

Evangelists of the postmodern: Reconfigurations of Bach since 1985

HARRY WHITE

1. Those masterful images

If Sebastian Bach and his admirable son Emanuel, instead of being musical directors in commercial cities, had been fortunately employed to compose for the stage and public of great capitals, such as Naples, Paris, or London, and for performers of the first class, they would doubtless have simplified their style more to the level of their judges; the one would have sacrificed all unmeaning art and contrivance, and the other been less fantastical and *recherché*, and both, by writing in a style more popular, and generally intelligible and pleasing, would have extended their fame, and been indisputably the greatest musicians of the present century.

Charles Burney, *A General History of Music* (1789)

It is no longer a surprise to encounter the music of J. S. Bach as a decisive agent in the musicological discourse of postmodernism, even if the protean condition of that discourse in relation to Bach is nevertheless arresting. Although his music continues to preoccupy a more conservative musicology (in which textual criticism, source-study and performance practice silently affirm an enduring and profound reception of its cultural authority), Bach also exerts an influence in the development of postmodern musicological thought which is nothing less than exemplary. Indeed, he appears as chief witness for the prosecution of so many distinct strands of musicological deconstruction that the exemplary condition of his own music extends to (or symbolises) a defence or negative reading of western musical culture as this is now arraigned, interrogated and re-contextualised. This is not to suggest that Bach's music exists in an atemporal (or ahistorical) relationship with those critical discourses which enlist it, but rather to observe its formative (and frequently problematic) status in the enterprise of historical and critical interpretation.

This exemplary condition is especially apparent (and acute) in the domain of Anglo-American musicology since the Bach Year 1985, but of course its origins lie

much further back than that.¹ It is sufficient here to remark that Bach has been enlisted both to define and to dismantle the western canon; to exemplify and to indict the hegemony of German musical culture; to reify and to condemn the immanent relationship between musical art and Christian theism; to affirm and to undermine the privileged relationship between word and tone in European art music; to validate and to interrogate the apolitical condition of art music; to consolidate and to dissolve the concept of composition as a stable entity in western music; to extend and to impugn the claims of German musical idealism; and to reinstate the autonomy of musical discourse as a sovereign engagement with modernity in the aftermath of a notably stringent postmodernism.

In the first instance, these radical shifts in perspective, promoted with plural vigour in Anglo-American musicology of the present generation, suggest (consciously or otherwise) that Bach has been used to promote a general reaction against those principles of music history which in other quarters continue to obtain, untroubled by the radical realignments proposed by postmodernism. Thus companions, guides, narrative histories and specialised studies continue to affirm a Bach largely (but not entirely) unaffected by the new musicology and its resonances, even if such publications occasionally demonstrate the abiding problem of accommodating Bach within a context limited to his own place in the continuum of time and musical event.² But it would be specious to pretend that our general perspective on Bach—specifically one which is invariably divided in its allegiances to narrative and social history (the provincial cantor almost completely at odds with his musical environment) and to reception history (the formative genius of German musical sovereignty)—remains unaffected by the critical enlistments of his music which I have identified here.

Four of these enlistments are especially germane to the argument developed in this article. Although Susan McClary, Lydia Goehr, Richard Taruskin and John Butt represent Bach to almost entirely separate ends, their work allows us to configure the 'New Bach' Testament (as against the 'Old') as one which profoundly alters not only the reception history of Bach's own music, but also the more general narrative in which this history is inscribed.³ In this process, the

¹ For a recent summary of the Bach revival from the publication of J. N. Forkel's biography of Bach (1802) onwards, see Yo Tomita (ed.), *Bach, The Baroque Composers* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), xv–xxviii. It is perhaps salutary to add that Tomita notes the omission of reception history from this compendium of essays because this aspect of Bach research is still considered to be 'work in progress' (xxviii). None of the work considered in this essay falls within its contents or purview.

² The difficulty of accommodating Bach within the confines of narrative history is illustrated by his representation in Simon P. Keefe (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). See my review of this volume in *Music & Letters*, 93/1 (February 2012), 132–6, in which I express the view on page 134 that the assessment of Bach's church music therein downplays the composer's imaginative extremism so as to contextualise his achievement as a working church musician.

³ I make no special claim for the 'New' Bach and the 'Old' as fixed categories except to acknowledge the marked difference between Bach reception before and after 1945. The 'Old' Bach was the supreme intelligencer of German musical sovereignty, a mode of representation that scarcely obtains any longer, even within the domain of conservative Bach scholarship otherwise dedicated to the maintenance of his 'stand-alone' status. Although the 'New' Bach is

Bach story illustrates a wider reorientation in which the musical artwork loses ground to such a degree that its meaning is not merely relativised (or deprived of 'universal' significance), but reconfigured in the light of its postmodern attenuations. It would be fatuous to suggest that McClary, Goehr, Taruskin and Butt are exclusively responsible for this state of affairs; but consider McClary's insistence that we appropriate Bach as an agent of radical discontent with the canon, Goehr's strategic deconstruction of Bach as a composer of musical works, Taruskin's criticism of his aesthetic, religious and expressive orthodoxies, and Butt's no less strategic recovery of the imaginative autonomy of individual works by Bach in the wake of such readings. There are good grounds for arguing that these views collectively reflect the more general trajectory of Anglo-American musicology of the past generation.⁴ The unmistakable repudiation of canonic authority (and of German canonic authority in particular), alongside a new orthodoxy in which musical discourse becomes a congeries of meta-narratives through which the holistic autonomy of the art work all but disappears, are by now familiar features of this trajectory. Thus the deconstruction of Bach's musical discourse in favour of 'our own political ends' (McClary), his radically altered status as a composer (Goehr), his embodiment of an anti-Enlightenment aesthetic and his role in the creation of a (subsequently undermined) hegemony of German musical idealism (Taruskin), and most recently the exceptional, if not unique, dialogue envisaged between certain of his major works and the concept and meaning of modernity (Butt)—all these attitudes almost completely circumvent those continuities and reliances which more conventional modes of musicological discourse assume as axiomatic.

Bach as the 'Fifth Evangelist' remains a meaningful category in these reliances (as in the recent retrieval of his theology as a vital agent in the semantic intelligibility of his cantatas and Passions), even if the phrase evidently connotes the 'Old Testament' Bach whose music once affirmed an ideological synthesis of Christian theism and German art, which for obvious reasons is no longer tenable.⁵ Nevertheless, one of the pervasive ordinances underlying contemporary Bach scholarship remains the existential authority of the music, which concedes in turn the autonomy of the musical artwork as a sounding form that achieves an incremental intelligibility as it travels through time. It is impossible to mistake the abiding currency of this general assent, however variously it is construed, so that

the subject of this article, there are several other scholars whose work would suggest that they are receptive to the kind of intellectual disturbance which this subject represents. Such scholars include Laurence Dreyfus, Eric Chafe, Tanya Kevorkian, Ruth HaCohen, Karol Berger, Daniel Melamed, David Yearsley and Michael Marissen.

⁴ Within this general trajectory, the work of McClary, Goehr and Taruskin is innovative and pioneering in its influential reconfigurations of narrative in western musical culture.

⁵ See Wolfgang Sandberger, *Das Bach-Bild Philipp Spittas: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Bach-Rezeption im 19. Jahrhundert* (Franz Steiner: Stuttgart, 1997), reviewed by George B. Stauffer in *Notes*, 55/44 (June, 1999), 894–6. On page 894 Stauffer observes that although Spitta's view of Bach as the Fifth Evangelist has long since been rejected, his monumental biography of the composer (1873–80) is 'the bedrock to which modern Bach scholarship remains firmly anchored'. The work of Tanya Kevorkian (see note 56) and Robin A. Leaver is prominent in this theological retrieval, although entirely innocent of the synthetic ideology promoted by Spitta.

preoccupations as otherwise distinct as Lutheranism, anti-Semitism, tonal allegory, contrapuntal artifice and numerology (to cite examples at random), which animate contemporary readings of Bach, assume (and depend upon) the inherent autonomy of the musical work as a *donnée* which remains at every point indispensable to the validating act of critical or historical engagement.⁶ To borrow a phrase from John Butt, ‘a revolution against the concept of “the music itself”’ forms no discernible part of such an encounter.⁷

By contrast, it is expressly this conceptual turn which distinguishes the work of those who formidably evangelise on behalf of a very different reading of music history. If only for this reason, it is necessary here to distinguish between evangelists of the postmodern (McClary, Goehr and Taruskin) and an evangelist of the ‘New’ Bach (Butt). Tempting as it is to systematise such a discrimination, I shall try to indicate during this article that no such easy passage is available (or for that matter desirable) to a serious engagement with the reception of Bach as an agent of recent musical historiography. Given the ‘multiple rediscoveries and revivals’ of the musical past since 1945 which characterise the new musicology, it seems prudent to concede a similar degree of plurality (and an ambiguous reception) to perspectives on Bach which have emerged during the same period. Charles Burney’s condescension to Bach in 1789, and especially his dismissive characterisation of ‘all unmeaning art and contrivance’ in Bach’s musical discourse, may now appear to many people as one of the great misreadings of cultural history. But Burney’s apparent complacency (not to say uncomprehending disdain) also preserves a vivid trace of Enlightenment thought which—if it does nothing else—reminds us that history makes and re-makes Bach in its own image. For our purposes, this is a reminder that postmodern readings of Bach (‘those masterful images that yet fresh images beget’) can throw earlier readings into sharp (and useful) relief.⁸ As I shall argue below, Burney’s image of Bach is one that resurfaces in recent configurations of musical narrative and meaning in relation to Bach’s significance. A more immediate source for these configurations is T.W. Adorno.

2. Sympathy in White Major

Why not let classical music die, and with it the oppressive culture
that has sustained it for centuries?

Kofi Agawu in *Music & Letters* (1997)

⁶ Thus the writings of Chafe, Dreyfus, and Berger—however different these are in orientation and emphasis—uphold the abiding and axiomatic centrality of the musical work as a valid concept in addressing Bach’s Lutheran significations through tonal allegory (Chafe), his decisive interventions against received ideas of compositional technique (Dreyfus) and his circular approach in the structuring of musical time (Berger).

⁷ See John Butt, *Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity: Perspectives on the Passions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 296.

⁸ ‘those masterful images’ is a phrase from Yeats’ poem ‘The Circus Animals’ Desertion’ (1939) which connotes a lifelong quest for the transformative agency of poetry. I borrow it here to apostrophise the far-reaching (and transformative) agency of postmodernist discourse in relation to music.

In a rare concession to plain speaking, Adorno's observation that 'Bach's music is separated from the general level of his age by an astronomical distance' sums up a principle of reception which has endured – either as an article of good faith or as an obstacle to historical perspective – throughout those overlapping phases of the Bach revival which originated in the early nineteenth century.⁹ Published in 1951 (a year after the bicentenary of Bach's death), Adorno's famous critique of historically-informed performance practice uncannily adumbrates and to some extent rehearses the conflicting perspectives on Bach which were to arise a generation later, following the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* (the first volume of which appeared three years after Adorno's essay) and the debates surrounding the *Urtext* principle which this edition embodied with such surpassing skill.¹⁰ Adorno's own reading of Bach, indeed, is conflicted, as in his remarkable distinction between the 'universality' of the music's ahistorical condition and the false consciousness of its quasi-theological power. Adorno concedes the autonomy of Bach's musical imagination not as the agency of an empirical objectivisation (which would restore to Bach an immutable ontology that Adorno condemns) but as an emancipation of the musical subject from 'the very church composer against whose office his music rebelled'.¹¹ Adorno's diagnosis of Bach's modernism in this respect (a 'becoming' reflected in the extreme signatures of his art) is not only directed against the historical performance movement (in which the 'nimbus of provincial craftsmanship as a classical quality' becomes a matter for repudiation). It is also oriented in relation to what Adorno regards as Bach's deliberate 'anachronism' as a composer, which is to say the pervasive condition of his counterpoint:

Down to the subtlest structural details it is always a question of the undiminished coincidence of the harmonic-functional and of the contrapuntal dimension. The distant past is entrusted with the utopia of the musical subject-object; anachronism becomes a harbinger of things to come.¹²

It is perhaps characteristic of Adorno's position that it should contradict the received wisdom of a revival which was barely under way when he criticised the nostalgia and 'philistine' empiricism of Bach's devotees as obstacles to a true understanding of his significance as a composer (which in any case Adorno locates in the act of composition, expressly in relation to Schoenberg and

⁹ See T.W. Adorno, 'Bach defended against his devotees' ['Bach gegen seine Liebhaber verteidigt'] (1951), republished in *Prisms*, trans. Shierry Weber (Neville Spearman: London, 1967), 133–46; see 145.

¹⁰ See Laurence Dreyfus, 'Early Music Defended Against its Devotees: A Theory of Historical Performance in the Twentieth Century', *The Musical Quarterly*, 69/3 (Summer 1983), 297–322, for a concise overview of the conflict between *Urtext* principles and historically informed performance practice as this developed in the years following the original publication of Adorno's essay. Dreyfus is sympathetic to Adorno's critique when it concerns a failure to distinguish between individual agencies of expression and meaning (a failure characterised by Adorno as 'They say Bach [but] mean Telemann' [145]).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹² *Ibid.*, 142.

Webern).¹³ Adorno's repudiation of such historicism, in which the musical subject is sacrificed to a false ontology, is of less moment here than his ability to juxtapose an immanent Bach (which the revivalists cannot know) with a historically circumscribed one (which they cannot understand). In an astonishing passage which seeks to reconcile these two perspectives, Adorno declares that the 'innermost truth' about Bach's music is its juxtaposition of the 'voice of humanity' with a socially constructed artwork:

A social deciphering of Bach would presumably have to establish the link between the decomposition of the given thematic material through subjective reflection on the motivic work contained therein, and the change in the work-process that took place during the same epoch through the emergence of manufacturing, which consisted essentially in breaking down the old craft operations into its smaller component acts. If this resulted in the rationalization of material production, *then Bach was the first to crystallize the idea of the rationally constituted work.*¹⁴

It is the singularity of this claim which the postmodern critique expressly denies, notably in relation to Bach himself. The 'social deciphering' recommended by Adorno envisages a relationship between manufacture and the 'rationally constituted work', which is eclipsed by reading the musical work (as an autonomous object) as an invention of German idealism after 1800. As the work-concept takes hold (to rehearse the argument), its function is to create a musical museum in which cultural sovereignty is attributed to a compositional practice irrelevant to the eighteenth century. But 'social deciphering' of another kind, which also takes its point of departure from Adorno's essay, is vital to the enterprise of postmodern musicology in its earliest representation of Bach. Susan McClary's exceptionally provocative (and often brilliant) essay 'The blasphemy of talking politics during Bach year' appeared in 1987 (two years after the famous triple tercentenary celebrations of 1985).¹⁵ Its provocations were to prove formative (specifically in relation to Bach's music as a mode of 'social discourse') in the subsequent evolution of a critique directed against the cultural hegemony of European art music as an oppressive and socially-constructed canon. In this respect, McClary's own deconstructions are uneven (an inspiring and broadly-brushed reading of the first movement of the fifth Brandenburg Concerto is juxtaposed with a brash, not to say contrived, understanding of *Wachet auf, ruft*

¹³ Ibid., 146: 'Justice is done [to] Bach not through musicological usurpation but solely through the most advanced composition which in turn converges with the level of Bach's continually unfolding work. The few instrumentations contributed by Schoenberg and Webern ... are models of an attitude to Bach which corresponds to the stage of his truth. Perhaps the traditional Bach can indeed be no longer interpreted. If this is true, his heritage has passed on to composition.' See also Max Paddison, 'Authenticity and failure in Adorno's aesthetics of music', in Max Paddison (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 198–221.

¹⁴ Ibid., 139; emphasis mine.

¹⁵ 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), 13–62.

uns die Stimme, BWV 140), but they have all the force and direction of a call to arms loudly echoed by postmodern scholarship. After the publication of this essay, Bach would never be quite the same again.¹⁶

McClary's work is important for another reason—namely, that it relates its own deconstructions of Bach to a broader project, in which she advocates a more general deconstruction of the entire western canon. In this respect, Adorno's arguments must be abandoned:

Adorno is still operating within and on behalf of the autonomous German canon, which he continued to regard as a repository of truth. Adorno's autopsy of western culture and his strategic stance of resignation offer few options and little room to maneuver for the post-World War II artist, especially those (such as blacks and women—indeed, non-Germans) whom he consistently occluded from cultural production. His discussion of Bach seeks on the one hand to relocate Bach's compositional enterprise in a social context but, on the other, to wrest him from the degradation of social reception for the sake of his music's autonomous truth-content.¹⁷

Although there is a logical problem with McClary's reasoning (as in her determination that we should 'appropriate Bach to our own ends' even as she criticises Adorno for doing the same thing), the abiding value of this essay transcends the postmodernism it helped to nurture. This value lies in McClary's identification of a complex musical discourse whose social inscriptions, once decoded (or 'deciphered'), affirm rather than denude the historical integrity of individuated works by Bach, irrespective of the contemporary meaning which she ascribes to them.¹⁸ Although one might be forgiven for assuming otherwise, I find no evidence that McClary's Bach entails a denial of the intentional agency of his compositions as musical works.

This is a denial formulated with lapidary grace by Lydia Goehr when she observes that 'Bach did not intend to compose musical works'.¹⁹ Almost twenty-five years after this claim was entered as a strategic revisionism in *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (1992), it is no longer necessary (if it ever was) to suppress the fact that Goehr's grander objective was to separate the idea of musical autonomy from its universal status in western music history and to relocate it in the nineteenth century. Nor is it particularly useful to acknowledge the persistence of this autonomy (above all in the abiding principles associated

¹⁶ Even if McClary's essay appears to have had very little (if any) direct bearing on the surge of specialised Bach scholarship in the past thirty years, it is no less the case that its storming of the citadel was a primary agent in the development of the New Musicology. The raw tone of her critical voice in this essay is ultimately of much less significance than the intellectual originality of her general argument, specifically in relation to music as social and political discourse.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60

¹⁸ See especially McClary's discussion of Bach's 'de-centred' position as a composer and the implications of this social orientation for the stylistic 'deviations' it engenders (*ibid.*, 19–21)

¹⁹ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 8. Goehr continues: 'Only by adopting a modern perspective—a perspective foreign to Bach—would we say that he had.'

with 'fidelity to the work' as text) as a means of transmission, especially not when this obtains with such clarity within the domain of contemporary Bach scholarship and performance. What remains in abeyance, however, is the extent to which Goehr's influential deconstruction of universal principles (above all, the principle of *Werktreue* as a pervasive and sometimes pernicious ideology which both distorts history and privileges a fetishistic commodification of the canon) promotes a new orthodoxy in place of an old one. Among much else, Goehr's argument adduces not only the sociology of musical production before the French Revolution (in which composers are invariably indentured to a discourse of political as well as cultural authority), but also the sheer volume of production as evidence of a conceptual imperialism which retrospectively (and anachronistically) attaches to this process the organic idealism of the absolute work:

It is inconceivable to think that any composer [before 1800] would have had time to produce new and original music for each occasion; in practice, they mostly produced music that was appropriate in quality and type... To describe musicians as having composed so many individual works is misleading, of course. Many of their compositions would have involved significant overlap and repetition of musical material ... This general sense of borrowing was comparable in fact to the general use of a language for which there is no uniqueness or ownership of any given expression. Musicians could almost say the same thing as often as they wanted.²⁰

The difficulty with this argument is that it enlists a general theory of musical production (not unrelated to Adorno's 'rationally constituted work') which is decisively undermined by the mere existential agency of Bach's late works (to look no further than that).²¹ It is very difficult to supervene this problem, because Goehr's argument appears to entail a suppression of Bach's autonomy – expressly in relation to his development of the work-concept – in the service of a distinction which is otherwise powerful and persuasive (as between the status and production of music before and after 1800). Moreover, the representation of Bach that emerges from *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* is so strenuously obliged to the idea of autonomy as an invention of German romanticism (in this respect, among many, Goehr's monograph achieves the classicising impulse of postmodernism) that the significance and semantic meaning of his work cannot function other than as expressions of a practice to which autonomy is wholly irrelevant. The strictly occasional status of almost all music before 1800 axiomatically entails a historical perspective in which a work such as the B minor Mass acquires autonomy only because of romantic theories of organicism and the

²⁰ Ibid., 182–3.

²¹ Thus Goehr's argument about 'musical production without the work concept' (the title of her seventh chapter) loses ground in the face of Bach's systematic and exhaustive approach to composition (and musical genre) in works such as *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the *Musical Offering*, *The Art of Fugue*, the B minor Mass, and so on, not to mention earlier collections, such as the *Orgel-Büchlein*, in which an evident and inherent autonomy abides, irrespective of the 'invention' of this autonomy in the nineteenth century. It only seems fair to both sides of this argument to add that Goehr presents this invention as an historical occurrence rather than a philosophical insight.

historical force of German idealism. At best (and I find no evidence to suggest that Goehr would support even this), Bach's late works become corroborating exceptions that prove this general rule. This means in turn that a conceptual disconnect between the immanent preoccupations of contemporary Bach scholarship (which persistently affirms the autonomy of his musical discourse, most especially in relation to his systematic cultivation and exhaustion of generic prototypes) and the deconstruction of canonic sovereignty (in which Goehr's critique of German romanticism is decisive) inadvertently problematises Bach's ambiguous relationship with historical narrative. This being the case, the rupture is grave indeed. The servile Capellmeister whose obligations 'placed enormous restrictions on his compositional activities'²² is very difficult to reconcile with the author of the St Matthew Passion, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and the *Musical Offering*, to name three works which, putting it mildly, affirm anything *but* 'enormous restrictions'.

Goehr's engagement with (and representation of) Bach self-evidently serves a larger purpose: the historicisation and dismantling of the work-concept as a universal regulator in the reception and practice of music. Self-evidently, too, her work emancipates the idea of musical practice from the hegemony of the work-concept and, by association, from the authority of western music as a mode of cultural imperialism. In these enterprises, Goehr's reading of Bach appears closely to inform Richard Taruskin's explicit identification of historicism as a nefarious agent in the historical narrative which he provides in *The Oxford History of Western Music*, against the grain and prestige of German idealism.²³ Although I have deliberated at some length on Taruskin's sense of (musical) history in earlier work, my concern in this article lies exclusively with his representation of Bach, in which the obstinate Capellmeister and the genius of German idealism belong respectively to the historical narrative as empirical truth, and to a myth of German musical supremacy in which Bach is foremost as protagonist.²⁴ Taruskin's subsequent deconstruction of this myth (in a notably severe critique which condemns the sovereignty of late modernism and formalism in American art music because it 'demands the enslavement—indeed the humiliation—of all human beings concerned')²⁵ has its roots, as we shall see, in a Bach perspective that is ultimately no less severe. It is also no less problematic. This is because the

²² Goehr (see note 19), 178.

²³ Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). See Vol. I, xxii ff., in which this history is offered as an 'interrogation' of the literate tradition, emancipated from the canonical authority vested in German models of writing music history.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 235: 'A mythology grew up around Bach, according to which his music had a unique quality that lifted it above and beyond the historical flux and made it a timeless standard: the greatest music ever written, and (even ideologically far more significant) the greatest music that would or could ever be written ... [it was necessary to justify] Bach's elevation to the legendary status he had come to enjoy as the protagonist of an unrepeatable, mythical golden age and the fountainhead of the Germanic musical "mainstream"'. See also Harry White, 'The Rules of Engagement: Richard Taruskin and the History of Western Music', *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland*, 2 (2006–7), 21–49.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, V, 56, in which these terms are applied to John Cage's effort to 'emancipate noise' and thus 'complete the job' begun by Schoenberg's emancipation of dissonance.

dual obligation to represent Bach as an agent of historical narrative and as a harbinger of German musical sovereignty entails a divided allegiance between the a priori recognition afforded to Bach's self-evident mastery of individual genres (especially instrumental genres) and the ideological meaning which Taruskin attaches to the vocal music (the church cantatas and Passions). Taruskin calls Bach a 'Janus-faced' composer, a characterisation which also speaks to the double-portrait of Bach which he creates (his two representations are separated by an assessment of Handel's English oratorios intended to throw the cantatas and Passions into sharper relief).²⁶

Because Taruskin's *Oxford History of Western Music* is a postmodern text par excellence, not least in its diagnosis and rejection of German idealism as a fatal abrogation of contractual intelligibility between the composer and his audience (an abeyance which only reveals its true consequences with the rise of modernism and the collapse of tonality), the structural importance of this double portrait is all the more significant.

Taruskin's account of Bach's instrumental music comprises the first of these portraits and is incontestably the more sympathetic of the two. In fact its deliberate point of departure is a strategic ploy in its own right: Taruskin begins with Manfred F. Bukofzer's supremely confident reading of Bach's achievement as one in which 'the declining curve of polyphony and the ascending curve of harmony intersected, where vertical and horizontal forces were in exact equilibrium', to which Bukofzer adds that 'this interpenetration of opposed forces has been realized only once in the history of music and Bach is the protagonist of this unique and propitious moment'.²⁷ Although Taruskin relocates this moment to the Bach revival of the nineteenth century (and thus attributes to Bukofzer the expression of 'a myth of music history itself'), his own mid-way conclusions (and the repertoire he chooses in support of them) promote an unexpected empathy with the older historian's assessment (which dates from 1947).²⁸ Taruskin's analysis of the B minor Fugue from Part I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, for example, stimulates the following benign concession to Bach's originality and genius, not as an historical construct of organicism but as a permanent condition of the composer's discourse:

Structure and signification, "form" and "content", are [thus] indissolubly wedded, made virtually synonymous... Formally and texturally [Bach's art] looked back to what were even then archaic practices. In terms of harmony and tonally articulated form, however, it was at the cutting edge. That cutting edge still pierces the consciousness of listeners today and calls forth an

²⁶ Ibid., I, 233–304 and 305–90. For the intervening assessment of Handel's operas and oratorios, see 305–40.

²⁷ Cited in *ibid.*, Vol. I, 235. Bukofzer's reading from his *Music in the Baroque Era* (London and New York: Norton, 1947, 260–305) echoes Adorno's discrimination between 'anachronism' (counterpoint) and harmonic-tonal function in relation to Bach's subjective identity as a composer, a discrimination which is in some measure also adopted by Taruskin in his discussion of the instrumental works. See also note 67.

²⁸ Ibid., I, 235.

intense response, while the music of every other Lutheran cantor of the time has perished from the actual repertory.²⁹

Thus far, indeed, one might rest content with the suggestion that Taruskin's Bach glows with the same serene complexion and assurance afforded by much older (and less ideologically aware) readings. It also affords a rare simultaneity of perspective (as between music then and history now) which postmodernism more generally disdains.

The second portrait is another matter. It is preceded by an assessment of Handel's operas and oratorios, which privileges (and approves) 'entertainment' as the fundamental meaning of the English oratorios in particular. Although space does not permit me to contest this reading in detail, certain aspects of it must be briefly engaged to understand the crucial discrimination between Handel's sunny rhetoric and the 'almost literally nauseous' introspection of Bach's musical Lutheranism upon which Taruskin is ultimately intent.³⁰ To achieve this flamboyant contrast, Taruskin takes two of Handel's least characteristic English oratorios, *Israel in Egypt* (HWV 54) and *Messiah* (HWV 56), to demonstrate the ebullient humour which animates the first, and the admixture of secular borrowings and sacred subject matter which dominated the swift composition of the second. Taruskin engages closely with the word-painting in *Israel in Egypt* to show that these 'marvellous and musically epochal illustrations are indeed, for the most part, no more (and no less) than jokes.'³¹ Nothing in the long catalogue of catastrophes set by the composer impedes this interpretation, neither the gruesome plagues nor the eerie darkness nor the massacre of 'all the first-born of Egypt'. Instead, 'we giggle in appreciation', if only because Handel's pictorialisms sympathetically endorse the righteous self (as an expression of nascent British nationalism) and the sinful Other, tormented to death and destruction. For Taruskin, the whole enterprise of *Israel in Egypt* is a merry jape to begin with—the recreation of a mercantile bourgeoisie in flight from the tedious solitudes of Italian opera.³²

Even if we set aside an abundance of evidence to the contrary (specifically with regard to Handel's lifelong preoccupation with the tragic consequences of fate, an introspection which pervades his stage works as well as his dramatic oratorios), this radically simplified reading is transparent in its ideological opposition to Handel's gravity of purpose, notwithstanding the provision of musical examples which sometimes contradict the general argument which Taruskin outlines.³³

²⁹ Ibid., I, 255.

³⁰ This assessment begins with an arresting—if somewhat untenable—paradox that contrasts Handel's place in the current repertory (one dominated by vocal works on sacred subjects) with Bach, 'the quintessential religious spirit ... largely represented by secular instrumental works' (ibid., I, 305). The phrase 'almost literally nauseous' occurs during the discussion of an aria from cantata BWV 13, *Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen* (Vol. I, 364).

³¹ Ibid., Vol. I, 321.

³² 'No matter how lofty or grisly the theme, Handel's representation of the plagues remains an entertainment.' [Ibid., Vol. I, 321.

³³ Taruskin's music example 26-F (the opening bars of 'He sent a thick darkness' from *Israel in Egypt*) receives a neutral description that is alert to the unusual ('unheard-of') colour of the

This is because Taruskin is preparing the ground for a reading of Bach's vocal works which comes to rest on an extremism of musical diction that allows Handel's provisional and gestural entertainments to appear all the more desirably humane and genial by contrast. His reading of *Messiah* is designed to the same end: we find nothing of the work's troubled reception in London (following its premiere in Dublin): 'Despite its embodying the sacredest of themes, it was an entertainment, and its music was designed to amuse a public in search of diversion, however edifying'.³⁴

It would be invidious to suggest that when he considers the cantatas in the light of this urbane encounter with Handel, Taruskin gives short shrift to Bach's technical and expressive finesse: on the contrary, there are detailed readings of cantatas BWV 4, 61 and 80, which are in fact much more persuasive in their critical-formal resolutions than the blithe appraisals of Handel that precede them. The subversion of these readings, however, is no less important to Taruskin's purpose: he enlists Charles Burney's remarks at the outset of the latter's *General History of Music* ('Music is an innocent luxury, unnecessary, indeed, to our existence, but a great improvement and gratification of the sense of hearing') and endows this definition of music ('the art of pleasing by the succession and combination of agreeable sounds') as one which 'reflects the intellectual history of the eighteenth century, when a complex of rationalistic ... ideas now referred to as "The Enlightenment" rose to prominence and eventual dominance in Europe'.³⁵ Astonishing as this magisterial reductionism may seem, it ushers in a far more provocative claim:

[Enlightenment ideals] have much less to do with Bach, and virtually nothing to do with Bach's church music, which embodied a pre-Enlightenment – and when push came to shove, a violently anti-Enlightened – temper. Such music was a medium of truth, not beauty, and the truth it served – Luther's truth – was often bitter. Some of Bach's most striking works were written to persuade us – no, *reveal* to us – that the world is filth and horror, that humans are helpless, that life is pain, and that reason is a snare. ... When his music was pleasing, it was usually to indoctrinate or cajole. Just as often Bach aimed

local sonority, but remains oblivious of the way in which this disembodied and unnerving effect relates to darkness as an abiding preoccupation in many of the oratorios (most obviously, perhaps, in *Saul*, *Samson* and *Jephtha*). This is to say nothing of the poor reception afforded to *Israel in Egypt* when it was first given. This reception surely modifies Taruskin's characterisation of Handel's invention of the English oratorio as 'an essentially choral genre' (*Ibid.*, 316).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, I, 336. Compare this reading to a pseudonymous report on the English premiere of *Messiah* in the *Universal Spectator* (London) on 19 March 1743: 'How will it appear to after-Ages, when it shall be read in History, that in such an age the People of England were arriv'd to such a height of *Impiety* and *Prophaneness* that most sacred things were suffer'd to be us'd as publick diversions?' Michael Marissen has recently made a persuasive case for *Messiah* as an agent of Protestant anti-Semitism which 'scandalously' affirms its 'Anti-Judaic' content. This is hardly the innocent entertainment and delight promoted by Taruskin's reading. See Michael Marissen, *Tainted Glory in Handel's Messiah* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 3.

³⁵ Cited in Taruskin, *ibid.*, I, 363. It is tempting to add that Burney's pronouncements speak volumes about the reception of music in England for much of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

to torture the ear. When the world of man rather than that of God was his subject, he could write music that for sheer, deliberate ugliness has perhaps been approached (mainly by much later composers, after Bach's momentous nineteenth-century 'rediscovery'), but never surpassed.³⁶

Even if one bows one's head before this whirlwind of indictment (several pages elapse before the storm abates), the terms of this commentary, firmly enshrined as they are in a globally prestigious history of music, can scarcely be ignored. This is partly because Taruskin attributes to Bach his own interpretation of history after the fact (so that Bach's intentions are a matter for us rather than him to decide) and partly because the aesthetic revulsion which the historian expresses is presented as an inhumane and inherent quality of the music. The progenitor of 'sheer, deliberate ugliness' (confirmed in his depravity a few pages later as a proto-Nazi, because 'we who remember the twentieth century have greater reason than Bach's contemporaries ever had to wince at the sound of a high-pitched German voice shouting reason down')³⁷ stands revealed as the contemptible father-figure of absolute music, 'the highest of all the arts, where the Germans most vehemently asserted their supremacy'.³⁸ Taruskin's portrait (at least the second one) is worthy of Dorian Gray: in the attic of German culture, the hideous deformities and grotesqueries of a music autistically absorbed with its own structural intelligence, and notably dismissive not only of music as 'entertainment' but of the human agencies of performance, will so far transcend its 'anti-Enlightenment' origins as to infect the entire enterprise of art music in western culture. In its wilful departure from the luxury and gratification of Burney's aesthetic of popular entertainment, Bach's music endures as a permanent intimation of elitism, religious obscurity and social collapse.³⁹

The sense of an ending which pervades the context in which this reading occurs (Taruskin's history is, above all else perhaps, distinguished by its teleology) is rivalled only by the fatal sense of misdirection which Taruskin attributes to Bach. The emancipation of popular musical culture (a reincarnation, perhaps, of Burney's aesthetics of 'entertainment') which sounds the death-knell of German idealism at the close of *The Oxford History of Western Music* provides a secondary context in which to display these impassioned arraignments. It is an emancipation that signifies the abolition of those autonomous signatures (the musical work, of course, and more widely still, the cultural authority and transmission of generic models fallen into general silence) which postmodernism so ably dismantles. It is for this reason that Agawu's sardonic enquiry about allowing 'classical music' to die matters: in the dissolution of its cultural

³⁶ Ibid., Vol. I, 363–4. Emphasis in original.

³⁷ Ibid., Vol. I, 369.

³⁸ Ibid., Vol. I, 388.

³⁹ Indeed, Taruskin appears to regard such readings as part of his mandate as an historian: 'responsible historiography, most historians now concede, must contain an element of reflexivity—concern with itself as a historical entity and with its own potential cultural and social influence, alongside the entities it studies' (Ibid., I, 389).

authority, the thing hardly seems worthwhile.⁴⁰ We attend, instead, upon the history of a discredited and moribund tradition, a 'sympathy in white major', to borrow Philip Larkin's musically-inflected trope for self-pity.⁴¹ As the monuments come crashing to the floor, the evangelists of postmodern musicology reveal the sorry enterprise of high culture for what it is: an anti-democratic, repressive and self-absorbed meditation on value systems disgraced and invalidated by European history for much of the twentieth century. If Bach is read as the wilful originator of German musical idealism, of a musical practice which is not only 'anti-humane', but which portends an abstruse American modernism destined for puzzled contempt and neglect, why bother with his music at all?

3. Unageing intellect

The overarching constructs of felt order, as we find them in Dante, in a Bach Passion, in the critiques of Kant or the frescoes of Giotto, but also in the concise parables of Kafka, whose briefest syllable is charged with a 'sickness unto God', may be of the past.

George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life* (1997)

An impatience with the extreme (and indeed autonomous) nature of Bach's musical discourse existed long before the Passions and certain of his instrumental works were absorbed into the creation of a German canon in the nineteenth century: the Scheibe controversy does not stand alone in this regard. If anything, Bach appears to have been constantly at odds with his employers in Leipzig, and his discontents justifiably encourage us to regard his music as having been composed against the grain of almost every norm that prevailed during his tenure there. His cantatas were too difficult to perform for the resources at his disposal; much of his instrumental music was either bewilderingly impertinent to the stylised prototypes which it addressed or formidably excessive in its complexity and systematic ingathering of cyclical patterns; and his tendency to exhaust the genres which most interested him contradicted the more general practice of simply composing music anew as occasion demanded. Even the singular trajectory of his Leipzig compositions, in which the number of works is drastically diminished while the proportions and scale of each one increases (as

⁴⁰ See Kofi Agawu, review of Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995) in *Music & Letters* 78/1 (February 1997), 127-9; esp. 129. Agawu criticises Kramer's attempt to frame terms in which 'an invaluable body of music can survive the dissolution of the cultural order that housed it' (Kramer, 34). If 'classical music' embodies a discredited value system, why invent a new one? Moreover, in commending Kramer's book (with tongue firmly in cheek) as one which provides 'new directions away from the music itself' (Agawu, 129), Agawu underscores the general problem of 'postmodern knowledge' in relation to the canon: 'The basis of [postmodern] knowledge construction has been reformulated so as to render superfluous the surplus of analytical detail that theory-based analysis produces' (Agawu, 129).

⁴¹ 'Sympathy in White Major' is a poem by Philip Larkin published in *High Windows* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974). Not only the substitution of 'sympathy' for 'symphony' is of account here, but also the gloss upon 'White' (and WASP) culture which this line imparts.

in 300 cantatas versus three or four Passions), anticipates a compositional impulse otherwise unknown until the first decades of the nineteenth century. And how is one to account satisfactorily for compositions such as *The Art of Fugue* and the B minor Mass, given their apparent disengagement from an otherwise axiomatic relationship between composition and performance not only throughout Bach's lifetime but for decades afterwards? Despite a Leviathan of Bach scholarship over the past two centuries, such matters obstinately resist a satisfactory resolution.

Bach's refusal to conform to the expectation of his peers adumbrates a similar degree of difficulty in relation to his later reception history. If nothing else, his seminal contribution to the making *and* unmaking of the western canon proves as much. Moreover, whether as the agent of a theory of history that negates the intentional autonomy of his musical works or as the exemplar of a compositional practice which promotes an elitist culture of supremacy, Bach's postmodern condition is (to put it mildly) ill-disposed towards the implicit significance and forensic scrutiny afforded to his compositions elsewhere. 'One of the most pernicious pieties of some self-proclaimed postmodernists is the assumption that everything within modernity necessarily points towards an ordered regulation of obedient, individualist subjects, always on the brink of some new Auschwitz', John Butt observes in the introduction to *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*. 'What seems to have been forgotten', he continues, 'is the fact that many examples of art—even some of the most supposedly canonical—articulate a resistance and oppositional character that represent the complex tensions of modernity far more vividly than many theoretical generalizations'.⁴² In this respect, *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity* is a cultural mode of remembrance and criticism which holds in apposition a dual conception of modernity that obtains from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. But it is also a close reading of the Passions which argues a perspective on Bach that is oriented against the ordinances of postmodern discourse. It re-inscribes Bach in history through the agency of musical works which are 'firmly grounded in experience of the past' and yet 'somehow orientated towards the future'.⁴³ That 'somehow' is worth a moment's further scruple. 'In the context of art', Butt argues,

the development of a subjectivity effected in communication and mediation would suggest that the concept of individual authorship is dependent on the collective will (or at least the consensus) of those who receive the work composed. A stronger Baroque concept of the musical work would therefore correspond to a stronger concept of the creating composer, which in turn coincides both with the rise of absolutism and with the crucial authorizing role of each individual subject'.⁴⁴

The musicological dissent from Goehr and Taruskin which this passage intimates is obvious. What is less immediately apparent is the extent to which such an argument depends on a reading of intellectual history that largely bypasses

⁴² Butt (see note 7), 20–1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 51.

musicological commentary (except where this supports or amplifies the close readings themselves) in favour of other disciplines (principally, perhaps, cultural theory, aesthetics, knowledge theory, Enlightenment philosophy, literary criticism, the history of religion, the sociology of music, critical biography, semiotics and, of course, the history of modernity).⁴⁵ Given Butt's exceptional command of Bach scholarship, the reach of these resources is all the more effectively engaged in the service of a 'critique of modernity' enabled by Bach's music. Thus the Passions are reconfigured not as self-standing works restored to an imaginary (and for many people discredited) canon, but as discrete agents of discourse which mediate between pre-modern and modern elements that solicit our attention on account of Bach's uniquely affective, technical and structural prowess. In an argument as ingenious as it is deeply-read, Butt proposes that Bach's subjectivity as a composer ('unwaveringly' tied to his deeply layered identity as a musician) promoted a strong sense of 'the necessary artificiality that was so much at the forefront of seventeenth-century progressive thought.'⁴⁶ Bach's musical intellect—expressly as an agent of human artefacts that shape and indeed access modes of awareness that a mere assent to 'nature' (or 'God') cannot engender—becomes an interlocutor between the past tense of Lutheran culture in North Germany and the enabling response of the present day.

In all, we cannot quite conceive of Passion settings of this kind without the figure of the single-minded authorizing composer ... Much as Bach may have thought he was representing spiritual and historical truths, and somehow [again] representing the developing consciousness of the believer, he is in fact creating these in the action of representing them ... perhaps his music is a mechanism or the trace of a process that is somehow common to both his world and ours.⁴⁷

Tempting as it might be to extend (or alter) the evangelical metaphor enlisted in this article to suggest that Butt represents the 'one true Bach' against the heresies of postmodernism, it is more useful to acknowledge that *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity* is in significant measure an argument in favour of the individuating musical subject authorised by the reception of intelligent (and informed) listenership. It is hard to obviate this conclusion, because Butt takes such pains to relate Bach's strategies of mediation to those principles of modernity (the legitimacy of authorship, of the observing subject and of imagination as stylistic individualism) which transcend history through the medium of the art work. In these respects, the existential authority of the Passions is non-negotiable. No

⁴⁵ This extra-musical engagement is especially characteristic of the introduction and first chapter of *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity*, in which an immersion in primary and secondary (critical) sources extraneous to musical discourse dramatically recasts the mediating qualities of the Passions themselves.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 63

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 96. Butt develops this argument under the heading 'The Composer is Created': 'We sense a particular musical intelligence that is going well beyond the mere adherence to the God-given rules of composition. Bach's single-minded vocation as musician may well be grounded in his understanding of Luther's Bible, but the musical objects of his attention soon seem to be defining him even more precisely as a specific subject' (95).

reading – not even one which regards the relationship between word and tone in Bach as a conspiracy against rational discourse – can supervene this contractual understanding.

Butt's awareness of this contract between the mediating subject and his reader (which is contextualised in terms of Bach's endorsement of political and religious absolutism)⁴⁸ appears to regard the text (the musical work) as being inherently vulnerable to (and dependent upon) its reception. To press this point home, he impersonates the tone of 'faithful' and 'suspicious' readings of the opening chorus of the St Matthew Passion and the music assigned to the Jews in the St John Passion respectively, a daring strategy (in which, however, Butt prudently refrains from identifying his model for the second passage, even if he identifies Christoph Wolff in relation to the first). A brief excerpt from the second 'suspicious' impersonation practically speaks for itself:

Yet there is something strangely beautiful about these profoundly violent choruses. Bach engineers them so that they are essentially autonomous musical structures, despite their very violent affects... Actual violence is normally 'local' and historically contingent (and occasionally to be excused, if it results from impossible conditions), while the violence that is sublimated in autonomous musical structures acquires an enduring beauty: this cannot be excused under any circumstances. Ultimately, this sort of aestheticized violence is analogous to the extremes of violence against the Jews within the modern world. The aesthetic mindset brings with it a sense of dispassionate autonomy and the separation of spheres of human action, enabling violence to be practised on an industrial scale as never before; this is something which has been eloquently shown in countless studies of the Holocaust.⁴⁹

It is not a provocation to describe this passage as a persuasive simulation of postmodernist discourse (at least in relation to Bach), but the conclusion which entails upon it is no less significant: 'one begins to wonder whether the hermeneut would perhaps be comfortable only with a form of music that was simple enough to invite no hermeneutic inferences whatever'.⁵⁰ This preference is (or would be) Burney's repudiation of 'all unmeaning art and contrivance' in Bach, translated into an ethical principle, and a perfectly plausible one (as we have seen). Nevertheless, it would be impossible to establish such an extreme argument without the mediating presence of the work. Butt's own mediations rely on the sovereignty of the text (i.e. the music of the St John and St Matthew

⁴⁸ This argument rests upon the notion of the composer as a validating agency, a subject that authorises the absolutism (politically and artistically) of the readership it addresses. In this regard, Butt enlists research by Ulrich Siegele on Bach's political adherences, including Siegele, 'Bach and the Domestic Politics of Electoral Saxony', in John Butt (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 17–34, and Siegele, 'Bachs politisches Profil oder Wo bleibt die Musik,' in Konrad Küster (ed.), *Bach Handbuch* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1999), 5–30. An extremely sophisticated and involved reading of the composer as subject and of the subjectivity of the composer (concepts strongly reminiscent, once again, of Adorno's 1951 essay) is thus fortified by a recourse to more traditional modes of Bach scholarship.

⁴⁹ Butt, *ibid.*, 158–9.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

Passions), not as a receptacle of fixed meaning, but as a semantic code that cannot be understood without enlisting the relationship between Bach's compositional technique and 'the experience of live performance'.⁵¹ His reading of the fugues in both Passions, for example, is predicated on the dialectic that exists (in Bach's mind) between a combinative technique which develops exponentially and the dramatic contingencies of the moment (so that the fugues often occur as sudden outbursts, in which the density of the counterpoint is at odds with the brevity and urgency of its duration). Even in cases where fugal texture appears as a rhetorical contrivance immediately answerable to the sense of the text (as in the setting of 'Wir haben ein Gesetz' from the St John Passion), Bach subverts the abstract intelligence of fugal discourse (its logical direction, its structural ingenuity) in favour of representing the textual (verbal) conflict between adherence to the law and a remorseless insistence upon its fateful consequences.⁵²

The close readings which Butt engages in such instances serve one end, namely to argue that '[T]his is music...[which] because of its dialectical nature—indeed its very evangelical purpose of not just moving but also *changing* the listener—can slip its historical moorings and perform any number of roles within a broad history of reception'.⁵³ Such a conclusion depends on concepts of the musical work and the creative persona of the composer which are unrelated to the canonic sovereignty dismantled by postmodern critique. Nevertheless, it can hardly be mistaken that Butt writes after the fact of this critique, or that *Bach's Dialogue with Modernity* restores to the composer and his works a historical presence inimical to it. In this latter respect, the book is a critique of postmodernism.⁵⁴

Whether or not Bach is denied the autonomy of a work-based practice, construed as a dogmatic agent of anti-Enlightenment rationality, identified as the fountainhead of an ultimately inhumane musical and cultural absolutism, or reconstructed as a composer of works that passionately mediate between his world and ours, it seems fair to suggest that his significance as a decisive figure in the crisis surrounding the reception (and transmission) of western musical culture is likely to abide. Meanwhile, anyone with even a passing interest in such matters can hardly fail to have noticed that those 'monuments of unaging intellect' which many of his works continue to represent now enjoy a global presence, even if the cultural agencies and beliefs which brought them into

⁵¹ Ibid., 251.

⁵² Ibid., 263–6. The correspondences between Bach's 'exhaustion' of permutation fugue and the inherent tension in adhering to the law not wisely but too well in 'Wir haben ein Gesetz' are central to Butt's reading of this passage.

⁵³ Ibid., 292. This conclusion is intended to underscore the autonomy of Bach's musical discourse, but it also recalls Taruskin's understanding of Bach's music as an agent of revelation, if to different ends.

⁵⁴ In the Afterword to this book, Butt comments that 'the revolution against the concept of "the music itself" was one of the headiest rallying cries of the New Musicology ... I am trying to develop a rather more nuanced model here by suggesting that "the music itself" does indeed have the capacity to elicit a particular range of reactions, at least under the broader conditions of modernity' (ibid., 296).

existence have largely fallen away, a point not lost on John Butt.⁵⁵ This conflict between ‘classical music and postmodern knowledge’ (to borrow a phrase) is exemplified by the contrast between those representations of Bach which I have addressed here and a correlative (and contemporary) scholarly reception which regards the existential authority of his music as axiomatic.

This is not to suggest that contemporary Bach scholarship is indifferent to reception history as a meaningful construct: on the contrary, its formidable versatility and diversity of address over the past thirty years has, if anything, significantly inflected our comprehension of ‘the music itself’ and its contextual agencies of expression. Nevertheless, it is scholarship underwritten by two reliances, which are essentially remaindered by the postmodern critique. One is a reliance on the transcendent autonomy of Bach’s musical imagination (defined by that ‘astronomical difference’ between Bach and his contemporaries identified by Adorno) which allows his works to survive their deconstruction as a (mere) invention of German romantic idealism. The other is an affirmation of the ethical and aesthetic value of European musical culture in the face of political barbarism, crisis and collapse. The cantus firmus underlying this research is an enduring assent to the historical integrity of the musical artwork in general, and to Bach’s musical works in particular. Irrespective of the nexus formed by this research—Bach’s anti-Semitism, the impact of Lutheran theology on his musical thought, the relations between his structural intelligence and modernity (to cite three recent instances)—this integrity remains in play.⁵⁶ The more intensively such scholarship deepens the historical context to which it belongs, the more intelligible the music appears to be.

A convenient example of this progressive understanding is the volume *Exploring Bach’s B-minor Mass*, published in 2013.⁵⁷ Through the agency of its individual contributions, this book unmistakably affirms the historical integrity of the B minor Mass (BWV 232), not as a desirable unity but as an empirical truth: its textual scholarship, numerical and proportional analyses, stylistic scrutiny and documentary study are dedicated to this one end, whatever else it may survey. Again and again we are returned to the singular entity of BWV 232 as a self-standing text, however uncertain its provenance remains, however exceptional its

⁵⁵ ‘Most interesting of all,’ Butt writes, ‘would be to take into consideration the extraordinary blossoming of interest in the music of Bach and other prominent Western composers in the Far East, specifically in Japan, Korea and China ... If there is any empirical evidence to support the connections I propose between music in the Western “classical” canon and the imperatives of modernity, here is surely where it is to be found’ (ibid., 295). The phrase ‘monuments of unageing intellect’ is Yeats again, from the poem ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, published in his collection *The Tower* (1928). Yeats contrasts the imperturbable progress of nature with those claims of imagination and intelligence vested in the phrase itself.

⁵⁶ The thematic preoccupations nominated here relate (in order) to the following writings: Michael Marissen, *Lutheranism, Anti-Judaism and Bach’s St John Passion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Tanya Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society and Music in Leipzig, 1650–1750* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing 2007); Karol Berger, *Bach’s Cycle, Mozart’s Arrow: An Essay on the Origins of Musical Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007). All three works are prominently engaged by Butt.

⁵⁷ Yo Tomita, Robin A. Leaver and Jan Smaczny (eds.), *Exploring Bach’s B-minor Mass* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

composite and complex relations with the music of Bach's contemporaries. When Ulrich Siegele remarks (at the close of his extraordinary essay on the formal design of BWV 232) that 'the bar numbers produce consistent evidence: Bach designed the B-minor Mass as a whole; in fact he conceived it as a single work', he speaks for the entire volume.⁵⁸ Irrefutable as Siegele's evidence seems to me (evidence corroborated by Ruth Tatlow's essay on proportions in BWV 232 in the same volume), it is evidence which nevertheless throws crucial aspects of post-war Bach reception into considerable disarray. This is partly because it is unnerving to discover such evidence after decades of Talmudic scrutiny leading in the opposite direction,⁵⁹ and partly because the results produced by forensic attention to the sources of BWV 232 (the autograph above all else) must be distinguished from the mediating dialectics so brilliantly engaged by other Bach scholars (including Karol Berger, Eric Chafe and, of course, John Butt) in comprehending and conceding the autonomy of Bach's music as a reliable principle of historically informed criticism. If BWV 232 is intelligible as an autonomous musical work because of empirical research, might we not want to reconsider other works by Bach in the light of these findings?⁶⁰ And might we not reconsider the relationship between the imaginative autonomy of this music and a more general musical discourse of authority, to which Bach's compositional strategies self-evidently subscribe?

4. After long silence

[The] prophetic elitism and authoritarianism of the modern movement are remorselessly identified in the imperious gesture of the charismatic master.

Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991)

⁵⁸ See Ulrich Siegele, 'Some observations on the formal design of Bach's B-minor Mass', in *Exploring Bach's B-minor Mass* (see note 57), 107–24, esp. 124. See also my review of this volume in the *Journal of the Society for Musicology in Ireland*, 10 (2014–15), 47–56.

⁵⁹ A direction which originates in the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* and Friedrich Smend's 1954 reading of BWV 232 as four composite but separate works (see Uwe Wolf's comments on this matter in *Exploring Bach's B-minor Mass*, 166, see note 57). The mental journey from Smend's disavowal of compositional unity in BWV 232 to Richard Taruskin's description of the work as a 'white elephant' that was created posthumously (Taruskin [see note 23], I, 375–6) to the confirmations avowed in this volume with respect to the intentional compositional unity of the work vividly illustrates the contrast between *Exploring Bach's B-minor Mass* and its postmodern forbears.

⁶⁰ Ruth Tatlow's recent monograph, *Bach's Numbers: Compositional Proportions and Significance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015) brilliantly extends the principle of 'proportional parallelism' explored in her essay on BWV 232 to several of Bach's printed and manuscript collections to demonstrate exact proportions (as between the total of bar numbers in individual movements) as an intentional and systematic feature of Bach's compositional technique. Such exactitudes (especially the proportion 1:1) affirm the autonomous condition of Bach's musical works, not only in relation to the mathematical perfection (and spiritual resonance) of the proportions themselves, but also in relation to the musical work as an empirical concept and as a sounding form that would 'last not only for posterity, but for eternity' (98). It is difficult to conceive of more persuasive evidence against the argument that 'Bach did not intend to compose musical works'.

A musicology which increases the presence and circulation of the work-concept – not as a construction or canonic formation, but as a valid consideration before the rise of romanticism—is vulnerable either to outright failure or deliberate exaggeration.⁶¹ It is likewise fair to observe that a musicology fully subscribed to its regulating force in the creation of an imaginary museum of privileged (and therefore exclusionary) art sooner or later represents a polemical critique of the canon, as is the case with McClary, Goehr and Taruskin. Specialised Bach scholarship either disdains or supervenes these extremes, even if there is an undoubted link between the implicit valuation of works such as the St Matthew Passion or the B minor Mass as chief exhibits in the museum and as the source of a magisterial body of critical commentary, source study, analysis and exegesis that is proverbially Biblical in its address. Bach's intellectual sovereignty is self-evidently preserved (and frankly increased) in these transactions, especially when his music becomes expressive of decisive patterns or changes in the historical narrative, or when it affords radical shifts of perspective within the canon.

But scholarly constructions of the musical past are no longer the preserve of specialists, as they once largely were. This is notably true of very recent Bach reception beyond the domain of musicological scholarship, in which the immanence of the music enjoys practically no cultural authority whatsoever. Tim Blanning's representation of Bach in *The Triumph of Music* (a book whose subject would be more accurately described as 'the triumph of popular culture') is a case in point. Leaving to one side Blanning's generalisations about the performance conditions under which the St Matthew Passion was revived in 1736, his comparisons between performances of Bach and Handel irresistibly return us to Burney's reading of Bach over two centuries before:

The different fates of the St Matthew Passion and *Messiah* had less to do with the quality of the respective scores than with the differences between Dublin-London and Leipzig. In the middle of the eighteenth century, Dublin was at least three times the size of ... Leipzig, while London was more than twenty times as populous. So the public sphere in the two large cities was correspondingly more extensive ... This greater depth and breadth of demand allowed Handel to become immensely rich and famous, and also influenced the kind of music he wrote. Bach composed for a captive audience of worshippers, whose primary purpose when they went to St Thomas's Church on Good Friday 1727 was to attend a religious service ... The music [in *Messiah*] ... is within the range of a good amateur choral society. 'Turn up and sing *Messiah*' events are common, but opportunities to 'turn up and sing the St Matthew Passion' are very rare if not non-existent.⁶²

⁶¹ Note in this regard John Irving's wise discrimination between different approaches to the musical work in his account of performance in the *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Music* (see note 2), 444–5, which acknowledges Goehr's 'ground-breaking' study, but also warns on page 445 against 'not benchmarking [eighteenth-century modes of musical production] against a later intellectualizing culture'.

⁶² Tim Blanning, *The Triumph of Music: Composers, Musicians and their Audiences, 1700 to the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2008), 84–5. Blanning is presumably not thinking of the common practice among German audiences during performances of Bach's Passions (especially when these are given in church) in which they join in singing the chorales.

Within the space of two paragraphs, Blanning explains Handel's success in terms of his audience (as against the 'quality of the respective scores'), and then imputes the enduring popularity of *Messiah* to its less demanding technique (by comparison with that of Bach). It is assuredly not a misrepresentation of Blanning to add that these observations are in support of a larger argument about the emancipation of musical culture in the present day, in which '[rock] music is the religion of the masses and the stadium its cathedral'.⁶³ The simpler the style, the larger the audience. The greater the market, the more successful ('rich and famous') the musician, then as now. But it is difficult to see how these truisms constitute a serious argument about the nature of Bach's musical discourse in relation to his contemporaries, let alone Handel. The temptation to declare a compensating elitism in Bach's favour may seem considerable. But this makes as little sense as the equation between commodification and enduring significance which is the dangerous undertow lurking beneath Blanning's diagnosis of mass entertainment as a mode of aesthetic emancipation, a perspective which he shares in significant measure with Burney and Taruskin. In either case (Bach as the preserve of an intellectual elite, or Bach as an irrelevance to the progress of demotic culture), the 'imperious gesture' of the master loses much of its charisma.

It also loses its historical bearings. An increasing conflict between autonomy, cultural meaning and historical significance lies at the very nerve-centre of Bach reception since 1985.⁶⁴ The more sharply we apprehend the semantic intelligibility of Bach's music (not least through performance), the more its cultural significance appears to fade, lost as this is to the rhetoric and ebullience of popular culture. The 'Old' Bach Testament is the increasingly remote signification of a cultural history that lost its singularity of meaning no later than 1945. The 'New' Bach Testament is a much more plural enterprise, but those who evangelise on its behalf entail the charge of bad faith: the argument in favour of exceptional (musical) intelligence remains illicit.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it may transpire that a reading of Bach which concedes a general discourse of servitude in the European musical imagination before 1789 (a discourse intimated by Tim Blanning's characterisation of 'the musician as slave and servant' in the eighteenth century)⁶⁶ will yet allow a continuity of meaning (as between the compelling signatures of Bach's insistent autonomy and his resolute adherence to a no less significant culture of authority) to arise as a plausible alternative to the 'either/or' representations I have considered in this article. Given Bach's 'fusion of international styles'⁶⁷ in the service of an explicitly religious aesthetic, the greater claim of cultural servitude in European music, especially as an expression of Roman Catholic absolutism, remains largely unexamined in relation to Bach's

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 319.

⁶⁴ This conflict, as between Bach's deconstruction as an icon of German idealism and the reanimation of his authorial legitimacy and intentionality, is representative of a culture war that continues to rage.

⁶⁵ If Bach is construed as the agent of an unwarranted and discredited cultural imperialism, no amount of close reading will redeem his music from the charge that it is about 'filth and horror'.

⁶⁶ 'The Musician as Slave and Servant' is the title of the opening chapter of *The Triumph of Music*.

⁶⁷ This is Bukofzer's apostrophe of Bach's achievement. See note 27.

allegiance to formal jurisdictions not his own. Despite the dramatic reconfigurations of his music over the past thirty years, a study of Bach's reliances in relation to the musical imagination of his contemporaries is long overdue. Bach did not invent a single genre during his career (even if he brought many such genres to a state of nervous exhaustion), an observation which prompts one to conclude that the nature of his own imagination might be more clearly understood through the agency of a contextual study it has yet to receive. Although Bach's imaginative autonomy has been affirmed, interrogated, suppressed, condemned or rehabilitated (as in the sequence of writings examined in this essay), it remains to be contextualised. The behaviour of Bach's musical imagination, specifically in relation to its formal and generic dependencies and subversions, might yet come into sharper relief. A theory of the late baroque musical imagination answerable to the relationship between Bach's expressive autonomy and the general discourse of compositional servitude from which it arose would lend critical and historical significance to such an undertaking. In this respect, and after long silence, Vienna waits in the wings.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ 'after long silence' is Yeats for the third and last time: 'After long silence, it is right... /That we descant and yet again descant/Upon the supreme theme of Art and Song'. The poem 'After Long Silence' appeared in the 1928 collection *Words for Music Perhaps*. In the context of this article, the phrase connotes my own ambition (in a forthcoming monograph) to contextualise Bach's musical imagination in relation to the sacred music of his contemporaries (Fux and Handel).