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Matthew Dirst
Excerpt
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PART I

The posthumous reassessment of selected works

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CHAPTER I

Why the keyboard works?

Among his contemporaries, Johann Sebastian Bach was known primarily as a great organist and as a composer of intricate and difficult keyboard and organ works. This fairly limited reception reflects not only the occasional nature of much of his concerted music but also Bach's own life choices: though widely admired as a virtuoso, he traveled little, preferring the stability of home and family. His publications provided similarly limited access to a famously idiosyncratic musical style and made few concessions to the casual consumer: Bach's four-part *Clavier-Übung* series, for example, circulated mostly among professionals and well-to-do dilettantes in expensive engraved volumes that enjoyed only modest print runs. Such works enhanced Bach's status as a learned master but did little to create the kind of international renown enjoyed by Georg Philipp Telemann or George Frederic Handel, both of whom were more attuned to popular tastes and the needs of musical amateurs. During the second half of the eighteenth century, copies of didactic works like *WTC* reinforced Bach's formidable reputation among the (mostly German) musical elite, while the cantatas, concertos, and so much else slipped quietly into oblivion, dispersed among his heirs to an uncertain future. Unsurprisingly, Bach's posthumous fame rested almost entirely on the contents of just a few key collections of highly learned music for expert players. But the appeal of his keyboard music, for admirers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, lay not only in its exemplary counterpoint. Over time the expressive and formative potential of this music became increasingly clear as well to those who thought and wrote about such things, who pointed to specific works that somehow filled contemporary needs while retaining just enough archaic flavor to mark this music as somehow timeless or universal.

These critical and sometimes very personal readings were part of the first great flowering of western music criticism, a development that made available for the first time a wide range of information about a fast-evolving art form. Unlike composition tutors or theoretical works written for a limited audience of specialists, eighteenth-century music journals provided readers with a variety of practical news, including discussions of various aspects of compositional craft, reviews of books about music, biographical sketches of leading musicians, translations of important foreign essays, even fictional

exchanges of letters on the model of Addison and Steele's *Spectator*. Their editors, following the lead of the literary community, worked to establish a geographically diverse readership, one that would prove remarkably durable despite economic challenges and a rapidly changing environment for musical employment. By century's end, most of these periodicals featured reviews of the latest repertory as well, with some serving effectively as house publicity organs for music publishers. Though only a small percentage of their contents may be considered criticism in the modern sense (much that appeared in them was still of a theoretical or learned nature), their popularity among the German bourgeoisie especially was such that even practitioners with little interest in academic debates – Sebastian Bach, for instance – could hardly afford to ignore them. Most carried a moralizing tone as well, which served to remind readers that the acquisition of good taste was no trivial matter.¹

Within these wide-ranging journals, discussion of the music of J. S. Bach appears only occasionally, especially during the second half of the century, when the name Bach usually refers to one of his sons. And yet, eighteenth-century criticism of the elder Bach's art can serve as a kind of prism through which are refracted the most important general trends in writing on music, towards a more expansive critical language and more personal impressions of particular works. Most striking in the Bach criticism of this lengthy historical period is the gradual shift from lively debate during the first half of the century over his music's fulsome textures and his fondness for complexity to general agreement by 1800 that these were in fact among the most meritorious aspects of his art. Though derided during his lifetime as "unnatural," Bach's music became, by century's end, a paradigm of "natural" expression – albeit one that needed to be unpacked through metaphors and personal experience and no longer solely through appeals to compositional standards or philosophical worldviews. Bach had ceased to be just a master of old-fashioned counterpoint; he had become a master of expression in keyboard music that demonstrated, in a nutshell, how the best music works. This chapter traces the general arc of that evolving critical view, partly as a prelude to the more specific concerns of later chapters but also to establish why certain works acquired such exalted status during an otherwise arid era in Bach reception.

¹ On the early development of German music journalism, see Imogen Fellingner, "Mattheson als Begründer der ersten Musikzeitschrift," in *New Mattheson Studies*, ed. George J. Buelow and Hans Joachim Marx (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 179–197; Mary Sue Morrow, *German Music Criticism in the Late Eighteenth Century: Aesthetic Issues in Instrumental Music* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); and Celia Applegate, *Bach in Berlin: Nation and Culture in Mendelssohn's Revival of the St. Matthew Passion* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 45–79 (Chapter 3: "Toward a Music Aesthetics of the Nation").

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EARLY JUDGMENTS

The earliest critical notices affirm what many still say about individual works of Bach: that this music is admirable, even “perfect,” but also uncommonly complex.² These seemingly distinct but in fact inseparable points were the nub of a famous argument about the general nature of Bach’s compositional style. In May of 1737 an anonymous letter appeared in Johann Adolph Scheibe’s *Critischer Musikus*, in which the writer (Scheibe himself) charged that in the works of the “most eminent of the music makers” there was little “natural melody.” This same composer’s music was said to demand too much of performers and listeners; its thick counterpoint and written-out ornaments obscured the beauty and perfection of a more natural art. The critic’s identity was plain to many, Bach included; that this criticism was directed primarily at Bach’s church music was clear as well to those who took part in the ensuing debate.³ Scheibe’s indictment of Leipzig’s most prominent musician ruffled more than a few feathers, not the least of which were those of the Thomas-Cantor himself. Although Scheibe later attempted to mend fences, praising Bach to the skies in subsequent reports on everything from “florid expression” to German keyboard music,⁴ the damage had been done, and the controversy lingered for years in the collective memory of Bach’s followers.

The problem, Scheibe maintained, was Bach’s complete disregard for clear declamation in vocal music. Scheibe had nothing against polyphony in general, nor was he opposed to its use in church music; he railed instead against the confusion wrought by the prodigious amounts of it in Bach’s concerted church works.⁵ Recalling his mentor Johann Christoph Gottsched’s complaint about the “bombastic” verse of a contemporary Silesian poet, Scheibe ventured that Bach “is in music what Herr von Lohenstein was in poetry. Turgidity has led them both from the natural to the artificial, and from the lofty to the obscure; and in both one admires the onerous labor and uncommon effort – which, however, are vainly employed, since they conflict with Nature.”⁶ How did Scheibe’s generation conceive of the relationship between nature and art? For enlightened writers the natural signified the simple yet appealing products of good taste and rational thought processes; thus music, like its sister arts painting and

² See, for example, the notices from Mattheson and Scheibe reproduced in *NBR*, 326–327.

³ Extensive excerpts are given in *ibid.*, 337–353.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 325, 331, 332.

⁵ This point, which usually gets lost in summary accounts of the Scheibe episode, has been made previously. See George J. Buelow, “In defense of J. A. Scheibe against J. S. Bach,” *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 101 (1974/1975), 85–100; Günther Wagner, “J. A. Scheibe–J. S. Bach: Versuch einer Bewertung,” *Bf* 68 (1982), 33–49; and Günther Wagner, “Die Bach-Rezeption im 18. Jahrhundert im Spannungsfeld zwischen strengem und freiem Stil,” *Jahrbuch des Staatlichen Instituts für Musikforschung* 1985–86 (1989), 221–238.

⁶ *NBR*, 338. Lohenstein had long been a target of such criticism: see Georgia Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Music Criticism: French and Italian Music 1600–1750* (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1981), 126.

poetry, needed to be both beautiful and intelligible. Scheibe found Bach's church compositions to be neither: their complex contrapuntal textures caused various bits of text to be juxtaposed and words and phrases to be repeated ad infinitum. Such was an ever-present danger in this genre, as Scheibe himself admitted elsewhere in the *Critischer Musikus*; the problem, fundamentally, was the nature of the beast itself. In his description of the various national styles, Scheibe observes that

German music ... is distinguished only by its assiduous work, the orderly progression of its movements, and by the profundity of its musical material. Thus it appears to be very accomplished but can easily lapse into the bombastic. But what is most peculiar to German music are the sacred pieces that are customary in Protestant worship. It is true that their invention and elaboration are, in part, borrowed from the Italians and the French; but the ideas, their realization, and the industry employed in the process distinguish them very clearly. Thus they make an extraordinary impression.⁷

Though he clearly admired the genre of the concerted church work, Scheibe found objectionable some of the more ambitious manifestations of it then heard in Leipzig's principal churches. Bach had crossed a fine line between compositional mastery and pretentious bombast, and to Scheibe's way of thinking, he neither fully understood natural expression nor did his music always accord well with the sensibilities of modern listeners.⁸

To be fair, Scheibe was not the only critic to fault Bach for his unusually complicated church works. In a 1725 issue of his *Critica musica*, Johann Mattheson chided Bach for much the same thing, by mocking (in this case) the first chorus of *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis*, BWV 21/2 (Ex. 1.1):

In order that good old Zachau may have company, and not be quite so alone, let us set beside him an otherwise excellent practicing musician of today, who for a long time does nothing but repeat: "I, I, I, I had much grief, I had much grief, in my heart, in my heart. I had much grief, etc., in my heart, etc., etc."⁹

Bach's compositional skill was not at issue here; it was his questionable taste and lack of generic propriety to which Mattheson objected in this oft-cited description of a piece that the critic probably heard at St Catherine's

⁷ J. A. Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, 2nd edn. (Leipzig, 1745; Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1970), 147–148:

Die deutsche Musik ... unterscheidet sich nur durch eine fleißige Arbeit, regelmäßige Ausführung der Sätze und durch die Tiefsinnigkeit, die sie in der Harmonie anwenden. Sie scheint also sehr gründlich zu seyn; allein, sie fällt auch dadurch sehr leicht ins Schwülstige. Dasjenige aber, was am meisten der deutschen Musik eigen ist, sind die Kirchenstücke, die bey dem Gottesdienste der Protestanten gebräuchlich sind. Es ist wahr, die Erfindung und Auszierung derselben ist gewisser maßen so wohl von den Italienern als Franzosen genommen; allein die Gedanken, die Ausarbeitung, und der dazu angewandte Fleiß unterscheiden sie sehr stark. Sie sind also von ausnehmendem Nachdrucke.

⁸ Although Scheibe's enthusiasm for both classical aesthetic theory and rationalism is often conflated in discussions of his Bach criticism, at least one scholar notes a subtle progression in Scheibe's thinking about these issues: see Jürgen Mainka, "Zum Naturbegriff bei Bach: Aspekte des Scheibe-Birnbaum-Disputs," in *Bericht über die wissenschaftlich Konferenz zum III. Internationalen Bach-Fest der DDR* (Leipzig: Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1977), 155–163.

⁹ *NBR*, 325.

Oboe

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Soprano

Alto

Tenor

Bass

Bassoon

Continuo

Example 1.1 (*cont.*)

Musical score for Example 1.1 (cont.), featuring a vocal line and a keyboard accompaniment. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 4/4 time. The vocal line is in the soprano register, and the keyboard accompaniment is in the right and left hands. The lyrics are in German and describe a scene of a person in a room, with a focus on the word 'Her' (He) and 'Be-küm-mer-nis' (sorrow).

4
Her - - - zen, in mei - - - nem
küm-mer-nis in mei - nem
Her - - - zen, in mei - - - nem
ich hat - te vie Be - küm-mer-nis, ich hat - te viel Be -
mei - nem Her - - - zen,
hat - te viel Be-küm-mer-nis, ich
hat - te viel Be-küm-mer-nis, ich

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Church during Bach's visit to Hamburg in November of 1720. Far from a reactionary diatribe, Mattheson's critique identifies the very real tension in this piece between a personal, almost pietistic libretto and a proudly old-fashioned musical setting whose self-interrogating texture effectively turns the poet's grief-stricken soul into a stutterer. While the portentous rhetoric of the opening chords might have been forgiven, the close fugal entries that follow make clear text declamation almost impossible. Mattheson may have admired such things in instrumental music (surely he was also present for Bach's half-hour contrapuntal improvisation at the organ on the chorale *An Wasserflüssen Babylon* during the same trip, a performance famously praised by the nonagenarian organist Johann Adam Reincken),¹⁰ but Bach's concerted setting of *Ich hatte viel Bekümmernis* was another matter entirely. The contrasting impressions are striking: Bach's virtuosically learned organ playing won him high praise virtually everywhere, while an equally learned cantata chorus caused this critic to laugh up his sleeve.

As the leading voice of progressive musical thought in Germany, Mattheson led the charge to demote learned counterpoint from the lofty perch it had occupied since the sixteenth century, not so much because it was aesthetically problematic but rather because of the potential for chaotic declamation in vocal music and the esoteric excesses to which partisans were prone.¹¹ In *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739) he warned of the dangers of learned counterpoint in church music, noting that "the meaning of the words ... suffers much too much with this motet style." A jumbled text setting, the inevitable result of multiple overlapping contrapuntal lines in concerted church pieces, was no longer acceptable in this genre. Strict imitation was especially problematic, as Mattheson observes: "whoever wants to bring the canonic style ... into the church should do such cautiously and seldom; [he] should use it more with instruments in sonatas and the like than with voices."¹² Although Mattheson's views on many musical matters changed over the course of a lengthy and brilliant career, on this subject at least he was consistent: in vocal music especially, melody could no longer play second fiddle to counterpoint. Like Scheibe, Mattheson could not understand why a highly skilled composer like Bach – who was, after all, quite capable of producing more up-to-date instrumental music – continued to write church works in such an antiquated and irrational vein.

Eventually showing himself to be at least as broadminded as Scheibe, Mattheson also brought to his readers' attention Bach's Fugue in A minor for unaccompanied violin, BWV 1003/2, a work he praised in the *Kern*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 302.

¹¹ See David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 52–58, esp. 56, for a summary of Mattheson's efforts to do away with the "culture of obscurantism and secrecy" surrounding learned counterpoint.

¹² Translation adapted from *Johann Mattheson's Der vollkommene Capellmeister: A Revised Translation with Critical Commentary*, ed. Ernest C. Harriss (Ann Arbor: UMI Press, 1981), 199, 209.

melodischer Wissenschaft (1737) as brilliantly worked out on “a whole sheet of music paper, without unusual extension, and quite naturally.”¹³ Similar observations about other instrumental works by Bach make clear that Mattheson’s lampoon of the opening chorus of Cantata 21, far from a comprehensive rejection of Bach’s art, reflects instead critical expectations that varied from genre to genre. Skillful instrumental fugues gave Mattheson considerable pleasure; indeed, more than once he pointed to examples from Bach (the G minor Organ Fugue, BWV 542/2; *The Art of Fugue*; the “Hudemann” Canon, among others) as models of their kind.¹⁴ Such glowing press, alongside the thoroughgoing discussion of counterpoint and fugue in *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, may have encouraged the ambitious experimentation in Bach’s late instrumental works, as some have proposed,¹⁵ but it seems not to have affected how Bach wrote texted fugues. In any case, the most progressive critics of this time were of one mind on this matter: Bach wrote exceptional instrumental works (even Scheibe praised Bach’s Concerto “in the Italian Style,” BWV 971, as a “perfect example of its kind”)¹⁶ but failed to acknowledge the key differences between church and chamber styles and the essential propriety of each.

German writers on music had long emphasized the distinctions between styles by maintaining that certain devices and procedures were better suited to one genre or venue than to another. Opinion varied on specifics, but most agreed that function determined content. Scheibe, perhaps the most outspoken advocate of this view, had no use for any mixed styles in music: he insists that “the clarity of style must be as carefully observed as the expression of the thing itself.”¹⁷ In 1739 the philosopher and encyclopedist Johann Heinrich Zedler likewise warned his readers of the dangers of mixed styles, complaining that “composers ... perform at the public [i.e., church] services pieces of a kind that are better suited to the theatre or dance-place than to so holy a place and such holy matters.”¹⁸ Of course, the better composers had always regarded stylistic boundaries as fluid, and theorists, for their part, had always complained about it. What was new in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, though hardly unique

¹³ *Ibid.*, 328.

¹⁴ George B. Stauffer, “Johann Mattheson and J. S. Bach: The Hamburg Connection,” in Buelow and Marx, *New Mattheson Studies*, 353–370 (357), proposes various scenarios to explain how Mattheson came to know these works.

¹⁵ See Gregory G. Butler, “*Der vollkommene Capellmeister* as a Stimulus to J. S. Bach’s Late Fugal Writing,” in Buelow and Marx, *New Mattheson Studies*, 293–305; and John Butt, “Bach’s Metaphysics of Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, ed. John Butt (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 46–59 (50).

¹⁶ See *NBR*, 343, 331.

¹⁷ J. A. Scheibe, *Compendium musices* (1736), as cited in Cowart, *The Origins of Modern Music Criticism*, 134.

¹⁸ J. H. Zedler, *Grosses vollständiges Universal Lexicon aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (1739), as cited in John Butt, *Music Education and the Art of Performance in the German Baroque* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 30.