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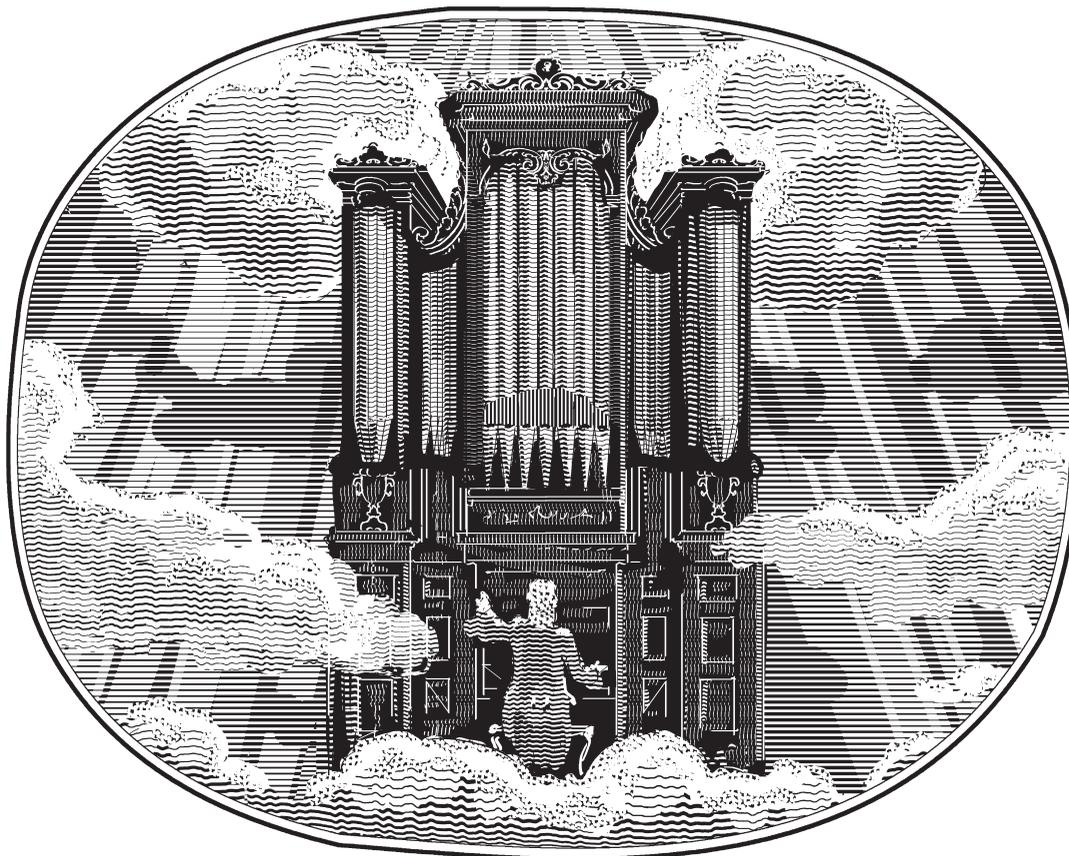
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Essay by Algis Valiunas

BACH THE TRANSCENDENT



THE STATURE OF JOHANN SEBASTIAN Bach (1685–1750) has never been greater than it is now. Leading conductors, performers, and critics honor him as the very greatest musician of all. Yet of the most esteemed composers, he is the farthest removed from us in time, and might seem even farther removed in sensibility, turn of mind, musical idiom, and not least in the fervent religious faith that pervades so much of his work.

Little is known of Bach's private life. We do know that he was on intimate terms with death, as few persons in civilized countries are today. By age 10 he had lost both parents. His first wife died at 35, while he was away on business. A man who fathered 20 children (by two wives) as Bach did must have had a potent confidence that life is worth living, and perpetuating. Yet of the huge brood he saw death claim a dozen, most before they had much chance of living. One can only suppose that Bach's private grief was as intense as any man's would be, but there is no record of it.

It is by his music that we know him. In his art he examined life and death in the light of the life that knows no death, though there are also masterworks that depart from Christian orthodoxy and reveal an inner turbulence familiar to more recent times. He served as

court musician to the duke of Weimar and to the prince of Anhalt-Cöthen, and from 1723 to his death he was director of music and cantor at St. Thomas's school and church in Leipzig. His most famous secular works include violin sonatas and partitas, the six cello suites, and the Goldberg Variations for keyboard. Among his sacred masterpieces are church cantatas, chorale preludes for organ, the *St. John Passion* and the *St. Matthew Passion*, and the Mass in B minor. His mind inclined naturally toward the ultimate questions. He did not attend university, but at his death his personal library included 80 volumes of theology.

Reconciliation and Peace

ALBERT SCHWEITZER, IN HIS DAY THE most famous Christian in the world, honored for his medical missionary work in Gabon, also happened to be an organ virtuoso, distinguished historian of that instrument, Biblical commentator in the reasonable and penetrating modern fashion, and author of the monumental critical biography *J.S. Bach*, first published in French in 1905, extensively revised for the German edition in 1908, and translated into English in 1911.

Schweitzer calls Bach "the musical father of the Lutheran church," who piously produced chorales "aiming simply at illustrating the central idea of the dogma contained in the words." Yet Schweitzer's Bach could not be delimited strictly by denomination or even by Christianity all told. "The great point is that Bach, like every lofty religious mind, belongs not to the church but to religious humanity, and that any room becomes a church in which his sacred works are performed and listened to with devotion." But what is meant then by sacred works and devout attentiveness? A Bach masterpiece with no religious affiliation suggests the true tendency of the composer's pious heart: "Nowhere so well as in the *Well-tempered Clavichord* are we made to realize that art was Bach's religion." But this must not be construed as anything like art for art's sake, which at the time Schweitzer was writing invoked the recent heyday of dandies, decadents, and perverts in fustian. Bach's art serves the inborn holiness of this world that was neither created by human art nor encompassed by human intelligence.

In Schweitzer's view, Bach depicts "the reality of life felt by a spirit always conscious of being superior to life, a spirit in which the most contradictory emotions, wildest grief



and exuberant cheerfulness, are simply phases of a fundamental superiority of soul." This sounds rather like the Romantics' view of Shakespeare, described by Friedrich Schiller as the "naïve poet" who "nowhere let himself be grasped and nowhere sought to give an account of himself," and proclaimed by Keats as the perfect exemplar of "Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason." One might be inclined to see Bach somewhat differently: as a pilgrim soul subject to all the fears, indignities, and turmoil of this earthly passage, who not only reaches for but confidently grasps the certainty of Christian faith, and gives an account of himself as he traverses this queer world suspended between hell and heaven, bearing witness before man and before God to his sins and hopes and exaltations, which are not unlike those of all other men; for Bach feels what ordinary men feel, only more sharply, and thinks what ordinary men think, only more subtly, and does so in the richest music, as exceedingly few men have ever been able or ever will be able to do. Schweitzer believes that in the innermost depths of his soul Bach creates in tranquility, and that may be so; however, this tranquility is not that of Schweitzer's artist as great-souled man "superior to life," but of a Christian man among men humble in his self-knowledge and humble in his gift—an art whose magnificence he knows is ultimately not of his own doing. SDG, Bach wrote, in homage and in gratitude, at the end of each church cantata: *Soli Deo Gloria*, to God alone the glory. The homage and gratitude pervade his entire life. If one understands Bach's greatness in this sense, then one can agree with Schweitzer that the listener who appreciates "the secret language of tone...will render Bach the thanks we render only to the great souls to whom it is given to reconcile men with life and bring them peace."

Reconciliation and peace: these do sound like upstanding Christian virtues, though they needn't be exclusively such. In any event, Bach's world was in particular need of them. They represented a turning away from the supreme philosophical innovations of the Renaissance, which were conceived in contempt and hatred for Christian groveling before a God who professed to be Love itself but treated human beings as the special objects of His displeasure. Even as Machiavelli rejected the otiose Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and preached a new ideal virtue that would gain for men the sort of happiness they really want, he did show himself Christ-like in one particular: he brought not peace but a sword. Francis Ba-

con for his part taught that humanity must no longer reconcile itself to the immemorial burden of hunger, want, pain, disease, and early death: relief is preferable to reconciliation, and the humane new scientific order would be devoted to the overthrow of the most odious aspects of the ancient divine arrangements, or of nature's blind indifference.

This Renaissance confidence that human reason would make life agreeable as never before proved premature. Martin Luther's reasoning, too, upended the authority of the Catholic Church, but it remained bound fast to the essential truth of Christian belief. His emphasis on individual conscience was revolutionary but quite unphilosophical: the undisputed truth was to be found in Scripture, which he proceeded to translate into German, to the consternation of the traditional order of Latinity. The One True Faith, and its staunch adherents, became to Protestant eyes the Whore of Babylon and Consort of the

plague epidemics ravaged the war's survivors. "Thus all four horsemen of the Apocalypse had been riding roughshod over the countryside of central and eastern Europe," wrote Pelikan.

One is, at first, surprised then by Schweitzer's declaration that after the war "the only thing of the soul that survived was religion." One might have expected it to be the first thing to go; and in the name of reason disentangled from the irrationality of faith, men of the next generation did indeed undertake to eradicate the religious distemper that turned believers into ravening beasts rather than serene and benevolent saints. But Schweitzer contends that in the struggle to climb out of the abyss, the lacerated German soul "created a religious poetry to which nothing in the world can compare, and before which even the splendor of the Psalter pales." Thus the supreme art of that epoch would genuflect before the very forces that had devastated the more or less civilized world.

Books mentioned in this essay:

J.S. Bach, by Albert Schweitzer.
Dover Publications, 2 vols.,
950 pages, out-of-print

Bach Among the Theologians,
by Jaroslav Pelikan. Wipf and Stock,
172 pages, \$20

Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven,
by John Eliot Gardiner. Knopf,
672 pages, \$35

Music of Genius

IN HIS NEW BOOK, *BACH: MUSIC IN THE Castle of Heaven*, John Eliot Gardiner, a conductor as important to the understanding of Bach in our day as Schweitzer was in his, is less sanguine in his appraisal of the holy German art begotten of this unexampled ruin. In Gardiner's view, the war's survivors were spiritual cripples, whose fear of God and man ensured that life would continue a brutal ordeal. The experience of losing very nearly everything instilled the terror of losing what little was left. The very landscape was infected with spiritual blight; as Luther had cowered in thunderstorms, which he believed to be the devil's work, so the descendants who had killed and suffered in the founder's name feared "the emptiness of the primeval forest with its undertones of demonic power unleashed by the long war." Prayer reached a new pitch of desperation and hysteria: begging for divine mercy was intensified but undermined by quite convincing evidence of God's mercilessness. All was vanity. The medieval *danse macabre* or *Totentanz*, with comely young women swept off their feet and into the grave in the embrace of leering skeletons, enjoyed a revival, even as the continent saw the first glimmers of the new generation of enlightened philosophers more confident in reason even than Machiavelli had been. The Enlightenment, Gardiner declares, really did not penetrate the primordial murk of the German heartland until much later; for that matter, the light of faith was ever in danger of being extinguished by the prevailing winds



of anguish and hopelessness. One typical German church musician spoke for many as he “bemoaned the fact that as a result of the war ‘nothing but weeping and wailing is to be heard’ in thousands of places instead of the usual sacred music.”

From this, Bach? Out of the depths, reconciliation and peace? Could that old-time religion, discredited to the mind of the emerging philosophical avant-garde, still bespeak purity of soul, hope of salvation, the tender mercies of a God of Love?

In music of genius it could; it did. Where dispute over the Word had incited murderousness that might generously be called insane and less generously satanic, Bach’s art offered the light of faith undimmed by contention and rage. That is not to say he renounced parochial ardor. Bach was a devout Lutheran, and a torrentially prolific composer of music specifically for the Lutheran service. Many of the best-loved chorales, or Lutheran hymns, had been written by Luther himself, text and melody both, as in *Ein’ feste Burg* (A Mighty Fortress Is Our God), or *Vom Himmel hoch* (From Heaven High). Bach devised coruscating elaborations on the hymns. He also wrote some 140 chorale preludes; the prelude was a piece for organ

based on the chorale. That most stately of instruments prepared the ground from which the congregation would launch into worshipful song.

Bach also adapted for sacred purpose the cantata, originally a secular form of tantalizing eroticism that devolved around 1600 from the earliest Italian opera. The church cantata, often enlisting instrumentalists, chorus, and vocal soloists, sometimes for an accompanied soloist alone, would precede and elucidate the sermon; a double cantata would both precede and follow the oration; a chorale cantata would incorporate words and music from the hymnal, and Bach composed a full cycle of these cantatas, covering an entire liturgical year. During his tenure at St. Thomas’s in Leipzig, he turned out cantatas week after week for four years running; some 200 are extant.

John Eliot Gardiner celebrated the 2000th anniversary of Christ’s birth and the 250th anniversary of Bach’s death with the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage, leading his chosen forces, the Monteverdi Choir and English Baroque Soloists, through dozens of the most storied churches in Europe and North America, to perform all 200 cantatas in proper liturgical sequence. An expert choral conductor, Gardiner devotes most of his extraordinary book

to Bach’s sacred vocal music, and provides arduous explications of a number of cantatas, as well as of the *St. Matthew Passion*, the *St. John Passion*, and the Mass in B minor. Often he is evidently writing for other conductors, who alone might be expected to know these works in sufficient detail to absorb the rapid-fire proliferation of abstruse subtlety.

To the non-expert reader Gardiner has much to teach, however, concerning Bach as spiritual dramatist, who never wrote an opera but demonstrated the skill of an operatic master. Here Gardiner describes the way Bach plunges the devoted listener into the psychic landscape of Hell, in the cantata *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* (Oh Eternity, You Word of Thunder):

A tenor soloist steps forward and piles on the agony: “there is no redemption from the pain of eternity...it drives on and on in its play of torment.” Bach draws on a varied armoury for this aria—long notes and undulating quavers [eighth notes, in British parlance] to imply eternity, tortuous intervals paired in quavers to suggest trepidation, broken fragments, chromatic and syncopated, for the quaking heart, wild

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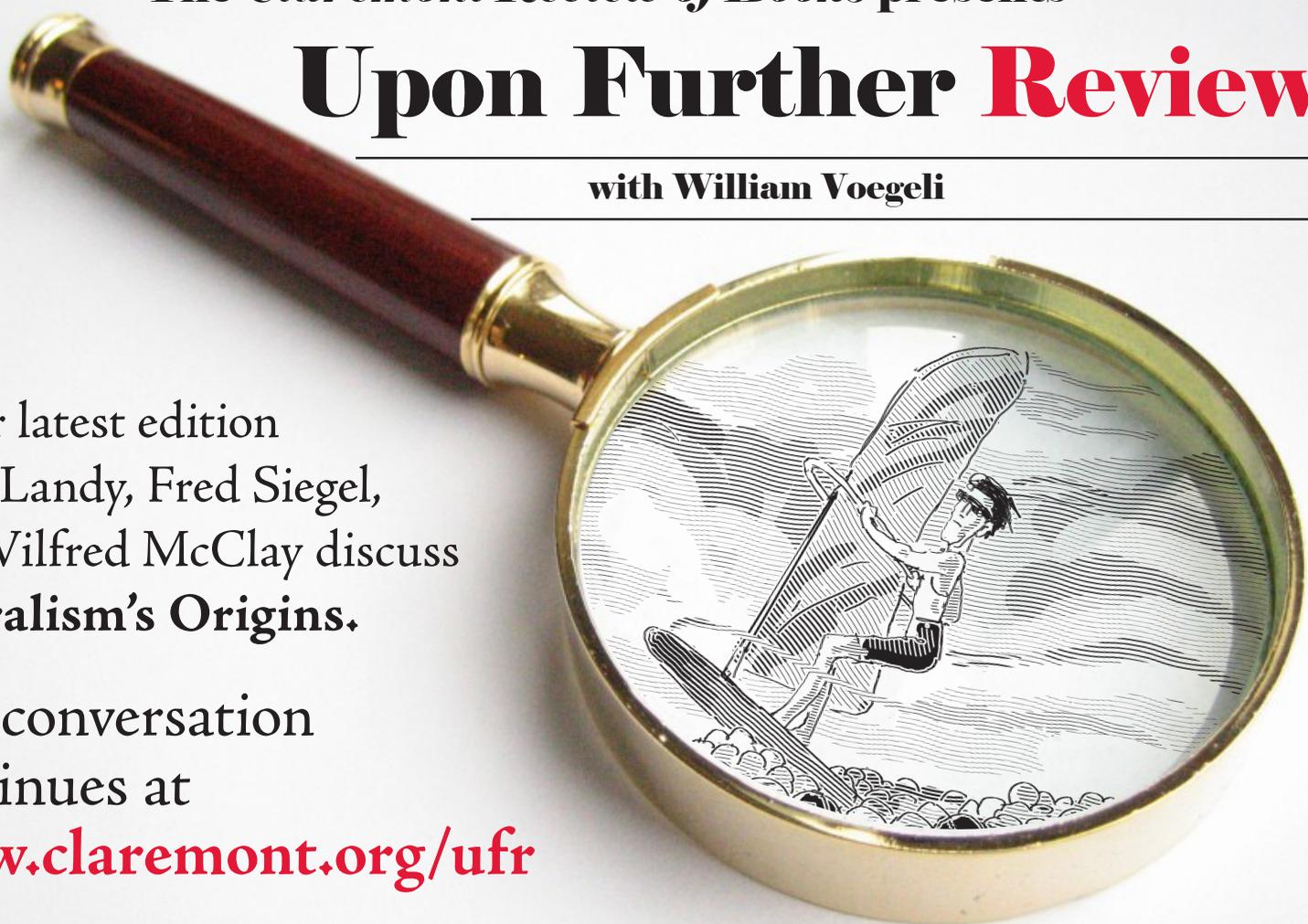
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coloratura runs for “flames that burn forever,” sudden silences to underscore the terror.

Then the bass soloist redoubles the sufferings of the damned, just before he proclaims that God is just, over and over and over, his sudden beaming contentment underwritten by three oboes and a bassoon that join in like quacking ducks (to Gardiner’s ear anyway), transporting the listener just like that to an ante-chamber of Heaven where all is *opera buffa* jollity. “[Bach] reminds us that the solution to life’s problems is childlike in its simplicity: all it takes is to put one’s trust in God. It is a deliberate ploy to dissipate the gloom and terror—like opening a window in a smoke-filled room.”

The Fullness of Glory

TO BECOME AS LITTLE CHILDREN, HOWEVER, might be an uncongenial directive for 21st-century men of complicated belief, or unbelief, who would rather think of themselves as having put away childish things. The cantata *Ich habe genug* (I Have Enough), a work of harrowing beauty, poised on the shadow-line between life and death, may better suit the modern temperament, which tends to concern itself with inevitable extinction—or the possibility of life everlasting—only when the end comes uncomfortably near. The cantata is written for solo voice and accompaniment, and the music explores the weariness of a creature who has known all he needs to of life and is now prepared for release and for union with the God Who, he hopes, awaits him. *Ich habe genug* cuts two ways: the singer has had enough of the pains of earthly existence, and he has all he will ever need because the Lord is in his heart. Yet the prospect of the divine embrace does not inspire ecstasies; it may not even inspire confidence; there are no rhapsodic leaps heavenward in the music. Nor is there fear or anxiety—just the fatigue of someone who has reached the limits of endurance, and who repeats and repeats all he really knows as his death approaches. This obsessive thought and feeling, spiraling round and round yet never quite reaching a conclusion, complicates the official Christian view of death: although the soul feels God within, death remains a mystery, and might mean simply the end of everything for the human animal, including this strange being’s hopes for eternity. Not a simple and straightforward faith.

For those who want an expression of faith unadulterated by doubt, there are Bach’s organ works, notably rendered by Albert

Schweitzer, who made several recordings during the 1930s, in London and Strasbourg and Gunsbach churches, of assorted pieces, including chorale preludes and the Toccata and Fugue in D minor, which became the performer’s signature work. Here is a sound world of Christian majesty that admits of no uncertainty or misgiving. The beauty of this music surpasses that of Biblical magniloquence or theological finesse, so that one is tempted to think that this is the purest form of worship there is—that here Bach offers the ultimate experience of the divine on earth, and that no more splendid music than this is to be heard in heaven. It has been said that Luther emphasized the theology of the Cross at the expense of the theology of Glory, and that his dutiful servant Bach composed sermons in music on Luther’s favorite themes, dwelling on suffering and terror rather than the marvels of Creation. There are instances enough of this severity in Bach’s oeuvre. But in this organ music one hears the fullness of Glory, spectacular as Alyosha’s vision of the stars in *The Brothers Karamazov*, or the world

One is tempted to think
that no music more
splendid than this is to be
heard in heaven.

above the clouds in the view from the mountaintop of Caspar David Friedrich’s wanderer. Yet even so, where Dostoevsky sets the pure-hearted wonder of a saint against the modern pandemonium where nothing is sacred, and Friedrich portrays the experience of supreme earthly beauty as the privilege reserved for the most daring spirits, Bach celebrates a simpler reverence, a more accessible beauty, created in order to inspire the awe latent in every human soul. In this particular precinct of Bach’s art, evil and suffering have no place; and one understands that the splendor of the world God has created for man is meant, not for the solitary spiritual alpinist in the rarefied heights, but for all who sit quietly within the sound of this music, which is the sound of God’s voice, the still small voice amplified so that the whole world reverberates and rejoices. The sonic grandeur of this music proclaims an extravagance of spirit that fills and even overflows these perfectly ordered geometric forms, in joy beyond all reckoning that God should be here in our midst, available to all who listen.

Elsewhere in Bach’s music, though, God seems unavailable, not just beyond our reach as in *Ich habe genug*, but not there at all, and achingly conspicuous by his absence. The Three Sonatas for Cello and Piano (originally for viola da gamba and clavier—most likely harpsichord) seem to belong to another century than Bach’s, such as the 19th of Keats and Schubert and Chopin. For here is longing never to be fulfilled, yet an exquisite torment that yields a dark bruised beauty inseparable from the pain, and maybe that is the best a certain type of soul can hope for any more: this is the world of the *Ode on Melancholy*, *Winterreise*, the *Nocturnes*, and it is the preserve of men and women who feel too much and will be crushed by life soon enough. In this music the Adagio and Andante always occupy the emotional center; overloaded with sorrow and woe, swoon-worthy at the very least and inches away from expiring altogether, this relentless keening music does not sound like the old familiar churchly Bach. It is in the Allegro and Vivace movements that Bach sounds more like himself again; however, even these don’t provide the missing half of a spiritual whole, but are exercises in the higher mathematics tricked out with displays of wondrous elan, for those who like their Euclidean proofs decorated with arabesques. These seem to be diversions from the weight of emotion too heavy to be borne. They don’t clarify; they don’t complete. How do these antithetical types of music cohere? At most they illustrate the sharp division between feeling and thought both at full extension, as they strain toward the infinite; the other Bach, the devout churchman, celebrates heart and mind as a unity divinely composed, in every sense.

In his 1921 essay “The Metaphysical Poets,” T.S. Eliot identifies the genius of early 17th-century poets such as John Donne and Lord Herbert of Cherbury in their perfect integration of mind, sense, and emotion—in the ability “to feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose.” Later in the 17th century, however, as Eliot laments, “a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered.” Bach embodies that earlier integrity, more impressively even than Donne, for the composer habitually thinks and feels how near to heaven he comes in the daily round of his vocation. Yet Bach also knows how that perfection crumbles under the pressure of fear and hatred loosed in God’s own name, as in the wars of religion—and with the ensuing revulsion from religious sentiment in the most furious minds of the Enlightenment, which bled with outrage and loathing of their own.

The *St. Matthew Passion*, considered by many to be Bach’s greatest work, and by



some the greatest piece of music ever, is instinct with sorrow at the depth of human evil yet rich in rejoicing at human goodness. For nearly the first hour of the piece, the chorus is reverent and decent and compassionate, never raising its voice, its music always decorous and lovely—until with *Sind Blitze, sind Donner in Wolken verschwunden* (Have lightning and thunder vanished from the heavens?), they unleash a shattering blast of righteous fury at Judas's betrayal of Christ. The earlier pieties of the crowd were simply inadequate to the gathering enormity, and this is the moment in which ordinary humanity awakens to its own nature. While almost to the end of this chorus the crowd directs its rage at Judas alone, in the final measures it calls for Hell's vengeance on *den falschen Verräter, das mörderische Blut*—the false betrayer, the murderous blood. Whose blood? Good Christians had of course traditionally stained all Jewry till the end of time with irredeemable blood guilt for the deicide; some interpreters suggest that here this chorus of Jews steps out of character for a moment to sing like good Christians. But blood is what all men have in common, and Bach teaches subtly but decisively that all men harbor murder in their blood.

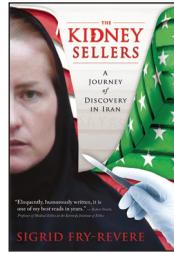
When Christ is taken before the High Priest, the joy with which the chorus proclaims him fit to die is fearsome and sickening. But the sadistic mockery with which they bait him as he is beaten and spat upon turns in an instant to pity and remorse, in the Chorale *Wer hat dich so geschlagen* (Who has beaten you so?). After Judas confesses his terrible guilt, the chorus that had reviled him earlier now states that it couldn't care less. To see Christ suffer and die is now all their interest. One moment they call for his crucifixion, the basses leading the cry, the other voices joining in one after the other, as Bach illustrates the irrepressible momentum of mob fury. The next moment, in the Chorale *Wie wunderbarlich is doch diese Strafe* (How wondrous is this punishment), the mob is suddenly an adoring congregation, awed by the Shepherd who lays his life down for his sheep. The renewed call to crucify him, and the eager acceptance of blood guilt for themselves and their children, are malignantly festive, as though the crowd has no idea of its own evil. The grosser the sin, the more fervently they celebrate it, in antic florid runs, and *fortissimo* belting. But vicious glee exists hard by solemn contrition, and it is the collective voice of chastened goodness that one hears at the last—soft, subdued, tender as they bid Jesus "gute Nacht," as though lulling a child to sleep, then magnificent with the full force of grief, resonant with the best in humanity.

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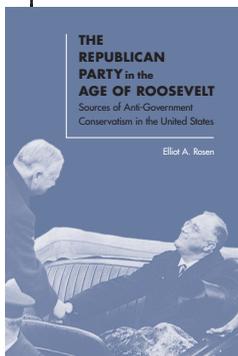
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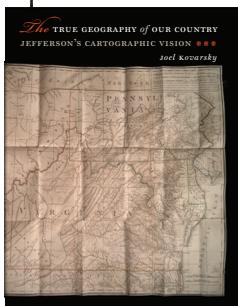
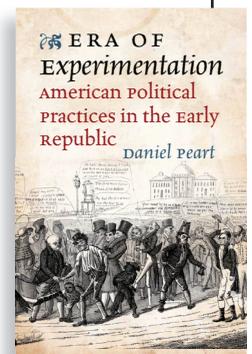
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The truths Bach presents are eternal. One hears the co-existence in the human breast of decency, compassion, reverence, with the frequently mistaken conviction that divine justice must invariably be on one's side, and the particular fillip that self-righteousness contributes to the enthralling spectacle of the enemy's torture and death. Here is religious feeling at its most exalted and at its most degraded. Bach implicitly conjoins the original rejection of Christ by the Jewish multitude adhering to the Law with the more recent abominations by Christian on Christian in the name of Christ. And yet these sinners remain capable of nobility, gentleness, spiritual beauty. These are the gifts of God's grace, bestowed on a welcoming soul. They are also the fruits of a mind in the full glory of reason.

Eternal Harmony

THE SACRED AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL have rarely been companionable. The taste of the Enlightenment cast Bach's music into oblivion for an entire century. Some few appreciated Bach's genius: Mozart dragooned some of his fugues to serve the needs of a string quartet; Beethoven called Bach the father of harmony, and said he should have been named not *Bach*, which means brook, but *Meer*, for he was vast as the sea. Yet mostly the new rage for the *style galant*, clear, elegant, and erotic, judged the old polyphony confusingly elaborate and needlessly godly and accordingly obsolete. The *St. Matthew Passion* went unheard after Bach's death until Felix Mendelssohn received the score as a gift and conducted a performance, employing his own severely truncated version, in Berlin in 1829; this

revival was said, with some imprecision, to take place exactly 100 years after the work's Good Friday debut. Mendelssohn remarked how wonderful it was that a young Jew should have revived this Christian treasure. Hegel was in the audience—Mendelssohn had attended his lectures on aesthetics while rehearsing the *Passion*—and the philosopher honored Bach as the master “whose grand, truly Protestant, pithy yet learned genius we have only lately learned to value again properly.” Hegel was one thinker who asserted that the Enlightenment in Germany was “on the side of theology,” and he was very much a champion of the most alluring musical setting for the Christian belief.

No less formidable an enemy of all things Christian than Friedrich Nietzsche wrote to his friend Erwin Rohde in 1870, “This week I heard the *St. Matthew Passion* three times and each time I had the same feeling of immeasurable admiration. One who has completely forgotten Christianity truly hears it here as Gospel.” By 1878, however, as befit his status as Antichrist-in-training, he felt obliged to revise his judgment: “In Bach there is too much crude Christianity, crude Germanism, crude scholasticism.... At the threshold of modern European music...he is always looking back toward the Middle Ages.” A remark by Nietzsche four years later, recorded by Arthur Egidi, another musical friend, dismissed Bach, and Goethe's rapture by Bach, coolly and curtly and for good: “Goethe, as is known, said to Mendelssohn on hearing Bach's music: ‘This sounds as if before the beginning of creation the eternal harmony in God's bosom were conversing with itself.’ Nietzsche, however, concluded: ‘So Bach is still not a world.’” That is a hard

standard to meet. Nietzsche faults Bach here for failing to create himself according to his own law, as men aspiring to the noblest seriousness must do; Bach was not his own master, but instead took the very foundation of his being on faith, submitting to an outworn tradition, both musical and theological, that he ought to have known would foreclose his chance at self-perfection. Nietzsche was the supreme philosophical sufferer of modern times, who conceived of his own life as the *Passion* that would supersede Christ's, consecrating his physical and psychic agonies to his understanding of indomitable human vitality, the greatest force in the godless universe. This understanding of pain and death and transcendence could not have been more different from that of Bach or Saint Matthew or anyone else privy to the eternal harmony in God's bosom. Nietzsche proclaims the eternal recurrence, which endows this earthly life with the ultimate significance, indeed the only significance, for as Nietzsche's demon tells him it shall be repeated forever and ever, so that all there is of the hellish and the glorious would be found here on earth; and only the strongest soul can consider such a prospect without horror.

Most 21st-century men no longer feel at home in Bach's eternity; but even so, one cannot help finding it rather more beautiful and joyous than Nietzsche's. And one suspects that some of the finest hours Nietzsche enjoys, as he goes round and round, world without end, are those in which he was once, and shall be again, wise enough to admire, perhaps even to love, the genius of Bach.

Algis Valiunas is a fellow of the Ethics and Public Policy Center

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