

The Bach Reception in the 18th and 19th Centuries

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Johann Sebastian Bach received a good deal of recognition in his own time as a performer and composer of keyboard music, but his vocal compositions were largely ignored until the Bach Revival of the nineteenth century. Many early scholars wrote that he was all but forgotten in the interim between his death and the Revival, which was sparked by Felix Mendelssohn's performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*. More current thought, however, holds that the Revival was actually the result of the convergence of a continuity of events and factors beginning just after Bach's death, and that this performance was only one among many causes of the Revival.

Bach was admired throughout Europe during his lifetime for his virtuosity as keyboardist and for his ability to write keyboard pieces. As Philipp Spitta wrote, "Friends and foes alike bowed to the irresistible force of an unheard-of power of execution, and could hardly comprehend how he could twist his fingers and his feet so wonderfully and so nimbly without hitting a single false note."¹ Bach's obituary stated that he was "the hero of virtuosos" and that his keyboard music was "unlike that of any other composer."² The Prince of Hesse was so impressed by one of his performances in 1714 that he spontaneously removed a diamond ring from his finger and gave it to Bach.³

Despite his fame as an organist and writer of fugues, Bach's role as a composer

of vocal music was largely ignored. Even his obituary mentioned it only in passing.⁴ Bach's contemporary, Johann Adolph Scheibe, acknowledged Bach's instrumental virtuosity but complained of his compositions that he "deprived them of the natural element by a bombastic and confused nature, and obscured their beauty by far too much art . . . [Bach] demands of the singers and instrumentalists that they should by way of their throats and instruments do precisely that which he can play on the harpsichord . . . this not only removes from his pieces the beauty of the harmony, but also makes the singing absolutely incomprehensible."⁵ A few, such as the Leipzig lecturer Johann Abraham Birnbaum, defended Bach, but the majority of music critics agreed with Scheibe's assessment.⁶ Even the congregation and city elders that he wrote for in Leipzig found his music to be too elaborate,⁷ and his *Mass in B Minor* may not even have been performed in its entirety during his lifetime.⁸

Most church performers of the time simply did not possess the technical ability to perform Bach's vocal works, even if they had had the inclination. Bach's more famous contemporaries, such as Vivaldi, Telemann and Handel, wrote pieces that were much more accessible to the average performers, and as a result their music received a much

¹ "J. S. Bach," *Great Composers 1300-1900*, 1966 ed.

² Christoph Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music* (London: Harvard University Press, 1991), 392.

³ "J. S. Bach," *Great Composers 1300-1900*, 1966 ed.

⁴ Albert Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1911), 227.

⁵ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 379-380.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 380.

⁷ Denis Arnold, "Bach," *New Oxford Companion to Music*, 1983 ed

⁸ John Butt, "Bach's Mass in B Minor: Considerations of its Early Performance and Use," *The Journal of Musicology*, (Winter 1991): 109.

wider distribution. Bach himself made little effort to change this situation. For example, he often broke the conventional limitation of writing in keys with no more than three accidentals.⁹

Bach's style was at odds with the fashion of the time. Many of his contemporaries were unable to fully understand and appreciate his works and saw them merely as curiosities. The elaborate nature of his works met harsh criticism. Abbe Georg Joseph Vogler criticized Bach's chorales in 1800 by writing, "The surprise over the absurdity . . . is without end . . . All of this is in exalted church music - to a noble, simple chorale - how unbecoming; how absurd!"¹⁰ Vogler then proceeded to "improve" several of Bach's chorales by removing much of the complexity that made it interesting, as can be seen in figures 1 and 2.¹¹ Bach was also criticized for sometimes giving all of his voices equal parts, rather than bringing one main voice to the fore as was the convention during the Baroque period.¹²

Bach wrote in a period of growing rationalism. Music that was simple and spontaneously emotional appealed more to the rationalists than his music, which critics saw as belonging to a period of rigid rules.¹³ Audiences wanted music that was simpler and closer to nature, and Bach was seen as old fashioned, with his complex polyphony having more in common with the style antico than the style moderno.¹⁴ The devout Protestant religious beliefs which characterized Bach's music also fell out of fashion in this period.¹⁵

Only a relatively small number of Bach's compositions were printed in his own time. Most of his works were recorded only as manuscripts and his students and friends were in general the only ones with access to them.¹⁶ This was partly due to the decline of the German music trade after the Thirty Year War and the costly production of polyphonic music. More importantly, however, Bach's music was innovative and very demanding technically and thus attracted only a limited, commercially insignificant elite. Bach also made little real effort to have his pieces published until after 1727, and even then these were mainly only keyboard pieces. He rarely even let others borrow his manuscripts for performance.¹⁷ Bach certainly had no shortage of ambition as a performer, and actively pursued prestigious posts, but his failure to take steps that would allow others to perform his music hindered the diffusion of his work.

This situation was made worse after Bach's death. His works were dispersed among his inheritors and many were lost or made almost inaccessible.¹⁸ Indeed, many of his compositions were handed down only in the handwriting of his pupils.¹⁹ Virtually all of the small portion of Bach's work which had been published went out of print, and the only large accessible collections of his music were held by Bach's pupil Kirnberger in Berlin and by Baron van Swieten in Vienna.²⁰

The other factors which had hindered the spread of Bach's music also intensified

⁹ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 374-375.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 382.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 381.

¹² *Ibid.*, 380.

¹³ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 228-229.

¹⁴ Kurt von Fischer, "Johann Sebastian Bach," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

¹⁵ Denis Arnold, "Bach," *New Oxford Companion to Music*, 1983 ed

¹⁶ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 371.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 371-373.

¹⁸ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 234.

¹⁹ Georg Von Dadelsen, "His Sons and Pupils," in *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life, Times and Influence*, ed. Barbara Schwendowius and Wolfgang Domling, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 155.

²⁰ Wolfgang Domling, "The Bach Tradition of the 19th and 20th Centuries," in *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life, Times and Influence*, ed. Barbara Schwendowius and Wolfgang Domling, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 159-160.

Figure 1: Bach's version of Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin

Figure 2: Vogler's correction of Bach's harmonization

after his death. Even his successors in Leipzig rarely played his music.²¹ His works were rarely performed in churches both because of the decreasing competence of musicians and choirs and because of their old-orthodox texts.²² The trend towards music that was simpler than his and much more homophonic continued, so it is understandable that Bach's music was not performed often and audiences were not given the opportunity to be exposed to him. Also, this period was one in which to be considered a true musician one had to perform one's own works. This meant that only those composers of the past which were already very highly regarded were given much attention. This attitude that the art of the present was inherently better than the art of the past persisted until the end of the 18th century, which happened to coincide with the Bach revival.²³

Bach's students and children did continue to play his work and use it to teach their own students, however. More and more people were gradually exposed to his music as they gained fame. Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Christian Bach were both more famous in their own time than their father had been, and although their own styles bore little resemblance to their father's they did use much of his work for pedagogical purposes.²⁴

Bach's four part chorales were often used as teaching examples, and became a standard tool for teaching harmonic elaboration as early as 1758.²⁵ *The Well-Tempered Clavier* soon became a common vehicle for teaching keyboarding and counterpoint. Many composers, including Ludwig van Beethoven and Johannes

Brahms, were taught Bach's music as children.²⁶ There was also a tradition in Vienna well before Mozart's time of copying and studying Bach's fugues.²⁷ Writers and teachers in Germany and abroad began to quote passages of Bach's music quite frequently, which led to the reprinting of a few of his works as early as 1765.²⁸

Unfortunately, Bach's vocal music was again being almost entirely ignored in favour of his keyboard music. Also, his works were being used only as tools to teach the rudiments of music, not as a basis for new compositions. But even though Bach's music had very little influence on what established musicians were writing, the awareness the existence of his music was being maintained in the minds of the younger generation of musicians.

Franz Joseph Haydn and Beethoven were two important musicians influenced by Bach's music. Although they were probably unaware of most of his vocal works, such as the cantatas and Passions, they were certainly aware of some of his keyboard compositions and impressed by them. Haydn owned manuscripts of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *B-minor Mass*²⁹ and Beethoven called Bach the "Progenitor of Harmony"³⁰ and planned an overture on the name of Bach at the end of his life.³¹ Still, Bach functioned mainly as a teacher to them, rather than a composer. It was only the next generation that saw him as such.³²

²¹ Nicholas Temperley, "Bach Revival," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

²² Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 233.

²³ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 227-228.

²⁴ Von Dadelsen, "His Sons and Pupils," in *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life, Times and Influence*, 145-155.

²⁵ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 386-389.

²⁶ Ludwig Finscher, "Bach's Posthumous Role in Music History," in *Bach Perspectives* 3, ed. Michael Marissen, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 7-8.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁸ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 372.

²⁹ Finscher, "Bach's Posthumous Role in Music History," in *Bach Perspectives* 3, 13.

³⁰ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 390.

³¹ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 240.

³² Denis Arnold, *Bach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 89.

One of the first important composers to use elements of Bach's style in his own work was Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Upon hearing Bach's motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*, Mozart exclaimed, "That is indeed something from which we can learn!"³³ Bach's influence can be seen in such works of Mozart's as the last movement of the *G-Major String Quartet* (which features a virtuoso combination of sonata and fugue, Austrian and Bachian counterpoint), the counterpoint of *The Jupiter Symphony* and the Bachian chorale setting of *The Magic Flute*.³⁴ Music critics also began to see Bach as more than just a teacher of an antiquated style. In 1781 Hohann Friedrich Reichardt, a musical connoisseur, described Bach as "the greatest harmonist of all times and nations."³⁵

The publication of Johann Nicolaus Forkel's biography *On Johann Sebastian Bach's Life, Genius and Works* in 1802 marked the true beginning of the Bach Revival. Although certainly not comprehensive, it contained a good deal of useful information and made the world acquainted with Bach and his music.³⁶ It was also a pioneer in bringing awareness to Bach's vocal works. As early as 1818 Hans Georg Nageli described the *B-Minor Mass* as the "greatest musical work of art of all times and nations."³⁷

The inheritance of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach played an important role in the increased accessibility of his father's compositions. He left a large collection of his father's manuscripts to the German state library in Berlin, where they were finally made available to those interested in Bach's music.³⁸ Some of Bach's instrumental works were gradually published in the years

following C.P.E. Bach's death, including keyboard works, violin sonatas and cello suites.³⁹

Carl Friedrich Zelter, the conductor of the Berlin Singakademie, was another primary character in the 19th century Revival of Bach's vocal music. He performed some of Bach's motets and showed Bach's music to many of his colleagues and students. It was he who exposed Eduard Devrient and Mendelssohn to the *St. Matthew Passion* and allowed Mendelssohn to conduct it in 1829.⁴⁰

This was an amateur performance, with the musicians playing for free. The audience reacted very well, both in terms of the music and its religious significance, and reports of the performance began to circulate throughout Germany. The true significance of this event was that it transformed the Revival from a cult of intellectuals and musicians to a popular movement.⁴¹ The *St. Matthew Passion* was produced in many German towns in the early 1830s, the *St. John Passion* was performed by the Berlin Singakademie in 1833 and the *Mass in B Minor* in 1844. There was also a great revival of interest in Bach's keyboard works, but for once they did not obscure Bach's vocal music, and even his cantatas gradually came to be played more and more.⁴² The *St. Mathew Passion* was printed in 1830, the complete *B Minor Mass* was finally published in completion in 1845⁴³ and the scores of six cantatas were printed in 1830-1831.⁴⁴

The *St. Matthew Passion* was not conducted by Mendelssohn as it had been

³³ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 232.

³⁴ Finscher, "Bach's Posthumous Role in Music History," in *Bach Perspectives* 3, 11.

³⁵ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 372.

³⁶ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 235-236.

³⁷ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 385.

³⁸ Arnold, *Bach*, 88-89.

³⁹ Nicholas Temperley, "Bach Revival," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

⁴⁰ Arnold, *Bach*, 89-90.

⁴¹ Nicholas Temperley, "Bach Revival," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

⁴² Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 242-246.

⁴³ Wolff, *Bach: Essays on his Life and Music*, 372.

⁴⁴ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 250-251.

written by Bach, however. There were cuts and alterations, the instrumentation was changed and it was presented in a highly Romantic style.⁴⁵ Zelter also often changed Bach's compositions. He once wrote that he had "arranged many of his [Bach's] church pieces for myself alone, and my heart tells me that old Bach nods approvingly at me."⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Bach was finally being recognized as a true composer.

Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann, Brahms, Anton Bruckner and Franz Liszt were among the many Romantic composers who began to promote Bach's music.⁴⁷ For perhaps the first time ever his music was being generally accepted as valuable simply for its musical brilliance, not merely as a means to display virtuosity or as a teaching tool. Richard Wagner typified this new attitude by writing that it was impossible to characterize Bach's compositions "by any comparison whatever their wealth, their grandeur and their all-embracing significance."⁴⁸

Many Romantic composers performed Bach's music or wrote pieces heavily influenced by him. As Schumann wrote, "The profound combination of elements, the poetic and humorous aspects of recent music have their origins principally in Bach."⁴⁹ Both Mendelssohn and Schumann added piano accompaniments to Bach's solo violin sonatas. Composers often used Bach's work as an accompaniment for their own melodies, such as Charles Gounod's interpretation of Bach's Prelude in C Major.⁵⁰ Liszt used his popularity to make Bach visible to the general public with his transcriptions of Bach's organ compositions, particularly the G minor and A minor fugues.⁵¹ Schumann also played an essential

role by using his influence as a music journalist to make sure Bach was well presented in the media.⁵²

Bach's fame continued to increase, until both his keyboard and vocal work were known throughout Europe. Approximately two hundred books were written about him in the 19th century, a very large number for the time. A major biography was published by Philipp Spitta in 1873⁵³ and a complete edition of his works was published in 1900, a huge effort which had taken fifty years to compile and was the first of its kind for any composer.⁵⁴ The performance of the *St. Matthew Passion* in Paris in 1885 and of the *B minor Mass* in Rome in 1889 were milestones in the international recognition of Bach.⁵⁵ Bach societies appeared throughout Europe in the second half of the century to perform his music.⁵⁶

Bach's appeal to the Romantics went beyond the musical aesthetic that they found so pleasing. They saw his music as expressing the richness of human emotion, which fit in with the artistic ideology of the time, and they saw his work as unique and original. Germany was also undergoing a religious revival that prompted many Germans to search for the distinctively religious in their cultural heritage. Bach's devoutly Protestant nature thus appealed to many Germans and his attitude that 'anyone who works as hard as I did will get as far' made him especially attractive to the Protestant middle class work ethic.⁵⁷ Indeed, it has been argued that Mendelssohn's

⁴⁵ Arnold, *Bach*, 89-90.

⁴⁶ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 229

⁴⁷ Arnold, *Bach*, 91.

⁴⁸ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 258.

⁴⁹ Domling, "The Bach Tradition of the 19th and 20th Centuries," in *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life, Times and Influence*, 160.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 167-168.

⁵¹ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 250-257.

⁵² Finscher, "Bach's Posthumous Role in Music History," in *Bach Perspectives* 3, 16-17.

⁵³ Domling, "The Bach Tradition of the 19th and 20th Centuries," in *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life, Times and Influence*, 161.

⁵⁴ Denis Arnold, "Bach," *New Oxford Companion to Music*, 1983 ed

⁵⁵ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 259.

⁵⁶ "J. S. Bach," *Great Composers 1300-1900*, 1966 ed.

⁵⁷ Arnold, *Bach*, 90-93.

original motivation in conducting the *St. Matthew Passion* was primarily religious.⁵⁸

Perhaps most important, however, was the utility of Bach to German nationalism. The new German Confederation was unsure of itself and in search of its identity at the time of the Revival. It needed a strong common German heritage, artistic and otherwise, to provide unity to the Confederation and to help it overcome the political and military humiliations of the Napoleonic period⁵⁹. The Revival happened at a time when many of the important musical posts in Germany were still held by foreigners, so Bach's music was thus convenient to the causes of nationalism. As Forkel wrote of Bach in 1802, "This man, the greatest musical poet and the greatest musical orator that ever existed, and probably ever will exist, was a German. Let his country be proud of him; let it be proud, but, at the same time, worthy of him!"⁶⁰ Forkel also wrote that Bach's works were "a priceless national heritage, of a kind that no other race possesses."⁶¹ Many composers also shared these ideas. Wagner wrote that Bach was "the history of the inner life of the German mind during the awful century when the German people was utterly extinguished."⁶² and Brahms related Bach and nationalism by saying that the two greatest events during his life were the foundation of the German Empire and the completion of the complete works of Bach.⁶³

England also experienced a strong but separate Bach Revival at the same time as Germany. English intellectuals had already developed a strong Romantic cult of the past by the beginning of the nineteenth century,

and Bach appealed to them as a genius whose brilliance had been overlooked in his own time. Baroque music was also still popular at the time in England and there were already many societies throughout the country that cultivated a taste for the music of the past. William Shield, George Pinto and Samuel Wesley all performed Bach's music and wrote music of their own based on it in the first decade of the nineteenth century. Parts of the *St. Matthew Passion*, *B Minor Mass* and *Magnificat* had all been performed at major English festivals by 1840. The Bach Society was formed in 1849 and by 1876 the London Bach Choir had undertaken the regular performance of Bach's larger choral works.⁶⁴

Bach was firmly entrenched internationally as one of the greatest composers in history by the end of the nineteenth century, not only for his keyboard music, but for the full range of his compositions. His popularity has waxed and waned in the twentieth century, particularly around the two World Wars, but there is certainly no doubt that he has become a steady part of the collective unconscious. The slow rise of his popularity during the end of the eighteenth century culminated in the nineteenth century Revival, where he finally received recognition for the originality and beautiful complexity of his music, the very qualities for which it was criticized in his own time.

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⁵⁸ Michael Marissen, "Religious Aims in Mendelssohn's 1829 Berlin-Singakademie Performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*," *The Musical Quarterly*, (Winter 1993): 718-719.

⁵⁹ Nicholas Temperley, "Bach Revival," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

⁶⁰ Arnold, *Bach*, 90-91.

⁶¹ Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, 235-236.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 257.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 254.

⁶⁴ Nicholas Temperley, "Bach Revival," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1980 ed.

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