Identische Musik – plurale Deutung?

Der historische Objektivismus, indem er sich auf seine kritische Methodik beruft, verdeckt die wirkungsgeschichtliche Verflechtung, in der das historische Bewußtsein selber steht. [...] Der historische Objektivismus gleicht darin der Statistik, die eben deshalb ein so hervorragendes Propagandamittel ist, weil sie die Sprache der ‚Tatsachen‘ sprechen läßt und damit eine Objektivität vortäuscht, die in Wahrheit von der Legitimität ihrer Fragestellungen abhängt. 18

Spätestens dann, wenn den Antworten der Musikwissenschaft kein Glaube mehr geschenkt wird, sollte sie beginnen, andere Fragen zu stellen.

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**Who Is Speaking in the Bach Passions?**

Is this an interesting question and do we want to know? Given the rich and vivid texts of Bach’s passions, based on Gospel text, Lutheran chorales and 18th-century poetry, one might claim that there is a clear-cut division of voice and that each personage (whether a historical character, narrator or ‚modern‘ character) is relatively unambiguous. Yet, I would suggest, the text is rather more complex than it might first appear, and when this is coupled with music that is extremely rich in virtually every aspect, the question of who is speaking becomes deeper. There are perhaps three crudely defined categories of view on who or what is speaking in a broader sense, within the music: first, it might mirror and amplify the Gospel text, together with the various interpretative glosses, something that to a believer might ultimately mean that the music is representing or at least serving the voice of God; secondly, it might reflect an outstanding composer’s reaction to the text and its associated theology, together with the deepest of encounters with the styles, techniques and latent possibilities of the music of the age – thus, to all intents and purposes, it is essentially the voice of Bach; and finally, to those of a more formalist persuasion, the music represents itself as a structure of fascinating variety and perfection. The composer remains the major, if largely metaphorical force of identity and unity, but more as a function of the work – evidenced in its quality and design – than as a specific historical personage. These three categories, together with the infinite number of interactions there might be between them, are interesting because they identify different types of listeners – they thus tell us something about ourselves, which is partly why I believe the issue of voice is an important and worthwhile question.

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In many ways, my approach is to find common grounds between my three groups of listeners, the theological, biographical and structural, while acknowledging that each approach brings its own pitfalls. Those who adopt an exclusively theological approach are easily upbraided by the truism that they would not spend so much time on decoding and interpreting this music if it had not made such a tremendous aesthetic impact over the last two centuries; on the other hand, those who adopt an entirely structural approach would surely admit that something was missing if the text were omitted; at the very least, the text would have to be regarded as a ›pretext‹ for much that is successful about the works. It might already be clear that I don’t see definitive answers lying merely in successfully determining the intentions of the composer: after all, we can never be assured of success, and even if we were, it is abundantly clear that all aspects of the works are beyond the composer’s power today. Yet our guesses about Bach are significant, particularly if they lead to a consideration of the specifically human creativity and presence in this music.

So, what is so special about the question of voice in Bach’s Passions? One absolutely obvious element, one that is often noted but rarely contemplated, is the fact that the Biblical text is fundamentally in the third-person, narrative mode, with elements of direct reported speech (most noticeably the speech of Christ). These flashes of first-person speech are given to specific singers, or, in the case of the crowd, the entire chorus. The music thus seems to serve a dual purpose of supporting a narrative and capturing the immediate presence of a speaker. All this may seem relatively unremarkable given our familiarity with Bach’s Passions and the occasional moments of narrative recitative in Handel’s Messiah (significantly, also based on direct biblical quotation). Yet virtually all dramatic music presents speech in the first person without the intermediary of a narrator. The same trend is evident in the fashionable Passion-Oratorio of Bach and Handel’s time, in which the Gospels are merely the narrative source for a directly spoken passion drama and specific characters are developed in operatic fashion; in Brockes’ text the role of the Evangelist is stripped down to present only the bare bones of the story, in rhyming couplets that tend to efface the dramatic impact of the narrative mode. Bach’s passions for liturgical use, together with those of many contemporaries, were undoubtedly old-fashioned in their reliance on biblical text even in the 18th century – but Bach’s clearly stand out for the dramatic and emotional impact. The suspicion arises that the endeavour to turn them into actual operatic dramas – a relatively common 20th-century ambition – somehow misses the subtlety of the fundamentally mixed mode of the narrative. Not only do we have the two levels of biblical narrator and speaking personage, we also have an astonishing variety of textual levels: the Lutheran chorales representing Bach’s local two-century reformation history and the free poetic texts of Brockes or Picander placing us in the Leipzig present. These texts in turn make allusions to past time, well before the time of Christ, and to the future and the end times; this is emphasised particularly in the opening choruses of both passions.

One relatively simple and effective way of explaining all these various narrative levels and temporal allusions is to note the closeness of the role of the oratorio passion to that of the sermon. Elke Axmacher made the discovery that the St Matthew Passion text relied strongly on the preaching traditions, and specifically on a set of published Lutheran sermons in Bach’s possession.² Several writers have gone on to describe some of the many
musical ways in which Bach behaves like a preacher: someone who effectively narrates a text, draws allusions and connections (especially from the Old Testament), draws a moral from each scene in the story and seeks to effect a spiritual transformation in the minds of his listeners. A preacher thus adopts a plethora of voices in order to present a message that is believed to be eternally true and of enduring value. Nevertheless, one immediate inference to draw from this is that a preacher (such as Bach) is not normally set on presenting his own voice or presence – he is performing God’s work rather than his own. If we accept that Bach undoubtedly shared something of this attitude, the resulting conception misses the composer’s voice, together with any specific aesthetic qualities the music might have. Bach may well have been a fine preacher, but this didn’t directly make him a fine musician. And then there is the issue of what the music might say entirely independently of the preacher or composer, how can this music work for those who do not crave conversion?

One thing that the music seems to do is provide continuity between the narration and the immediate presence of the personages. In the case of the role of Christ (in the St Matthew Passion) the string ›halo‹ not only points to his undoubted special status, but also underlines his presence – with additional strings there is, literally, more musical substance present. Presence in the crowd scenes is also underlined by the joining of all voices together into a much larger texture that frequently mimics the very noise and texture of the crowd. But there is more to this sense of flickering, first-person presence, than these forms of musical emphasis. In Bach’s own performances, precisely the same people who were singing the major parts of Christ and the Evangelist were also leading their parts in the chorus (whether doubled or not is not a point we need to argue here!). In other words, we see the same people performing multiple roles, just as the music seamlessly plays the multiple roles of narrative (often articulated through the flow of keys) and mimesis (especially obvious in word painting and the contours of the line), past and present. Quite contrary to an opera, where the illusory presence of each character is generally consistent throughout the work, here several presences happen simultaneously – we almost feel as if the music can take us across centuries in an instant, and can make different personages live within the living, breathing singer of our present. This could obviously be of great significance in a religious sense: Christ was present at a particular juncture, yet has always been present and can be present again, in living people who have the capacity for both good and evil. In a secular context, this complexity might tell us much about the way our own characters are provisionally constituted out of circumstance, the passing of time and, in a very real sense, in counterpoint with others and the world in which we live. This, I would argue, is a feature of the work that is becoming of particular significance in our own time, when our sense of identity has become so fluid and provisional in the wake of modernity’s ambiguous victory. Opera as a genre seems to correspond with a specific moment of modernity, most importantly in the solidification and emancipation of the human subject. But in many ways, Bach’s aesthetic is ›pre-subjective‹, albeit extremely complex and nuanced. Are we perhaps entering a post-subjective age, one in which Bach’s conception perhaps strikes a new resonance?

What has interested me recently is what effect could Bach’s vocal scoring have had on the way the music actually «speaks» in relation to its text and theological stance. In other words, some of the voices and their complexity only become latent in actual performance. Some find it absurd that the same man who sang the part of Christ would also have sung the arias within his part, since, for instance, is seems patently absurd that when Christ dies in the *St John Passion*, he suddenly seems to stand up again and sing the ensuing bass aria »Mein teurer Heiland, laß dich fragen«. Yet there may be good reason for this juxtaposition. First, one of the central points of John’s Gospel is the view of Christ as divine from the start and that his resurrection and victory are all preordained the mechanical means by which we achieve salvation. In this aria, the singer who has just played the part of Christ now speaks as a human who asks if the process of salvation has indeed been achieved through Christ’s death. With the line »Es ist vollbracht, bin ich vom Sterben freigemacht?«, the sense of the singer’s salvation is particularly strong; having just »died« he now has the means towards eternal life, he is »freed from death« both as a human being and as Christ himself. Moreover, the accompanying chorale begins with the lines »Jesu, der du warest tot, lebest nun ohn Ende« addressed by the entire chorus of singers to the very singer who took the part of Christ. At the moment of his death, his resurrection and immortality are thus assured.

Closely related to this role of music as strongly evoking a particular meaning through its connotations as a sounding phenomenon is its functioning as a form of translation. There does seem to be a sense in which Bach clearly believed music – as a voice in its own right – to be a reliable medium of translation, most specifically at the final words of Christ, where the original Hebrew text is sung by the bass taking the role of Christ, closely followed by the translation into German by the evangelist. As Martin Geck has observed, this translation is effected by a direct transposition up a 4th, using the same intervals and even accidentals in the same place in the notation.2 To Bach, it seems that the translation from Hebrew to German is analogous to the direct transposition of a melody and chords. If music is so powerful, what other ways could it be used to decipher that which seems at first obscure? The evangelist’s quotation of the bass’s words in the first person, also suggests that the move from one time zone to the other is merely a matter of a form of transposition.

It may be worth dwelling on the beliefs Bach’s generation might have had in the special powers of music, for, as David Y earsley has recently shown, the very art of counterpoint was seen as a way of engendering a foretaste of heaven on earth, something of particular comfort to the dying. Mattheson, quoting J.A. Herbst, stated that the music of heaven »will be performed in the angelic, heavenly choir, with the highest perfection […] in all eternity to the praise of God«. Another contemporary noted that so rich would the celestial counterpoint be that earthy music would sound monophonic by comparison.3 In this light it is easy to see the counterpoint of the opening chorus of Matthew, together with its eschatological imagery, as not only Christ’s foretaste of heaven but also our own. Many German Lutheran writers also saw their Christian beliefs in the cosmic pow-

er of music as of a piece with the Orpheus myth (»David was the Hebrew Orpheus« according to Herbst⁴) – in this sense music is the medium that specifically belongs to the temperaments of both God and man.

Yet, perhaps imagining Bach’s complex music as a benevolent foretaste is not as simple as it seems. For Bach uses counterpoint to depict the bad as well as the good: there is, for instance, the exact canon for the two false witnesses showing how they are repeating, parrot-fashion what they have been told to say; there is the permutation fugue »Wir haben ein Gesetz« in the St John Passion. In such instances the music serves its immediate purpose well since the contrapuntal procedures are appropriate both for the sense of the situation (following an instruction or law) and the aural image of several people saying the same thing at close intervals. One begins to wonder whether the voice of music has any conscience at all – it would have been much simpler for us had Bach simply written bad music for the more negative aspects of the text. Bach (like Luther) might well have argued that well-written music is intrinsically good and that its juxtaposition with evil points to the truth to which the singers are blind. This is harder for us without a systematic cosmological belief about music, but the notion that music – as a subject in its own right – can be good and bad simultaneously is perhaps useful in pointing to the complexity of our own moral constitution and choices; this teaches us that many things are latent within us, both as individuals and collectively.

If we are to accept music as embodying its own subjectivity, providing a voice or voices independent of a specific text or human actor, can it take on a role as a model or ideal for human action and behaviour?

The final example concerns the way that »Erbarme dich« (St Matthew Passion) has been written for its performers. We tend to regard it as a superlative solo for Alto accompanied by a violin obligato that sets the scene, but which is basically subservient to the voice. However, if most who are familiar with the work were asked to sing the melody, the likelihood is that they would try and hum the violin melody and not the alto part which diverts into counter-melody after the opening gesture. In other words, Bach has written a melody that is basically impossible to sing in its entirety. The voice can sing the fragments that come within its range but then can only shadow the violin, singing a simple version of the same melody or singing a counter-melody. In an aria that relates so directly to human failing, coming at the point at which Peter has betrayed Christ, we hear a model of musical perfection – the opening ritornello for solo violin – to which a human (i.e. the singer) aspires without ever quite succeeding.

There is also a sense in which the opening ritornello dominates the whole piece in a structural sense: it sets the scene as the complete, opening 8-bar ritornello, then it is essentially repeated – both in segments and as a whole – throughout the remainder of the piece. Often the returns of the ritornello, such as in the last section of the vocal part, are not even evident in casual listening. In other words, a model of musical perfection – as realized by the agile violin – not only represents an unattainable model for the singer but also is there throughout the piece as the very support for its musical being, sometimes more evi-

⁴ Johann Andreas Herbst, Musica Moderna Pratica, Nürnberg 1653, preface.
dent (such as when there is an interlude – what would often be called the ritornello proper) but just as often concealed. Here then there seems to be a musical model of perfection that lies behind the entire music that could well be an allegory for a model of spiritual perfection, the model of Christ that we are all enjoined to imitate even in the knowledge that we cannot entirely succeed.

Perhaps it is here that music can teach us to aim higher – music is something that is humanly created, specifically to point to higher truth, but in turn points well beyond its original context and function. The voices we find can reflect what we want to hear, but they can also challenge us to hear further and find alternatives. One feature in the culture of much music, but especially in popular music, is the way it seems designed to confirm the identity we have already or to encapsulate an identity or »group« to which we would like to belong. It reinforces our own voices, or that of our »group«, and comforts us with our own presence. Bach’s music does a different service: what it does is confront us with supremely human voices, some of which we may love, some of which we hate, many with which we can identify, but some which ultimately challenge us with worlds that are always slightly beyond our immediate abilities and experience. Works such as the Passions not only suggest many alternative identities, but show us how such identities can emerge, blend or disappear within a musical world bounded only by the harmonic and stylistic practice of Bach’s age.

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Zur Genealogie der Musik

Nietzsches antimetaphysische Musikästhetik in
Menschliches, Allzumenschliches

In seinem Buch *Nietzsche in Weimar* zeichnet Manfred Riedel ein düsteres Bild der Geschichte der Nietzsche-Rezeption. Diese Rezeption sei, besonders in der »Kulturstadt«, von Anfang an gekennzeichnet durch Missverständnisse, Vereinnahmungen und Instrumentalisierungen. Als Hauptmerkmal der allseitigen Inanspruchnahme könne das Phänomen der Banalisierung Nietzsches gelten, Banalisierung im ursprünglichen Sinn verstanden als Einhegung, als Akkommodation eines komplexen und problematischen Denkens an Gewohntes und längst Bekanntes.¹

Eine nicht unähnliche Diagnose muss sich dem Betrachter aufdrängen, der sich Nietzsches Musikästhetik zuwendet. »Nietzsche und die Musik« – das hieß und heißt bislang immer »Nietzsche und Wagner«. Was man üblicherweise über das Thema zu sagen weiß,