist as narrator. In Schütz's time nothing extraneous was added to the Gospel texts; but now both cantatas and Passions were composed on librettos, like operas, and Pietist poetry demanded admission, especially in the arias; the insertion of such poems into the Passions and the cantatas slowed down the drama and lengthened the works. In Bach's time considerable uncertainty surrounded the style, purpose and use of the Passion. Composers were not clear whether this late Baroque oratorio should be destined for the church, the theatre or the concert hall, so strong was the Italian operatic influence. Evidently Bach decided for the church; but even he could not bring full order to the nearly unworkable mixture of old and new – not to speak of the outsize proportions and the elaborate disposition of his great settings. His original plan was to build his composition on a popular basis though employing the greatest artistic means, yet aside from the chorales, some of the arias and the great lullaby at the end of the *Matthew Passion* turned out to be pretty close to what is called the 'colossal Baroque'. Bach demands two orchestras, two choirs, two organs, a combination that clearly goes back to the old Venetian polychoral music.

J. A. Ernesti, rector of the Leipzig Thomasschule

There are some other archaisms that even his contemporaries did not understand. Whenever the words of Jesus are sung, the animated accompanied recitative ordinarily used at such dramatic spots is discarded; instead the strings suddenly freeze into distant-sounding, stationary chords while the sacred words are sung in highly expressive recitatives mixed with ariosos. These mysterious sounds are not a sort of musical halo; they come from the old Venetian opera and were called *ombra* ('ghost') scenes, which Bach still knew, but which by the second half of the century seem to have puzzled everybody. The arias are lyrical contemplations of Christ's sufferings, timeless confessions of faith. Though there are individual dramatic figures, the real drama is in the explosive choruses of the *turbae* (the 'crowd'), while the chorales are prayerful and were probably sung by everyone at the service. It is undeniable, however, that Bach's Passions go beyond the frame of the church liturgy and no longer answer their erstwhile purpose. Nowadays, though they may be performed on Good Friday in churches, they really join the exodus of the large concerted works from the church to the concert hall. Haydn's cheerful oratorios, let alone Beethoven's *Missa solemnis*, fully established the oratorio and mass in the concert hall and were so planned in the first place. Still, Bach's great Passions are an island in the broad river of musical history; nothing like them has ever been attempted.

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When Bach first went to Leipzig, the rector of the Thomasschule, Gessner, a fine scholar of the old Lutheran Latin school tradition which always considered music an integral part of religion and culture, was a congenial superior and friendly towards him. The neo-humanists, imbued with the ideals of the Enlightenment, reversed this order and merely tolerated music in the curriculum. With Ernesti, the new rector, who was interested only in discipline and a pure classical education, there began a warfare between Bach and his superiors that embittered and alienated him. He continued to discharge his duties but withdrew into his shell – workshop and family – and composed for his own satis-

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faction. With the recently established true chronology of Bach's cantatas and the B minor Mass, it turns out that many of the 'late' Leipzig cantatas are earlier works simply retrieved from his bottomless foot-locker, though some of them were refurbished to their advantage. Now all his formidable energy, turning inward, was engaged in a plan that had for its aim nothing less than the exploration of the final boundaries of the musical universe.

In Germany a master would sum up his art, his craft, and his views in a so-called *Kunstbuch*, an anthology of all he had learnt in his artistic life. *The Art of Fugue*, the second book of the '48', the *Musical Offering* and, yes, the B minor Mass, are such *Kunstbücher*. They were not intended for public performance but for other composers to study. These incredible canons and fugues, and the miscellany in the *Clavierübung*, must be studied lovingly one by one for they contain inexhaustible riches that take a lifetime to explore. Significantly, the original title Bach gave the *Musical Offering* was *Ars canonica* ('The art of canon'); the more colourful title is not his. These large anthologies should not be performed *in toto*, in one sitting, for one cannot absorb such highly concentrated polyphony hours on end. The second worst mistake is to orchestrate them, because the instruments add colour to what is a purely linear concept. These works were intended for the keyboard, some of the open scores notwithstanding.

The B minor Mass is a special case. Originally it was a Lutheran *missa brevis* consisting of Kyrie and Gloria, a version of the Mass still cultivated in Protestant Germany long after the Reformation; Bach submitted it to the King-Elector in Dresden in the hope of obtaining the coveted title of court composer and simply called it *Missa*. He could not have called the completed work 'Mass in B minor' because the additions to the *missa* are largely in D major. No less than three-quarters of the mass as we know it now is borrowed from earlier cantatas; and the work was completed much later than hitherto assumed, as Bach gradually added to the *missa* to round out the anthology. The last pages of the score date from the year of his death. It is in fact incorrect to say that the work was 'composed' because of the extensive *contrafacta*. To demonstrate the variety and the possibilities of vocal composition, all Bach needed were the inexhaustible examples from his many cantatas, with a few special pieces freshly written. Each of the movements is independent, and no two show the same style and idiom. Some are gigantic, the Gloria and the Credo each have eight subdivisions amounting to eight shorter cantatas, and the duration of the aggregate of movements, if considered as one work, is almost prohibitive. At concert performances there is usually an interval, which makes no sense in a Mass. For the same reason the B minor Mass cannot be used in the liturgy. Portions of this great *Kunstbuch* can be performed separately to advantage, but then why not perform the original cantatas on which the work was based?

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As we contemplate these tremendous musical monuments of Bach's last creative period, the question again intrudes whether we really understand Bach. By 'understanding' we mean a realization of the creative process, but the curtain that covers the riddle of creation in these works is yet barely drawn, and what the scholars have managed to clarify has not yet fully penetrated the practice of music. The use of period instruments and very small ensembles, which makes this giant work a *missa da camera*, do not solve the riddles – the Baroque was not an age favouring miniatures.

To many the inexorable polyphony of these anthologies appears as the revelation of an exclusively professional mind, the 'mathematical' or 'Gothic' Bach, as they used to say. Ruskin expressed this dilemma when he said that in contemplating certain art he could often see but could not feel. But this was the age of the Enlightenment, an age that changed the outlook of mankind by its adherence to Rationalism, which is a philosophy that seeks the sources of knowledge in the pure intellect, independent of any affective motives. In works such as *The Art of Fugue*, Bach embarked to find the sources and limits of the art of music. The great problem that we face here is that this music appears to be – and really is – a severely intellectual, minutely planned and calculated, scientifically organized art, yet at the same time it is music composed more intensely and dramatically than ever. Modern aesthetics has taught us that music inevitably possesses psychological and affective ramifications, whether intended or not, and though the Enlightenment wanted to bring music within the realm of reason, it could not stifle its affective power; the latter is indeed present in the *Kunstbücher*, but in such profound depths that it is not immediately revealed, and demands long and devoted study to be apprehended.

But in Bach's case there was another complicating factor opposed to Rationalism: mysticism. The German mind had been particularly fruitful soil for mysticism ever since the Middle Ages, and this German mysticism displays a particularly speculative bent. The musical tone can become the basis for an allegorical type of mysticism through which music, by analogy, can symbolize a wide range of non-aural objects, including abstract notions. The sacred numbers of the Old Testament and *Revelations*, which Lutheran theology inherited from the Alexandrians and St Augustine, are used and expressed through musical means. Bach was able to juggle ideas and hypotheses in musical terms in a way that baffles us ordinary mortals. Seven was the number standing for Creator and creation; three referred to the Trinity and for the triple 'holy' in the Sanctus; two threes (that is, 33) represented Christ; four signified the corners of the world; ten was recognized as involving the Commandments; and so forth. While it is fairly difficult to do so, these symbolisms can be unravelled in their musical settings. Thus, for instance, in the B minor Mass the word 'Credo' is heard 49 times (7 x 7). But when this numerology is combined with caballistic values, where the letters of the alphabet are given serial numbers (A = 1, B = 2 etc), things can become exceedingly complicated. 'Credo' now becomes 43, the

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mathematical sum of the position of its letters in the alphabet. With the aid of this abstract rationalistic numerology, words, names, even sequences of them, can be expressed in music by using a corresponding number of notes, bars, points of imitation, entries of voices or appearances of the theme. Bach occasionally used a signature, at times in actual notes, B-A-C-H, but more often by the caballistic number 14 (2+1+3+8).

These subtleties are not manifest to the listener; they are private, used solely for the composer's satisfaction, and can be discovered only by painstaking study of the scores and their texts. Undoubtedly many have escaped us. The materials so used brought with them no intrinsic suitability to their symbolic role, nor do they show any resemblance between symbol and object. Such symbolism was not unique with Bach; it was practised by German composers, painters and architects, and there was a considerable instructional literature on the subject. The miracle is that, though heavily weighted with this ballast, Bach's music never becomes forced or contrived. The symbolism concerned Bach alone and we should not worry too much about them; the performer should concentrate on the music and leave the mysticism to the theologians and the programme annotators.

The first giant modern biography of Bach by Philipp Spitta appeared in 1875, 73 years after Forkel's first attempt at such a work; it was soon translated into English. It was a tremendous achievement; despite its age and Spitta's inevitable Romantic and theological bias, the work remains the indispensable foundation for Bach research. Two important and influential monographs on Bach followed early in our century: André Pirro's *L'ésthétique de Jean-Sébastien Bach* and Albert Schweitzer's *Bach: le musicien-poète* (the latter soon becoming very popular and offered in many languages). Today both are dated because of their excessive hermeneutics, seeking behind every note some profound hidden meaning. In 1904 there appeared the first volume of the *Bach-Jahrbuch* which ever since has contributed important research material to its subject, and the growth of the musicological periodicals all over the world has greatly advanced our knowledge and appreciation of Bach's art. With the recent discoveries by Dürr, Dadelsen, Emery, Wolff and others, we have gained a more rounded view of Bach, and the two great musical encyclopedias, *Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* and *The New Grove* have excellent short essays on Bach by Friedrich Blume and Christoph Wolff (with Walter Emery), respectively. Though these days it is no longer possible for a single scholar to write biographies of such heroic proportions as those of Spitta, Chrysander or Albert, a new modern scholarly biography and critical study of Bach, encompassing the large amount of important research since the end of the war, as well as the often neglected socio-cultural background, is overdue.

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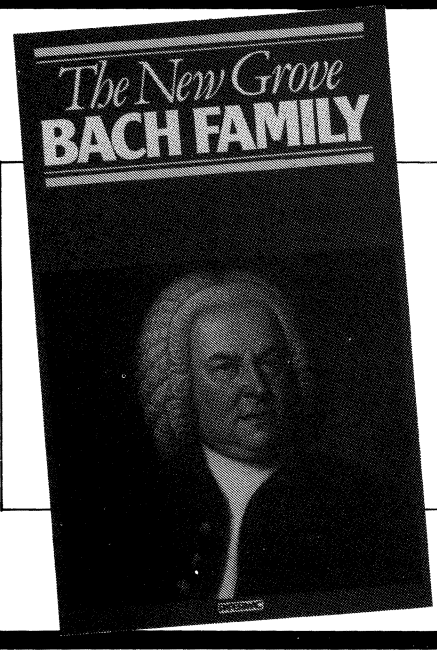

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