



Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven

By John Eliot Gardiner

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Johann Sebastian Bach is one of the most unfathomable composers in the history of music. How can such sublime work have been produced by a man who (when we can discern his personality at all) seems so ordinary, so opaque—and occasionally so intemperate?

John Eliot Gardiner grew up passing one of the only two authentic portraits of Bach every morning and evening on the stairs of his parents' house, where it hung for safety during World War II. He has been studying and performing Bach ever since, and is now regarded as one of the composer's greatest living interpreters. The fruits of this lifetime's immersion are distilled in this remarkable book, grounded in the most recent Bach scholarship but moving far beyond it, and explaining in wonderful detail the ideas on which Bach drew, how he worked, how his music is constructed, how it achieves its effects—and what it can tell us about Bach the man.

Gardiner's background as a historian has encouraged him to search for ways in which scholarship and performance can cooperate and fruitfully coalesce. This has entailed piecing together the few biographical shards, scrutinizing the music, and watching for those instances when Bach's personality seems to penetrate the fabric of his notation. Gardiner's aim is "to give the reader a sense of inhabiting the same experiences and sensations that Bach might have had in the act of music-making. This, I try to show, can help us arrive at a more human likeness discernible in the closely related processes of composing and performing his music."

It is very rare that such an accomplished performer of music should also be a considerable writer and thinker about it. John Eliot Gardiner takes us as deeply into Bach's works and mind as perhaps words can. The result is a unique book about one of the greatest of all creative artists.

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Editorial Review

Review

Gardiner has joined the select ranks of luminary musicians articulating their experience, with this long, sumptuously illustrated survey of Bach's life and times. The result is dazzling -- Iain Burnside * Observer * There could be no better-qualified guide to the mysteries behind Bach's music than the conductor who has breathed new life into its performance . . . As an exploration of Bach's labyrinthine thought-processes, and as an analysis of his music's overwhelming power, this book will now be required reading . . . for listeners and performers alike -- Michael Church * Independent * Gardiner weaves industrial-strength scholarship, musical analysis and performing insight into a highly readable narrative ... extraordinary -- Richard Morrison * The Times *

About the Author

Sir John Eliot Gardiner is one of the world's leading conductors, not only of Baroque music but across the whole repertoire. He founded the Monteverdi Choir and Orchestra, the Orchestre de l'Opéra de Lyon, the English Baroque Soloists, and the Orchestre Revolutionnaire et Romantique. He conducts most of the world's great orchestras and in many of the leading opera houses. He lives and farms in Dorset.

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Under the Cantor's Gaze

In the autumn of 1936 a thirty-year-old music teacher from Bad Warmbrunn in Lower Silesia suddenly appeared in a Dorset village with two items in his luggage: a guitar and a portrait in oils of Bach. Like old Veit Bach, the founder of the clan, escaping from Eastern Europe as a religious refugee almost four centuries earlier, Walter Jenke had left Germany just as Jews were being banned from holding professional posts. He settled and found work in North Dorset, married an English girl and, with war imminent, looked for a safe home for his painting. His great-grandfather had purchased a portrait of Bach in a curiosity shop sometime in the 1820s for next to nothing. Doubtless he did not know at the time that this was – ?and still is – ?by far the most important Bach portrait in existence. Had Jenke left it with his mother in Bad Warmbrunn, it would almost certainly not have survived the bombardment or the evacuation of Germans from Silesia in the face of the advancing Red Army.

I grew up under the Cantor's gaze. The celebrated Haussmann portrait of Bach¹ had been given to my parents for safekeeping for the duration of the war, and it took pride of place on the first-floor landing of the old mill in Dorset where I was born. Every night on my way to bed I tried to avoid its forbidding stare. I was doubly fortunate as a child in that I grew up on a farm and into a music-minded family where it was considered perfectly normal to sing – ?on a tractor or horseback (my father), at table (the whole family sang grace at mealtimes) or at weekend gatherings, outlets for my parents' love of vocal music. All through the war years they and a few local friends convened every Sunday morning to sing William Byrd's Mass for Four Voices. As children my brother, sister and I grew up getting to know a grand miscellany of unaccompanied choral music – ?from Josquin to Palestrina, Tallis to Purcell, Monteverdi to Schütz, and, eventually, Bach. Compared to the earlier polyphony, Bach's motets, we found, were a lot more difficult technically – ?those long, long phrases with nowhere to breathe – ?but I remember loving the interplay of voices, with so much going on at once, and that pulsating rhythm underneath keeping everything afloat. By the time I was twelve I knew the treble parts of most of Bach's six motets more or less by heart. They

became part of the primary matter in my head (along with folksongs, ribald poems in Dorset dialect and heaven knows what else, stored in my memory) and have never left me.

Then, during my teens, I came to know some of his instrumental music: the Brandenburg Concertos, the violin sonatas and concertos (with which, as a distinctly average fiddle-player, I often struggled – and usually lost – between the ages of nine and eighteen, at which stage I switched to the viola), some of the keyboard pieces and several cantata arias for alto, of which my mother was very fond. Even now I cannot hear arias such as ‘Gelobet sei der Herr, mein Gott’ (‘The Lord be praised’) or ‘Von der Welt verlang ich nichts’ (‘I ask nothing of the world’) without a lump in my throat, remembering her voice floating across the courtyard from the mill-room. But my early apprenticeship in Bach, the nurturing of a lifelong engagement with his music and a longing to understand the stern Cantor at the top of the stairs, I owe to four remarkable teachers – three women and one man – who helped to determine the kind of musician I was to become.

The man was Wilfred Brown, the great English tenor, who visited my school when I was fourteen, singing both the Evangelist and the tenor arias in a performance of Bach’s John Passion. I was so captivated that, unpardonable in a principal second violin, at one point I stopped playing altogether and just gawped. As an interpreter of Bach’s Evangelist, Bill Brown was nonpareil. His singing was characterised by an extraordinary subtlety of inflection and word-painting, and by a pathos that was inseparable from his own Quaker beliefs and the humility they brought, something I recognised from my mother’s Quaker upbringing. Later on he offered to give me singing lessons from the time I was sixteen until I was twenty-two, sometimes travelling to Cambridge to do so and always refusing a fee.

Imogen Holst, daughter of Gustav and amanuensis to Benjamin Britten, was a regular visitor to my parents’ home and sometimes led their choral weekends and gave singing lessons to me and my sister. She, I suppose more than any other musician I had encountered at that early stage, stressed the importance of dance in Baroque music. This was so clearly visible in her own interpretation and her way of conducting Bach that someone once filmed her just from the waist downwards while conducting the B minor Mass. To this day, thanks to Imo, I feel that the worst interpretative sin (committed with painful regularity even now) is to plod in Bach; denying or resisting the rhythmical elasticity and buoyancy of his music ensures that its spirit shoots out of the door. In speaking touchingly of her father, she stressed the indispensability of music, that it was a part of life that ‘can’t be done without’.

Letting Bach dance was one lesson well learnt; the other was how to make him ‘sing’. This sounds so obvious and so much easier than it is in practice. Not all of Bach’s melodies are singer-friendly or melodious in the way that, say, Purcell’s or Schubert’s are. Often angular, the phrase-lengths uncomfortably long, peppered with little curlicue flourishes and ornaments, they require a lot of purpose, underpinned by iron breath-control, before they can truly sing. And that applies not just to the vocal lines, but to the instrumental ones as well. This I learnt from my violin teacher, Sybil Eaton, a pupil of the celebrated Greek violinist and musicologist Minos Dounias. Sybil certainly ‘sang’ when she played the fiddle, but, through her inspirational teaching and sheer love of Bach, she was also able to help her pupils to take melodic wing, whether we were playing concertos, solo partitas or obbligato parts to arias from the Passions or the cantatas.

The person who crystallised all these ideas for me was Nadia Boulanger, justly recognised as the most celebrated teacher of composition in the twentieth century. When she accepted me as a student in Paris in 1967, she had just turned eighty and was partially blind, but with all her other faculties in tip-top order. Her way of teaching harmony was founded on Bach’s chorales, which she regarded as models of how to establish a beautiful polyphony – with each voice being accorded equal importance while still playing a different role in the four-way conversation, now advancing, now retreating: contrapuntally conceived harmony, in other words. She insisted that the freedom to express yourself in music, whether as a composer, conductor or

performer, demanded obedience to certain laws and the possession of unassailable technical skills. One of her favourite sayings was ‘Talent [by which I think she meant technique] without genius is not worth much; but genius without talent is worth nothing whatsoever.’

Confined for two years to an unvarying diet of harmony and counterpoint exercises and solfège (the particularly nasty but effective French system of ear-training), I metaphorically kicked and scratched like a cornered animal. On at least one occasion, from sheer frustration, Hindemith’s *Elementary Training for Musicians* ended up in the gutter – thrown out of the window of my bed-sit in the 4th arrondissement. But I owe her a colossal debt. She had a way of challenging every preconception as well as a knack of exposing one’s shortcomings, technical or otherwise, quite mercilessly. She saw something in me that I did not even see in myself. It was only after I had left the boulangerie that I realised that what had seemed like torture at the time was actually an act of kindness, equipping me to avoid certain professional embarrassments in the future. And, despite her severity, she was extraordinarily generous, even bequeathing to me her unique collection of transcriptions of Renaissance and Baroque music (from Monteverdi to Rameau), including scores and parts of her favourite Bach cantatas, all meticulously annotated – some of my most treasured possessions.

How was I to translate this painfully acquired theory and ear-training into actual sound when standing in front of a choir and orchestra? Luckily by this stage (1967–78), while I was a student in Paris and Fontainebleau, from time to time I had access to an ‘instrument’ in London – the Monteverdi Choir. It had all started back in 1964 when I was in my third year at Cambridge. My tutor, the social anthropologist Edmund Leach, authorised me to take a year off from the History tripos to sieve through the possible directions my life might take and, crucially, to find out whether I really had it in me to become a full-time musician. Ostensibly I was there to read Classical Arabic and medieval Spanish; in practice the task I set myself was to perform Monteverdi’s 1610 *Vespers*, a work that, although I had first heard it as a child, was still very little known and had never before been performed in Cambridge. Despite the dual handicap of my relative inexperience as a conductor and my little formal musical training up to that point, I had set my heart on conducting one of the most challenging works in the choral repertoire. I spent the best part of that year studying the original part-books on microfilm and, with the encouragement of the Professor of Music, Thurston Dart, preparing a new performing edition. I also ended up doing everything involved in planning a public performance in King’s College Chapel – from assembling and training the choir and orchestra, to having the tickets printed and putting out the chairs.

Vibrant colour contrasts and passionate declamation seemed to me to be the hallmark of this music. The test for me was whether I could draw any of that from a group of student singers trained in a totally different tradition. To that extent the Monteverdi Choir started life as an anti-choir – in reaction to the well-mannered euphony and blend which characterised the celebrated chapel choir at King’s in my day, whose mantra was ‘Never louder than lovely’. Their style was summed up for me by a performance, at Boris Ord’s memorial service, of *Jesu, meine Freude* – that most extended and interpretatively challenging of Bach’s motets – sung in English with effete and lip-wiping prissiness: ‘Jesu .??.’ (pronounced Jeez-ewe), followed by a huge comma and expressive intake of breath, ‘??. priceless treasure’ (pronounced trez-ewer). I seethed. How had the wonderfully exultant music that I had known since I was a child come to be treated in such a precious, etiolated way? Was this not like adding a layer of face powder and a few beauty spots to the dour old Cantor’s portrait?

My first attempt at performing Monteverdi’s masterpiece took place in March 1964 with some of the same performers. It fell a long way short of the ideals I had set for it, yet people who heard it were encouraging, even enthusiastic. For me it was not just a test of skill, but the epiphany I had been searching for. The decision was made: better to follow an overwhelming passion, even one that would need years of study and

practice and with absolutely no guarantee of success, than to pursue safer career paths for which I might already have had the rudimentary technical qualifications. I was encouraged to persist in my rebellion against the vestiges of Victorian performance and to find a more permanent footing for the Monteverdi Choir. My starting-point, then as now, was to bring passion and expressivity to the vocal music of the Baroque, and, as appropriate, to the nationality, period and personality of the composer. In a typical programme, such as we gave in the Cambridge Festival in 1965, devoted to music by Monteverdi, Schütz and Purcell, we set out to enable listeners to hear the idiosyncratic approach of each master sung in the original language, to follow each composer as he experimented with music based on recitation over a figured bass line and revelled in the new expressive range it offered. It was heady stuff, and our efforts were doubtless crude and exaggerated; but at least they did not sound half-baked or indistinguishable from Anglican pieties during a wet November Evensong.

I was desperately short of working models. Nadia Boulanger no longer conducted. Nor did Thurston Dart, from whose Sherlock Holmes-like approach to musicology I had learnt a great deal in the postgraduate year that I studied with him after he moved to King's College, London. I did, however, have the luck to observe the distinguished keyboard virtuoso and conductor George Malcolm. George knew how to draw dazzling performances of a most un-English ardour from his choir at Westminster Cathedral, and, amazingly, he took the trouble to travel up to Cambridge to hear my first Vespers performance. Here was a true master and, I felt, a kindred spirit, whose approbation and encouragement at that stage made all the difference to me, although he had virtually given up choral conducting.

Then, at a friend's invitation, I went to hear Karl Richter conduct his Munich Bach Choir in 1967. Richter was acclaimed as the foremost exponent of Bach's choral music at the time, but even his muscular LP recordings of cantatas hadn't prepared me for the oppressive volume and sheer aggression of the motet *Singet dem Herrn* as delivered by seventy lusty Bavarians from the gallery of the Markuskirche. This was a world apart from the mincing 'holy, holy' approach of King's or the Bach Choir in London in their annual Good Friday Matthew Passion outing at the Royal Festival Hall, but hardly more inspiring. Nor did Richter's thunderous approach to the Goldberg Variations next day on a souped-up Neupert harpsichord, given in the Musikhochschule (Hitler's former residence), do much to restore my faith. Here, as in most of the live performances or recordings that I had access to, Bach came over as grim, sombre, po-faced, lacking in spirit, humour and humanity. Where was the festive joy and zest of this dance-impregnated music? A few years later I heard a performance of the John Passion under Benjamin Britten, a very fine conductor who combed out the separate strands of Bach's elaborate counterpoint before my ears, revealing the work's drama from the inside. Yet, even so, to me it sounded fatally 'English'. I felt a similar disappointment when I first heard Mozart played in Salzburg and Vienna in 1958: the elegant surface of the playing seemed to overlay and disguise the turbulent emotional inner life of the music.

Users Review

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