

Thoughts on the Interpretation of J.S. Bach's Sonatas, Partitas and Suites BWV 1001-1012

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Johann Sebastian Bach's Sonatas and Partitas for Violin Solo BWV 1001-1006 and Suites for Cello Solo BWV 1007-1012 were composed ca. 1717–23, during his time as *Kapellmeister* in Cöthen. While they were rarely performed in the first 150 years after their composition, they gained popularity in the late 19th century and have since become ubiquitous among string players. In fact there has likely not been a moment during the past forty years during which one of these works was not being played somewhere in the world.

Written sources from Bach's time are rich in guidance for musicians studying, performing and recording these works. Among the best-known prose from Bach's own hand appears in the preface to his *Vorschriften und Grundsätze zum vierstimmigen Spielen des General-Bass oder Accompanement* ("Guide to Four-Part Basso Continuo Playing") of 1738:

Der General Bass soll wie aller Music.... Finis und End-Ursache anders nicht, als nur zu Gottes Ehre und Recreation des Gemüths seyn. Wo dieses nicht in Acht genommen wird, da ists keine eigentliche Music, sondern ein teuflisch Geplerr und Geleyer. ("With the Basso Continuo, as with all music.... the absolute goal and fundamental purpose should be the glorification of God and the rebirth of the mind and spirit. Where this is not taken into account, the result is not actual music, but rather a devilish bawling and mechanical churning of tunes.")

Aside from Bach's obvious religious conviction and clear directive as to the purpose of music, significant in this passage is the writing style Bach employs - specifically the transition from elevated language (*Gottes Ehre und Recreation des Gemüths*) to common "everyday" speech (*teuflisch Geplerr und Geleyer*). This is evident not only in terms of content, but in the choice of grammatical form (the pejorative spoken form *Geplerr und Geleyer* as opposed to the formal *Plerren und Leyern*). This use of colloquialisms is reminiscent of the writings of Martin Luther, who attended the same school in Eisenach as Bach did, two hundred years earlier, and who of course had an enormous influence on the composer's thinking.

Martin Luther's statement regarding the use of language:

...man mus... auff das maul sehen, wie sie reden, und darnach dolmetzschen... ("One must look at people's mouths, see how they speak, and translate accordingly")

went beyond merely translating the Bible from Latin to German, and extended to a frequent use of colloquialisms in his writing. (In fact, the passage cited above, from the preface to Luther's translation of the Bible, is written in colloquial German.) Luther's aim here was of course to take his religious views directly to the people. As explained by Thomas Neuhoﬀ, director of the Kölner Bachverein (Bach Society of Cologne), Bach appears to have applied this principle to his religious works - and by extension to all his music, as he regarded even his

ostensibly secular compositions as being religious in nature - by imbuing his musical language with an emotionality that aims to appeal listeners regardless of their level of musical understanding, and bring them directly in contact with God through music. This was not without controversy. According to Neuhoff:

Bachs Kantaten wurden als "fleischlich, luxuriös und sinnlich" abgelehnt. Manche Kritiker verstiegen sich zu der Warnung, sie führten zu "teuflischer Versuchung....hier werden Emotionen angesprochen, die geistiger Musik überhaupt nicht anstehen." (Bach's Cantatas were condemned as being "carnal, luxurious, and sensual." Some critics went so far as to warn that they would lead to "devilish temptation... here emotions are being expressed that have no place in sacred music whatsoever.")

It was in part for this reason that the city of Leipzig refused to finance a second performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* during the composer's lifetime. Even before Bach was appointed *Thomaskantor* in Leipzig in 1723 (shortly after composing the works on this CD), the Leipzig town council expressed doubts as to his suitability as a successor to the great Johann Kuhnau. Bach was initially not listed as one of the six preferred candidates for the post, and was considered only after Georg Philip Telemann and other luminaries such as Johann Friedrich Fasch, Johann Heinrich Rolle, and Christoph Graupner had turned down the post. In the words of the Ratsherr (council member) Abraham Christoph Plaz:

Da man nun die Besten nicht bekommen könne, so müsse man mittlere nehmen. ("As the best candidates are not available, we need to settle for a mediocrity.")

Thus Bach was finally appointed.

Similar critical opinions of Bach's compositional style were expressed by highly knowledgeable musicians – including those who professed great respect for Bach. As an example, in 1737 the composer Johann Adolf Scheibe wrote of Bach in *Der Critische Musicus*:

Dieser grosse Mann würde die Bewunderung ganzer Nationen seyn, wenn er mehr Annehmlichkeit hätte, und wenn er nicht seinen Stücken durch ein schwülstiges und verworrenes Wesen das Natürliche entzöge, und ihre Schönheit durch allzugrosse Kunst verdunkelte. ("This great man would win the admiration of entire nations if he were more agreeable and didn't obscure the natural essence of his music through a bombastic and convoluted spirit, and didn't darken the beauty of his music through excessive craft.")

These contemporary views on the "excesses" of Bach's compositions bring up a thorny question of performance practice: If Telemann, Fasch, Rolle and Graupner were regarded in their day as tasteful, acceptable, reasonable composers, then it makes sense, when performing Telemann, Fasch, Rolle and Graupner, to abide by the guidelines of their time for tasteful, acceptable, and reasonable musical performance. By the same token, if Bach's music was considered in his day to be carnal, luxurious, sensual, overly emotional, bombastic, and convoluted, it would be appropriate to perform Bach in a manner considered by Baroque standards to be carnal, luxurious, sensual, overly emotional, bombastic, and convoluted. In fact, a performance lacking in these "objectionable" qualities may have been condemned by Bach himself as an example of the *Geleyer* (mechanical churning of tunes) of which he so disparagingly wrote.

While emotionality and religiosity in music defy objective measure, Bach's music appears to have struck listeners in this regard throughout the ages, whether in a negative or positive manner. As Friedrich Nietzsche stated in 1870 after hearing the *St. Matthew Passion*:

Wer das Christentum völlig verlernt hat, der hört es hier wirklich wie ein Evangelium. ("Anyone who has completely forgotten about Christianity hears it truly as Gospel here.")

The emotional intensity of Bach's music was likely influenced not only by composers he emulated (particularly his Italian predecessors), but by his life experiences. Simply the consideration that only ten of his twenty children survived to adulthood can provide insight into the emotional depth and complexity of his works. Although infant mortality was of course common in 18th-century Europe, experiencing the deaths of ten of his own children must have taken a spiritual toll on Bach.

I view Bach's works as a musical *Prex Precis*, or direct appeal to God, which guided the composer through experiences that could otherwise easily have broken anyone's spirit – hence his use of the term Recreation des Gemüths (rebirth of the mind and spirit). Capturing Bach's meditative compositional process, and transmitting it to an audience, involves an internalization and externalization of the emotional and religious content of the music on the part of the performer, which then resonates with the listener.