

TRADITION, AUTHENTICITY, AND A BACH CHORALE PRELUDE

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Old habits die hard; old traditions die harder. A Hollywood sequel and a performance tradition don't have much in common, except for their similar *raison d'être*: we like familiar things. There is, to be sure, a substantial difference in the motivations behind the film industry's tiresome rehashings and the traditions of the music world, but the end product is still very much the same. One movie—for our purposes, one performance—resembles its predecessors to a remarkable degree. The implication for music is obvious: interpretation becomes simply a matter of conforming (be it consciously or subconsciously) to an existing tradition that has proved its validity. And that is fine, if the tradition truly does reflect something which is intrinsic to the music. But what happens when a tradition attains the (albeit tacit) status of a normative law or a method? We forget that the tradition has any power over us; the way we play is simply the way it's done. This is not particularly dangerous, except in the case of a well-ingrained tradition whose validity is suspect. A fresh, critical look at the many common assumptions which underlie our performance traditions can, in fact, reveal a startling level of dependence on the whims and fancies of previous generations—who may not be any closer to the music than we are.

The late 20th century is a profoundly skeptical time, and yet we as a profession continue to follow blindly a number of traditions born in the previous century. As a result, a certain level of atrophy has infected our creativity; we no longer interpret, we merely execute. This opinion is not exclusively mine; it was recently set forth by Scott Cantrell in his review of the 1990 AGO National Convention in Boston (August 1990 issue of *THE AMERICAN ORGANIST*). He observes that we have developed “a sort of American Classic ‘school’ of organ playing. Its hallmarks are technique buffed to a high gloss, rhythmic integrity, and a certain abstracted reserve—polish cultivated at the cost of personality.” Cantrell is quick to point out that we are not the only ones: the worldwide conservatory/music school system has produced legions of technically competent (even brilliant) musicians who, alas, seldom match their superb abilities with an equal level of inspiration.

But collective guilt is the sum of individual guilt; the fact remains that this assessment, if accurate, is quite disturbing. The performance art has drifted into an antiseptic, abstract state of self-perpetuation. Continuation of our high virtuosic standards is paramount, and few bemoan the resulting sameness, and the lack of individuality and real creativity. Although Cantrell does not single out any generation of performers in particular, I think it would be fair to say that the younger generation must bear the brunt of his criticism—if only to stimulate them to change. As a member of that generation, I respond not by defending my peers, but rather by challenging the prevailing wisdom of the performance traditions that we have inherited.

The recent debates about early music and “authenticity” have had a lot to say on the subject of traditions and their legitimacy. I begin with the question of what it means to be authentic, because the proper definition of this word will influence how we look at a performance tradition which claims validity for itself.

Among the more outspoken critics of the philosophy behind the urge for authenticity, Richard Taruskin reviles our adoption of the term as a justification for the use of historically informed performance practice or instruments.¹ Why should we equate being authentic with being historically accurate? (Who really knows what “historically accurate” means, anyway?) Taruskin rightly observes that what is lacking in most performances which advertise themselves as “authentic” is precisely that quality which is essential to the very definition of the word: the self-awareness of one's own creative intention. Artistic dehumanization is pervasive in contemporary society; in certain fields—pop art and music, particularly—it is an ideal. But in the performance of art music, this loss of contact with humanity (either the self or an imaginary *persona*) is particularly vexing—and unfounded as an historical ideal.² In short, to be authentic must include being oneself: is this too much to ask?

Unfortunately, we have not always had this conception of the word in mind when we talk about the performance of music. When Walter Emery asked in 1971 whether our Bach playing was authentic, he had something completely different in mind:

For practical purposes, I think an authentic performance must be defined as one that Bach would give if he were alive today. In such a performance the notes would be right: the ornamentation would be right: the phrasing would be right: the tempos would be right, for the particular building; the tempo-relations that arise in sectional movements like the St. Anne Fugue would be right: rubatos and rallentandos, and such conventions as those on triplets and double-dotting would be rightly applied: and the registration would be the best Bach could do on the particular organ. No doubt there are other things to be wished for; but that list as it stands is enough to show that complete authenticity is an unattainable ideal. All the same, the ideal is worth striving after; for from some directions it can at any rate be approached, and the nearer you approach it, the better.³

Emery's definition, instead of stressing the essentiality of self-awareness and an awareness of one's place in the world (Heidegger's *Dasein*), insists rather on compliance with a long set of rules which he finally admits are impossible to follow perfectly. Authenticity is an unattainable ideal, something we should strive for but be content never to reach. How much easier it would have been for Emery to interpret the works of Bach if only he had changed the emphasis in his first sentence: we can almost hear him say that “an authentic performance must be defined as one that Bach would give if he were alive today.” How much better to say “if he were *alive* today.”

Taruskin, who criticizes our (mis)use of the word, nevertheless wholeheartedly approves of the *urge* for authenticity—in both his and Emery's sense of the word. He credits the Early Music movement for “the inestimable and indispensable heuristic value of the old instruments in freeing minds and hands to experience old music newly.”⁴ The one sure way to “experience old music newly” is to interpret it for ourselves: not for the composer (who is probably long gone), and not for the performance tradition into which we (or someone else whose views we respect) were born—including the teacher or school responsible for molding our basic musical abilities. Imagination cannot be replaced by either scholarship or sentimentality. It is the second of these snares—our inherited performance traditions—into which we have fallen, if Scott Cantrell's Boston postmortem is to be believed.

The natural temptation is to dismiss organists collectively as a breed which lags behind the times. After all, church music has been one of the most conservative areas of Western art music since the Protestant Reformation. But today that conservatism is more than just a resistance to things new within the church (which is seldom *our* complaint!): it is a problem which reflects our whole musical culture, making us more the wardens of the past instead of its re-creators.

We would do well to remember the rhetoric of a recent challenge issued by a leading musicologist, advocating the creation of a more inclusive music criticism: “How we got into analysis, and how to get out of it.”⁵ In like fashion, we must recognize our institutions for what they are—the guardians of our musical culture and at the same time the generators of our musical traditions—while we attempt to steer a new course away from the overly mechanized, dehumanizing feeder system that these institutions tend to foster. This should not be construed as an attack on American musical education; on the contrary, it is a testimony to the spirit of our times that the issues of performance practice, historical awareness, “authentic” instruments, and the like can even be discussed in a friendly manner.

And in that spirit, I would like to offer a personal example. In his review of the National Young Artists Competition, Cantrell states that my performance of the Bach chorale prelude *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein*, BWV 641, “outraged some people.” While I do appreciate the compliment (Mr. Cantrell went on to defend the performance in question), I cannot resist the opportunity to defend myself publicly. People were upset because I dared to question a well-established performance tradition. Simply put, I played the piece too fast. “Tradition” says that BWV 641 is to be played very slowly, because of the rather pathetic *affect* of the text and the profuse ornamentation of the melody. But neither of these reasons stands up to careful scrutiny.

The published interpretations and performance directives for this chorale prelude are numerous; remarkably, many present essential-

ly the same view. A representative sampling is given below. It is important to remember that, whether or not we have made a conscious effort to adhere to them, these opinions form the basis of our tradition.

Albert Schweitzer had this to say about BWV 641: "In the little chorale prelude . . . the text is translated into music in a particularly intimate way. The motive derived from the commencement of the melody is of such a kind that the three lower voices repeat continually the words *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sind* [Schweitzer's grammatical modernization] *(When we are in our greatest need)*. Over this lament the melody flows along in (sixteenth notes) like a divine song of consolation, and in a wonderful final cadence seems to silence and compose the other parts."⁶ Schweitzer calls this type of lower voice figuration a "speaking" motif, and claims that Bach was the first to invest meaning into motivically derived accompaniments: "Bach's predecessors . . . had given no thought to the poetic significance of the repeated chorale-motive. Bach, however, saw that the motive should bring the corresponding words to mind. In the *Orgelbüchlein*, therefore, the motive derived from the chorale is employed only where there is a meaning in the repetition of the words." And yet, "the frequent employment of canon in the chorales of the *Orgelbüchlein* has no poetic significance."⁷ But how is this possible? How can one type of imitation be poetically significant while another is not?

This may be the primary source for all those who see BWV 641 as a lament. Bach's use of a three-note contrapuntal motif derived from the head of the chorale tune somehow infuses the meaning of the first words of the text into the whole piece. The comforting words of the ensuing stanzas are completely ignored in favor of a dark, morbid interpretation of Bach's intentions in setting this text as an expressive, coloratura-type prelude. Schweitzer took Spitta's earlier observation on the contrapuntal derivation of the accompaniment to BWV 641 and turned it into a quasi-mystical interpretation of Bach's compositional process. And the mysticism lingers on . . .

Hermann Keller certainly knew where to take his cue: "Coloration is also employed here [in BWV 641] with great depth of meaning: for the anxiety and longing in the heart of man 'that is restless until it repose in Thee' [from St. Augustine]. Even the accompanying voices join in prayer with the beginning of the melody."⁸

Karl Geiringer had this to say about the three ornamented chorale preludes in the *Orgelbüchlein* (*Das alte Jahr vergangen ist*, BWV 641; *O Mensch, bewein' dein' Sünde gross*, BWV 622; and *Wenn wir*): "The melody is almost obliterated by rich ornamentation, which establishes a mood of utter dejection, as though a mourner was hiding his face."⁹ The transformation from chorale prelude to funeral dirge is, in effect, complete for all three works. Later, in comments on *Alle Menschen müssen sterben*, BWV 643, Geiringer observes that "at first sight, Bach seems to have misinterpreted the text . . . The dance-like rhythm of the bass produces a serene mood, which is only explained by the vision of eternal life evoked near the end of the text: 'There the faithful souls will see God's transcendent majesty.'" Geiringer looked to the end of the text of *Alle Menschen*, but seems unwilling (or perhaps just unmoved because of a certain tradition) to look beyond the first words of *Wenn wir*.

Peter Williams provides this translation of the first two stanzas of Paul Eber's 1566 text.

<i>Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein und wissen nicht, wo aus noch ein, und finden weder Hilf noch Rat, ob wir gleich sorgen früh und spät, so ist dies unser Trost allein, dass wir zusammen insgemein dich anrufen, o treuer Gott, um Rettung aus der Angst und Not . . .</i>	When we are in the greatest distress and do not know where to turn, and find neither help nor advice, day and night, then is this our only comfort, that all of us together call on you, O true God, for rescue from care and distress . . . ¹⁰
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These two stanzas make clear that the full text¹¹ is not exclusively a lament on the brokenness of the human condition (as so many seem to think); it is also an ardent prayer of confession. Distress and comfort, both traditionally a part of the act of confession, are presented here as a gently fluctuating antithesis. Schweitzer's interpretation of the first line may, in fact, be needlessly literal (did it influence Williams?): "*wenn*" can mean "when," but in this case a more logical (and more poetic) translation would read "whenever." The meaning of the entire first stanza certainly becomes less draconian when "deep distress" is reduced from a permanent state of despair to a frequent condition. Far from being a mourner's lament (Schweitzer and Geiringer) or man's anxious wait for eternity (Keller), *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein* is an affirmation of God's forgiving powers, which provide solace *while we are here on earth*.

Williams readily admits that BWV 641 lacks the more overt

rhetorical characteristics of plaintive or mournful pieces: "the absence of chromaticism . . . and a shorter, more restrained melodic line around g'-b' . . . help to produce an organ chorale of direct beauty rather than rhetorical effects."¹² He finds Schweitzer's notion about the implied textual repetition within the accompanimental figure to be, at best, an exaggeration. On the overall character of BWV 641, Williams finds it to be a work of "sweet gentleness," due mainly to the pervasive thirds and sixths which accompany the appoggiatura-laden melody. With that observation, he may have hit upon the one thing which separates this piece from the usual rhetorical baggage of the more sorrowful (read slow) ornamented chorale prelude: the ornamentation in *Wenn wir* serves to connect the notes of the melody in a unique way. The figures are written so as "to lead to the next note of the melody on the next (quarter-note) beat; the coloratura thus colors the interval of time or musical space between the notes of the melody, which are placed just as they would be if there were no decoration."¹³

So, the ornamentation in BWV 641 does nothing to make the musical setting more "affective" one way or the other; it serves merely to gracefully connect the notes of the chorale melody. Logically then, the piece should be heard four beats to a bar, for that is the meter of the chorale—and not in eight, as the tradition (witnessed by the recordings cited below) seems to imply. Otherwise, the chorale tune is forever lost within Bach's graceful decoration. What then are we left with? A fairly straightforward, if heavily ornamented, chorale prelude set in a very conventional harmonic style on a melody whose text expresses a feeling of gentle repose and comfort in the knowledge that God will, in fact, forgive our sins and "rescue [us] from care and distress."

Strangely enough, the recorded performances of BWV 641 do not show the same progression of thought that we have begun to see with the musicologists, namely with Peter Williams. (As usual, Williams raises more questions than he answers, but the questions themselves should provide an impetus to performers to seek their own solutions to the problems of interpretation.) A well-established tradition is clearly evident in this cross section of European and American performers; indeed, it shows little signs of any change, even with the most recent recordings. *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein* seems to have escaped radical transformation thus far in the drive toward authenticity—and here I mean in Walter Emery's sense of the word!

Helmut Walcha <i>The Works of Johann Sebastian Bach,</i> Series F: Organ Works, <i>Orgelbüchlein</i> , pt. 2 Archive: ARC 3026	[eighth note] = 44	1952
Finn Videre <i>J.S. Bach: Orgelbüchlein</i> Haydn Society HSL-84	[eighth note] = 48	1953
Anton Heiller <i>J.S. Bach: Orgelbüchlein</i> , Vol. 2 Cardinal/Vanguard VCS-10027	[eighth note] = 44	1967
Marie-Claire Alain <i>The Organ Works of Johann Sebastian Bach,</i> Vol. IX MHS 668/9/70	[eighth note] = 36	1967
Helmut Walcha <i>Johann Sebastian Bach: Orgelbüchlein</i> Archiv 2708 023	[eighth note] = 48	1969
Michel Chapuis <i>Johann Sebastian Bach: Das Orgelwerk,</i> Vol. 10 Telefunken/Das Alte Werk BC 25107-T1-2	[eighth note] = 50	1969
Lionel Rogg <i>J.S. Bach</i> , Vol. 14 (<i>The Orgelbüchlein</i>) Peerless: Bach Oryx 1014	[eighth note] = 42	197-?
George Baker <i>J.-S. Bach: L'Oeuvre pour Orgue</i> FY 044/047	[eighth note] = 44	1976
Daniel Chorzeppa <i>Bach Orgelbüchlein</i> Philips 6700 115	[eighth note] = 36	1977
Sandra Soderlund <i>Sandra Soderlund Performs at Stanford</i> Arkay Records AR 1082	[eighth note] = 44	1986
Yuko Hayashi <i>Bach at Old West</i> Classic Masters CMCD-1016	[eighth note] = 44	1988

The message from the recording artists is loud and clear: this piece is to be played slowly, and it is to be counted in eight (some even seem to be in sixteen!). Chorale tunes may come and go, but we don't dare play a Bach ornamented chorale prelude at a speed which would allow the chorale melody to be heard; we would be trivializing Bach's ornamentation!

Now for the shocker: Hermann Keller, in *The Organ Works of Bach*, recommends a speed of [eighth note] = 58. He first published his book in 1948, four years before the first recording on this list. Although Keller's speed was clearly out of line with the tradition as it was developing (we can assume that the tradition was pretty well determined when Walcha made his 1952 recording, since his speed is a rough statistical mean for all those that follow), it is musically plausible. At [eighth note] = 58, *Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein*, BWV 641, practically plays itself: the bars of four beats flow effortlessly from one to the next, allowing Bach's beautifully crafted coloratura to fulfill its role as soloist and, at the same time, chorale commentator. Keller's pose is certain proof of his place in history, and yet his performance directives show him to be remarkably individualistic.

And now, throwing caution (and immodesty) to the wind, I must respond to those in Boston who were shocked to hear a non-traditional interpretation of BWV 641. The cassette recording of my performance reveals, to my great astonishment, a tempo of [eighth note] = 58: Keller's tempo! It seems Keller wasn't such a rabid individualist after all; at least one other interpreter managed quite independently to come up with the same tempo. This tempo works, but it is surely not the only one that does. Interpretation means making use of the realm of possibilities, not insisting dogmatically on the "right" answers.

Finally, a few words from Robert Donington, one of the early pioneers in the 20th-century revival of Baroque performance practice. In his little book, *Tempo and Rhythm in Bach's Organ Music*, Prof. Donington notes how fundamentally attitudes concerning the careful notation of music have changed since the 18th century:

[A] casual inconsistency is extremely characteristic of the methods of writing music down which still prevailed in the time of Bach. It must not be inferred, however, that the composers of the day were indifferent to the many details of performance which they left so much vaguer in their notation than we attempt to render them at the present time. On the contrary, they paid as much attention to them as we do ourselves. The difference was that they preferred to leave within the province of the performer many elements which we expect to have decided for us at least in broad outline by the composer [or by the "tradition"?]. This had nothing to do with either laziness or incompetence; it was a deliberate act of faith in the principle of individualism as applied to the interpretation of music... There were drawbacks to the system, but it was certainly an encouragement to spontaneous musicianship.¹⁴

Donington's message to performers is quite simple: try to glean as much as possible from the scores themselves and any relevant historical documents (ornament tables, treatises, letters, instruments, etc.), and use that information in the creation of an *authentic* (in the correct sense of the word) and *musical* interpretation. Individualism, which Donington so vigorously promotes, must include a healthy mistrust of historical traditions in order to separate the wheat from the chaff, the useful advice from the folklore. Authen-

tic individualism does not enshrine past traditions, nor does it presume cultural relativity.

Authentic interpretation, then, means reckoning with the unconscious or deliberate habit of traditions to impose methodology on performance. And here we should be cautious: the more foolproof an interpretive strategy, the less its views will honestly reflect anyone but the originator(s) of that particular method. The traditions of the "American Classic School" of organ playing (and, for that matter, most of Europe's) are not inviolable; some are downright silly. There are no secrets to the art of interpretation, just as there are no "right" answers for subjective, *interpretive* questions. Interpretation, at this moment in history, means an awareness of cultural and historical context wedded to an active, aesthetically informed imagination. We deal mostly with historical works of art, but we must live and create our own history, lest we cease to exist entirely.

NOTES

1. Richard Taruskin, "The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past," *Authenticity and Early Music: A Symposium*, ed. N. Kenyon (Oxford, 1988), pp. 137-207; "The Spin Doctors of Early Music," *The New York Times*, July 29, 1990.
2. The concept of the performer as an expressive agent began to appear in aesthetic theories of the late 18th century. Earlier, more rational theories of imitation in the arts, including the so-called "doctrine" of the affections, are more critical to the study of the music of J.S. Bach. For a summary of changes in the aesthetics of self-expression, see Chapter 3 ("Changing phases of the aesthetics of emotion") in Carl Dahlhaus, *Aesthetics of Music*, trans. W. Austin (Cambridge, 1982; 1967 orig.).
3. Walter Emery, "Is Your Bach Playing Authentic?," *The Musical Times*, cxii (1971), p. 483.
4. Taruskin, "Pastness," pp. 203-204.
5. Joseph Kerman, "How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), pp. 311-31.
6. Albert Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, Vol. II, trans. E. Newman (New York, 1966; 1911 orig.), p. 71.
7. Schweitzer, pp. 67-68.
8. Hermann Keller, *The Organ Works of Bach*, trans. H. Hewitt (New York, 1967; 1948 orig.), p. 223.
9. Karl Geiringer, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Culmination of an Era* (New York, 1966), p. 234-35.
10. Peter Williams, *The Organ Music of J.S. Bach*, Vol. II (Cambridge, 1980), p. 94.
11. For the complete seven stanza text, see Mark S. Bighley, *The Lutheran Chorales in the Organ Works of J.S. Bach* (St. Louis, 1986), pp. 240-41.
12. Williams, p. 95.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Robert Donington, *Tempo and Rhythm in Bach's Organ Music* (London, 1960), p. 16.

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