

Bach in the Original

Edward Rothstein

You play Bach your way, I will play him his way.

—Wanda Landowska

IN THOSE arts, such as music or drama, in which the interpretation of a work is necessary to its public apprehension, the interpreter is in a delicate position. In translating the silent text and giving it voice, he at the same time appropriates it; the voice he gives it is his own. The success of an interpretation, whether Olivier's Shakespeare or Landowska's Bach, lies in the dialectical balance between the appropriation of a work and its translation.

This balance becomes the more difficult to achieve the further a work is removed from contemporary consciousness. In music, one response to the difficulty has been to bowdlerize texts, to eliminate a disturbing dissonance here or a puzzling connotation there in favor of the modern sensibility. This response asserts a kind of Darwinian notion of progress: we are better able than our ancestors to know what is musical, we have superior instruments with which to execute their ideas, and so we can free the work from the accidental restrictions of its birth. An opposite approach has been that of "authenticity," the attempt to return, through scholarship, to the original text, the original instrumentation, the original performance practice. This approach holds the text and the style of the composer sacrosanct and asserts the primacy of the past over the present.

One of the most remarkable representatives of this latter impulse, the restorative impulse, has been

the German conductor Nikolaus Harnoncourt. With the Vienna Concentus Musicus, which he founded in 1953 with members of the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, Harnoncourt has recorded on the Telefunken label "authentic" performances of works by composers from Monteverdi to Mozart, but his main field of concentration has been the works of Johann Sebastian Bach. Using original instrumentation, restored scores, and the "latest knowledge regarding the performance practice" of Bach's time, Harnoncourt has set down on records his interpretations of the *St. Matthew Passion*, the *St. John Passion*, the *B-minor Mass*, the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the *Orchestral Suites*. Several years ago, he embarked on a recording project, together with the harpsichordist and conductor Gustav Leonhardt and his Amsterdam-based Leonhardt Consort, which in its ambition and scope could occupy their joint attention until the three-hundredth birthday of Bach in 1985: they are recording for Telefunken his complete cantatas in authentic performances.*

Quite apart from the issue of authenticity, Harnoncourt's project is an impressive one, almost the equivalent, aurally, of the *Neue Bach Ausgabe Sämtlicher Werke*, the new edition of the complete Bach that was begun twenty years ago to replace the *Bach-Gesellschaft* edition of the previous century. The cantatas constitute half of Bach's complete works, and in comparison with them, as Albert Schweitzer wrote, "everything else Bach has done appears as hardly more than a supplement." Bach's obituary noted the composition of five complete cycles of such church works, each written for a particular week in the ecclesiastical year, using texts of Lutheran hymns and

Gospel-based poetry by Erdmann Neumeister (the initiator of the "new" cantata style) and other librettists. About two hundred of these nearly three hundred compositions survived the early years of Bach's eclipse, as have over twenty secular cantatas—dramatic and often humorous works written for civic celebrations. They span most of his creative life, from 1707, when, at age twenty-two, he was organist at Mühlhausen, to his final decade when as Cantor and Director of Music for the Leipzig churches he was responsible for preparing the music for the weekly services in the municipal churches. Most of the surviving church works date from Bach's first five years in Leipzig beginning in 1723, when he was required to compose and prepare for performance a new cantata every week—a prodigious output matched only by the quantity of his keyboard and orchestral compositions (and his twenty children).

UNLIKE Bach's keyboard and orchestral works, these cantatas, despite their incomparable beauty and variety, are little heard in concert and are grossly underrepresented in the recorded literature. Nearly a hundred are not even listed in the Schwann catalogue (though many of them have been released by the mail-order Musical Heritage Society) and many have been recorded only once. Any recordings of this music are therefore welcome, and those of Harnoncourt and Leonhardt, which approach the music in a spirit of scholarly dedication, and which promise to take a unified view, doubly so.

About four boxed sets of these recordings are being released each year; each contains two records offering a total (usually) of four cantatas per boxed set. Thirteen sets have been released so far, containing the first fifty cantatas of the *Bach-Gesellschaft* listing (BWV 1

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* Telefunken is likely to have an authoritative command over Bach's recorded literature by the tricentennial. They are also releasing his complete organ works performed by Michel Chapuis.

through BWV 50). This systematic approach curiously lends variety to each set, for the numbering system does not correspond to the order in which the cantatas were written (as, for instance, the Mozart Köchel listing attempts to do), nor does it group them according to the time of the ecclesiastical year for which they were written; the numbers merely indicate the order in which the works were published by the *Gesellschaft* over a hundred years ago. Thus, the first Telefunken set contains Cantata 3, "*Ach Gott, wie Manches Herzeleid*," written in 1725 for the second Sunday after Epiphany, and the well-known Cantata 4, "*Christ lag in Todesbanden*," probably written in 1707 or 1708 for Easter Sunday, according to the latest research. These are very different works, and it is interesting to hear them, so to speak, back to back.

Included in each set are three booklets of notes which practically exhaust the possibilities for complete documentation. One contains a brief and informed historical essay about the cantatas by Alfred Dürr (whose research has radically changed the established dating of the cantatas through examination of watermarks, handwriting, and style), and an essay by Harnoncourt about the motivations behind the recording project. Dürr also contributes a brief analysis of each cantata in the second booklet which contains the complete text in the original and in English and French translations, and a discussion of the specific problems of scoring and instrumentation that arise in performance. Finally, included in every set is the full musical score for each cantata in miniature reproduction of the *Gesellschaft* edition, or, if it is available, the *Neue Werke* edition.

The inclusion of the score is evidence of the higher intentions of the project, of its seriousness, its announced willingness to be judged by the letter of the text. It also allows a look at Bach's pictorial musical language. "*Musica poetica*," a baroque musical affectation practiced earlier by Schütz and Buxtehude, was raised to a new level by Bach. Albert Schweitzer's *Bach* contains nearly a com-

plete concordance of Bach's symbolic musical vocabulary for the translation of emotion, in which the melodic line and the continuo line combine to paint individual words as well as the overall spirit of the piece. Thus, the word "descent" is sung with a descending line; "grief" is accompanied by chromaticism. There are even canonical rhythms for joy (an eighth followed by two sixteenths) and sorrow (a "sighing" motif consisting of two slurred descending sixteenths with a strong accent on the first note of the group). Seeing the score emphasizes these effects even more. Satan is pictured in a winding serpentine series of thirty-seconds that blacken the staff. To represent freedom from earthly ties, the continuo line is omitted. Arias dealing with faith are fugal. The score also reveals effects that might be inaudible, such as Bach's predilection for numerical symbolism.*

If the inclusion of the score is important to the apprehension of the works, the inclusion of the texts is essential, for they were the starting point of Bach's own interpretative project. In this connection it is unfortunate that the English translation provided does not attempt to be literal. Even minor liberties change the spirit of the text: "*Liebster Jesu, mein verlangen*" should not be translated "Dearest Jesus sore I need thee," which severely restricts the erotic connotations of the words, but "*Dearest Jesus, my craving*," or "*objet de mes désirs*," as the French translation has it. There is also at least one really curious instance of mis-translation that borders on the deliberately deceptive: "*Friede über Israel*," rendered correctly in French as "*Paix sur Israël*," appears in English as "Peace be unto all Mankind." This gratuitous ecumenicism is all the more out of place in a project which when it comes to musical translation prides itself on being as literal as possible.

Still, the degree to which Harnoncourt and Leonhardt have succeeded in their undertaking is not to be measured by the English translations of the texts or by the inclusion of scores and commentary, but by the interpretations they offer of the music. Because

their project is meant to be definitive, questions may be raised about it of a musicological nature. There has already been some questioning, for instance, of whether Bach did indeed use the lower performance pitch that Harnoncourt says he did. Furthermore, some of Harnoncourt's choices of instruments and the size of his orchestral forces have been challenged, as have some of his phrasings. And it has been argued that the practice of Bach in St. Thomas's may not really have been indicative of the general performing practice of his time since he may have had to make compromises on the basis of the forces and talent available to him.

BUT the heart of the matter is the performance, and at the heart of the performance is Harnoncourt's ideology of authenticity, in the service of which he goes to such lengths as personally researching the score and using male sopranos—boys, not castrati—and vintage instruments whose dates and makes are listed with each recording. For his recording of the *Brandenburg Concertos* he chose as his studio the baroque hall of Schönberg Palace in Vienna. All of this is meant to return the listener to the sound and style of the music as it was originally performed, and so release him from the illusions of intervening history. Does it work?

When one first listens to these performances, the ear has to adjust to new timbres and sounds. It is somewhat like shifting one's gaze at

* The Crucifixus of the *B-minor Mass* is written over a passacaglia bass line ominously repeated thirteen times. There are more obscure instances. Harnoncourt points out in his comments on the *St. Matthew Passion* that the number of notes in the continuo line occurring under three passages describing an earthquake refer to the numbers of the Psalms in which the descriptions appear. Karl Geiringer, in his fine biography of Bach, discusses a canon Bach wrote for a musical society after Handel had joined: "The bass of the canon is borrowed from a chaconne by Handel. The composition's first measure contains eight notes and the whole piece, including the imitations, sixty notes. A person conversant with the number-alphabet would not find it difficult to discover the hidden meaning. Apparently 8 stands for the first letter of Handel, and 60 for his full name (G.F. Handel)."

an art exhibition from an ebullient Impressionist painting to a finely detailed etching by Rembrandt. It is not merely the quantity of sound which has changed, but also the quality, which is more restrained, less smooth, somewhat reedier though no less passionate than in "modern" renditions of Bach. The older baroque instruments used in these recordings are richer in overtones and more distinctive in color than newer ones. Gut strings and baroque bows cause the string instruments to sound as if the notes were being physically pulled out from them, drawn from their innards. There are differences of articulation too; just as a harpsichord will not phrase the way a piano does, the smooth effortless line of the contemporary orchestra is replaced here by an earthier, almost wavering, song-like quality which is transparent even in ensemble.

Once one has entered this alien world, variations can be discerned, especially as between Harnoncourt and his colleague Leonhardt. It has been pointed out that Harnoncourt speaks with the voice of the Viennese school of string playing and Leonhardt with the voice of the Northern keyboard tradition (Harnoncourt plays the gamba in his recordings, Leonhardt the organ continuo); Leonhardt's performances, of sixteen out of these fifty cantatas, consequently have a more direct quality. And where Harnoncourt uses the emotive power of the strings to vary the intensity of his short but lush phrases, Leonhardt seems to prefer a more even phrasing technique. Yet the two have essentially similar ideas, and one can speak of the performances as a unified, joint effort.

Many of the performances, quite simply, are exquisite. The baroque instruments combine well with the human voice, and every line, including the often lost continuo foundation, remains clear. One relishes, too, the sound of the instrumental combinations alone—the breathy baroque flute playing alongside a violin, a tenor's voice echoing a phrase of the oboe. The clarity of texture gives even the fullest choral movements an excitement that comes from being able to hear each voice. The soloists (ex-

cept for the sopranos) are uniformly fine. The recitatives are excellent and serve as effective textual and dramatic bridges between movements; the chorales which close most of the cantatas can be quite moving, and seal the pieces as they should.

But the recordings do not provide a wholly satisfactory encounter with the cantatas. There are, first of all, occasional problems with tempos (as in the bass aria in Cantata 13, with its overdone "groaning and weeping," or in the soprano aria in Cantata 31 where the tempo is too fast to convey the death-wish quality of the words, "Final hour break over me"), and in some places phrasing is exaggerated; Harnoncourt's recurring pulsations especially disrupt the long line of the music. Bach himself stressed the need for *cantabile* playing, the art of singing each instrumental line as though with a human voice, but Harnoncourt's strings sometimes seem to parody the human voice in its most distorted moments. His instrumental treatment, for example, of the aria, "Our mouths and sounding strings," from the first cantata, mocks the meaning of the words. The playing can become baroque in the derogatory sense; one hears the concentrated attention being paid to individual phrases and to filigree, but the whole is oblique, a misshapen pearl.

The long line which is often missing in these performances should carry the listener through the entire work; it gives the work its drama. And these pieces are founded on dramatic principles; they were meant to affect the listener through a kind of cathartic transformation that would prepare him for the church sermon that followed. The pieces embody both the subjective trials of faith and the answers of Lutheranism to those trials. Whether the cantatas take a traditional Lutheran choral hymn and play out its meanings in harmony and word, as in "*Christ lag in Todesbanden*," or base themselves on a pietistic text arising out of the Gospel, as in the other Easter cantata, "*Der Himmel Lacht*," the effect must be total and totally dramatic.

The cantatas are Bach's double interpretation of the librettist's text and of the more abstract "text" of religious faith, both translated into musical form through word painting and counterpoint. And Bach's musical genius also has two sides, or faces, "one face looking back to the epoch of formal architectonic structure, the other turned toward the future—toward the freest subjectivity of musical speech," in the words of the pianist Von Lüpke. The task of the performer is to encompass both these double aspects, balancing the fixed canons of form against the demands of subjectivity, Lutheran orthodoxy against the silent inwardness of mystical pietism. If these recordings are not entirely satisfying, it is because they sometimes lack this balance or necessary tension, a defect traceable to their too-rigid adherence to the ideal of literal authenticity.

HARNONCOURT has argued that he chose his method of presentation for artistic reasons, not merely historical ones: the music, he believes, is best served by these instruments and this mode of performance. But in several instances the text as a whole suffers. One such instance is the introductory orchestral sonata to Cantata 31. The cantata was written at Weimar in the "choir pitch" of the Weimar organ which was tuned a minor third above the "chamber pitch" of the woodwinds. Since the violins at Weimar were tuned to the organ's pitch, the woodwinds had to transpose upward a minor third to play in tune. To recreate the original performance Harnoncourt follows the same practice and retunes the strings. "Naturally," he writes, "a completely unusual sound picture of the string orchestra results from this today." This is an understatement: the sound is unnatural, the music is utterly destroyed. The movement, scored for a full orchestra with trumpet fanfares, is meant to herald the joy of the choral second movement, "*Der Himmel lacht*." As played, the piece fails dramatically as well as musically, and the tinny bodiless sound only adds to the difficulties created by a labored and varying tempo.

Harnoncourt's "solution" seems all the more strange when one considers Bach's own handling of the scoring problem when he took the score to Leipzig. There, the violins customarily played in the lower "chamber pitch," so Bach simply transposed the organ part downward; in this way the strings did not have to be retuned, and the problem of inaccessible depths in the woodwind scores was solved by altering the instrumentation. Bach's emergency solution, which must have sounded satisfactory, involved a change in the scoring and in Harnoncourt's reasoning would supposedly have been "inauthentic" because the Leipzig performance differed from the Weimar one. In fact one of the issues at stake here, Bach's performance pitch as compared with today's, is still an open question.

DOGMAIC authenticity leads to another difficulty when it extends, as it does in these performances, to the use of boy sopranos. Just as Shakespeare, had the choice been open, might not have wished a twelve-year-old boy to appear as Lady Macbeth or Cordelia, so Bach might well have regarded the use of boy sopranos as an unfortunate if necessary compromise—the dramatic meaning of many cantatas would appear to require a woman's voice. The duets for soprano and bass suffer especially, since the two voices typically represent the Soul and Christ respectively, the Soul being also the Bride to Christ the Bridegroom (following the Christian interpretation of the Song of Songs). These arias are known as erotic duets, and not merely for their sensuous intertwining of voices. Cantata 140:

SOUL: When will you come,
my Salvation?
JESUS: I am coming thy Part.
(Thine own)
SOUL: I wait with burning oil.
Open the hall
To the heavenly feast.
JESUS: I open the hall
To the heavenly feast.
SOUL: Come, Jesus!
JESUS: Come, beloved soul!*

Cantata 21 has a duet only a bit less suggestive: "Come Jesus, revive

and gladden my soul with thy regard," the Soul pleads, "*Ja ich komme und erquickte*," replies Jesus. "Indeed thou art saved, I love thee." The two voices repeat and reply, "*Komm mein Jesu, Ja ich komme*."

When a boy soprano sings the part of the soul, any potentiality for soul-quickenings seems to vanish: instead of a woman longing for her lover, we have a boy innocently seeking the protection of an older man in disturbingly insinuating language.

Albert Schweitzer once argued that "a time will come when boy sopranos would again be used in these pieces because of the natural lightness of boys' voices" and their "full, penetrating, objective tone." But the objective tone is just the problem when the voice must address itself to Bach's most subjective texts: "Sighing, tears, distress, grief . . . prey upon my distressed heart." "Hour of parting, come to me"; "the grievous night of sorrows presses down my faltering heart." Sung by a twelve-year-old boy, these words seem almost bizarre (comparable, perhaps, to having a boy soprano sing Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*). The drama of the soul, the driving force of eros, are hard to locate in the "objective" tone and musical immaturity of a child. Though the voices and phrasing are at times beautiful, more often there are audible breath and intonation problems, and one never senses the depth of feeling that a mature artist can deliver. (Is it an indication of their acknowledgment of the problem that Leonhardt and Harnoncourt by and large omit the soprano soloists' names from these recordings?)

LITERAL authenticity of this kind denies a musical text's historical life of transmutation and interpretation. Harnoncourt says that his recordings are an attempt "at releasing the great old music from its historical amalgamation with the classical symphonic sound and by means of the transparent and characteristic selection of old instruments, at finding a truly modern interpretation." He is right to call his interpretation modern; it

would not have been possible before the extensive scholarship of this century, not to mention its engineering and technology. Nor is the "release" he speaks of to be scoffed at, especially when he has in mind performances that have obscured the music "with an unsorted blend of geniality, traditions of the 19th century, and ignorance." But the past cannot be simply invalidated, and release is not the same thing as replacement. In what sense can the revival of the harpsichord be said to have provided a release from piano interpretations of Bach? Indeed, even the most "inauthentic" approaches to each of these instruments, Wanda Landowska's romantic harpsichord and Glenn Gould's eccentric piano, can live side by side together and speak through recordings to equally important aspects of Bach's genius.

The dogma of authenticity must in the end come up against the ultimate irreversibility of historical musical sensibility. Igor Stravinsky, in his *Poetics of Music*, tells of one encounter with the extreme "archeological" approach:

One day the *Comédie française* was rehearsing a medieval play in which the celebrated actor Mounet-Sully, according to the author's directions, had to swear an oath on an old Bible. For rehearsals the old Bible had been replaced by a telephone directory. "The script calls for an old Bible," roared Mounet-Sully. "Get me an old Bible!" Jules Claretie, the director of the *Comédie*, promptly rushed to his library to find a copy of the two testaments in a magnificent old edition and brought it triumphantly to the actor. "Here you are, *mon cher Doyen*," said Claretie, "a 15th-century edition. . . ." "Fifteenth century!" said Mounet-Sully. "But then at that time it was brand new. . . ."

This is Harnoncourt's dilemma, too. His recordings are recordings of old music in an old style. But at the time the music was written, it was brand new. It spoke naturally in its new language, and its interpreter needed no scholarly research to uncover methods of trill executions, of filling out a figured bass,

* Translation by Joshua Rifkin.

or of improvising in a baroque manner upon a theme. What happens today when one attempts to recreate that moment by denying the past three hundred years of musical history is similar to the dilemma facing a contemporary composer who sits down to write an "authentic" baroque prelude and fugue. What emerges is a *stylization*—a creation that arises out of imitation and the rules of imitation, rather than out of the wellsprings of contemporary consciousness.

MUSICAL orthodoxy insists that the texts of the past are primarily historical documents rather than artistic ones, and to the extent that they speak to the present they must do so with the voice of the past, to the extent they are to be appropriated artistically they can be appropriated in only one mode. This thesis is as misapplied to music as it is to exegesis of the Bible. If a text is not responsive to different consciousnesses it will not last, but will become an archeological work, of interest only to cultural historians. The Bible has responded with equanimity to medieval scholasticism, gnostic mysticism, Freudian analysis, and existential hermeneutics, because it is a work open with possibility. So with the musical texts of the past. Chopin is reputed to have said, after hearing Liszt perform a Chopin Nocturne: "Whose piece is this?"

Landowska once wrote: "At no time in the course of my work have I ever tried to reproduce exactly what the old masters did. Instead, I study, I scrutinize, I love, and I recreate." The word *bacchante*, she said, "would suit me . . . , but one that works hard, zealous as a schoolgirl, trying to understand the letter, fustigating herself 'to make it sound,' and then forgetting everything—books and laws—unleashed, intoxicated with freedom." This is the secret of playing Bach "his way." Harnoncourt's and Leonhardt's performances are not entirely successful partly because they ignore this secret. Their interpretations tend to be stylized and overdrawn, and so much attention is paid to detail that the drama gets lost. The reluctance to take risks in interpretation robs the

music of the force which is hinted at in these recordings but seldom fully expressed—the force not of the original "live" presentation but the force of the musical drama which speaks both for itself and for its religious roots.

Yet it would be surprising indeed if anybody could perform every one of the cantatas with its full mystery and drama. These recordings are important for the scholarship they reflect, for their restoration of a "baroque" sound, for their de-bowdlerization of the text. After hearing them and living in their world it is difficult to go back to the performances of Karl Richter, or Robert Shaw, without missing the clarity of articulated phrase and audible score which Harnoncourt and Leonhardt achieve. And whatever quarrels one might have with the ideology that lies behind the performances one must acknowledge their eloquent beauty which recalls the feeling of absolute necessity in Bach's works, as though the entire piece were emanating out of a single theme. Telefunken, with its clear recordings

and lavish presentation, has served the performances well. Certainly any lover of Bach should own at least one of these sets, not because their "authenticity" grants them any sort of priority, but because they offer a new view of the cantatas by representing them in yet another of their many possible incarnations.

NOTE

The following works by Bach performed with original instruments are among those available on the Telefunken label, distributed by London Imports:

Brandenburg Concertos, 2635043
Christmas Oratorio, 641124
Das Kantatenwerk. Volumes 1-13, Cantatas 1-50, 26 records, 2635027-36, 2635269, 2635283-84.
Harpsichord Concertos, 5635049
Mass in B-minor, 3635019
Musical Offering, 3635022
Orchestral Suites, 2635046
St. John Passion, 3635018
St. Matthew Passion, 4635047

Movies

Obsessions

William S. Pechter

I FIDGETED my way through at least two-thirds of *The Story of Adèle H.*, waiting for it to get off the ground. The materials are all impressive: the daughter of a remote and famous father, trying to wrest her own identity from under her father's shadow, even while vying for his affections with the memory of a favored younger sister no longer alive; her own tortured feelings about that younger sister and her death; and, above

all, her pursuit to the point of obsession of an unrequited love, a pursuit which serves not only as a rebellion against her father's wishes but as her attempt to find a calling for herself to equal his. But though Adèle, the headstrong heroine of this new film by François Truffaut, is clearly in the line of those earlier heroines of *Jules and Jim* and *Two English Girls* (heroines about whom Truffaut plainly feels some deep ambivalence), the