

## MUSIC

## Bach Reaches Out to God

By Ralph de Toledano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH, the most towering figure in music's pantheon, saw composition and performance as a craft, more exalted than pottery making but no inspirational bath. To the compliments on his organ playing, he once responded, "There is nothing remarkable about it. All one has to do is hit the right notes at the right time and the instrument plays itself." Put down the right notes in the right way and you have great music. He would have been baffled by later composers who courted the muse by deep-breathing and yanking at the psyche. It was his craft to compose, working at it steadily and producing more than a thousand works.

His religious compositions alone would have sufficed for any other composer—five "Passions" and three oratorios, plus Masses, Magnificats, motets, and other larger and smaller works for church use. Secularly, there was his *Kunst der Fuge*, his skeletal "Art of the Fugue" which took that form as far as it could go; the Concertos for Violin in A Minor and E Major and the Double Concerto in D Minor (recorded respectively by Isaac Stern and Stern and Itzhak Perlman); the *Clavier-Übung* in the distinguished renditions of Paul Badura-Skoda; and the many other works for most of the instrumental gamut.

Yet we forget in our awed admiration and respect for Bach's genius and the unflagging beauty and solidity of his music that when what some consider his greatest religious work, the "St. Matthew Passion," was first performed, there were critics who dismissed it as "operatic comedy." For a hundred years it was forgotten until the 20-year-old Mendelssohn resurrected it—and then it

was greeted as if it were the Second Coming. Berlioz, who understood Bach with more precision than the new worshippers, would write somewhat petulantly, "God is God and Bach is Bach."

Bach believed that the "aim and final reason" of all music is "the glory of God. . . . Where this is not observed, there will be no real music, but only a devilish hubbub." Even in his most secular works, he was addressing God. My own view is that he was speaking more to God's glory in the B Minor Mass than in the "St. Matthew Passion." For one thing, the Romance languages—Latin, Spanish, Italian—are pen-throated. German, the language of the "Passion," is not. How can one speak freely to God with an *umlaut* caught in the gullet? Bach coped with this difficulty, but he could not surmount it. Perhaps he realized this, because it is always the violins that soften the sung language when the Christ is singing.

Nevertheless the power, the beauty, and the cadence of the "St. Matthew Passion" cannot be gainsaid. I remember the tremendous excitement in the late 1930s

In contrast to the "St. Matthew Passion"—Bach's most fervent Protestant and Germanic statement of belief—there is the less personal Mass in B Minor, in which he reaches back in spirit 150 years to the Catholic expression of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and Tomás Luis de Victoria. Bach sent the first section of the B Minor to the Catholic Elector of Saxony with a request for a court appointment. It is often said that his motivation was simply to get an appointment. But it is impossible to listen to the B Minor Mass and still hold that opinion. Bach took his theology seriously, and I subscribe to the more reasonable explanation that he was appealing to the *catholicism* of the Catholic Church.

After re-playing the "St. Matthew Passion," I took down the old but still great recording of the B Minor by Herbert von Karajan, with Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and Nicolai Gedda among the soloists, and a much later one by Otto Klemperer and the New Philharmonic Orchestra, also with Gedda. Could career consider-

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when RCA Victor issued the first complete recording. Those were the days of the heavy 78 rpm shellacs, and the three muscle-challenging volumes of the "Passion," with their awkward breaks as each record thudded down on the turntable, were a trial. Then we later had it on three long-playing records, stereo, digitally recorded, and later still on CD, beautifully paced and sung by the Knabenchor Hannover and the NDR Symphony Orchestra, directed by Raymond Leppard.

The "St. Matthew Passion" is grandly conceived—in 24 scenes, double-choruses, chorales, arias, concerted passages. Yet underlying this structural complexity there is the deep simplicity of a foursquare and personal religious statement. Perhaps Leppard is telling us that if you play the right notes at the right time, the music conducts itself.

ations have produced the tranquility and exaltation of the "Et Unam" or the "Et incarnatus est?" Could a composer who believed that all music was a celebration of God have written the tremendous grandeur of the "Sanctus" merely to get a court appointment? In the "St. Matthew Passion," Bach faced towards the Reformation, in the B Minor Mass towards the Counter-Reformation. In the former, he took a step forward to the music that would evolve. In the latter he stepped back to the mysticism of Victoria and the effulgence of Palestrina. In both he lifts up his eyes and his heart to God. ■

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# Slipshod Scribblers



I have a terrible confession to make. Sen. John Kerry was right, except for one tiny detail. Nothing good comes to people who goof off in

class, don't do their homework, and cheat in their exams. Only they don't end up in Iraq. They end up as journalists, sending others to Iraq.

The bad habits they pick up at school serve them well in a profession that thrives on laziness. (One of the main reasons I became a journalist.) Rather than do original research or develop new sources or leads, journalists prefer to rely on government handouts. Rather than pick up a telephone to hear both sides of the story, they would rather call their one or two tried and true sources, not coincidentally the same one or two tried and true sources that other hacks rely on. I was recently rung up by a London *Daily Mail* hack asking me if *Vanity Fair* magazine had paid for a party I gave in London to celebrate my birthday. "What reason could *VF* possibly have to pick up the tab for a party I gave for my friends?" I said. "There is absolutely no truth to it." Well, you guessed it. The next day the hack led off his column in London's leading tabloid that *VF* had paid for my party. Outrageously unfair? Not really, just par for the course.

Mind you, the British press is the yellowest this side of the Greek one, but even here, in the Land of the Free, hacks feel free to ruin the reputation of anyone they don't agree with or happen to dislike. When *TAC* was starting up four years ago, I had many journalists ring me up pretending to wish to interview me about the magazine. Some did, most of them didn't—mention the magazine, that is. One of them, a woman, I found

going through my mail and my wastepaper basket. She works for *Tatler* magazine in London. No wonder the old joke about a journalist who is discovered working on a paper by a friend and who tells the friend, "For God's sake, don't tell my mother I'm a reporter, she thinks I play the piano in a warehouse," works. As does the old Baldwin jibe—he had Beaverbrook in mind—that journalism enjoyed the prerogative of the harlot throughout the ages: power without responsibility.

Journalists actually are purveyors of conventional wisdom. This makes them very useful mouthpieces for corporations. As the poet Humbert Wolfe wrote: "You cannot hope to bribe or twist / Thank God! The British journalist / But, seeing what the man will do / Unbribed, there's no occasion to."

Making up stories out of whole cloth comes naturally to people who honed their skills inventing variations on "the dog ate my homework." If he hadn't become a politician, Bill Clinton, a very skilled and persuasive liar, would have or should have been a journalist. He would have been a great one. Almost as good as Judith Miller in the *New York Times* talking twaddle about Saddam's supposed weapons of mass destruction and relying on the word of mega-crook and con man Ahmad Chalabi. Probably better than Jeffrey Goldberg in *The New Yorker* hyping up a fanciful link between Saddam and al-Qaeda. His other mentors could have been Ruth Shalit, with her multiple plagiarisms at *The New Republic*, Stephen Glass writing fiction

and passing it off as fact, and of course Jayson Blair of the good old *New York Times*.

Okay, I am being a bit tough on the Fourth Estate, perhaps because I know it quite well. It was Carlyle who called hacks the Fourth Estate, referring to the enormous power wielded by those who direct the flow of information.

But let's face it, the power is staggering. Control of the press is concentrated in a few hands and their responsibilities are small in proportion to their power. Hacks can set up their own kangaroo courts in which they figure as prosecutor, counsel, jury, and judge. Awareness of this power sets the tone and puts a swagger in the media's step. It respects no authority and is cavalier where the right of individual privacy is concerned. In fact, it tends to see itself above the law, and governments quail before the media as kings once did before barons.

And it gets worse. Journalism is supposed to report the facts, however unobjectively, but now it has morphed into entertainment. Caught up in the ratings war, the search for profits, and ego gratification, hacks are now seen as less trustworthy than lawyers, used-car salesmen, and undertakers.

Two generations ago, Noel Coward sang, "Don't put your daughter on the stage, Mrs. Worthington," warning of the perils that stage-struck young women had to endure as showgirls. If he were alive today, the "master" would surely be warning Mrs. Worthington not to let her daughter become a journalist. Then again, he might not. Judith Miller, Maureen Dowd, Leslie Stahl, Barbara Walters, and others of their ilk have not done so badly. It beats having to sleep with Harvey Weinstein. ■