

The Legacies of J. S. Bach

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Review of Dirst, Matthew. *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy from Marpurg to Mendelssohn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. xiii, 186 pp.

THE COMMONLY-TOLD STORY OF BACH RECEPTION has traced the tale of a composer falling out of fashion and favor soon after his death (or even before), and generally holding little interest for listeners, and even most other musicians, until the famous ‘revival’ generated by Mendelssohn’s performance of the *St Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829. Yet in *Engaging Bach: The Keyboard Legacy from Marpurg to Mendelssohn*, Matthew Dirst shows that the story is not quite so simple. In a series of case studies, mostly in Germany, but also in England, Dirst chronicles the quest of several theorists and musicians in the later eighteenth century to attain for J. S. Bach the broadest possible audience. He shows how a vital engagement with Bach continued in the second half of the century, while arguing that the terms of Bach reception itself need to be reconsidered in a period in which the aesthetic categories necessary for the appreciation of Bach did not even exist.

The *Well-Tempered Clavier* and the four-part chorales serve as test cases through the entire book, and we see how various writers use them to support their own agendas. Dirst makes much of source material that is already well known, drawing heavily on the *New Bach Reader* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998). Yet his insights are hardly stale, and his argument carefully draws on Marpurg and Agricola, C. P. E. Bach and Burney. As Dirst says, “the second half of the eighteenth century was for Bach’s posthumous reputation a kind of historical crucible, during which his heirs and followers sought to ensure the continued viability of those parts of his output they considered both useful and representative of his unique gifts” (p. 169). Keyboard music is a natural focus, because although “vocal music still represented, for this generation of German music theorists, the highest realm of achievement and meaning in music ... [with] the gradual decline in both the prestige of Lutheran cantorates and the standards of their musical establishments, Bach’s concerted church works ceased to be a compelling topic, except for the most conservative critics and

theorists” (p. 19). Ultimately, “as various individuals and communities came to know his keyboard works especially, a multifaceted legacy took shape, one whose influence has been pervasive and long-lasting” (p. xi).

In his first chapter, Dirst shows that the changing views toward Bach and his music are something of a microcosm of the significant aesthetic and philosophical shift that took place in the second half of the eighteenth century. In fact, “eighteenth-century criticism of the elder Bach’s art can serve as a kind of prism through which are refracted the most important general trends in writing on music, towards a more expansive critical language and more personal impressions of particular works” (p. 4). The chapter begins with a retelling of the controversy between Bach’s former student Johann Adolf Scheibe and his defender Johann Abraham Birnbaum. Famously, Scheibe criticized Bach’s vocal music (and not his keyboard music, as Dirst is careful to emphasize) as complex and “bombastic.” In his response, Birnbaum inaugurated a new critical approach to this issue, one rooted in Lutheran theology. Dirst connects criticism of Bach’s works to the search for “unity in diversity,” a concept most memorably articulated by Charles Batteux, who said that “the composer discovers in the very unity of his subject the means to achieve variety” (p. 23). Even the complexity of the music ceases to become a problem. By the end of the century, when writers were beginning to place greater emphasis on individual creativity, the old disagreements were replaced with a more urgent concern: “finding new ways to appreciate and make sense of that same complexity” (p. 22). Yet the music retained “just enough archaic flavor to mark [it] as somehow timeless or universal” (p. 3).

Continuing through Marpurg and Agricola, Dirst reaches Johann Friedrich Reichardt, who “retained . . . the essential goals of earlier Bach criticism (naturalness, clarity, unity in diversity) while insisting that a work’s sounding quality and its effect on the player were equally, if not more, important: it was the act of playing, not just hearing or contemplating [the Fugue in F minor, from the second book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*], that put Reichardt into a melancholy state, where he finally felt at ease with an otherwise problematic composer” (p. 29). Johann Friedrich Rochlitz, the founder of the Leipzig *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, figures heavily in Dirst’s narrative. By the early nineteenth century, he was praising Bach for his “disregard for the vagaries of fashion” (p. 31)—how far we have come from Scheibe’s concern that Bach was out of date. Rochlitz’s criticism reached its apotheosis in his magnum opus *Für Freunde der Tonkunst* (Leipzig, 1824), where he argued that the study of Bach, especially his fugues, was a necessary prerequisite for the appreciation of all important works.

It gradually becomes clear that it is somewhat out of necessity that Dirst focuses on the keyboard works, given their greater availability in the period relative to the vocal works. By 1829, much of Bach's keyboard and organ music had been published, yet only one cantata, "Ein feste Burg," BWV 80, was available. (Table 4.2, p. 113, helpfully collates the publication information for all of the earliest Bach editions.) Even Hoffmeister and Kühnel's *Oeuvres complètes* (Vienna and Leipzig, 1801–4) was something of a misnomer, as it contained only excerpts from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, along with the Chromatic Fantasy, the Goldberg Variations, and a handful of other keyboard works: publishers sought to release only what they thought was marketable. Bach's music had come to be understood as music for connoisseurs, for private study—public performance of his large vocal works remained virtually unknown. Reichardt and Rochlitz clearly envisioned the private contemplation of the intricate complexity of the music, solo, at the keyboard. The remainder of Bach's music would need to wait until the establishment of the Bach Gesellschaft edition in 1850.

Today, it is hard to imagine a comprehensive musical education that does not include substantial study of Bach's four-part chorales. Yet in their own time, they hardly met with universal acclaim: we can recall the Arnstadt council's complaint that he "mingled many strange notes in them," confusing the congregation. After his death, it was difficult for eighteenth-century theorists to classify the Bach chorales and there was no significant market for four-part harmonizations. The majority of publications could be characterized either as *Choralbücher* (two parts, with continuo, and limited texts, such as Christoph Graupner's *Neu vermehrtes Darmstädtliches Choral-Buch* [1728]) or *Gesangbücher* (full texts, but only the melody, if that, as in the *Chur Pfälzisches allgemeines reformirtes Gesang-Buch* [1763]). It is noteworthy then that the project by C. P. E. Bach and Johann Philipp Kirnberger, a former Bach student, to collect and publish the chorales (Breitkopf, 1784–87) was undertaken in the context of study, rather than performance. Noting that "attention to their initial reception has been scant," Dirst shows that the chorale genre was revitalized "not by a composer actively trying to create something new, but instead by the posthumous elevation of [Bach's] work to the status of an 'unquestionable concept.' Posterity, in short, invented the Bach chorale" (p. 37). Though the chorale had existed long before Bach, and though his settings were not the most popular in his own day (that honor belonged to Telemann), it was the Bach chorale that would come to define the genre for students and scholars alike.

It is likely that, while the Bach chorales were originally written in four parts in open score, the early publications condensed them onto two staves, to, in

Emanuel Bach's words, "accommodate lovers of the organ and the clavier, since they are easier to read in that form." Thus we see that even the chorales became "keyboard music" (pp. 46–47). Neither of the earliest editions of the chorales was intended to accompany singing, whether inside or outside church. Rather, their purpose was abstract study: C. P. E. Bach, in 1775, described the chorales as integral to his father's method of teaching composition. Indeed, Bach's chorales were largely dismissed as unsuitable for use in church: "it would be some time before Bach chorales became a standard feature of German hymnals, and the few organists ... who had the skill to realize these works properly surely knew better than to use them to accompany congregational singing" (p. 50).

Perhaps not surprisingly given their Lutheran roots, the chorales were caught up in the nationalist element of Bach reception, which took on a more prominent role over time. This element is exemplified by Johann Nikolaus Forkel's fervently-argued preface to his *Allgemeine Geschichte der Musik* (Leipzig, 1788–1801). Dirst summarizes: "Chorales had great value to the German people; Bach was a master at chorale harmonization; therefore anyone who cared about German art needed to know his four-part chorales" (p. 51). Over the course of the first hundred years of Bach reception, the chorales go from an unclassifiable curiosity to the prototypical definition of their genre; "they rewrote the rules of cultivated part writing and tonal harmony and continue to convey these essentials of western musical practice to students everywhere" (p. 54).

In chapter three, the only chapter devoted to Bach's influence on a particular composer, Dirst discusses how study and transcription of Bach's fugues, particularly those from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, influenced Mozart. He sounds a note of caution about analysis of this kind, however, noting that it is nearly impossible to sort out exactly what came from J. S. Bach and no one else, in the absence of direct quotation or explicit acknowledgment. The role of the Austrian diplomat Baron Gottfried van Swieten in the dissemination of Bach's keyboard music, particularly the fugues, in Vienna is well known. As ambassador to Prussia, van Swieten spent much of his time in the musical circle of the Princess Anna Amalia, sister of Frederick the Great. He studied with Kirnberger and brought back to Vienna, among other things, the Inventions and Sinfonias, the French and English Suites, the organ trio sonatas, parts one and three of the *Clavierübung*, the Musical Offering, and portions of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Rather than merely observing, as others have done, that Mozart's interest in counterpoint increased after his encounter with Bach's music around 1782, Dirst argues specifically that it was the stretto fugues that interested him.

Mozart's earlier fugues "lack the technical finesse and musical sophistication of his late contrapuntal works," (p. 57) but after encountering Bach (and Handel) his abilities improved noticeably. Taking as his primary piece of evidence Mozart's string quartet transcriptions of several *Well-Tempered Clavier* fugues, Dirst demonstrates that the significance of the fact that they are all stretto fugues "emerges only when one considers how an eighteenth-century composer might have learned how to master stretto and how Mozart himself had used this device earlier" (p. 61). This leads Dirst to a clear and cogent summary of eighteenth-century contrapuntal pedagogy; he suggests that Mozart's most important lesson from Bach was to work out the stretto capabilities of a subject in advance. It was this lesson that allowed Mozart to make the leap from the formulaic counterpoint then commonplace to the sophisticated counterpoint of his later works. The progression from the often unsuccessful stretto episodes in the finales of Mozart's early quartets K. 168 and K. 172 to his sophisticated use of the device in the "Cum sancto spiritu" from the Mass in C minor, K. 427 and the Fugue in C minor, K. 426 makes this transition clear. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the Fantasia in F minor for mechanical organ, K. 608.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the *Well-Tempered Clavier* circulated only in manuscript form among connoisseurs and professionals. Christian Gottlob Neefe famously bragged about having raised Beethoven on a steady diet of its preludes and fugues; Beethoven was said to have been able to play Book One from memory at age eleven. Yet by 1800 there was still no printed edition of the work. For Forkel, Bach's first biographer, it was something of an embarrassment that so central a German masterwork could not be easily obtained. Just one year later, Nicolaus Simrock in Bonn and Hans Georg Nägeli in Zurich both released competing editions of the work. And so it went from famine to feast: by 1850, there were more than thirty printed editions, far more than any other work of Bach, and across all of Europe (p. 91 and Table 4.1).

Paradoxically, however, the aesthetic shift that had taken place over the previous fifty years had enshrined Bach as a "music genius who created 'nothing but masterpieces'" (p. 93). And so it was the task of Forkel (in his biography) and Johann Karl Friedrich Triest (in "Remarks on the Development of the Art of Music") to create a quintessentially middle-class Bach. Rather than an artist endowed with divine talent, they depicted a Bach who was humble and hardworking. The implication is clear: the same mastery could be attained by anyone who worked and studied as hard as Bach had done. The lionizing of

Bach and his works was caught up in the newly developing nationalism of the nascent German state, for, “what better way to encourage national pride than to point out the collective debt owed an illustrious and little understood forebear?” (p. 100).

Dirst concludes the first four chapters, which are linked in their mutual concern for the reception of Bach in his homeland, by arguing that Rochlitz and his likeminded contemporaries wanted more than “mere recognition” of Bach; “they wanted their readers to engage with his music and to regard music-making itself as a purposeful activity that improved humanity” (p. 118). When, under Felix Mendelssohn’s direction, the *St. Matthew Passion* was performed at the Berlin Singakademie in 1829, it was no singular event. It was the culmination, or rather the fulfillment, of a series of aesthetic and pedagogical struggles over the previous eight decades.

In England, the challenges for Bach’s music were much different than in Germany: “its sheer complexity, coupled with a stubborn cultural prejudice against the music of any rival to Handel, were serious impediments to a wider reception, even among professionals” (p. 119). More than anyone else, it was Samuel Wesley, nephew of the founder of Methodism, who was Bach’s evangelist in England. The foremost organist of his generation, he was said to have a “kindred spirit with the German giant” (p. 127). What began with improving Charles Burney’s opinion of Bach culminated with the publication of the first English edition of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* in 1810–13. More than their German contemporaries, English Bach partisans appealed to the aesthetic category of the sublime. Bach’s counterpoint (e.g., the Fugue in E-flat major, BWV 552/2) could have the same overwhelming effect on listeners as any great Handel chorus. Whereas in Germany, a *bürgerlicher* Bach was motivating and edifying, in England, the sublime Bach was awe-inspiring. “Perhaps,” writes Dirst, “this is why English composers of this time took from Bach only general inspiration and not a specific lesson” (p. 134).

As the musical public became more knowledgeable about Bach’s music, new editions began to incorporate, for the first time, specific ideas about performance practice, which Dirst explores in his sixth and final chapter. The transmission of musical style thereby began to shift from individual instruction to “a modern mass-media model” (p. 143). By 1850, the market was completely bifurcated. The performer-oriented editions, on the one hand, gave strong guidance about all manner of aspects of realization. Carl Czerny’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, perhaps foremost among these editions, was controversial from the start—it was commended by Brahms, yet rejected by Schumann. The Bach Gesellschaft edi-

tion, on the other hand, sought scholarly objectivity, making few concessions to the performer. Indeed, their “rigorous methodology determined not only the contents of the volumes but the physical dimensions ... [the] volumes fit comfortably on the bookshelf but not on the music rack” (p. 144). Dirst shows how the move of Bach’s fugues from the private realm to the public resulted in changes in performance practice, particularly the foregrounding of the fugue subject through use of articulation. In an interesting twist, he connects the performance of the fugues on the keyboard with their earlier transcription for string quartet. The small audiences who initially gathered in salons like Baron van Swieten’s in Vienna wanted to hear the various treatments of the subject, and the performers obliged.

Dirst’s concise volume does not claim to be comprehensive. Rather, through its various case studies, it offers a series of focused views into a fascinating period of music history. At times, if one reads from cover to cover, this can make the book feel a little disjointed. The fifth chapter especially, which deals with English Bach reception, stands clearly apart from the other five, which all deal primarily with Germany. Yet, in place of dry historiography, Dirst depicts a vibrant and lively intellectual climate, one in which the reception and understanding of Bach’s music is an important, and indeed even central, concern. At under two hundred pages, this book is a fairly quick read, and will surely find a place in the libraries of scholars and musicians who are interested in the place of the keyboard works in the development of Bach’s legacy.