

# BACH AT MID-LIFE: THE CHRISTMAS ORATORIO AND THE SEARCH FOR NEW PATHS<sup>1</sup>

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*For Maynard Solomon*

Only about seven years separate the creation of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* from the onset of work on the *Art of Fugue*. The *Christmas Oratorio* was put together in the weeks before the 1734/1735 Christmas/New Year's season; the manuscript containing the earliest portions of the *Art of Fugue* can be dated to around 1742. Yet the two works occupy altogether different stylistic and aesthetic worlds and seem to bear witness to a profound artistic "evolution," in a remarkably brief period of time, from a flirtation with the immediately appealing, the sensuous, and progressive in music to the uncompromisingly rigorous, serious, and timeless.

## I

The *Christmas Oratorio* is Bach's last major contribution to the repertoire of German Lutheran liturgical music. By 1730, when he was just forty-five years old and was still to live for another twenty years, Bach had substantially completed what he had expected to be his life's work as a church composer—his *Endzweck* (final goal), as he called it—namely, the creation of "a well-regulated church music to the glory of God."<sup>2</sup> As it happened, it had taken him little more than

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<sup>1</sup>Versions of this essay were presented as lectures at Tufts and Brandeis Universities, at the Baldwin-Wallace College Bach Festival, and at a symposium at the Juilliard School, New York, in honor of Maynard Solomon on the occasion of his eightieth birthday.

<sup>2</sup>The phrase appears in Bach's request for his dismissal dated "Mühlhausen, June 25, 1708." The German original reads: "den Endzweck, nemlich eine regulirte kirchen music zu Gottes Ehren." See *Bach-Dokumente*, eds. Werner Neumann and H.-J. Schulze (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963), 1:19 (no. 1). The English translation is printed in *The New*

twenty years, rather than a lifetime, to achieve this life's goal. The project began when Bach had assumed the post of organist in Mühlhausen in 1707. Over the next twenty-plus years the nature of his official duties from one job to the other determined how much time and energy he would be able to devote to the *Endzweck*. At times it was sporadic; at other times (such as during his six-year sojourn in Köthen) it virtually ceased altogether. At still other times (specifically, his last few years in Weimar [1714–1717] and most especially his first few years in Leipzig [beginning in 1723]), the commitment was intense, indeed—even heroic: culminating in the creation of some two hundred church cantatas, along with the *Magnificat*, and the *St. John* and *St. Matthew Passions*. (It is tempting to think that the first version of the *St. Matthew*—which was written in 1727—was intended to mark the capstone and endpoint to that almost super-human achievement.) In any event, the *Christmas Oratorio*, dating from around 1735, is a delayed outlier to the entire enterprise; for by 1730 Bach's systematic production of Lutheran church music had effectively ceased, and the composer had already turned his attention in new directions.

Actually, Bach had begun to look in two new directions, both decidedly secular in nature. In 1729 he had assumed the directorship of an amateur music-making society—the Collegium Musicum—consisting mainly of university students. He occupied this position faithfully through 1737 and took it up again, more intermittently, in 1739. We should not underestimate the importance of the Collegium Musicum for Bach's activities in the 1730s. In purely quantitative terms it was substantial. George Stauffer has recently demonstrated that Bach spent considerably more time conducting secular music during his ten-plus years as director of the Collegium than he had performing church cantatas over the course of his entire twenty-seven years in Leipzig as Thomascantor.<sup>3</sup>

By 1730—especially after a highly unpleasant confrontation with his superiors on the Leipzig town council—Bach was ready to leave

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*Bach Reader*, eds. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel; rev. and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: Norton, 1998), 57 (no. 32).

<sup>3</sup>George B. Stauffer, “Music for ‘Cavaliers et Dames’: Bach and the Repertoire of His Collegium Musicum,” *About Bach*, eds. Gregory G. Butler, George B. Stauffer, and Mary Dalton Greer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008): 135–56.

Leipzig and was literally looking in a new geographic direction as well, specifically, toward the well-endowed royal court in Dresden. Bach documented his admiration, even his envy, of the favorable musical conditions in the Saxon capital with crystal clarity in a famous memorandum which bore the provocative title: "Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music, with Certain Modest Reflections on the Decline of the Same."<sup>4</sup>

In the year 1733 Bach began to strengthen his longstanding but hitherto informal connections with the Saxon court. He took the occasion of the death in February of the Elector Frederick Augustus I (August the Strong) to apply to the new monarch Frederick Augustus II (August III of Poland) for a court title and promised "my untiring zeal in the composition of music for the church as well as for the *orchestre*." He made this request in a letter dated July 27, 1733; it accompanied a gift: a set of performance materials for a newly composed work: the Kyrie and Gloria of the *Mass in B minor*. Bach's ties with Dresden were to grow over the following years; and eventually, in November of 1736, he received the title of Dresden Court Kapellmeister.

Bach's new activities during this period—his connections with Dresden and his directorship of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum—reinforced one another since he found himself in both activities engaged to a large extent in related, often identical, projects such as the composition of music in honor of the royal family in Dresden or of notable middle-class burghers in Leipzig. Most of these works were performed by the Collegium Musicum.

## II

This all brings us back to the *Christmas Oratorio*, for almost all of the arias, duets, and free choruses (i.e., those not based on traditional chorale melodies) are not original compositions but are derived from earlier works. Most of them were taken from two compositions that were written approximately a year earlier to celebrate the birthdays of

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<sup>4</sup>For the German original of the "Kurtzer, jedoch höchstnöthiger Entwurff" see *Bach-Dokumente* 1:60 (no. 22). For the English translation see *The New Bach Reader*, 145 (no. 151).

members of the Saxon royal family: *Laßt uns sorgen, laßt uns wachen*, BWV 213, performed in September 1733 (composed for the birthday of the Saxon Crown Prince, Friedrich Christian), and *Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten!*, BWV 214 (written for the birthday of the Queen Maria Josepha), performed three months later.

Bach distributed the movements derived from Cantatas 213 and 214 among the first four parts of the *Christmas Oratorio*. He also drew on a few other earlier works. (The details are well known and need not concern us here.)<sup>5</sup> But it is worth taking a moment to consider the opening chorus of the *Christmas Oratorio*, “Jauchzet, frohlocket” (“Rejoice, exult”—one of the most brilliant and colorful compositions ever to issue from Bach’s pen (see Example 1).

The opening words read:

Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage,  
Rühmet, was heute der Höchste getan!

(Rejoice, exult! Arise, praise these days;  
Glorify what God has accomplished today!)

The music so perfectly captures the joy and exuberance of both the text and the Christmas holiday (see Example 2) that it is hard to believe that it was not originally written for this work but rather for the opening movement of Cantata 214, which begins (see Example 3) with the words:

Tönet, ihr Pauken! Erschallet, Trompeten,  
Klingende Saiten, erfüllt die Luft!

(Sound, ye drums now! Resound, ye trumpets!  
Resonant strings fill the air!)

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<sup>5</sup>A concise overview appears in the standard *Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis*, ed. Wolfgang Schmieder, rev. and enlarged edition (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1990): 442–43 (no. 248).

1. Coro

Tromba I

Tromba II

Tromba III

Timpani

Flauto traverso I

Flauto traverso II

Oboe I

Oboe II

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Soprano

Alto

Tenore

Basso

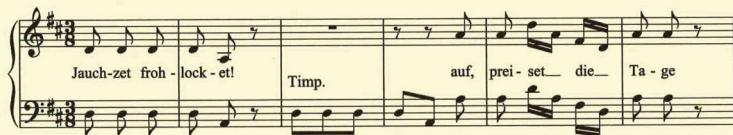
Violoncello

Fagotto

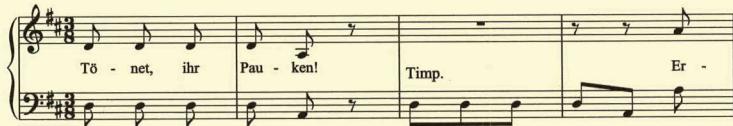
Continuo

Organo

Example 1. BWV 248/1: *Christmas Oratorio*, Opening



Example 2. BWV 248/1: Choral entry

Example 3: BWV 214/1: *Tönet, ihr Pauken*, Choral entry

The explicit evocation of kettle drums and trumpets in the very opening line of the work, and of the “resonant strings” in the second line, abundantly explains Bach’s vivid scoring of the movement, which after all offers a graphic representation—literally tone painting—of the original text, which it fits even more snugly than it does that of the *Christmas Oratorio*.

But describing the connections between the two versions of this movement is not really the main point of this comparison, which is rather this: Anyone would think that the opening words of Cantata 214—“*Tönet, ihr Pauken*”—must have been the inspiration of Bach’s stroke of genius: to begin a work commanding the kettle drum to sound literally with a kettle drum solo. And of course they were—eventually. But that was not Bach’s original idea. It was an after-thought. The first draft of the movement, which still survives in Bach’s composing score of the cantata, certainly has a great deal in common with the final version (See facsimile example; see Example 4).<sup>6</sup>

Both readings have the same key (D major), the same meter (3/8), the same orchestration, and the same character. Even the melodic and rhythmic motifs were largely the same. But the inspiration of letting the timpani begin alone and having the other instruments enter in carefully calibrated stages, creating that exhilarating step-by-step

<sup>6</sup>In the autograph score of BWV 214 (Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz, *Mus. ms. Bach P 41*) the final version is superimposed on the original draft. The reproduction here is from the facsimile published in *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* I/36, ix; the transcription is reproduced from *NBA I/36, Kritische Berichte*, 84–85.



Example 4a. Facsimile, Rejected Draft of BWV 214/1

A musical score for six voices, likely a rejected draft of Bach's Cantata BWV 214/1. The score is arranged in six staves, each with a different clef (G, F, C, G, F, C) and key signature (3, 3, 3, 3, 3, 3). The music consists of measures of rests and various rhythmic patterns, including eighth-note and sixteenth-note figures. The vocal parts are mostly silent or feature simple harmonic patterns.

Example 4b. Rejected Draft of BWV 214/1, Transcription

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A musical score for four voices and basso continuo. The score consists of eight systems of music, each ending with a double bar line and repeat dots. The top three systems are in common time, G major, and treble clef. The bottom system is in common time, D major, and bass clef. The vocal parts are soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. The basso continuo part is indicated by a bass clef and a small 'C' (for cello) or 'V' (for violoncello). The vocal parts sing eighth-note patterns, while the continuo provides harmonic support with sustained notes and eighth-note chords. Measure numbers 5, 10, 15, and 20 are visible above the staves.

Example 4b, cont'd. Rejected Draft of BWV 214/1, Transcription

buildup of rhythmic energy and excitement, was not there. It may be enlightening to speculate about why it was not.

Such a theatrical gesture, one suspects (one that was guaranteed to delight—and surprise—his audience) did not come very naturally to Johann Sebastian Bach. The creator of some of the most complex (and serious) music ever written was surely reluctant to “stoop” to opening a serious large-scale work so sensationaly. He eventually did it, presumably, not only because it perfectly captured the imagery of the text but also because he knew it would make a surprising, audience-pleasing effect.

Mozart often remarked that music had to make an “effect.” “Effect” was one of the most important concepts in his aesthetic vocabulary; the term appears a number of times in his letters.<sup>7</sup> But it is not a term that one associates with the aesthetic outlook of Johann Sebastian Bach. Flamboyant effect and immediacy of appeal—essentially for their own sakes—must have been unnatural—almost immoral—motivations for Bach (especially after he had outgrown his youthful career as an organ virtuoso); but they did belong to the aesthetic values of the new, modish style of music (and life) cultivated and appreciated at the Dresden court and increasingly everywhere.

In other respects as well, the opening chorus reflects the new *galant* aesthetic. It is predominantly homophonic with some fairly “unthreatening” stretches of counterpoint. Melody and harmony are mostly diatonic and straightforward. The phrasing is quite regular, frequently falling into clear two- and four-measure groups, and sixteen- and thirty-two measure sections.

As for the *galant* values of charm and immediacy of appeal: nowhere has Bach written a more charming, more appealing composition than the Sinfonia that opens Part II of the *Christmas Oratorio*. The scoring famously features two transverse flutes and a quartet of exotic oboes: a pair of oboes d'amore and another pair of oboes da caccia. Again, as he had done with the opening of Part I of the oratorio, Bach

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<sup>7</sup>In this connection see my *Mozart Speaks: Views on Music, Musicians, and the World* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1991), 181–84.

offers here an exquisite tone painting, one that this time evokes a pastoral ambience for the adoring shepherds (see Example 5).

The Sinfonia, however, does not seem to have been adapted from a pre-existing secular work. As far as we know, it was newly composed for the oratorio. But it may well have been inspired by a pre-existing secular work—one written not by Bach himself but by a younger Italian contemporary: Pietro Locatelli (1695–1764).

Locatelli's Concerto grosso in F minor, op. 1, no. 8 (composed by 1721), was one of the compositions Bach performed with the Collegium musicum. He performed it at least three times, the first time around 1734, i.e., in the same year as the *Christmas Oratorio*. Locatelli's concerto ends with a movement marked "pastorale." Like Bach's Sinfonia it is in the major mode and in a gentle, lilting 12/8 meter; the melodic writing is sweet, even innocent; and there are delicate exchanges between the string soloists and the tutti ensemble (see Example 6).

All this has led to the plausible speculation that Locatelli's pastorale may have inspired Bach's decision to compose a pastoral sinfonia for the *Christmas Oratorio*.<sup>8</sup>

Incidentally, Bach's colorful quartet of oboes, like that drum solo in the first movement, documents Bach's intensified interest at the time in the emerging art of orchestration and in exploiting this resource to a degree only occasionally observed before in his career. He experimented with a similarly imaginative instrumental combination the year before. The Quoniam of the B-minor Mass is scored for bass voice accompanied by four low instruments: an obbligato horn, two bassoons, and the basso continuo.

### III

The *Christmas Oratorio* marks the highpoint—although definitely not the endpoint—of Bach's flirtation with the progressive style.<sup>9</sup> He

<sup>8</sup>On Bach's performances of the Locatelli concerto see Stauffer, op. cit. 139–40.

<sup>9</sup>See my "Bach the Progressive: Observations on his Later Works," *The Musical Quarterly* 62 (1976), 313–57; reprinted in Marshall, *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, the Significance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 23–58.

Musical score for mm. 7-10 of the Sinfonia from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248/10. The score includes parts for Flauto traverso I, Flauto traverso II, Oboe d'amore I, Oboe d'amore II, Oboe da caccia I, Oboe da caccia II, Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Continuo/Organo.

The score shows two systems of music. The first system (mm. 7-8) features woodwind entries. The second system (mm. 9-10) features bowed strings and continuo. Measure 10 concludes with a basso continuo realization showing harmonic progressions.

Example 5. *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248/10: Sinfonia, mm. 7–10

Musical score for mm. 7-10 of the Sinfonia from Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248/10. The score is divided into two systems by a vertical bar line.

**Top System (Measures 7-8):**

- Fl. I
- Fl. II
- Ob. d'a. I
- Ob. d'a. II
- Ob. da c. I
- Ob. da c. II

**Bottom System (Measures 9-10):**

- Vln. I
- Vln. II
- Vla.
- Cont.

The bassoon part in the bottom system includes a measure number 7/5.

Example 5, cont'd. *Christmas Oratorio*, BWV 248/10: Sinfonia, mm. 7–10

**Pastorale ad libitum obbligata con tutto il concerto grosso. Largo Andante**

**Concertino**

Violino I  
Violino II  
Viola I  
Viola II  
Violone

**Concerto grosso**

Violino I  
Violino II  
Viola I  
Viola II  
Basso

Example 6. Locatelli, Concerto grosso in F minor, op. 1, no. 8 (1721),  
Pastorale

The musical score consists of eight staves, each representing a different instrument. The instruments are: Vln. I (Violin I), Vln. II (Violin II), Vla. I (Viola I), Vla. II (Viola II), Vc. (Cello), Vln. I (Violin I), Vln. II (Violin II), Vla. I (Viola I), Vla. II (Viola II), and Db. (Double Bass). The score is divided into two measures by a vertical bar line. In the first measure, Vln. I and Vln. II play eighth-note patterns with grace notes. Vla. I and Vla. II provide harmonic support with sustained notes. Vc. rests. In the second measure, the instrumentation changes: Vln. I and Vln. II play eighth-note patterns with grace notes; Vla. I and Vla. II play eighth-note patterns; Vc. rests; and Db. enters with a sustained note.

Example 6, cont'd. Locatelli, Concerto grosso in F minor, op. 1, no. 8  
(1721), Pastorale

did not abandon this direction entirely, but he did turn now (or rather: returned), with a renewed sense of purpose, to the musical traditions that were more congenial to his inborn gifts as a consummate master of the complex arts of polyphony.

This redirection—this course reversal—took place almost immediately after the performance of the final part of the *Christmas Oratorio* on January 6, 1735. His very next composition was composed for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, which fell on January 30th, less than four weeks later. This was a regular Sunday cantata, *Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit* (Were God not with us in this time), BWV 14. It was written to fill a gap in the cycle of chorale cantatas that Bach had composed exactly ten years earlier, in the years 1724–1725. It is, if anything, old-fashioned rather than progressive: rigorously, even defiantly, contrapuntal and complex.

The opening movement dispenses with the concerto-inspired instrumental ritornello typical of most of Bach's chorale cantatas. It has, rather, the archaic form of the chorale motet: each line of the chorale cantus firmus—typically intoned in long notes in the soprano voice—is preceded by a fugue-like pre-imitation in the three remaining voices of the chorus. Often enough the pre-imitation develops motives derived from the chorale melody. In the present case, all four choral parts participate in the pre-imitation, while the cantus firmus melody is intoned by instruments—two oboes and a horn in unison—in augmentation. Bach, then, has expanded the contrapuntal fabric from four to five independent parts. He has added another level of complexity as well: the four-part pre-imitations of each chorale line are constructed as a counter-fugue: each entering part sings the motivic idea of the previous part in inversion: If the motive in the first voice (whose contour, once again, is taken from the chorale melody) ascends, then the answering voice descends. Bach maintains this challenging pattern throughout the movement (see Example 7).<sup>10</sup>

Bach's growing interest in such archaic styles and techniques is dramatically documented in a recently discovered, altogether unique, source, one in which we observe Johann Sebastian working out

<sup>10</sup>See the analysis in Alfred Dürr, *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1971), 255–56.

Corno

Obœ I, II

Violino I

Violino II

Viola

Soprano

Alto

Tenore

Basso

Continuo

Wär\_\_ Gott nicht

Wär\_\_ Gott nicht mit uns

Wär Gott nicht mit uns die - se\_ Zeit\_\_\_\_\_ die - se\_ Zeit. war Gott

Wär Gott nicht mit uns die - se\_ Zeit\_\_\_\_\_ die - se\_ Zeit,

6<sup>4</sup>  
3

Example 7. *Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit*, BWV 14/1, Opening

9

Corno  
Ob.  
Vln. I  
Vln. II  
Vla.

S. mit uns die - se\_ Zeit, die - se\_ Zeit, wär\_ Gott nicht mit uns

A. die - se\_ Zeit, die - se\_ Zeit, wär\_ - Gott nicht, wär\_

T. nicht mit. uns. die - se Zeit, die - se Zeit, die - se Zeit, wär\_ Gott nicht,

B. wär Gott nicht mit uns die - se Zeit, die - se Zeit, wär\_ - Gott nicht,

Cont. Org.

Example 7, con't. *Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit*, BWV 14/1, Opening

traditional exercises in strict counterpoint together with his oldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann.<sup>11</sup> They are literally working side by side—on the same page. Handwriting and paper analysis dates the manuscript approximately to the years 1736 to 1738, a time when Friedemann was in his mid-twenties and employed in Dresden as the organist of the Sophienkirche. Since the paper is of Dresden manufacture, one assumes that the exercises were written out during one of J. S. Bach's visits to the Saxon capital—perhaps during his visit in early December 1736, when he officially accepted the appointment as Dresden Court Composer (and marked the occasion with a recital inaugurating the new Silbermann organ at the Frauenkirche).

The entries on the sheets show Bach and his son collaboratively—or perhaps competitively—working out problems in double and triple counterpoint, inventing contrapuntal exercises in augmentation, diminution, inversion and stretto; exploring the idiosyncrasies of the old church modes, and wrestling with difficult-to-answer fugue subjects. Here is an example of Friedemann struggling with, and Sebastian completing, with effortless insouciance, an exercise in sixteenth-century style (see Example 8):<sup>12</sup>

W. F. Bach

Example 8a. W. F. Bach: Exercise in Counterpoint

J. S. Bach

Example 8b. J. S. Bach: Exercise in Counterpoint

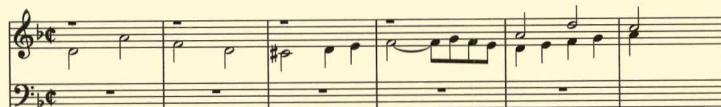
<sup>11</sup>Peter Wollny, "Ein Quellenfund in Kiew. Unbekannte Kontrapunktstudien von Johann Sebastian und Wilhelm Friedemann Bach," *Bach in Leipzig—Bach und Leipzig: Konferenzbericht Leipzig 2000*, ed. Ulrich Leisinger (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2000), 275–87.

<sup>12</sup>Transcription, *ibid.*, p. 282.

These exercises were not by any means mere abstract theoretical puzzles but rather quite practical issues of the kind that Bach was to face repeatedly in the music contained in Part III of the *Klavierübung* and in the *Art of Fugue*. As Peter Wollny, who brought the manuscript to light, suggests, the exercises reveal that Bach was tackling these problems seriously by the mid 1730s. Indeed some of the exercises use a theme that is the prototype of the *Art of Fugue* subject (see Example 9).<sup>13</sup>



Example 9a. J. S. Bach, Exercise in Diminution canon



Example 9b. Art of Fugue, BWV 1080: Subject

We must backtrack a bit. Just three months after Bach completed the *Christmas Oratorio* in January 1735, he marked his fiftieth birthday. The significance of this event—a landmark for anyone—must have been considerably greater for Bach, owing to the fact that his father, Johann Ambrosius (1645–1695), his mother, Elisabeth (1644–1694), and his brother, Johann Christoph (1671–1721), all died at the age of fifty.

This poignant fact may help explain why at just this time, around the year 1735, Bach compiled a family genealogy and began to put together a collection of music composed by his ancestors—known today as the *Alt-Bachisches Archiv*.<sup>14</sup> At this time Bach also began to look back on his own achievements to date: he revised a number of

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<sup>13</sup>Transcription, *ibid.*, p. 281.

<sup>14</sup>A modern edition of the *Alt-Bachisches Archiv* was published in *Das Erbe deutscher Musik*, ed. Max Schneider, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1935), repr. (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1966).

his own earlier works and organized them into systematic collections. The fair copy of the *St. Matthew Passion*, the eighteen great organ chorales, originally composed during the Weimar period, and also the second volume of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* were the most significant products of this retrospective project. All this genealogical, collecting, and revising activity abundantly attests to Bach's desire to refresh and reassess his connection with the musical traditions of his ancestors—and to rededicate himself to perfecting them further.

## IV

Bach's evolving aesthetic reorientation received a powerful, perhaps decisive, external impetus in the year 1737—at the very pinnacle of his public career (only months after he had been named “Composer to the Court Chapel of His Royal Majesty”). In that year the composer was famously taken to task—in print—by his former pupil, Johann Adolph Scheibe, in the following all too well-known passage:

This great man would be the admiration of whole nations if [his music] had more charm [*Annehmlichkeit*], if he did not take away the natural element [*das Natürliche entzöge*] in his pieces by giving them an overly ornate and confused style [*ein schwülstiges und verworrenes Wesen*], and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art [*ihre Schönheit durch allzugrosse Kunst verdunkkelte*].<sup>15</sup>

A controversy was ignited: there was a lively exchange in the musical press over the next several months, and lingering contributions to the issue appeared years later.<sup>16</sup> Now, Bach himself had already acknowledged—a year before all this commotion broke out—in an official letter to the town council (dated 15 August 1736), that his church compositions were, in his words, “incomparably more

<sup>15</sup>The *New Bach Reader*, 338. Regarding the nature of the “natural” in this debate see my essay “Truth and Beauty: J. S. Bach at the Crossroads of Cultural History,” *A Bach Tribute; Essays in Honor of William H. Scheide*, eds. Paul Brainard and Ray Robinson (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1993), 179–88, esp. 179, 186–87.

<sup>16</sup>The German original in *Bach-Dokumente* 2:286 (no. 440). The exchanges between the chief protagonists, Johann Adolph Scheibe and Johann Abraham Birnbaum, as well as the contributions to the debate by Lorenz Chrisoph Mizler and Christoph Gottlieb Schröter are printed in *The New Bach Reader*, 337–53.

difficult and more intricate” than those by other composers.”<sup>17</sup> Whether, as it seems, Bach and his supporters misconstrued Scheibe’s remarks and reacted with undue vehemence is beside the point: it is clear that Scheibe’s comments stung the perhaps overly sensitive, battle-scarred composer—and that they also encouraged him to dig in his heels.<sup>18</sup>

Bach’s own response to his critic, however, was not a literary piece but a musical one. It was actually addressed even more directly to another essayist. In 1739, Johann Mattheson, arguably the pre-eminent German music theorist of the time, published his monumental treatise, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*. On page 441 of the tome he made the following appeal to the Thomaskantor:

Of double fugues with three subjects, there is, as far as I know, nothing else in print but my own work [*Die wolkende Fingersprache* (1735, 1737)], which I, out of modesty, would commend to no one. On the contrary, I would much rather see something of the same sort published by the famed Herr Bach in Leipzig, who is a great master of the fugue (*ein grosser Fugenmeister*).<sup>19</sup>

Gregory Butler has made a compelling case that Bach must have been familiar with this passage before its publication.<sup>20</sup> And while one need not agree with Butler that the term “Fugenmeister” was meant derogatorily, one can nonetheless agree with him that Bach took up Mattheson’s invitation to construct and publish such a fugue and that he would have meant it to serve as well as (in Butler’s words) “a published musical rebuttal to Scheibe’s criticisms.”<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup>“Ohn gleich schwerer und *intricater*.” *Bach-Dokumente* I, 88 (no. 34), *The New Bach Reader*, 176.

<sup>18</sup>For an extensive overview of numerous recent treatments of the Bach-Scheibe controversy, including the incorporation of new documents, see Beverly Jerold, “The Bach-Scheibe Controversy: New Documentation,” *BACH, Journal of the Riemschneider Bach Institute* 42/1 (2011): 1–45.

<sup>19</sup>Translation by Gregory Butler, p. 295. See next note.

<sup>20</sup>Gregory G. Butler, “*Der vollkommene Capellmeister* as a Stimulus to J. S. Bach’s Late Fugal Writing,” *New Mattheson Studies*, eds. George J. Buelow and Hans Joachim Marx (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 293–305, esp. 294–95.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

Butler has plausibly identified Bach's great five-voice Fugue in E-flat, BWV 552, the concluding item in Part III of the *Klavierübung*, as the composer's response to Mattheson—and Scheibe. He observes that: "No other fugue of Bach's quite resembles this one in its structure . . . Is it a double or a triple fugue? In fact, it is a double fugue with three subjects as specified by Mattheson, that is, a fugue in which there are three distinct subjects and in which the first subject combines in double counterpoint with each of the two other subjects but never with both (see Examples 10a–d)."<sup>22</sup>

Scheibe's critique and the ensuing controversy it unleashed—together with Mattheson's challenge—can only have strengthened Bach's determination to abandon the effort to ingratiate himself to potential patrons and the larger public by catering to the vagaries of taste, to acknowledge his true calling and strongest gifts, and to devote himself instead ever more totally to what he increasingly recognized to be the lasting verities and values of his art.

Part III of the *Klavierübung*, published in 1739, is mostly devoted to the traditional repertoire of the organ chorale. But "traditional" hardly begins to describe the backward-looking character of the collection, which is notable for its exploration of the ancient church modes, the sixteenth-century "Palestrina" style of contrapuntal writing, (i.e., the *stile antico*), and for the extensive use of canonic procedures. The volume, in short, forms the gateway to Bach's ensuing collections of serious, demanding contrapuntal *tours de force*.

But it might be more appropriate to refer to what Part III of the *Klavierübung* achieved not so much as forming the "gateway," but as opening the "floodgates." In the years following the publication, Bach produced a steady "flood" of formidable contrapuntal masterpieces gathered together into monumental collections. The final volume of the *Klavierübung*—the *Goldberg Variations*—appeared in 1741. Along with its tribute to modern keyboard virtuosity, the *Goldberg Variations* recorded Bach's interest in systematic canonic procedures. And, again, during the late 1730s and early 1740s, Bach was occupied not only

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 296.

Examples 10a–d. Fugue in E flat, BWV 552/2:

Musical score for Example 10a. The score consists of two systems of music. The top system shows the Principal Subject in the treble clef, starting with a dotted half note followed by eighth-note pairs. The bottom system shows the Pedal part in the bass clef. The second system begins at measure 5, with the Organ part playing eighth-note pairs and the Pedal part resting. Measure numbers 1 through 9 are indicated above the staves.

Example 10a. Principal Subject, mm. 1–9

Musical score for Example 10b. The score consists of two systems of music. The top system shows the Second Subject in the treble clef, starting with a dotted half note followed by sixteenth-note patterns. The bottom system shows the Pedal part in the bass clef. The second system begins at measure 39, with the Organ part playing sixteenth-note patterns and the Pedal part resting. Measure numbers 37 through 41 are indicated above the staves.

Example 10b. Second Subject, mm. 37–41

The musical score consists of three staves of music for two voices. The top staff uses soprano C-clef, the middle staff alto F-clef, and the bottom staff bass G-clef. The key signature is one flat (B-flat). Measure 58 begins with a melodic line in the soprano part, featuring eighth-note patterns and grace notes. The bass part provides harmonic support with sustained notes and eighth-note chords. Measures 59 and 60 continue this pattern, with the soprano line becoming more prominent. Measure 61 starts with a melodic line in the bass part, followed by a transition to the soprano part in measure 62. Measure 63 concludes the section with a final melodic line in the soprano part.

Example 10c. Second Subject + First Subject, m. 58–64

82

83

Org.

Ped.

84

Org.

Ped.

85

Org.

Ped.

86

Org.

Ped.

87

Org.

Ped.

88

Org.

Ped.

89

Org.

Ped.

90

Org.

Ped.

Example 10d. Third Subject, mm. 82–90

with the compilation of the second volume of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* but also with the *Art of Fugue* as well.

The *Art of Fugue*, most of which had been composed by 1742, represents the next logical step for Bach, following on *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *Goldberg Variations*, for it unites the compositional premises of both. Like *The Well-Tempered Clavier* it is a collection of fugal compositions surveying a variety of contrapuntal styles and techniques. Furthermore, like the "Goldbergs," the *Art of Fugue* explores the technique of strict canon and is designed as a set of "variations" in that all the contrapuncti and canons make use of the same subject—melodically embellished or contrapuntally altered though it may be from one movement to the next.

### *Conclusion*

The 1730s were a time of artistic crisis for Johann Sebastian Bach. The decade began soon after Bach had achieved his *Endzweek*: the creation of a comprehensive repertoire of sacred music for the Lutheran church. In the immediate aftermath the composer experienced a dramatic drop in productivity, a demoralization, and a conflict with the church authorities. By the end of the decade, however, Bach had completed and published the third and fourth parts of the *Klavierübung*, and was well along with the composition of the second volume of *The Well Tempered Clavier* and *The Art of Fugue*.

On closer inspection we can see that the decade of the 1730s—actually a "long" decade spanning some dozen years from 1729 to 1741 or 1742—was almost evenly bisected into two equal parts. During the first half-dozen years—from about 1729 to 1735—Bach assumed the directorship of the Collegium Musicum and became involved with modern secular instrumental music and with secular and sacred vocal music for the Dresden court. This period, which culminates in the composition of the *Christmas Oratorio*, is marked musically by Bach's engagement or "flirtation" with the new *galant* style.

The second half-dozen years of the long decade began immediately after the completion of the *Christmas Oratorio* in January 1735, which was shortly before the composer turned fifty. It ends with the composition of the major portion of the *Art of Fugue*. Musically, it was at first a time of consolidation—pulling together (and revising) previously written works into systematic collections (the eighteen great organ chorales, Volume Two of *The Well Tempered Clavier*). That is, it began as a retrospective taking stock of where Bach had arrived in his compositional development—and what was left to do. By its end these half-dozen years witnessed a renewed commitment to the contrapuntal tradition and the ethos of uncompromising musical craftsmanship.

Earlier in his career, during the fifteen years or so from around 1707 to 1723, Bach had famously succeeded in creating a synthesis of the leading national traditions of his age: the organ and church music of Germany (toccatas, fantasias, etc.), the concerto instrumental music of Italy (the *Brandenburg Concertos*), the secular keyboard music of France (the *French* and *English Suites*). By the same token, the dozen years or so of the “long decade” from around 1729 to 1742 can be understood as a Second Synthesis, one in which Bach expanded his horizons in greater historical (rather than geographic) directions to embrace both the ancient (the *stile antico*) and the most recent (the *style galant*). On the one hand, Bach was interested in emulating, absorbing (and surpassing) the new impulses of his sons’ generation; on the other hand, he was intent on looking backward and embracing the stylistic conventions and aesthetic values of his musical ancestors, which for him were moral values as well. Common throughout was the restless quest for new stimuli, new impulses, new paths.

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