"Choosing an Influence, or Bach the Inexhaustible: The Heterophony of the Voices of Twentieth-Century Composers"

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Bach's influence on posterity has been evident for over 250 years. In fact, since 1829, the year of Mendelssohn's historic performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, Bach has been one of the most respected figures in European musical culture. By the start of the twentieth century, Bach's cultural presence was a given. Nevertheless, the twentieth century witnessed a new stage in the appreciation and understanding of Bach. In the first half of the century, "Back to Bach" was a significant motto for two waves of neoclassicism. From the 1960s on, Bach's passion genre tradition was revived and reinterpreted, while other forms of homage to him blossomed (preludes and fugues, concerti grossi, works for solo strings). Composers' spiritual dialogue with Bach took on a new importance.

In this context, it is appropriate to investigate the reason(s) for the unique persistence of Bach's influence into the twentieth century, an influence that surpasses that of other major composers of the past, including Mozart and Beethoven. Many scholars have addressed this conundrum; musicological research on Bach's influence can be found in the four volumes of *Bach und die Nachwelt* (English, "Bach and Posterity"), published in Germany,[1] and the seven volumes of *Bach Perspectives*, published in the United States.[2] Nevertheless, "Why Bach?" has found only a partial answer and merits further examination.

The first point to address is the composers' *motivation* for choosing the same figure as their predecessor and model. Is it the myth of Bach's unique personality—a supernally balanced artist, whose brilliant and clear mind could serve as support?[3] Might such a choice be seen as answering a need to compensate for some spiritual or creative deficiency? Or was it a challenge for a twentieth-century composer to compete with Bach's genius? All these options are relevant to the discussion, as will be clear from the historical examples presented below.

Let us begin at the beginning. In 1900, Max Reger launched the new century with his *Fantasy and Fugue on BACH*. In reply to a survey carried out by the journal *Die Musik* in 1905, Reger expressed his beliefs quite clearly:

> Sebastian Bach is for me the beginning and end of all music; upon him rests, and from him originates, *all* real progress!

[1] *Bach und die Nachwelt*, ed. Michael Heinemann & Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen (Laaber: Laaber-Verlag, 1997-2005). Bach's influence on the twentieth century is examined in Vol. 3 (1900-50) and Vol. 4 (1950-2000).

[2] *Bach Perspectives*, Vols. 1-7 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1995-2007); Vol. 8 (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011). In connection with subject of the article, the publications included in the third volume are of special relevance (*Creative Responses to Bach from Mozart to Hindemith*, ed. Michael Marissen, 1998).

[3] Clytus Gottwald, "Mythos Bach," *Bach und die Moderne* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 1995), 9-19.

> What does—pardon, what should—Sebastian Bach mean for our era?
>
> A really powerful, inexhaustible medicine, not only for all those composers and musicians who suffer from "misunderstood Wagner," but for all those "contemporaries" who suffer from spinal tuberculosis of any kind.…[4]

Gustav Mahler, Reger's older contemporary, said: "The ideal for the future would be composers who are as excellent in the science of Bach's polyphony as they are singers of folk music."[5]

As we know from the recollections of Natalie Bauer-Lechner, Mahler spoke about Bach's chorales, which are based on well-known hymns: "For [Bach], the newness of the themes was not important: the main and only emphasis was the art of arrangement, of development, of hundredfold transformations."[6]

On the one hand, for both Mahler and Reger, Bach was primarily a model and ideal, a brilliant craftsman to be emulated in their time as well as in the future. On the other hand, each of them focused on the traits that he himself deemed most important.

For Reger, the first priority was a compelling architectonics based on the purposeful development of the musical flow. Accordingly, he assigned a high rating to Bach's creation of perfectly balanced musical structures. For Mahler, the main point was the synthesis of diverse musical materials; he admired Bach's mastery of combining and uniting different types of material. Thus, each of them perceived Bach's music through his own ears, with their specific orientations. It is no wonder that both of them employed their vision of Bach to formulate their own musical credo. Ostensibly thinking and speaking about Bach, they are in fact thinking and speaking about themselves.

The composers of the next generation also continued this tendency.

In 1921, a young Paul Hindemith asked a rhetorical question about his piece "Ragtime Wohltemperiert," which is based on the subject of the C minor fugue in Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (and the BACH motto):

> Do you suppose Bach is turning in his grave? He wouldn't think of it! If Bach were alive today, perhaps he would have invented the shimmy, or at least introduced it into decent music. Perhaps he would have also drawn on a theme from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* by the kind of composer who would have represented Bach for him.[7]

As Stephen Hinton put it: "In other words, if Bach were alive when Hindemith wrote those words (in 1921), he would be Hindemith."[8] A rather startling idea!

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[4]: Walter Frisch, "Reger's Bach and Historicist Modernism," *19th-Century Music* 25, 2-3 (Fall/Spring 2001-2002): 299.

[5] Norman Lebrecht, *Mahler Remembered* (London–Boston: Faber & Faber, 1987), 254-55.

[6] Alexander Odefey, "Gustav Mahler, Johann Sebastian Bach und die Mystik," in *Musik als Lebensprogramm: Festschrift fur Constantin Floros zum 70. Geburtstag*, ed. Matthias Spinder, Gottfried Krieger (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000), 131. In the original German text: "Auf die Neuheit der Themen kam es ihm dabei nicht an: in der Art der Behandlung allein, der Ausgestaltung and hundertfältige Verwandlung, lag für ihn das Schwergewicht."

[7] Stephen Hinton, "Hindemith, Bach, and the Melancholy of Obligation," in *Bach Perspectives*, Vol. 3, *Creative Responses to Bach from Mozart to Hindemith*, ed. Michael Marissen (Lincoln–London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 134.

[8] Ibid.

Here is one more example from between the two world wars. In 1931, some years after the invention of dodecaphony, a mature Arnold Schoenberg wrote two articles entitled "National Music." In the second, he wrote about what he had learned from his great predecessors, beginning with Bach. In his own words:

> My teachers were primarily Bach and Mozart, and secondarily Beethoven, Brahms, and Wagner.
>
> From Bach I learned:
>
> Contrapuntal thinking: i.e., the art of inventing musical figures that can be used to accompany themselves.
>
> The art of producing everything from one thing and of relating figures by transformation.
>
> Disregard for the "strong" beat of the measure.[9]

Two decades later, in 1950, on the bicentenary of Bach's death, Schoenberg wrote his unfinished essay on Bach. The first lines of it were quite provocative:

> I used to say: "Bach is the first composer with twelve tones." This was a joke, of course. I did not even know whether somebody before him might not have deserved this title. But the truth on which this statement is based is that Fugue No. 24 of the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, in B minor, begins with a *Dux* in which all twelve tones appear.… In Fugue 24 the chromatically altered tones are neither substitutes nor parts of the scales. They possess distinctly an independence resembling the unrelated tones of the chromatic scale in a basic set of a twelve tone composition.[10]

As they say, every joke has a bit of truth. For Schoenberg, calling himself a successor of Bach, who allegedly composed a fugue subject with 12 tones, was apparently a source of pride and a way to self-affirmation, his answer to all accusations of overthrowing the classical tradition.

Obviously, both Hindemith and Schoenberg felt an indissoluble bond to Bach: Hindemith imagined himself as a modern quasi-Bach, or a reincarnation of the great master, while Schoenberg presented himself as Bach's student and successor. Both felt very close to Bach, seeing him as a spiritual parent.

At the same time, each of them conceived of Bach's personality and music in a different way and sometimes looked at Bach from opposing perspectives. A striking example of this difference may be seen in their respective analyses of Bach's works. Whereas Hindemith analyzed Bach's D major *Fugue* from the first volume of WTC as *a harmonic progression*,[11] Schoenberg perceived the *homophonic Prelude* in e flat minor from the first volume of WTC as being based on *a polyphonic (imitation)*

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[9] Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea* (London, 1975), 173.

[10] Ibid., 393.

[11] Stephen Hinton, "Hindemith, Bach, and the Melancholy of Obligation," in *Bach Perspectives*, Vol. 3, *Creative Responses to Bach from Mozart to Hindemith*, ed. Michael Marissen (Lincoln–London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 143.

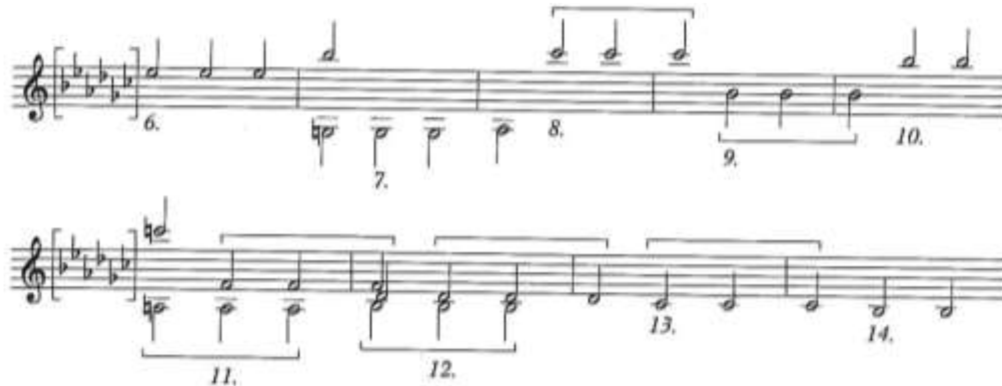
technique.[12] Via those rather surprising approaches, each composer promoted his own image of Bach along with his own compositional principles and preferences.

Example 1 J.S. Bach, Fugue in D major from Book 1 of *Well-Tempered Clavier*, unpublished harmonic analysis by P. Hindemith, ca. 1935

[12] Rudolf Stephan, "Schoenberg and Bach," in *Schoenberg and His World*, ed. Walter Frisch (Princeton University Press, 1999), 135.

Example 2a J.S. Bach, Prelude in E flat minor from Book 2 of *Well-Tempered Clavier*

Example 2b A. Schoenberg's scheme of the same Prelude (manuscript, Schoenberg's notes to the analysis by H. Schenker in his periodical "Der Tonwille")



The next generation, beginning with Schoenberg's student Anton Webern, sometimes had a different attitude toward Bach. After the London performance of his orchestration of Bach's six-voice Ricercar from the *Musical Offering*, Webern wrote to Franz Rederer about Bach's piece:

> … It is unspecified as to whether it should be sung or played, whether it should be performed fast or slow. It is without tempo marking, includes no dynamics, in short, nothing by which one normally indicates how things are to be understood or performed. And now I have transformed this abstract conception into a "Klangfarbenmelodie." [13]

Following the same line of thought, Webern wrote to Hermann Scherchen in 1938, in connection with Scherchen's planned performance of the Ricercar: "I am very glad that you are doing 'my' (I think I may call it that) Bach Fugue on BBC.… It is supposed to set the character of the piece as I feel it."[14]

The standard title of Webern's orchestration, "Bach-Webern, Ricercar from the *Musical Offering*," represents the dialogue between two composers, where Webern's respect for Bach manifests itself in the preservation of each sound of the old master's text and the orchestration introduces the second author of the work, Webern, as a competent co-author.

Another artist who commented on his multifaceted interaction with Bach was Alfred Schnittke, a Soviet composer of the post-Webern generation. He confessed to Alexander Ivashkin, his longtime friend and confidant:

> Bach is for me number one. Nevertheless, I don't have to imitate Bach.… I don't have to imitate anyone, I have to remain myself.… I have understood the right of everybody to remain herself/himself, notwithstanding the indisputable existence of much more significant phenomena.… Otherwise, you are left with only the status of a mirror image.[15]

[13] Martin Zenck, "Tradition as Authority and Provocation: Webern's confrontation with J.S. Bach," in *Bach Studies I*, ed. Don Franklin (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 314.
[14] Ibid., 315-16.
[15] Alfred Schnittke, *Conversations with Alexander Ivashkin* (Moscow, The Culture Publishing, 1994), 178 (in Russian, translated by author).

The resemblance between Webern and Schnittke is striking: they combined great reverence for Bach with the desire to express their own vision and conception—whether through Webern's unique orchestration or the individual interpretation of a BACH motive found in Schnittke's Violin Sonata (Quasi una Sonata, 1968) and Piano Quintet (1976).

In Schnittke's *Quasi Una Sonata*, the BACH motivic connotations depend on the context: the original form and its inversion are played simultaneously at the end of the sonata (an allusion to Bach's polyphony); the closing quasi-tonic G triad includes both "h" and "b" (an allusion to a modern expanded tonality).

Example 3 A. Schnittke, Sonata no. 2 for violin and piano ("Quasi una Sonata"), the end

In the Piano Quintet, the BACH motive also passes through many transformations; however, the most expressive of them is the estranged waltz in G minor, with its diffusing chromatic cluster. In both examples, tonality and polyphony are treated as recollections of music of the past, but also as a part of a modern musical language in which the BACH motive can reveal both tonal and atonal chromatic potential.

Example 4 A. Schnittke, Piano Quintet, second movement

As is clear from the examples above, the motivations for choosing Bach were diverse, and each composer heard Bach differently**.** We might compare their individual readings of Bach to the diverse interpretations of the abstract inkblots of a Rorschach test; each way of hearing Bach is also a reflection of the modern composer. Bach is cited as a justification for a range of individual preferences.

The Rorschach test analogy may seem surprising: how can one compare the free interpretation of inkblots with the interpretation of Bach's music by his successors? In both cases, though, the subjects or composers are interpreting something that may be perceived in many different ways, and their own imagination is the dominant agent in this process. As a result, each interpreter's "Bach" may be thought of metaphorically as a "voice" of an imaginary heterophony, in which the composer's own "line" has some Bach-oriented elements even while being a rather distant variant of the same prototype.

In any case, all the composers mentioned here explicitly declared their connection with Bach; it is quite natural to conclude that Bach exerted a strong influence on their work. If so, how did this influence work? On the one hand, the phenomenon of influence, as a way of continuing the chain of tradition seems to be undisputable, both in the history of the arts and in the biographies of individual artists. For a long time, it was taken for granted as common knowledge, not worthy of further investigation.

Then, in the early 1970s, Harold Bloom introduced an original approach, which brought new energy to the discussion. The crux of his theory was what he called "the

anxiety of influence."[16] Analyzing the development of literary styles, Bloom underscored and explored the problems and difficulties faced by young authors seeking their own individual style. In his view, this quest was always ambivalent, because their reverence for their predecessors and their need to overcome their almost hypnotic influence required an exhausting and sometimes unbearable struggle.

In fact, Bloom's main field of interest was the subconscious aspects of the creative process; he based his work on Freud's studies of the subconscious mind. Bloom's theory stimulated literary scholars to investigate the dialectics of attraction and rejection in the early stages of an author's work. Musicologists, too, adopted Bloom's ideas and invested substantial effort into exploring the attitudes of great composers' heirs to their models from the past. The monographs by Mark Evan Bonds[17] and Joseph Nathan Strauss [18] hewed closely to Bloom's approach.

With regard to Bach's influence on posterity, however, Bloom's approach seems to be insufficient—it fails to consider young artists' other, conscious choices. To find their way, they select from the outside world the impressions closest to their heart and discard whatever they deem alien. The two sides of this process, attraction and repulsion, are equally significant for the formation of an individual style.

In such a situation, the preference for and the conscious and even explicit reliance on a certain predecessor define not only the direction of composers' creative search, but also the most important elements of their style. These choices cannot be random or accidental. In the words of the Russian literary scholar Alexey Bushmin, "to be a true artist one needs to be profoundly selective, to have the skills to choose from one's versatile experience precisely those elements that can correspond with one's own search in art, and which can organically merge with one's own nature."[19]

As mentioned before, very different composers—Reger and Mahler, Hindemith and Schoenberg, Webern and Schnittke, and many others—have expressed their admiration and reverence for Bach, both in their words and in their music. Despite their differences and possible anxieties, each of them consciously and specifically chose Bach as his partner in an imaginary dialogue with the past. In most cases, Bach's influence was highly positive, both in the composer's early career as well as in his maturity.

Nevertheless, returning to Bloom's "anxiety of influence" theory, we can often apply it in part, because the choice of Bach can also trigger anxiety or stress during the imaginary dialogue with his genius. The question is whether anxiety can be seen as a positive factor, for all our habit and inclination to assign anxiety and stress—primarily negative connotations—to both words.

Hans Selye, the father of stress theory, explained the matter in another way. He documented that stress differs from other physical responses, and occurs whether one receives good or bad news, whether the impulse is positive or negative. He called negative stress "distress" and positive stress "eustress."

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[16] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

[17] Mark Evan Bonds, *After Beethoven: Imperatives of the Originality in the Symphony* (Harvard University Press, 1996).

[18] Joseph Nathan Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Harvard University Press, 1990).

[19] Alexey Bushmin, *Continuity in the Evolution of Literature* (Leningrad, 1975), 138 (in Russian, translated by author).

According to research conducted in the early twenty first century, eustress is not defined by the type of stressor, but rather by how one perceives that stressor (e.g. a negative *threat* versus a positive *challenge*). As a result, a stressor that connotes meaning, hope, or vigor may trigger eustress.

A revealing example is the story of the composition of *24 Preludes and Fugues* by Shostakovich. He wrote this work during a very difficult and depressive period, after the authorities accused him of "formalism" in the infamous document of 1948. After this decree, Shostakovich was reduced to composing incidental works, including music for films glorifying Stalin, as well as cantatas with texts of typical Soviet slogans. However, after he attended the Bach celebrations in Leipzig (1950), Shostakovich decided to write a work that would correspond with the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. Shostakovich's subsequent works, written after the *24 Preludes and Fugues,* demonstrated his emotional recovery (the outstanding achievements of the early 1950s included his Tenth Symphony).

Any discussion of the "anxiety of influence," often combined with the "desire for spiritual support," should be complemented by another discussion, mentioned before: "Why Bach"? More specifically: why has Bach remained such a popular spiritual interlocutor for so many years after his death?

To begin with, Bach as an imaginary interlocutor is highly attractive. The first reason is probably his unsurpassed mastery, which became a mythic ideal of professional perfection. *Inter alia*, it is believed that he never encountered problems in composing works of any level of contrapuntal complexity, and had no problem turning his ideas into full scores. Modern composers trying to set their ideas down on paper have also felt a challenge to achieve Bach's creative freedom.

The second reason for choosing Bach is modern composers' need to challenge themselves with the extremely demanding dialogue with Bach, not as a teacher or model (typical of professional studies) but as a colleague, almost as a peer. In order to combine awe and veneration for Bach with a dialogue of near equals, the moderns need courage and daring, as well as professional and spiritual maturity—in other words, confidence of their right to feel that they are Bach's peers.

In the 1930s, the prominent Russian physiologist and psychologist Alexey Ukhtomsky (1875-1942), formulated the concept of the "interlocutor one deserves," that is, a figure whose message can be perceived only if one is sufficiently motivated and sensitive to grasp its meaning. Significant efforts need to be invested to understand such a message, because "the interlocutor would be revealed to me in the way that I would deserve, which would be dependent on all my past deeds and my present condition."[20]

Further research is required to prove this hypothesis. As a possible direction for continuing the search for answers to the question of "Why Bach?" a statement by Witold Lutoslawski may show the way: "When contemplating Bach's works, we are often amazed that he was able to liberate huge masses of psychic energy with such simplicity and naturalness. He did it in a way that brings to mind a notion of some kind of obviousness. This clarity of Bach's art is perhaps its greatest mystery."[21]

[20] A.A. Ukhtomsky, *The Intuition of Conscience. Letters. Notebooks. Notes on the Margins* (St. Petersburg, 1996), 252 (in Russian, translated by author).
[21] *Witold Lutoslawski on Music*, ed. Zbigniew Skowron (Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 189.