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“Not in Tune”

Poets Consider the Music of Bach

by Jean Kreiling



More than 250 years after the death of Johann Sebastian Bach, his music continues to move and intrigue listeners, performers, and scholars. The Tower Records website offers 3,796 recordings of music by Bach; his music appears with reliable frequency in concert programs and church bulletins; and musicologists constantly delve into his life and work, discovering just last summer a previously unknown aria. While scholars have illuminated many facets of Bach’s music, a different kind of elucidation comes from another group of writers: the many poets of the past century who have reacted to Bach’s music by creating their own works of art. By exploiting the famously “musical” qualities of poetry—rhythm, meter, sonority, pattern—as well as distinctively literary elements like metaphor, imagery, and indirection, these poets offer unusual and expressive commentaries that may prove enlightening to a variety of listeners.

Most of the poets inspired by Bach have celebrated or meditated upon a listener’s or performer’s experience of the music; some describe the composer and/or his music more directly. In “Homage to J. S. Bach,” John Heath-Stubbs first focuses on the relatively prosaic facts of Bach’s life and work, and then seamlessly leads the reader into the intensity of a musical experience. Heath-Stubbs is himself a pianist, and his many poems about music reflect his understanding of musical and historical contexts. He portrays Bach as a diligent worker and family man,

*...grinding away like the mills of God,
Producing masterpieces, and legitimate children—
Twenty-one in all—and earning his bread
Instructing choirboys to sing their ut re mi....*

Heath-Stubbs acknowledges Bach’s conservative aesthetic—“He groped in the Gothic vaults of polyphony,/ Labouring pedantic miracles of counterpoint”—and finds in Bach’s music both “order” and “passion.”

The poem itself has a relatively orderly form: five quatrains employing nearly equal line lengths and a simple pattern of rhymes (some exact, some approximate). Such regularity seems especially suitable for the matter-of-fact opening lines about Bach’s diligence already quoted. But this formal tidiness persists even as the poem’s imagery and ideas become more fanciful, as in the phrase “super-celestial harmonies/Filtered into time through that stupendous brain.” By the final lines, the poem’s formal conventions contrast more significantly

with its increasingly metaphorical and extravagant tone, particularly in multiple meanings of “passion” and “blindness”:

*It was the dancing angels in their hierarchies,
Teaching at the heart of Reason that Passion existed,
And at the heart of Passion a Crucifixion,
When the great waves of his Sanctus lifted
The blind art of music into a blinding vision.*

The logical consistency of the poetic framework paradoxically exposes something less rational: an effect of perceptual expansion and emotional intensification. Despite its formal regularity, the poem seems to accelerate towards its end; that is, the poem itself, like the music, embodies both order and passion.

While Heath-Stubbs’ poem contains neither definitive biography nor detailed explication, it does convey some crucial truths about Bach and his music, calling our attention to both the composer’s workaday productivity and his towering artistic achievement. Granted, images such as “dancing angels” and “great waves” give us no information concerning tonal relationships, harmonic progressions, or contrapuntal technique; even poetically, these images are not especially fresh. But they add to a sense of the progressively overwhelming impact of the music, in a verbalization of the musical experience that seems at least as true—and as carefully constructed—as more technical descriptions.

Among the poems focusing more directly on the sounds of Bach’s music, Robert Schuler’s “listening to Yo Yo Ma playing Bach’s unaccompanied cello sonata” represents an especially idiosyncratic and impressionistic approach. The somewhat confusing title leaves the identity of the subject in some question, since Bach’s cello sonatas call for harpsichord accompaniment; most likely, the title refers to one of the unaccompanied suites for cello. No details in the poem connect it to a specific piece, but much suggests the distinctive sound of the cello, as in these lines:

*...leaning down
into darkness
the sawing the chafing the rumbling
echoes
droning out of the stone-bound well.*

The vaguely allusive quality of these words is reinforced by their arrangement on the page, which features extra space between some words and the absence of punctua-

tion. These elements, along with a lack of rhyme, regular meter, and clear grammar, all contribute to an improvisatory effect far removed from the intricate, premeditated patterns of Bach's music. Clearly the poem is not meant to imitate the music; instead, it describes the perceptions of one creative listener. Like Schuler's poems on music by Miles Davis and Maurice Ravel, this one has the spontaneity of a fleeting first impression. While the meandering, free-verse approach might seem especially suitable for describing jazz and impressionist musical styles, it reveals here a more instinctive and sensual reception of the learned Baroque style than one might expect. Indeed, it recalls—in an entirely different voice—Heath-Stubbs' insistence that passion lives within Bach's Baroque orderliness.

Occupying a formal middle ground between Heath-Stubbs' rhymed, metrical quatrains and Schuler's free verse is the blank verse of Howard Nemerov's "Playing the Inventions." Each line of this poem has five stresses; in addition, each of the poem's five sections has fifteen lines—perhaps in homage to the number of Bach's two-part and three-part Inventions (fifteen of each). "Playing the Inventions" includes more specific musical descriptions than the poems discussed above. It begins as follows:

*The merest nub of a notion, nothing more
Than a scale, a shake, a broken chord, will do
For openers...
...it is not the tune
But the turns it takes you through, the winding ways
Where both sides and the roof and the floor are mirrors
With some device that will reflect in time
As mirrors do in space...*

These lines supply not only straightforward musical details—a scale, a shake, a broken chord—but also an effective visual metaphor for the overlapping melodic imitations in Bach's music. The images of reflective walls, roof, and floor add a new twist to the notion that music—especially Baroque music—has a sort of "architecture."

Nemerov's poem goes beyond a description of the music and one listener's response to it; it earnestly enlightens another, perhaps untutored listener. As quoted above, the poet points out to those who might listen only for a catchy melody that "it is not the tune / But the turns it takes you through." That idea is echoed in a similar assertion several lines later—"The tune's not much until it's taken up"—and then supported by vivid images suggesting that the tune might best be heard as "the thread that spins the labyrinth" or "the acorn opened that unfolds the oak." Near the end, the music is described as

*...clear streams...
Whose currents twine, diverge, and twine again,
Seeming to think themselves about themselves
Like fountains flowering in their fall.*

Such words remind even the knowledgeable listener of distinctive qualities of the Inventions not always captured in scholarly descriptions: their continuous and apparently inevitable flow, the separation and reunion of different melodic lines, the self-reflective symmetry of individual melodies, the fluid and expansive atmosphere of the music.

As rich as Nemerov's imagery is, some purists may have reservations about its usefulness for the task of describing music—and yet even the most scholarly analysis and sober criticism of music can hardly avoid figurative language. Conventional musical terminology often relies on metaphor, as in references to tone, color, texture, and the rise and fall of melodic lines. Moreover, musicologist Anthony Newcomb reminds us that thoughtful music criticism "is not a true-or-false demonstration of the unique meaning of the artwork," but instead "the communication of one view of the expressive resonance of the artwork... part of the shared enterprise that is culture... a way of transmitting, changing, and adding layers to the meaning of the pieces..."

The "shared enterprise" of culture also includes poetry, of course, which almost by definition involves "adding layers" of meaning. Thus, poet Robert Bly claims that in a performance of Bach's Mass in B minor, the low-reaching bass part becomes "bits of dark bread" for the poor, and a dialogue between wind instruments concerns a promise to feed orphans. And Richard Powers' novel *The Gold Bug Variations* begins with a long poem that describes the theme of Bach's Goldberg Variations, then entwines that musical idea with the novel's ensuing narrative—and also, astonishingly, with the design of the genetic code. Such creative connections may seem to lead the reader away from the strictly musical plane—but they also draw the reader into distinctive, dynamic experiences of music that may inform or intensify the reader's own experience.

As in Powers' juxtaposition of eighteenth-century art and twentieth-century science, several poets have reflected on the historical distance between Bach's day and our own, as well as the capacity of Bach's music to bridge that distance. In "Playing the Inventions," Nemerov marvels that after

*Two hundred and fifty years
Of time's wild wind that whips at the skin of that sea
Whose waves are men . . .
...the moment of this music is...
A happiness implacable and austere
The feeling that specifically belongs
To music when it heartlessly makes up
The order of its lovely, lonely world...the world
We play forever at while keeping time.*

The historical sweep of the poem includes an anecdote concerning the early twentieth-century harpsichordist Wanda Landowska, and finally, a bow to today's "backward dilettante,/Amateur, stumbling slowly through [Bach's] thoughts."

The historical perspective also intrigues David Berman, who remarks in his poem "Bach" on the incongruity of hearing Bach's "weighty organ works" on a modern cassette tape "that weighs an ounce at most." In addition, he notes the contrast between his own listening environment—including the noises of windshield wipers and engine fans—and the cathedral or "gilded hall" the music deserves. In "A Bach Cantata," Margaret Stanley-Wrench marvels at Bach's apparent prescience: "How did he know our age,/Gnawn, bitter, riven? ... Listening, our hearts/Beat, echoing his own." For these poets, Bach's music connects the listener to the composer's own day and his transcendent creativity—although these particular poems hardly describe the music itself at all.

Among the more straightforward poems about the music of Bach, Siegfried Sassoon's "Sheldonian Soliloquy (During Bach's B Minor Mass)" combines emotional response and historical awareness in a neatly structured and often witty narrative. Sassoon juxtaposes the sounds and images of an afternoon performance of the Mass with the atmosphere outside the hall, noting contrasts, parallels, and interactions. The "impious clatter" of a motorbike seems at first to disrupt the "confident and well-conducted brio" of the choir—but only a few lines later, the choir is described less reverently as "intense musicians [who] shout the stuff...." The speaker recognizes the music's age, with the phrase "God's periwigged...The music's half-rococo...." But he also notes the composer's capacity for timeless communication, as when the birds outside the hall "rhapsodize/Antediluvian airs of worm-thanksgiving" and Bach "replies/With song that from ecclesiastus cries...." In the poem's final stanza, the choir and the birds both sing "Hosanna," confirming what has been hinted at throughout: all of the speaker's perceptions have been woven into a single all-encompassing polyphonic texture.

Sassoon's poem itself achieves a sort of polyphony, that musical texture in which two or more melodic lines are heard simultaneously. The careful reader of this poem pays attention nearly simultaneously to descriptions of sounds both indoors and out, to both the enduring qualities of art and the fleeting impressions of the mundane present, and to both the dignity of the Mass and the light, neatly rhymed, sometimes ironic tone of the poet. Poetry often mixes contrasting images and ideas, creating what composer and historian Dragutin Gostuski called an "accumulation of layers of thinking," and encouraging "simultaneous contrapuntal interaction" among disparate thoughts. In this sense, poetry might

be considered an especially apt medium for commentary on music, especially the polyphonic music of Bach's era. "Sheldonian Soliloquy" reminds us of the distinctive texture of Bach's music even as it supplies the added counterpoint of one listener's experience.

In the end, of course, what we hear in poems about Bach is not the music of Bach at all, but the voices of imaginative listeners. Whatever musical qualities the poetry may have, it is "not the tune." Instead, the poets take us through new "turns," articulating their own creative responses to the music and offering fresh perspectives on Bach's aesthetic and his historical significance. These poetic retellings of personal encounters with Bach's music may inform both the most scholarly and the most casual listener, since we all hear music through the filter of our own lifetimes of intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional experiences. Sassoon's "From a Fugue by Bach" concludes with such a recognition: "In the mirror I see but the face that is me, that is mine;/And the notes of the fugue that were voices from vastness divine." Poetic images of Bach and his music turn out to be self-portraits—and they reveal to us repeatedly, and convincingly, the simple truth that Bach's music reaches across time and geography to rouse imaginations of remarkable diversity.

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