

The Global Importance of Bach Today

(Opening presentation by Uwe Siemon-Netto at the "Bach in Today's Parish" conference, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, IN, November 2, 2009)

A few caveats are in order before I speak to you about the global significance of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. I am not a musicologist, nor a musician; you'll hear from these eminent scholars and artists later. I am just a journalist, and as a journalist, I'll start with hometown news first -- before going global.

I was born in Leipzig, virtually in the shadow of the Thomaskirche. When I was four, my parents began taking me to the motet or cantata services in the Thomaskirche every Friday or Saturday. This might sound alien to present-day parents, Lutherans included, who do not introduce their kids to music saying that they were "too busy" for that and preferred to spend some "quality time" with their children, like munching hamburgers together.

I spent most of World War II in Leipzig. This is why a blend of two kinds of acoustical impressions has been resonating in my head ever since my childhood - the sound of bombs and sound of Bach.

Often the two dovetailed. Often an air raid followed a cantata service or an organ recital. Or an air raid interrupted a house concert in our home. It was during one of these weekly concerts that I was first introduced to the Art of the Fugue, to which I shall return several times this morning.

The first time I heard the Art of the Fugue, it was played by a string quartet in the music room of our downtown apartment, which was destroyed on Dec. 4, 1943. Two of the musicians were members of the Gewandhaus orchestra, and two were amateurs. In the middle of the performance the sirens howled, and we all rushed to the basement.

There is something else I must tell you about these extraordinary events. They suspended on a very private level the artificial division between Jew and non-Jew imposed on us by the Nazis. Often Jewish relatives or friends came out of hiding a night to perform Bach or Beethoven, Pachelbel or Pastorius with us before joining us in the air raid shelters or disappearing into the night.

From that the very moment I heard the Art of the Fugue at home, the opening bars of its Contrapunctus One returned to my inner ear virtually every day - while being bombed, while fleeing from Soviet-occupied Leipzig after the War, while sitting exams at school, while feeling lovesick or covering the Vietnam War as a reporter, while suffering from a writer's blocks.

O, I sang Lutheran hymns in my head too, and I still do, none more often than "Abide with me." But most of all I am fixated by these fugues! They order my mind and my soul.

In my prayers fugues join the hymns my grandmother sang into my ears during the air raids. And this has been so for nearly seventy years now.

But that's enough about me for the moment. Let's stay in Leipzig for a while longer, though, in Leipzig, cradle of the peaceful revolution that brought down the Berlin Wall exactly 20 years ago. Did you know that this monumental event in history has a strong Bach connection?

The protest movement that ultimately snowballed into the bloodless revolution of 1989 started with young Christians, and even though it developed into a mass movement involving more non-Christians than Christians, it was the Church that provided the umbrella for its growth.

Here is a significant bit of information you will rarely find in your media:

This protest movement had its roots in the popular anger over a barbaric act committed by the regime of East Germany's Communist leader Walter Ulbricht. Ulbricht was a former bordello bouncer.

On his orders, the Communists blew up Leipzig's graceful late-Gothic university church. It stood on Karl-Marx-Platz, formerly - and now again -- called Augustusplatz. Ulbricht, also a native Leipziger, had big plans for transforming this largest square in Germany into the biggest proletarian parade ground in Europe. In Ulbricht, a church had no business standing at such secular venue.

The university church, symbol of Leipzig's academic life, as murdered on May 30, 1968. Three weeks later, the Third International Bach competition took place in Leipzig. During its opening session in the Congress Hall of the Zoo, Aall the Communist bigwigs sat in the front rows, next to prominent personalities of the international Bach community.

Suddenly, invisible hands unrolled a yellow poster from the ceiling of this concert hall causing a gasp. The poster showed the outline of the murdered church, the year of its death --1968 - and the words, "Wir fordern Wiederaufbau" ("We demand Reconstruction").

This spectacular incident drew the attention of the world's musical elite to a Communist outrage. The authors of this demonstration were four young physicists, all Christians. One was eventually betrayed by a West German leftist to East Germany's secret police and sent to prison.

It was this stunning episode that ultimately spawned the resistance movement whose success in November of 1989 Germans are commemorating in these weeks.

I must still beg you to remain with me in Leipzig for a little longer for it is, after all, the capital of the global Bach community, the number one pilgrimage site for Bach lovers from all continents. Of the 850 students at Leipzig's Hochschule für Musik und Theater Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, Germany's oldest state conservatory, almost one quarter hails from Asia. Asians fill the pews of the Thomaskirche during its motet and cantata services.

Japanese in particular have been flocking to Leipzig even in Communist days. One of them was musicologist Keisuke Maruyama. He became a Christian by studying the impact of the weekday pericopes in the 18th-century Lutheran lectionary cycle on Bach's cantatas.

After he had finished his research he told my friend Rev. Johannes Richter, then the superintendent (regional bishop) of the half of Leipzig's Lutheran parishes: "It is not enough the read Christian texts. I want to be a Christian myself. Please baptize me."

When Richter told me this during one of my rare reporting stints to Leipzig, atheism was the state religion of East Germany. On the same occasion I interviewed the members of the Thomanerchor, whose director Bach had been from 1723 until his death in 1750.

Since the Reformation, the Thomanerchor has been a municipal institution, and so it was in Communist days. But under Communism, for the first time in the choir's history, no chaplain was allowed to provide pastoral care to these boys in their boarding school. For the previous 800 years, their predecessors received their instruction in the Christian faith in their dorms; now even table prayers were forbidden. To be catechized they had to go to a nearby church.

But when I asked several of these children whether they were believers they replied: "O yes, almost all of us are. You cannot really sing Bach without faith."

These two examples show that in an era of darkest atheism Bach worked as a missionary - to a scholar from far-away Asia, and to kids raised in a godless environment, and even a ranking Communist functionary.

I remember interviewing the director of the Leipzig Bach Institute of that period. He was a member of the Communist hierarchy. He told me that he could only be an atheist only as long as he did not have to listen to Bach. "It is strange, though, how quickly this changes when I hear Bach's music."

This now really does take me to the global significance of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. I have made the fascinating discovery that whenever I write about Bach for the Atlantic Times, my regular client, these articles automatically appear in its sister paper, the Asia-Pacific Times.

Why should this be so? Because the editors of both publications know that Bach is one of the hottest topics in the Far East. You write about Bach in Germany or in France or in the United States, and Asians gobble it up - so much so that features like these sell advertising space more easily than many other topics.

My wife and I spend our summers in the Dordogne in southwestern France, where towns and villages are gradually restoring their Romanesque parish churches; there are about one thousand of them in the Dordogne alone. These sanctuaries are usually empty, largely for lack of priests. But this changes during the summer thanks to a concert series organized by Ton Koopman, the great Dutch organist and Bach performer, who owns a home there.

Then busloads of music lovers pour into the Dordogne from all over the world, Dutch, Belgians, Germans, Scandinavians, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese. A French count sleeps in a car parked immediately in front of ancient churches where the musicians store their ancient instruments. He protects those instruments literally with his own body against thieves and vandals.

French peasants devoid of musical education suddenly appear in their churches they and their ancestors had ignored for at least two centuries. Their children, until recently ignorant of any form of classical music now join choirs whipped into shape by Koopman, the star, and hitherto unknown instructors.

Wealthy Frenchmen like my friend Francis Vigne, a retired engineer, buy orphaned organs from the Netherlands and Germany and install them in these rural sanctuaries that had never held any instrument since they were built a millennium ago. Now slowly the locals, intrigued by their alien sounds, pop into these churches they had never seen from the inside. And more and more often do I hear them sigh: "All we need now is a pastor."

It is my impression, which I cannot substantiate with statistics, and for which I must beg you to trust my experienced journalist's nose, that all this is a manifestation of what many French call *la grande soif pour Dieux* or, more sophisticatedly, *la soif pour la transcendance*.

I claim that the music of Bach and his contemporaries lures the thirsty to a place where they will be refreshed -- to ancient edifices where they sit tightly packed on narrow benches, often without backrests, and listen to Koopman's Baroque ensemble, more and more and more every year - so much so that many copycats are now imitating Koopman's initiative.

When I see and hear all this I cannot help thinking with enormous sadness and anger of one big Lutheran church near St. Louis, which proudly proclaims: "Here you will never hear the music of Johann Sebastian Bach."

Well, let me tell you this: In southwestern France people might not fill the pews every Sunday but they have also not replaced the altars with sets of drums; they swing along not with praise bands but with Bach, Telemann and Pachelbel, Schütz, Schein and Scheidt. And I have noticed that when the concert season is well over, some of the churches, once so empty, remain packed.

Yes, I do believe that Bach is busily at work as an evangelist, to paraphrase Nathan Söderblom, the former archbishop of Uppsala in Sweden. I also share a similar view expressed by the late Arthur Peacocke, one of the most significant figures in the burgeoning dialogue between Faith and Science.

Peacocke, an Anglican canon and a noted biochemist, sounded much like Martin Luther who once described music as a tool of the Holy Spirit. He specifically made a point to which I am inclined to subscribe to heartily:

The Holy Spirit Himself dictated The Art of the Fugue into Bach's plume.

When I wrote this on my blog site I got into deep waters with Lutheran coreligionists who believe themselves to be more orthodox than I.

What infuriated them was not only my reference to the Holy Spirit's authorship of the Art of the Fugue, but even more so a story of mine describing how Glenn Gould's rendering of the Goldberg Variations, another very abstract work by Bach, had triggered the interest of Masashi Masuda from Hokkaido in northern Japan in Christianity.

Masuda told me on the telephone one day that he wanted to discover the source of this wonderful composition - and was guided to the Christian faith, thus supporting Arthur Peacocke's theory.

Masashi Masuda became a member of the Society of Jesus, and ultimately a professor of systematic theology at Sophia University, a Jesuit-owned school in Tokyo.

You cannot believe the furious electronic missives aimed at me across the internet in response to this report. "Sir, did you not know that the Holy Spirit only works through the Word?" one angry reader chided. I replied, "I thought we had learned in Systematics III that the Holy Spirit blew as he wished.

I apologized saying that I was unaware that the Third Person in the Trinity was under any obligation to study the Book of Concord before blowing? So now we know: The Holy Spirit has no right to use an abstract composition by Johann Sebastian Bach as a shoe ladle for the Word of God.

Another email correspondent seemed ready to burn me at the stake, if only this could be done in cyberspace, for implying in my Masashi Masuda story that the Holy Spirit might have guided this former non-believer to a denominationally incorrect target. "See? Now Siemon-Netto even asserts that Bach has driven this man to the Antichrist."

Rare in a journalist's life are such wonderful occasions when divine irony refutes absurdity with swift fury. On the very day I received this email a friend from Portland, Oregon, sent me this beautiful bit of news: She had a grandson, who used to be a godless lout. Then one day his father gave him a Glenn Gould recording of Bach's Italian Concerto, another work without words.

A few months later, this young man surprised his father by playing the Italian Concerto on the father's piano, from memory. Until that point Dad had had no idea that this teenager even knew how to handle a piano.

Next, the boy informed his grandmother that he would now like to learn how to play the organ.

So from that day on he accompanied her every Sunday to her Lutheran church, and now he can play the organ and has become a Christian. I just copied this bit of her email to my angry interlocutor, self-righteously adding three of the first Latin words I had ever learned: "Quod erat demonstrandum."

As Prof. Robin Leaver told me this morning, Johann Olearius, the 17th-century German mathematician and librarian called the Holy Spirit "der grosse Kapellmeister" (literally, the great orchestra donductor). Again: Quod erat demonstrandum.

This leads me to a fascinating question others are probably more competent to answer than I:

How come that the most destructive and tasteless forms of music and the very best have an almost equal ability to transcend ethnic, cultural and geographic barriers while others don't.

How come you see people twitch to the same inane beat whether you are in Iceland or Okinawa, in Berlin or Bali? If Arthur Peacocke is right that the Holy Spirit disseminates Bach, what do you call the spirit that promulgates rap and Hip Hop but not, for example Schubert's lieder, on a global scale?

We might have to consult psychologists here, perhaps even physicians. After attending a genuine - not touristy - Voodoo séance in Haiti back in 1964 my wife told me that this experience had literally put a spell on her, mesmerized her, changed her physically at least as it was happening.

One physician said that this intense drumbeat actually changes your breathing or your heartbeat. I don't know about that. I was there too, and it did nothing for me. But like my wife, and evidently like huge audiences in Tokyo, I feel profoundly changed when listening to the Art of the Fugue or the final chorus of Bach's St. John's Passion.

There might well be some kind of spirit involved in Rap and Voodoo, in addition perhaps even to temporary biological and physiological transformations. Others might be more competent to opine on this.

But what about the Spirit who made sure that the Japanese with their entirely different musical background grasp the significance of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, whereas most of us Westerners might find the traditional tunes of Japan charming, exotic, an alien delight, but not really overwhelming.

About ten years ago, I put this question in Tokyo to a couple of musicologists, whose names, I am ashamed to say, I have misplaced in my messy archives. They came up with the following theory that might in part explain the current Bach Boom in Japan and other parts of Asia for several decades now.

When Francis Xavier and other Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries landed in southern Japan in the mid-16th century, they brought with them Western-style church music, especially Gregorian chant, and the organ. In fact they built pipe organs from bamboo, and before the sixteenth century was out, some Japanese princes were so accomplished on the Queen of the Instruments that in the 1560s three of them toured European courts playing before kings and princes and before the Pope.

Christianity was eradicated in Japan in the early 17th century. Christians were crucified, burned at the stake, and scorched to death while hanging upside-down over cesspools.

But my Japanese interlocutors told me that while the Christian faith was wiped out, elements of Western music infiltrated Japanese folk song. This influence evidently remained strong enough to help Bach's music sweep Japan four centuries later.

I like this theory. I am sure Arthur Peacocke would have loved it. It comforted me in my perplexity throughout the last four years in St. Louis when I listened to Robert Bergt's spectacular Bach at the Sem performances, and found the huge Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus filled with white heads.

Most of these heads belonged to members of outside communities. I was grateful to see them there. But where were the seminarians in whose theological tradition the music of Johann Sebastian Bach played such a towering role? Where, for that matter, were most of the faculty members?

These concerts were recorded and then repeated over KFUO-FM, this marvelous gift by faithful German-American Lutherans to the larger St. Louis community, a jewel of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod whose reputation is otherwise not really one of winsomeness.

Now this KFUO is being sold for an apple and an egg. The church body whose founder had linked music and the Holy Spirit so closely glibly jettisons one the Comforter's most splendid tools. Ladies and gentlemen, by all means grill me electronically for this outburst: This unfathomable act reminds me hauntingly of Walter Ulbricht's massacre of our University Church in our mutual hometown of Leipzig in 1968.

I have been invited to talk to you about the Global Significance of the Music of Johann Sebastian Bach. You cannot do this without contemplating the Third Person of the Trinity, and I cannot help noticing that He is being mocked in our own family of faith.

Of course you can try to keep the Holy Spirit and his toys out of reality and replace them with kitsch. But be warned. The Holy Spirit will still blow as he wills, perhaps not on Founder's Way in St. Louis, but -- Japan and Korea, in once abandoned Romanesque churches in southwestern France, in the head of a formerly godless lout in Oregon -- and in my head, which keeps finding order and comfort thanks to Bach's incomplete masterpiece, the Art of the Fugue.

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