

Jefferson Quick, Timely Reads

Visionary J.S. Bach Painted in Music and Religion

By: Reverend Charles Brock
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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is considered the top in his field by most professional musicians, if not for his religious music, but for his intricate and creative music without the words.

In this brief study, I want to look at words and music and ask about his mysticism. When I listen to his music I often forget about the words, the music itself is so profound, often dancelike and joyful, but also he seems to be able to plumb the depths of my personal being. It is a strange but wonderful experience, and I am always glad to see what other respected musicians and religious thinkers have made of him.

I was brought up on Bach. My grandfather hired and paid the fare for an organist and his wife from Germany to come to Erie, Pa. for the Central Baptist Church – he specialized in Bach. My wife of 58 years was a choral conductor and organist whose favorite was Bach. My good friends are Bach hounds. I have his complete works on 140 discs. I sang many of his choral works. He is my favorite composer by a long shot.

I will rely on three major interpreters – the musician, scholar, and missionary Albert Schweitzer, the late Yale professor of church history Jaroslav Pelikan, and the contemporary British conductor John Eliot Gardner. There are hundreds of others that could be considered, but that would be book length.

“Bach [was] a Lutheran and a mystic,” according to Albert Schweitzer.[1] His religious music is vast, and he relied on Martin Luther for words and some music, as well as the extensive Pietist German Lutheran tradition, as Pelikan points out extensively. He used prayers and poems of his religious contemporaries as well. He often borrowed secular barroom tunes for his music, too. “Be not a borrower nor a lender” did not apply to Bach.

Schweitzer writes broadly about how Bach understood music and religion. He painted words and music together. Various musical themes were used to set biblical stories with pious prayers and thoughts. “The idea that prompted Bach to paint a musical picture is not always clear to us. It often takes us some time to discover how he has realized his text in music. But when once we have grasped the sense of the music, it seems unthinkable that the poem could be depicted from any other standpoint.”[2] His music is pictorial not only in the story line but also in capturing the profound feelings of devotion, sin, forgiveness, joy, etc., that come from Christianity for the believer.

John Eliot Gardiner writes, “His art celebrates the fundamental sanctity of life, an awareness of the divine and a transcendent dimension as a fact of human existence. ... Above all, as musicians you can never afford to be earthbound – to plod, in other words: it has to dance. Ultimately, his style is also vision. Misjudge the style and you miss the vision.”[3]

Bach helps us relive the life of Christ for ourselves, from birth to death. “At times Bach’s music suggests an almost physical engagement with the bones and blood of the story [of the crucifixion].”[4]

Gardiner’s book has his final words of praise: “Monteverdi gives us the full gamut of human passions in music, the first composer to do so; Beethoven tells us what a terrible struggle it is to transcend human frailties and to aspire to the Godhead; and Mozart shows the kind of music we might hope to hear in heaven. But it is Bach, making music in the Castle of Heaven, who gives us the voice of God – in human form. He is the one who blazes a trail, showing us how to overcome our imperfections through the perfections of his music: to make divine things human and human things divine.”[5]

How does he do this? He brings his mysticism to us by engaging us in the great themes and stories of the faith. You must listen to the music and read the texts to get the fulness of what is on offer. But you also need to be aware of Bach’s intentions. “Bach [has a] strategy of pulling us into the action (in arioso) and then arranging the angles from which we can contemplate its application to ourselves.”[6]

The many cantatas show the wide use of the Bible and human emotions. I will use four examples. The first is his cantata for Midsummer Day or John the Baptist’s birthday – Cantata #7 Christ to the Jordan came. Cantata #10 is a form of the Magnificat; Cantata 39 is on the command to love; and Bach’s last cantata is on personal dereliction during a war.

Christian baptism is generally understood to be the sacrament of joining the church. It is based on Jesus being baptized by John in the Jordan. There is a strong emphasis on sin and forgiveness in the action and the Christian is embodied to lead a new life with God no matter what age the baptism takes place. One of the arias in the Cantata states a strong Lutheran theology of salvation by grace through faith. Part of the opening chorale:

He wishes to draw us a bath,
to cleanse us from sin,
to drown bitter death as well
through His own blood and wounds;
it permitted a new life.

There are other meanings of baptism that Luther or Bach did not consider – why was Jesus baptized if he was “sinless”? It might be that he was joining the cause of John the Baptist which was to continue the work of Joshua from his crossing of the Jordan – to bring the rule of God to the Promised Land. As for Joshua and John, the Jordan was the starting point of the movement.

Cantata 10 brings out the drastic justice of God as expressed in the Magnificat (Luke 1) and can also help us with the meaning of Christ’s baptism as the beginning of the movement to institute the Kingdom or Rule of God:

Jesus remains my joy,
my heart’s comfort and essence,
Jesus fends off all suffering,
He is my life’s strength,
my eye’s desire and sun,
my soul’s treasure and pleasure;
Therefore I will not leave Jesus
out of heart and face.

—from BWV 147, chorale movement no. 10

[1] Albert Schweitzer, *J S Bach Vol II*, Ernest Newman trans., Dover Publications, NY, 1966 p 133

[2] Schweitzer *J S Bach Vol II* op cite p 44

[3] John Eliot Gardner, *Bach - Music in the Castle of Heaven*, Knopf, 2013, p 523

[4] Gardiner op cite p 407

[5] Eliot op cite p 557-8

[6] Gardner op cite p 425

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rev. Charles Brock, an Erie native, is an Emeritus Fellow, Chaplain, and Director of Ministerial Education at Mansfield College, Oxford, UK, where he taught for 35 years. He serves as the Director of the Institute on the American Dream at Penn State Behrend. Rev. Brock is acting minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Girard, Pa., and he is a Founding Member of the Jefferson Educational Society. Rev. Brock serves as the Director of the Brock Institute for Mega Issues Education at the Jefferson and serves as Secretary of the Jefferson Educational Society's Board of Trustees.

