

Fugue No. 7

E-Flat Major

Well-Tempered Clavier Book II

Johann Sebastian Bach

© 2004 Timothy A. Smith (the author)¹

To read this essay in its hypermedia format, go to the Shockwave movie at <http://www2.nau.edu/tas3/wtc/ii07.html>.



Subject: Fugue No. 7, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II

For a hundred years the *St. Matthew Passion* had gathered dust. In 1829 Mendelssohn blew away the dust and began a revival of interest in Bach's music. In this analysis we'll consider a theme that accompanied that revival:

- Bach as healer
- a never-failing medicine
- in troubled times
- looking back to the middle ages

I shall conclude with a personal reflection on Nietzsche's criticism of Bach.

Bach as Healer

If Felix Mendelssohn introduced Bach's music to the concert hall, it was Robert Schumann whose scholarship preserved it for posterity. In the summer of 1845, battling a severe episode of mental illness, Schumann embarked upon a study of Bach's counterpoint. His self-prescribed medication was to compose six fugues on the name B-A-C-H (Op. 60).

Thirteen years earlier Schumann had confided to J. G. Kuntsch that Bach had a "morally empowering effect" (*moralisch-stärkende Wirkung*). The salvific power of Bach's music was, for him, an article of faith. In reviewing Mendelssohn's 1840 performance of Bach organ works

¹ You may print, copy, link to, or cite this document, for non-profit educational purposes, so long as credit is given to the author as per fair use. You may not reproduce this document electronically, enfold it into a web site, or incorporate it into a saleable product without written permission from the author.

Schumann wrote: "What art owes to Bach is hardly less than what religion owes to its founder."

Schumann culminated his study of Bach in 1870 by initiating the thirty-year process of collecting and editing Bach's music--known as the *Bach Gesellschaft*. It is fitting that this monument, perhaps begun in a personal quest for healing, was completed with reflection, anew, upon the curative nature of Bach's music.

To celebrate completion of the *Bach Gesellschaft*, the editors of Berlin's *Die Musik* solicited, from more than 200 international thinkers and artists, an answer to the following question: "What does Johann Sebastian Bach mean to me and what is his importance for our time?"

In his allusion to the editor's 75-page report, Walter Frisch was struck by its many references to the sanative influence of Bach's music: "The idea of Bach as healer--as healing fountain or physician--in sick, troubled, or 'hypernervous' times comes up repeatedly, often with specific medical terminology."²

Theodor Müller-Reuter, for example, described Bach as "a restorative spring into which I step when my musical soul has suffered some kind of damage....Bach is like a physician to me" (Frisch, p. 127). The composer Max Reger replied that his age, diseased by a bad case of "misunderstood Wagner," was in dire need of the "never-failing medicine" that Bach's music provides (Frisch, p. 127).

A Never-Failing Medicine

The "never-failing medicine" of Bach is wonderfully illustrated by this fugue. Its active ingredient is a subject that will, at the right moment, reveal itself to have a wondrous capacity to accompany itself (in stretto).

Whereas the subject begins with a rising fifth (do-sol), its answer inverts the interval to a rising fourth (sol-do). The reversal of tonal polarity enables the answer to continue in the same key as the subject; it is a "tonal" answer. The subject-answer relationship is rational; one thought is born of another.

Recognizable as being the same, yet different, the subject and its answer illustrate the aesthetic ideal of unity within variety. They are beautiful not because they titillate the ear, but for their relationship with each other. As we have already noted, this relationship allows them to accompany each other--they are contrapuntally compatible. This beauty exists apart from how one feels about the structure, or the mood it swings one to. The subject and its answer are intrinsically beautiful.

Alternating subjects with answers, the fugue's exposition states the primary idea in each voice from low to high--bass (subj.), tenor (answ.), alto (subj.), and soprano (answ.). The exposition's phrasing is formal; it follows a pattern and adheres to a plan. Its purpose is not to challenge convention, but to satisfy expectations about how a fugue should behave.

² Walter Frisch, "Bach, Brahms, and the Emergence of Musical Modernism," *Bach Perspectives* 3, University of Nebraska Press, 1998, p. 127.

The first development combines the subject with its answer in stretto, with the answer taking the lead. The first stretto involves the lower two voices. Its contrapuntal inversion comprises the second stretto, this time in the upper two voices.

Following an extended sequence, the second development offers a third stretto, again contrapuntally inverted, this time occupying the outer voices. Having presented all vocal combinations except for the least musical (inside voices), the fugue gracefully makes its exit. All of this is done with the utmost simplicity, and logic, as one texture inevitably projects the possibility of another.

The fugue is reasonable, circumspect, and lucid. It is not self-conscious or flamboyant. Its careful treatment of dissonance betrays its *gebunden* (strict) style and venerable pedigree--the ancient tradition of *ricercar*. Its purpose is not to excite the emotions but to reveal craftsmanship and challenge the intellect.

Johann Sebastian has found, in form, a "formula" for producing what Richard Weaver calls "the unsentimental sentiment" (*Ideas Have Consequences*, chap.1). Bach's favorite form is fugue; others used rondo, sonata-allegro, etc. Weaver asserts that such forms form the basis of civilization: "We invariably find in the man of true culture a deep respect for forms. He approaches even those he does not understand with awareness that a deep thought lies in an old observance" (p. 23).

If Weaver is correct, that "pre-cultural periods are characterized by formlessness and post-cultural by the clashing of forms," then Bach's predilection for fugue places him squarely in the middle of a "cultural" epoch. His was an age famous for its flourishing forms. The deep thought of old observance is his "never-failing medicine."

In Troubled Times

If this was the medicine, what was the disease? Reger hinted of the answer when he described his age as afflicted with "misunderstood Wagner." How misunderstood, and by whom? To answer that question it will be our duty to study Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), arguably the greatest philosopher of the modern era. In the *Sturm und Drang* of Nietzsche's "friendship" with Wagner we'll come to understand what Reger meant by "troubled times," and why so many contemporaries heard Bach's music as healing.

Nietzsche's turbulent world-view began to take shape in his teens when, concurrent with his discovery of Wagner's music, he became enthralled with the militant atheism of Schopenhauer (also admired by Wagner). During his youth Nietzsche had composed works for orchestra, piano, and chorus. Upon enrollment at the University of Leipzig he finally met Wagner, with whom he quickly formed a fatherly attachment (Wagner was born in the same year as Nietzsche's father, who had died when he was four).

At twenty-four Nietzsche was appointed to teach philology (biblical and classical literature) at the university of Basel. While in Switzerland Nietzsche's friendship with Wagner grew as he visited the composer often in Tribschen, and later in Bayreuth.

Four years after his arrival in Basel, Nietzsche wrote his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy, Out of the Spirit of Music*, where he articulates a philosophy of aesthetics sprinkled with allusions to Wagner, Schopenhauer, classical Greek texts, and misgivings about popular German culture. Wagner reciprocated with fervent praise. In the following year Nietzsche completed *Unfashionable Observations*, a stinging critique of German culture, again idolizing Wagner and Schopenhauer as standards for a cultural renaissance. His third book, *Human, All-Too-Human*, had the unintended effect of destroying Nietzsche's relationship with Wagner as the composer took umbrage at the author's thinly veiled reference to "the artist."

Of Nietzsche's many other books we need not comment other than to observe that his last three return to Wagner, this time in bitter repudiation. In *The Case of Wagner, a Musician's Problem*, Nietzsche mocks the deceased composer's style as overly theatrical and "sick." In *Twilight of the Idols, or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer*, he satirizes Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*. In his last book, *Contra Wagner*, Nietzsche recasts his earlier admiration for the composer's ability to express suffering and loneliness with a conclusion that Wagner had been corrupted, in the end, by Christianity.

Looking Back to the Middle Ages

Nietzsche was a passionate and articulate man who expressed strong and sometimes contradictory opinions about many things, including the music of J. S. Bach. The following excerpt from Aphorism 149--*Human, All-Too-Human* (1878)--represents one of his more controversial:

In Bach there is still too much crude Christianity, crude Germanism, crude scholasticism; he stands on the threshold of modern European music, but looks back from there to the Middle Ages.

Nietzsche follows this with nineteen more aphorisms on other composers. Because this portion of the book is nonfiction, these represent Nietzsche's own opinion, not that of a fictional character. It is a "mixed opinion." He begins the Bach aphorism by observing that persons unable to perceive "perfect and subtle counterpoint and fugal style" will be able to hear Bach only in the sense that Goethe described it, as being present when God created the world. So in Aphorism 149 Nietzsche acknowledges the perfection of Bach's counterpoint.

Nine years earlier (in the same year he met Wagner) Nietzsche had also praised the *St. Matthew Passion*. He wrote to a friend that he had attended three performances in one week, "each time with the same feeling of immeasurable admiration." He concluded that, "Even they who

have completely un-learned themselves from Christianity can hear this work as if it were the gospel."

Nevertheless, his subsequent Aphorism 149 suggests that Nietzsche would have fiercely disagreed with those who, in the year following his death, heard a healing power in Bach's music. To understand why, we'll need to review his first book: *The Birth of Tragedy, Out of the Spirit of Music* (1872).

Nietzsche begins *The Birth of Tragedy* on a high place where he invites us to join him in "lonely contemplation" of Hellenic culture before the time of Socrates. He theorizes that this culture was characterized by a wild and boundlessly creative "Dionysian" energy. This energy was intuitive, therefore healthy. Dionysian music was employed, in Greek tragedy, to excite the passions and heighten a sense of loss, futility, and hopelessness.

Enter Socrates, and the Dionysian energy was overwhelmed by a force more rational and sober. This he called "Apollonian," after sculptural representations of Apollo. Socrates had advocated a type of music that would produce delight in such beautiful forms. Ever striving for perfect representation, the Apollonian force relied upon logic, not intuition. It employed reason to moderate passion.

Nietzsche felt that the Apollonian ideal had dominated the arts and learning until modernity, and that this was unhealthy. Regretting history's suppression of the Dionysian impulse, Nietzsche called the Apollonian force "degenerate" and "sick."

Nietzsche lamented the loss of the Dionysian because his philosophy demanded it. In a nutshell, he believed that reason tells us that there is no order. The universe is chaos. Ultimately reason tells us that there is no reason (for our existence). If there is a reason, it is only to come to the terrible realization that there is no reason.

Because this realization was horrifying, Nietzsche called it "gazing into the abyss." Because he considered it true, he called it the "Dionysian wisdom." His disciples would develop this philosophy into what we now call *nihilism*: a "total rejection of current religious beliefs or moral principles, often involving a general sense of despair and the belief that life is devoid of meaning" (*O.E.D.*).

Nietzsche theorized that the purpose of music was to move consciousness to the edge of this abyss. It was a purpose best achieved by abandonment to Dionysian forces, which he likened to intoxication. At the time he wrote *Human, All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche believed that Wagner's music followed this impulse: "If only a few hundred people get from it what I get, then we will have a completely new culture."³

³ As quoted in Carson Holloway, *All Shook Up: Music, Passion, and Politics*, Spence Publishing, 2001, p. 95. Wagner, who described his prelude to *Die Meistersinger* as "applied Bach" and the Meistersinger chorus as "a continuation of Bach," obviously did not believe that his own work was foreign to the Bach tradition. Finscher observes that Wagner likened the *Well-Tempered Clavier* to a sphinx, "with

Inevitably, Nietzsche's philosophical orientation compelled him to reject Bach's music. With their continual representations of form, rational structures, and "unsentimental sentiments" (to use Weaver's phrase), each fugue of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* would have been a powerful expression of the Apollonian "pathology" that had made German culture "sick."

Because formal music betrays an orderly universe, Nietzsche considered it to be "unhealthy" and "degenerate." It leaves the hearer with an illusion, what he called "Greek cheerfulness." Nietzsche sought immediacy in the dissolution of form in order to get at the Dionysian wisdom behind the object. Form obscures the truth that "the cosmos is in fact not a cosmos at all but a chaos. It is not...orderly and intelligible but 'contradictory' and 'mysterious'." (Holloway, p. 106)

Returning to the theme of healing, it is important to note that Nietzsche's interpretation of Hellenic thought was radically and romantically revisionist. Strongly influenced by Johann Winckelmann's *History of Ancient Art* (1764), Nietzsche essentially attributed to Socrates either a gross misunderstanding of music or sinister motives for its use.

As it was in the interest of the state to produce healthy citizens, Socrates had reasoned that the state should promote music that moderated the passions. Nietzsche theorized that this was none of the state's business, and, if it thought so, then the true and "pathological" purpose of Apollonian music would be to deceive citizens into obeying the civic order. Such music would be "unhealthy" not only for its manipulative use, but also because it stifled individual realization of Dionysian wisdom.

Personal Reflection

Having considered Nietzsche's purpose for music, we can appreciate (though not necessarily agree with) his Aphorism 149: "In Bach there is still too much crude Christianity, crude Germanism, crude scholasticism; he stands on the threshold of modern European music, but looks back from there to the Middle Ages."

By "European music," Nietzsche referenced the musical dramas of Richard Wagner that exemplified the Dionysian ideal of literature, myth, drama, and music inflaming the passions and inspiring a rebirth of culture (European culture, not the degenerate "beer-drinking" German culture he despised).

Bach "stands on the threshold" of this music. But instead of stepping through the portal, he looks back. Here Nietzsche referred to Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, lauded for its fusion of drama, music, and religion. He perceived the power of the *St. Matthew* precisely for its "passion." He recognized, as do most musicologists today, that Bach's passion music was a precursor to Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

As for looking "backward," Nietzsche meant Bach's religion. As he

rotating planets and with a world before the dawn of mankind" (*Bach Perspectives* 3, p. 6)

conceived of Christianity to be in league with the Apollonian suppression of Dionysian wisdom, Nietzsche hated it. Forward-looking music would abandon Christianity for the type of myth-making that Wagner was accomplishing in his *Ring des Nibelungen*. Nietzsche's rejection of Bach's music was two-fold; it was first a rejection of music that was rational, and second, Christian.

Friedrich Nietzsche was born in Lützen, not far from Leipzig, the city of Bach's death. Although they were countrymen, no two could have been more unlike each other. One embraced the past, the other rejected it. One valued his German culture, the other hated it. One loved Christianity, the other despised it. One was a theist, the other not.

In "Metaphor, Mystery, and the Music of Bach" I attribute Nietzsche's Aphorism 149 to "self-loathing." My purpose was not to magnify Bach at the expense of Nietzsche (although the latter surely glorifies himself at the expense of former).

Both men were born of the same mother--their intellectual forbearers were of the Greek and Judeo-Christian heritage (Nietzsche's father was a Lutheran minister). Many people represent Nietzsche's philosophy as the intellectual conclusion of that heritage. The difference between Bach and Nietzsche was that one loved, and the other loathed, his "mother." In the same sense that Nietzsche abandoned his father's faith, and repudiated the music of his intellectual father (Wagner) because he felt that the latter had been corrupted by Christianity, Nietzsche also loathed his father.

In the same essay I referred to Nietzsche as a "neuro-syphilitic madman." This statement was not intended to be cruel. He was indeed mad, on two levels. First, he died in literal madness as a consequence of his disease. On a higher level his philosophy drove the 20th century into madness.

Finally, in "Metaphor and Mystery," I state that the world needs more Bach and less Nietzsche. To be sure, most people today could not articulate a single Nietzschean belief other than "God is dead." Nevertheless, events of the 20th century were powerfully shaped by them. Nietzsche's ideas comprised the intellectual basis for Nazi philosophy and propaganda, particularly their doctrine of the *Übermensch* (superman and master race). Although Nietzsche was probably not, as often portrayed, anti-Semitic, he was virulently anti-Christian. The militant atheism that he advocated has produced suffering on an unimaginable scale perpetrated by the likes of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and Pol Pot. How much happier the 20th century might have been had it listened more to Bach than Nietzsche?

Whether Bach and Nietzsche were both influential and eloquent thinkers is not the question. The real question is: can one attach equal validity to both men's ideas, hold such radically opposed world views in consonance with each other, simultaneously maintain contradictory propositions as true? To attempt such a thing leads only to madness and despair--Nietzsche's abyss.