

# The Postmodern Mindset, Musicology and the Future of Bach Scholarship

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## Introduction

'Postmodernism' and 'postmodernity' have become rather irksome, slippery terms. Do they refer to styles, a period, a condition or a cultural-political preference? My view is that the stylistic definition is usefully applied only to a rather narrow band of artistic enterprises and that to see postmodernism as a specific ideal is to convert it into a form of utopia that is as little feasible as it is inherently dangerous. However, to claim that we have entered a period of 'postmodernity' does make some sense to me, provided we view it more as a description than a prescription and that we don't have any pre-formulated views as to what is postmodern and what is not. Some – perhaps sensibly – suggest that another term might be more appropriate. Arthur C. Danto prefers terms such as 'contemporaneity', or the period 'after the end of art' or 'history'.<sup>1</sup> I must quash at the outset the inference that art or history thus cease to exist, it is rather that they can no longer be fitted into neat and enclosed categories or stories containing a discrete canon of works, events or heroes, all pointing to an ever-perfectible future. Even relatively conservative figures, such as Jacques Barzun writing in his nineties, suggest that we are entering a period of comparative stasis, not unlike that which we often perceive as characterising the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> Of course, he was writing just before global terrorism came to dominate the western imagination, and it may well be that what could ultimately be a disastrous 'war on terror' will render the cultural stasis of postmodernity (or contemporaneity) more short-lived than we might previously have imagined.

I would hold on to the term 'postmodernity' because of its verbal link with the 'modern' which thus suggests a conceptual dependence on 'modernity' itself. Postmodernity could thus refer to that state in which 'modernism' and modernisation have in some sense been 'completed' with the total dominance of

<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. Danto, *After the End of Art – Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), esp. p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Barzun, *From Dawn to Decadence – 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), esp. pp. 799-802.

the flow of global capital in virtually every element of increasingly administered life. It is that which Fredric Jameson describes as the 'cultural logic of late capitalism' in which the modern has led to a sense of historical rootlessness and a seemingly limitless potential for self-creation and recycling. Everything becomes contingent and all values become relative in a world in which the market value of everything is in a state of constant flux.<sup>3</sup> According to Jameson's theory, the modern is successful to the degree that it purposely severs our link with the past; the postmodern is the direct result of this success, but it is something that was not necessarily predicted within - or during - the tortuous process of modernisation. This includes a new relationship to our history as no longer so directly part of ourselves as it once was; the past is something we might nonetheless try to recreate and understand, but accompanied by a certain sense of 'historical deafness'. It is precisely this deafness (i.e. a lack of critical discernment where everything from the past seems equally good or bad, relevant or irrelevant) that makes us crave the past to a degree that would have seemed entirely indiscriminate to most of our ancestors. What makes this postmodern world both so interesting and so dangerous is the fact that the chances of genuine communication are so slim between those cultures that find themselves in a state of 'completed' modernity, those still undergoing a process of modernisation and those which resist modernisation, often using the most deadly of modern means.

Whatever the eventual consequences of the 'war on terrorism', I would claim that by their nature the various fundamentalisms at large in the world are themselves largely of a piece with the postmodern condition. As Jameson has noted, however much fundamentalists might intend to return to the purity of a lost practice, they do so in the wake of changes wrought by modernity, changes that make the contemporary situation fundamentally different from any past. Moreover, the impulse to restore lost practices is born of the desire to compensate for modernity's ultimate severance of historical roots,<sup>4</sup> something that I have claimed as being a central impetus behind the historically-informed performance movement.<sup>5</sup>

## Postmodern musicologies

Turning from a necessarily generalised diagnosis of the world at large to the microscopic province of musicology, there is no doubt that musicology in the west has experienced a sea-change in attitudes towards the functions and methods of the discipline. Those writers who proclaim themselves as postmoderns often claim that they are restoring the human interest in musical discourse - a sort of secular empathy thus replaces the impersonal, quasi-religious certainties of so-called modernist (or 'objectivist') scholarship. Music

<sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham N.C., 1991); see also Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London, New York, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 386-91.

<sup>5</sup> John Butt, *Playing with History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. chs. 5 and 6.

ceases to be that hermetically-sealed object existing apart from our everyday concerns, and becomes instead a line within an infinitely-expanding polyphony of cultural practice. This has led to a renewed emphasis on the performative – both in terms of the object of study and the style of musicological writing itself – at the expense of stable, timeless, concepts and works. With the death of so-called ‘grand narratives’ (which, in music, would include such elements as rationality, progress, historical imperatives, unity and structural depth) music scholarship often compensates for the shallowness of its musical analysis by developing a virtuoso interdisciplinary pluralism. This can lead to an almost hedonistic engagement with music and culture – an ‘anything-goes’ attitude that has so often suggested to those of an ‘old-fashioned’ radical bent that postmodernism is an irresponsibly decadent prolongation of the status quo. But it has also, conversely, led to the further entrenchment of the old Marxist view that everything is political. Thus, while to some the postmodern condition allows an element of sophisticated play to be introduced into musicology, to others, its pluralistic perspective demands that everything we cherish must be demystified. This recycles the notion of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ by which virtually anything that has been held dear in the western tradition has to be debunked in order to reveal hidden iniquities of power. If there is one characteristic that applies both to the postmodern condition and to the self-proclaimed postmodern musical scholarship of recent years, it is the recognition of contingency in every position, event and artistic expression. Truth is no longer a single unitary thread to which everything ultimately adheres but the infinite plurality of perspectives and value systems that must somehow co-exist if we are to survive at all.

Bach studies have been affected only obliquely by the postmodern directions in musicology. Many of us, I’m sure, will claim that it’s just a matter of carrying on as normal and waiting for all the nonsense to subside (this attitude clings to British notions of musicology, if not to all British musicologists, to a degree seldom evident elsewhere). However, if there’s anything we can learn from the history of the discipline of musicology, it is that most forms of musical scholarship mirror – at some distance – developments in the other fields of the humanities and culture. Thus the new ways of thinking in music are, if anything, trailing a broader movement rather than embracing some momentary trend. And this broader movement is not merely an American phenomenon, as so many UK musicians seem to believe (not that this would necessarily matter, given the crucial importance of American musicology over the last fifty years). On the other hand, given that there are several voices calling for a move beyond the postmodern theory of the last thirty years, particularly given its apparent impotence from a political standpoint, it could be that musicology now has an opportunity to leap beyond the smug cultural clichés of postmodern theory.<sup>6</sup> But any step beyond self-conscious postmodernity can hardly mean a return to the perceived certainties of old.

There is no doubt that the main weight of musicology has recently lain in the study of nineteenth-century (and, increasingly, twentieth-century) music, the rich

<sup>6</sup> For one of the more recent attacks on the political and moral impotence of critical theory, see Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Penguin, 2003).

intertextuality of which plays directly into postmodern concerns. While seventeenth-century opera, with all its ambiguities of gender and moral purpose, has been another obvious area of interest, the attention given to much of the eighteenth century (and even to Bach), is strikingly slight.<sup>7</sup> Notable exceptions among those prominent musicologists who are not specifically Bach scholars, include Susan McClary who attempts to show Bach as something of a political revolutionary with the supposed reversed hierarchies of a Brandenburg concerto; Laurence Kramer attempts to play some Bach keyboard music in his highly subjective postmodern monologue about how one engages with music, and Suzanne Cusick enjoys playing the Canonic Variations as an articulation of lesbian sexuality.<sup>8</sup>

However, a few Bach scholars have embraced some elements of the postmodern turn: Michael Marissen has modified McClary's revolutionary view of Bach by showing that the subversion of hierarchies in instrumental music has strong Lutheran roots. He has also worked on the hoary issue of the anti-Semitic (or at least anti-Judaic) elements of the St John Passion. He tried to show that Bach mollified the anti-Judaic tradition lying behind the work and thus made the best he could out of a bad job.<sup>9</sup>

One thing to note at this stage is that Bach scholars tend to take a defensive attitude towards the composer: they show him to have been as well-intentioned as possible in order to ward off any potential attacks from the band of deconstructionists and politically-correct police just waiting to pounce on the composer's seemingly rigid religion and absolutist politics. Another thing this shows, perhaps less consciously, is the acceptance that the artist as a person is a significant part of the evaluation of the music. This marks a striking deviation from the modernist view that it is the artefact that is of paramount importance and that the artist himself is an almost-dispensable historical midwife, however simple or fascist he (or she) might have been. Hard-line postmodernists would, of course, dispose of the concept of authorship in a way far more radical than that of the formalists. Nevertheless, I would relate the renewed interest in the biography and personality of the composer (greatly boosted by the recent publications of the anniversary of 2000) to two wider symptoms of the postmodern condition: the interest in the human aspects of art on the one side, and the culture of restoration on the other.

<sup>7</sup> The recent foundation of the journal *Eighteenth Century Music* was specifically aimed at redressing this balance.

<sup>8</sup> Susan McClary, 'The Blasphemy of Talking Politics during Bach Year', in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds.) *Music and Society: the Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 13-62; Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 233-42; Suzanne G. Cusick, 'On a Lesbian Relation with Music: a Serious Effort not to Think Straight', in Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood and Gary C. Thomas (eds.) *Queering the Pitch: the New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 67-83.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Marissen, *The Social and Religious Designs of J. S. Bach's Brandenburg Concertos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism, and Bach's St John Passion* (Oxford and New York, 1998).

By the latter term – restoration – I allude to the fact that it has become acceptable to return to forms of expression and enquiry that were relatively recently outlawed by high modernism: biography, meaning, even religious elements in music. In other words, there is a real sense in which Bach scholarship has returned to concerns that were current in the nineteenth century and up until the middle of the twentieth. It has become acceptable again to relate Bach's music to his life and personality, and also to see him as a figure deeply concerned with his religious calling. This is often connected to the articulation of theological points through his music and its interaction with the texts at hand. With Eric Chafe's writing we almost get the sense that he picked up Friedrich Smend's pen, just where he'd left it.<sup>10</sup> There is perhaps a broader knowledge of the music and the historical-theoretical background, but basically Chafe's hermeneutic programme differs little from that which was in place some half a century before. Even within writing that adheres to the concept of a close analytical reading of the music, there has been this humanising turn: Laurence Dreyfus, for instance, sets great store on the intentional stance still evident in the music as it stands before us. Our interest in it, he claims, lies partly in our intuition of a human mind at work, dealing with real human problems and decisions as to how to proceed, working around necessary imperfections.<sup>11</sup> Objective formalism is thus tempered with the sense of a creative energy latent in the music, now a process instigated by the composer who is, in a sense, still active. The music is no longer just the artefact that he merely finished and then left. Returning to earlier, more humanistic, forms of music criticism thus partly reverses the dehumanising implications of modernisation and modernist analysis.

Many will see the culture of restoration as a generally retrogressive movement. It is certainly evident in a wide range of cultural areas: house restoration and period style, and our own historical performance movement. As I've written at length elsewhere, it is primarily from a modernist perspective that any departure from progress is seen as cultural treachery.<sup>12</sup> If one thing is clear from our contemporary age it is that progress at any cost and in every field no longer seems to carry the imperative that it once did. While few of us could argue that progress in medical science is a bad thing, there are many areas where our culture or lifestyle has become 'modern enough' and where further relentless progress can only lead to self-destruction. The return to period styles, the restorations of the heritage industry might themselves be a reaction to the very impersonal horrors brought on by too swift a modernisation; battery housing and urban motorways have both obliterated long-cherished neighbourhoods and seriously compromised our standard of living. Historical reconstruction and returns to past ways are thus a bid to recapture a past that is out of reach. Through the very success of modernisation and the inhuman division of labour some of us can now

<sup>10</sup> Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996); see also 'Bachian Invention and its Mechanisms', in John Butt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 171-92.

<sup>12</sup> See Butt, *Playing with History*, pp. 183-217.

- with an unprecedented economic surplus that buys us the time and the tools - afford to return to the ethos of the craftsman.

Nevertheless, given the break caused by successful modernisation, there's a sense in which whatever past is restored is profoundly different from what actually happened in the past. Thus, however traditional or retrogressive a style of art, practice or scholarship might be today, it is operating in a context that has never been more different and thus, in a very real sense, it is new. The recent return of interest in the religious context within Bach scholarship is addressing a world profoundly different from that of fifty years ago (the same might be said of Christian revivals in eastern Europe and even the evangelical revival in America). Even our most objective understanding of the religious culture of Bach's age is inescapably different from that held by scholars of the mid-twentieth century.

Another pervasive return of recent years is that of numerology and 'secret' messages or symbols embedded within the music. As Ruth Tatlow has shown, Smend's grand theory for Bach's use of number alphabets was developed at a time of great personal danger and uncertainty in the world situation.<sup>13</sup> The resurgence of this phenomenon coincides more or less directly with the notion of conspiracy theory, which Fredric Jameson describes as 'a degraded attempt...to think the impossible totality of the contemporary world system.'<sup>14</sup> In other words, the more the world around us seems out of our control, the more plural its systems of power, the more we try to intuit some hidden order that somehow controls us; by understanding it we feel that we are recovering some degree of control over our world. By finding something secret within Bach's music we may feel we are beginning to understand what we were already intuiting in its boundless sonic qualities. A Bach whom we can explain and pin down to a specific message, hidden yet always profound, might thus provide some degree of comfort in a world of ever-increasing openness.

In short then, the return of many earlier approaches to Bach should not automatically be dismissed as the stultifying lack of originality in a flattened-out world. As we are all constantly being told, recycling is a concept we are going to have to accept as an imperative in our future society. The culture of restoration is not the result of a lack of progress but the reaction to too much progress on a blandly massive scale. I'm not trying to say that everything retro is automatically good (least of all the 'conspiracy theory' approach to Bach), rather that it is authentically related to our needs and outlooks and that, with vastly changed external circumstances, it is to some degree 'new'.

### **Bachian ideology under pressure?**

However, the fact remains that Bach studies are still somewhat removed from the most lively arenas of music scholarship (and, perhaps even more importantly, public discourse about music). Seldom does Bach feature in the keynote

<sup>13</sup> Ruth Tatlow, *Bach and the Riddle of the Number Alphabet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), esp. pp. 1-36.

<sup>14</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 38.

addresses of the great international conferences, there's a sense in which he's simply absent from the hottest debates. It was, for instance, highly significant that the discursive elements of Radio 3's 2005 'Bach Christmas' tended to avoid anything that was too controversial or that questioned the quality of the entire oeuvre of Bach's works (which were programmed in their entirety). Many will obviously argue that keeping Bach as a 'reserved area' is just as well, given the sorts of things that now get the new musicological pulse racing. Indeed, it might be possible to argue that Bach has *always* stood somewhat apart from the central musical discourses, although as Carl Dahlhaus argued, the composer did become the key player in German musical thought just after the Matthew Passion revival of 1829, achieving a 'point of perfection' that has seldom been attained since.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, my suspicion is that even if Bach is always out of fashion by definition, he is now more out of fashion than ever. Musicologists who see postmodernism as a specific, desirable stance may well be avoiding Bach because of his strong associations with a recent modernist ideology. There is no doubt that Bach was crucially central to the principal poles of musical modernism: the objective, elegant neo-classicism of Stravinsky; the craftsman's ethic of Hindemith; the deep constructivist ideology of the Second Viennese School; and the alternately hated and ridiculed high modernism of the 1950s' generation.

Of course, if we were being 'genuine' postmodernists we would argue that there is no intrinsic connection between Bach and twentieth-century modernism, that there is nothing that essentially links him to high formalism because there is nothing essential about any music of any period or composer. And even without adopting the radically anti-essentialist approach we might profitably observe that the history of Bach reception reveals a broad range of angles from which Bach has been appreciated: one moment for his formal perfection, one moment for his poetic character, one for his wild virtuosity, another for his rhetorical speech-like quality, and of course most often for his religious profundity. Might it be, then, that we could find an element in his music that links it to our current concerns and interests?

It is hard to escape the fact though that Bach's music has a structural presence that is weightier than most in the classical canon and 'structural presence' is specifically that element of western music which is currently most under siege. Moreover, there were certain elements within the ideology developed by Bach's close supporters, if not by himself, that became a thread in the high cultural conception of music and thus eventually essential to the modernist standpoint. The Bach circle saw his music as going beyond the imperfections of nature towards a 'truer' nature underlying creation; his music was special specifically for its difference from the ordinary; according to Marpurg it stood as an enduring masculine structure in the face of the superficialities of womanly fashion.<sup>16</sup> Standing in the face of the popular or the acceptable, shocking the audience while

<sup>15</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Foundations of Music History*, trans. by J. B. Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 156-58.

<sup>16</sup> Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel (eds.), *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, revised and expanded by Christoph Wolff (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), pp. 375-77 (translation of *Bach-Dokumente*, III, no. 643).

assuming oneself to be alluding to a higher truth or reality (beyond the apprehension of those who were merely 'respectable'), was to become a central feature of modernist art. Bach himself certainly showed tendencies that were to be prized by the modernists of the twentieth century: an increasing specificity in the notation at the expense of the performer's freedom and, if the 1730 'sketch for a well-regulated church music' is anything to go by, a desire that performers become expert at one instrument only so that they can contribute better to the overall production of the music establishment.<sup>17</sup> This suggests a 'rationalising' impulse and the desire for a division of labour that ran in the face of Bach's own artisan background and became an essential element in the very process of western modernisation. Bach's attitude to the teaching of composition also betrayed a new pedagogy in which theory and abstract counterpoint exercises were abandoned in favour of a more practical approach to composition. By making the actual pieces of music the focus of the education of his more advanced students and providing exemplary works to facilitate this process, Bach engendered a new respect for the theoretical qualities of concrete composition. Whereas one traditionally showed intellectual superiority by believing oneself not to be concerned with the actualities of live music, whether in composition or performance, Bach's attitude contributed greatly to the notion that the weight of intellectual thought lies in the activity of the composer as individual creator and in the specific work produced. If it would be glib and anachronistic to claim that Bach shared anything directly with the modernists of the twentieth century, there is surely a relation of contiguity, a handing-down of an ever-evolving ideology of music, relating to the wider cultural drift of rationalism and the Enlightenment which peaked in modernism: Bach stands near the beginning of this mindset, Stravinsky and Schoenberg near to its end. Claude Lévi-Strauss's now dated structuralist approach seems to provide a telling insight in his musical-historical analogy within his study of food practices, *The Raw and the Cooked*. He links Bach and Stravinsky as the outer members of a closed cycle (both emphasising the code of music), the inner members of which (from Beethoven to Ravel) emphasise message, myth, then message again. As he states 'when one lists these composers in chronological order, the special functions to which they relate form a closed cycle, as if to demonstrate that in the space of two centuries tonal music has exhausted its internal possibilities of renewal'.<sup>18</sup>

Does this suggest that all is lost for Bach, that the 250 year-old culture he dominates has itself run out of steam? First, even if it is true that a certain process – modernisation, rationalisation, disenchantment etc. – has run its course, there is also no doubt that whatever position we are in today could not have happened without this process. That culture is certainly different in that we have come out the other side of it, but awareness of it is surely necessary if we wish to understand the roots (and hence the contingencies) of our own condition. Secondly, such is the culture of recycling and pluralism – however bland this may

<sup>17</sup> See Ulrich Siegele, 'Bach and the Domestic Politics of Electoral Saxony', *The Cambridge Companion to Bach*, pp. 17-34, esp. p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques* vol.1: *Le cru et le cuit* (Paris: 1964); trans. John and Doreen Weightman as *The Raw and the Cooked* (New York: Penguin, 1969), p. 30.



sometimes be – that virtually anything from the past is of interest and ripe for restoration. If the great continuous culture of classical music has ended in one sense, it can be convincingly revived in another. As I've noted already, the revival will be profoundly different from the 'original' even if the details are duplicated precisely, since the reception – our contemporary and future worlds – is so changed. However much we might lament the cessation of 'progress' and the interruption of a 'true' tradition, conscious revival might be the only way of recovering whatever might still be valuable in these ideals.

To return to Bach, much of today's scholarship can enlighten us by introducing new historical perspectives, finding new ways in which the music signified and has its effect on the original listeners and those throughout its long history of reception. This is as useful to us today as it has ever been since, as I've suggested already, recovering our historicity is a very necessary activity in our state of marooned modernity. Moreover, the historicist approach is useful to the degree that we can assimilate historical meanings and significance remarkably easily, thus making them at least a part of our own interests and concerns. However, what seems particularly crucial to understand is why Bach's music can still mean anything at all to us in such a changed world (its vigorous revival in certain non-western cultures, especially Japan, could be an important area of study). Many might believe that there are essential elements of Bach's achievement which are universally valid, regardless of time and place. We should be wary of ridiculing beliefs of any kind, and these are certainly serious beliefs. However, to peddle universals in a world as diverse and disunited as ours is not necessarily the most useful ploy overall. What we surely need to do is that which has really been done all along in Bach reception: interpret him according to the interests and presuppositions of our own age.

### **Bach as a new critical tool?**

What might be particularly significant today is the possibility that one aspect of the creative context of Bach's life might actually provide a parallel to our current situation. Then, just as now, Bach belonged to a particular musical culture that was more or less in decline. Anyone who wished to show themselves to be with the times would have viewed music as a subservient handmaid to verbal text, and as something that was relatively simple and tuneful and, above all, accessible. This view was considered progressive because it supposedly accorded most with 'nature'. Today a very similar aesthetic rules musical culture, the conceptual balance in western music is weighted more towards the performance and performer than the composer and work; complexity or inaccessibility is viewed with suspicion. Even popular music is considerably simpler and more accessible than it was a few decades ago. It is 'natural' in its comforting celticisms, pleasingly progressive in its use of the most up-to-date technology; its very unoriginality, its banal, platitudinous profanities provide succour in a confusing world.

Bach's musical aesthetic, then and now, was held by a relatively articulate minority, one part of which had a siege mentality, holding out for good old-fashioned values, the other part seeing itself, more productively, as the guardian of a more enlightened future. Laurence Dreyfus has made the interesting point that Bach actually set himself up, through his music, as a critic of the prevailing Enlightenment mentality.<sup>19</sup> David Yearsley has been developing this approach with the view that Bach actively engaged with the aesthetic debates of his age through his music. Works such as *ClavierÜbung* III and 'Vom Himmel hoch' contain several examples of his purposely reversing the presuppositions of the age: the intricate and complex can sound entirely accessible while gestures associated with the 'galant' are often rendered obscure and strangely inaccessible.<sup>20</sup>

Could it be, then, that we who appreciate Bach's achievement might actually be able to recover the critical level of this music and redeploy it as part of a critical stance towards the present? However unfashionable complexity and structural emphasis might be today, Bach's astonishing achievement as a polyphonist is surely instructive for our age. His polyphony works on many levels beyond that of merely combining musical melodies, covering elements such as style, allusion, form and genre. He combined things in ways that were often deemed impossible at the time – or at least distasteful – as in the case of combining galant and serious styles. His countless lessons in polyphony are surely relevant for the very necessary polyphony of the present. But his music also gives us a sense of depth that is so often absent in a world where plurality and populism can have a levelling influence (and our contemporary situation is surely perilously complex, deep even, however flat the results might often be). A more engaged Bach criticism might help us deal with depth and complexity in a way that is profoundly satisfying but also instructive and thought-provoking. In this respect, the comparative accessibility of his music renders it considerably more potent than the esoteric complexity of late modernist music. However much such music might embody the horrific truth of the modern condition (as Adorno would have put it), it has proved singularly impotent culturally and politically. Rather than concentrating on Bach as the composer of a closed, finite canon of masterworks, we need to look for the productive openness of his achievement, the implications of which seem already to have rendered his music relevant to astonishingly diverse eras and cultures.

<sup>19</sup> Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention*, pp. 219-44.

<sup>20</sup> David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), esp. pp. 98-119.