
4

ON BACH'S UNIVERSALITY*

A number of years ago I was asked to revise the article on "Bach, Johann Sebastian" for the fifteenth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. One of the guidelines was to begin not with the conventional "J. S. Bach was born at Eisenach in Thuringia on March 21, 1685" and so on but with a "Statement of Significance." I decided to put it this way:

Although he was admired by his contemporaries primarily as an outstanding harpsichordist, organist, and expert on organ building, Johann Sebastian Bach is now generally regarded as one of the greatest composers of all time and is celebrated as the creator of the Brandenburg Concertos, the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the Mass in B minor, and numerous other masterpieces of church and instrumental music. Appearing at a propitious moment in the history of music, Bach was able to survey and bring together the principal styles, forms and national traditions that had developed during preceding generations and, by virtue of his synthesis, enrich them all.¹

There is nothing particularly original about this assessment, nor—I'm relieved to say—is it in any way incorrect. But I do believe now that it does not really do full justice to the magnitude of Bach's achievement. It subscribes, first of all, to the traditional view that Bach was "the culmination of an era"—to cite the subtitle of Karl Geiringer's well-known study of the composer²—or, in Albert Schweitzer's famous comment: "Bach is a . . . terminal point. Nothing comes from him; everything merely leads up to him."³

* A lecture presented at the Library of Congress on the 300th anniversary of Bach's birth: 21 March 1985.

Now, about ten years ago, in an essay entitled "Bach the Progressive,"⁴ I tried to demonstrate that Bach's "synthesis" was, if anything, even more extensive than was commonly appreciated—that his music constituted not only a "culmination" or a "terminal point" but often enough reflected the most advanced stylistic currents of his time. Two of Bach's most monumental and serious works in particular—the Mass in B minor and the so-called "Goldberg" Variations—both written relatively late in the composer's career, could be shown to be indebted almost as much to the new, light, "pre-classical" or *galant* style associated with the generation of Bach's sons—and normally taken to be the very antithesis of Bach's personal style—as they were to the venerable contrapuntal traditions of the preceding century. I was arguing, in effect, that Bach's synthesis did not only extend historically into the *past* and geographically to embrace the great European national traditions of France, Italy, and Germany, but that it also sought to encompass the most recent stylistic developments—to look *forward* as much as in any other artistic direction. In other words, Bach's music seemed at times to aspire to, and to achieve, a *universality* of style and idiom that was considerably more far-reaching—and in fact more deliberate—than had hitherto been recognized.

I wish at this time to pursue the notion of Bach's "universality" more fully and to explore its specific implications for our understanding of his art.

I should emphasize that I am not primarily concerned here with the question of the universality of Bach's *appeal*. But it might be good to begin by asking whether the appeal of Bach's music is in fact really all that general. With a few notable exceptions, his music is certainly not as *popular* as that of, say, Beethoven or Mozart, not to mention Tchaikovsky—although that situation might have changed by the end of 1985. But if it did, I would expect it to be a temporary, and most easily explainable, phenomenon. For the fact is that Bach's music by and large is considerably less accessible to the typical music lover than is that of the other major composers of history; nor was it ever intended or expected to appeal to a concert audience in the modern sense, that is, to a large, and, musically considered, minimally educated, assembly of essentially passive listeners. It is important to remember that commercial concert life for the general public was only in its infancy by the end of Bach's life, and that Bach accordingly had little occasion—although there was some—to write what we may call "public" music.

It is possible, in fact, and rather profitable in many ways, to consider Bach's music in terms of its function, or, what is to a great extent the same thing, in terms of its intended audience. In fact, such a functional classification of music was common at Bach's time—but I hasten to add that contemporary commentators did not recognize such a category as "public" music but rather divided musical activity into three principal

realms or institutions: the church, the chamber, and the theater. In the eyes of his own contemporaries, accordingly, Bach could hardly have been regarded as a "universal" composer by any means, since, strictly speaking, he wrote no music at all for the theater, that is, operas or ballets—although the argument certainly could be made that there is more genuine musical drama in many of his church compositions than in any opera of his time.

I should like to pursue the notion of "public" music a little further, though, and suggest that Bach's most generally appealing, that is, his most popular music today, falls into one or the other of two categories, both belonging to that sphere: on the one hand, the free toccata or fantasia for the organ or some other keyboard instrument (which his contemporaries would quite properly have considered a species of church music); on the other hand, the instrumental concerto, regarded at the time as music for the chamber. Common to both forms, however, is an emphasis not only on virtuosity and exuberant technical display—that is, on a readily appreciated sort of artistic prowess—and individualism—but also, often enough, on an intensity and immediacy of expression that strikes a sympathetic listener as "personal" in tone and feeling. I am thinking of course of such works as the famous Toccata and Fugue in D minor for organ and the Brandenburg Concertos.

Needless to say, I do not in any way wish to disparage these genuinely grandiose works. They are not only supremely successful but in fact represent the epitome of compositions of their kind. And they are all quintessentially and unmistakably "Bachian" in the vigor and vitality of their rhythms, the boldness and originality of their harmonies, the richness and complexity of their colors and textures. And nowhere is Bach's music more searingly intense, more deeply "personal," if you will, than in the slow movement, say, of the First Brandenburg Concerto, or just about any other slow movement from a Bach concerto, for that matter.

There is surely no need to remind you how the Toccata in D minor goes; and I am confident that you can call to mind the brilliance and excitement, and also the poignant expressivity, of a Bach concerto. Virtually any movement from any Bach concerto, indeed, is music eminently well designed to excite and exhilarate or to move and grip the attentive and responsive listener who would have heard it in Bach's day, as today, as a member of an audience—no matter whether as an invited and privileged guest in the aristocratic salon or "chamber" of, say, the Margrave of Brandenburg or in the less exclusive surroundings of Herr Zimmermann's Coffee House in Leipzig where the members of the local Collegium Musicum would have performed such music under the direction of the composer. That is, the music would have been performed, then, as now, for an audience, and as part of a concert.

But barely two dozen concertos by Bach have survived, and—even if one adds the four orchestral suites (or overtures) which are in many

ways similar and almost as popular—this would still obviously constitute a very small fraction of the close to eleven hundred compositions from his pen that have come down to us. As for the Toccata in D minor: its immense popularity is not only quite unique among Bach's organ works but, sorry to say, probably owes more to the extravagant arrangements of Leopold Stokowski and others and to Hollywood's exploitation of it in such movies as Walt Disney's *Fantasia* and *20,000 Leagues under the Sea* than it does to its own considerable, inherent interest. And much the same is true for Bach's other "great hits": the so-called "Air for the G-String," the aria "Sheep may safely graze," or the chorale "Jesu, joy of man's desiring": they are typically lifted from their original contexts and often enough outfitted for an entirely different medium from the one prescribed by the composer.

Of Bach's close to two hundred church cantatas, on the other hand, which represent the largest single body of compositions in his output, I doubt whether more than a handful have established themselves securely in today's musical life. But this is, really, quite understandable. For these works, for all their superb technical craftsmanship and profound expressivity, are not at all "public music" as I have just defined that term. Moreover, they were clearly designed to have anything other than a "universal" appeal. Indeed, they are, if you will, Bach's most "parochial" works, written for a completely circumscribed audience: not only, in the first instance, for an orthodox Lutheran congregation but specifically for one thoroughly familiar with the particular repertory of hymns, local liturgical traditions, and theological outlook prevailing in early-eighteenth-century Leipzig. It is inevitable, I should think, that the modern listener has difficulty with this, quite frankly, rather alien repertoire: difficulty not only with the theological content, and especially, the rather drastic imagery of the texts, but also with some of the basic *musical* conventions of the genre—which (as it happens) were largely imported from the even more alien world of early-eighteenth-century opera: the fairly regular succession and alternation of recitatives and arias, for example, and the apparently relentless repetition schemes associated with the all-pervasive da-capo principle of aria construction—a device which often renders the individual arias—for all their intrinsic beauty and effectiveness if heard separately—simply too long and, to our taste, too static in the context of a complete church cantata. In short, such compositions were not intended primarily for the "delectation" of a concert *public*, but rather for the "edification" of a church *congregation*. Indeed, from the composer's own point of view, they may have been conceived for and dedicated to the ultimately exclusive audience; for almost every one of Bach's cantata manuscripts closes with the inscription: *SDGI (Soli Deo Gloria)*, "to God alone the glory." Bach's cantatas, in fact, were conceived and should be regarded not as concert pieces at all but as musical sermons;

and they were incorporated as such in the regular Sunday church services. I am reminded at this point of a remark by the Swiss theologian (and passionate Mozart enthusiast) Karl Barth which goes as follows: "It may or may not be the case that when the angels make music in praise of God they play Bach; but I am sure that when they are by themselves they play Mozart—and then God, too, is especially eager to listen in."⁵

In contrast to the regular Sunday cantatas, Bach's most monumental, and inspired, church compositions (the St. John and St. Matthew Passions, the Christmas Oratorio, the Mass in B minor) are not only recognized and appreciated as towering masterpieces but are performed regularly and frequently. In the case of the Passions and the Oratorio, I suspect it is not only the power of Bach's settings but also the inherent—and genuinely universal—drama of the biblical narratives at their core—in addition of course to their association with the major religious holidays, that have eased their way into our musical life. But even here I can't quite erase the suspicion that their frequent performance during the holidays may in fact be as much an act of musical piety as a sign of popular audience appeal. With the B-minor Mass, however, I believe the explanation is not the same; for it is not only immediately accessible but positively thrilling with its brilliant and utterly majestic choruses, the grace and straightforward lyricism of its solos and duets, and its unusually colorful and varied orchestral palette. Above all, the Mass is entirely free of those problematic baroque conventions of text and form that I mentioned before. The Mass in B minor is indeed a *catholic* work in every sense of the word, and as such occupies a unique place in Bach's *oeuvre*, one that gives it special significance in any consideration of the composer's universality.

I imagine that it is unnecessary for me to say that I have no doubt at all that even the few works of Bach for which I have just conceded broad popular "audience" appeal—the concertos, Passions, the Christmas Oratorio and the B-minor Mass—provide ample testimony of his genius and would guarantee a prominent place for him in the pantheon even if no other compositions of his had survived. But it seems to me that the actual source of Bach's supreme stature at the pinnacle of Western culture lies elsewhere. It is to be found in those works that, quite obviously, I'm sure, I have deliberately avoided mentioning up to now—the awesome collections of instrumental music: the compositions for unaccompanied violin or cello, the various chamber sonatas for flute, or violin, or viola da gamba and harpsichord; and, of course, the keyboard masterpieces: the French and English suites, the partitas, the "Goldberg" Variations, the miniature gems of the *Orgel-Büchlein* as well as the grander chorale preludes and fantasies, and above all the sublime preludes and fugues that reach a veritable apotheosis in the two volumes of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

I did not mention these works before because, with the possible exception of the "Goldberg" Variations, they are *not* "public" works aimed at a *listening* "audience." Unlike the fundamentally *dramatic* conception that underlies the concerto (and, to some extent, the toccata and fantasia) which is based on a *dualistic* principle emphasizing and exploiting contrasts and juxtapositions of all kinds—first of all, the inherently dramatic opposition of solo and tutti which brings in its wake sharp contrasts of dynamics, rhythms, melodic ideas, instrumental textures, harmonies, and even keys—most of Bach's instrumental music is governed by an aesthetic principle that was known at the time as the "Unity of Affect," according to which a composition was to be governed and unified by a single emotion or mood. This premise led, in Bach's case, to a veritably breathtaking logic and consistency in the development of musical ideas that has never been surpassed or perhaps even equaled since. The dualistic principle of composition was to reach its culmination in the classical era: in the sonata forms of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. The *dramatically* conceived masterpieces of these composers—the string quartets of Haydn, the operas of Mozart, the sonatas and symphonies of Beethoven—epitomize, if you will, music as an art of personal *communication*; the *logically* conceived preludes and fugues of Bach, it seems to me, are, by contrast, in the first instance an art of *revelation*. Accordingly, they belong, primarily, not in a recital hall—or even in an eighteenth-century salon or "chamber"—but on one's own music stand. They are not so much meant to be merely "listened" to, but to be played—and studied. In this, Bach's position in our musical life is absolutely unique. His most profound appeal is not to the "general" or even "sophisticated" public but to the *initiated*—by which I mean, quite frankly, to fellow musicians. This does not mean that one literally has to earn one's living as a professional musician in order to appreciate, and love, Bach's music. But I would venture the guess that almost all of Bach's most devoted admirers today, as in the past, developed their admiration—indeed their almost physical need—for his music not by hearing it performed (on records or at concerts—no matter) but by playing it, or perhaps singing it, themselves and thereby entering actively into an aesthetic realm of a particularly sublime, transcendental, sort. This is a quite different experience from that of allowing oneself to be emotionally moved, be it ever so deeply, by more—shall we call them—worldly, or "human" sentiments transmitted, that is "communicated," by intermediaries: by professional "interpreters."

The sense of actively participating in something transcendental, when we play or intensively listen to Bach's music, I maintain, is central to understanding his position in our culture. Pablo Casals once said:

For the past eighty years I have started each day in the same manner. It is not a mechanical routine but something essential to my daily life.

I go to the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise. It is a sort of benediction on the house. But that is not its only meaning for me. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day it is something new, fantastic and unbelievable. That is Bach, like nature, a miracle.⁶

But I think Goethe came even closer to the essence when he wrote in a letter to a friend after having heard the preludes and fugues of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* for the first time: "I expressed it to myself as if the eternal harmony were communing with itself, as might have happened in God's bosom shortly before the creation of the world."⁷

Perhaps it would be fair to say—in any case, it is the main point of this essay—that the notion of the universality of Bach's music acquires its profoundest meaning when it is understood, once again, not in terms of the universality of its appeal, its popularity, since, as I think I have made clear, such a claim could be credibly challenged, but when it is understood with reference to a kind of universal validity. And there is some evidence that Bach in fact conceived of his art, and also his artistic mission, in much this way. Of course, he would have put it far more modestly himself, and in fact did so, for example, on the title page of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, which he declared was "for the Use and Profit of the Musical Youth Desirous of Learning as well as for the Pastime of those Already Skilled in this Study." In a similar, if more playful, mode, he ended the title of his *Orgel-Büchlein* with an ingenuous couplet that has been translated as "In Praise of the Almighty's Will / And for my Neighbor's Greater Skill."⁸

That is, it is quite clear that while Bach may not have thought of himself as a musical prophet, he certainly did very much think of himself as a teacher; and not only the title pages and prefaces of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the *Orgel-Büchlein* but those of the Two- and Three-part Inventions, and *Musical Offering*, and the *Art of Fugue* as well, all provide explicit testimony as to the didactic function of these monumental works. It would certainly not be difficult to argue, in fact, that Bach was the most self-consciously pedagogical of the great composers. An important implication of this is that Bach evidently regarded the pieces contained in these collections in the first instance as "exemplary" in the most literal sense: as *models*—to be studied and emulated—rather than, say, as divinely inspired and profoundly individual poetic or visionary statements that were intended to move his fellow man and perhaps even contribute to his spiritual or moral salvation. Unlike Beethoven, Bach did not claim to be a Bacchus who, for the sake of mankind, pressed immortal wine out of the grapes of art—even if he in fact did so.

Now just what did Bach think he was imparting in those didactic compositions? The title page of the Two- and Three-part Inventions reads as follows:

Upright Instruction / wherein the lovers of the clavier, and especially those desirous of learning, are shown a clear way not alone (1) to learn to play clearly in two voices, but also, after further progress, (2) to deal correctly and well with three obligato parts; furthermore, at the same time not alone to have good inventions [i.e., ideas] but to develop the same well, and above all to arrive at a singing style in playing and at the same time to acquire a strong foretaste of composition.⁹

Evidently Bach was convinced that virtually everything in the "craft" of music was teachable and learnable. He is supposed to have remarked on one occasion: "I have had to work hard; anyone who works just as hard will get just as far."¹⁰ For music, even first-class music, was not so much the product of divine inspiration granted to the rare genius, but was rather the product of the proper application of certain fundamental principles—principles that Bach seems to have regarded as eternal, that is, as God-given, verities. He once expressed his sentiments on the thorough bass, for example, as follows:

The thorough bass is the most perfect foundation of music, being played with both hands in such manner that the left hand plays the notes written down while the right adds consonances and dissonances, in order to make a well-sounding harmony to the Glory of God and the permissible delectation of the spirit; and the aim and final reason, as of all music, so of the thorough bass should be none else but the Glory of God and the recreation of the mind. Where this is not observed there will be no real music but only a devilish [wailing and whining].¹¹

It seems to me that such phrases as "the most perfect foundation of music," "a well-sounding harmony to the Glory of God," "the aim and final reason of all music," "otherwise no real music but a devilish [wailing and whining]" all document Bach's conviction that music—real music, at all events—is constructed according to God-given, that is, eternally and *universally* valid, principles, call them "laws"; and with his systematically organized collections of keyboard music and their explicitly didactic prefaces, Bach's main, but certainly not sole, purpose, apparently, was to demonstrate these universal musical laws in operation. The *Well-Tempered Clavier*, for example, explores both the potentials of an innovation in tuning which, for the first time in the history of keyboard music, made all the keys equally usable, and, more significantly, the possibilities for musical organization afforded by the newly established system of "functional tonality." [. . .] The basic principle of this "tonal" system has been described as the creation of a sense of key-feeling by means of "sequences of chords that gravitated toward a

tonal center. The degree of attraction depended on the distance of the chords from the tonic—that is, the home key—and this distance was measured and determined by the circle of fifths."¹² [. . .]

[It is surely significant that] it evolved at just about the same time—in the 1680s, mainly in Italy in the music of Corelli and his contemporaries—that Isaac Newton was giving final form to his theories of gravitation based on precise, and universal, laws and measurements of distance and motion. Both Newton's laws of the universe and the principles of musical tonality were obviously the product of the same Age of Reason into which Bach, like Newton, was born.

When I mentioned in the encyclopedia article which I quoted at the outset of this talk that Bach appeared at a propitious moment in the history of music, what I had in mind was his advent at the completely unique moment when the age-old traditions of counterpoint and polyphony intersected with the newly-established system of tonal harmony. Bach, more than any other composer of his time, or since, not only thoroughly perfected and advanced the techniques of both but fully realized the implications and the potential of their fusion. If I may pursue my analogy with natural science a bit further, I think it may be fair to say that Bach's unification of linear counterpoint and tonal harmony represents an accomplishment in the art of music hardly less impressive than that which would be achieved if a physicist someday would realize Albert Einstein's hope of formulating a theory—a unified field theory—in which the nature of the relationships obtaining among the various forces at work in the cosmos—gravitation, magnetism, electricity, and so on—were precisely defined and established once and for all. But I suspect that I may be rushing in where angels properly fear to tread.

At all events, from the perspective of musical history, synthesis and fusion are the hallmarks of Bach's achievement. Not only did he unify and reconcile the structural principles of harmony and polyphony but, as I remarked at the beginning, he also effected a synthesis of the most important national schools and traditions of Europe; and in this respect as well Bach's music betrays a "universal" ambition in its range and scope.

I have already mentioned that musical commentators of the early eighteenth century, like all writers of the Enlightenment age, were typically fond of categories, and I referred specifically to their division of music into the stylistic realms associated with the church, the chamber, and the theater. They had also developed a system of classification based on national distinctions, particularly those that were to be observed between the dominant French and Italian styles: French instrumental music, for example, was characterized, among other things, by the dance and the dance suite and by profuse and delicate ornamentation; the instrumental music of Italy—by the expansive formal designs of the sonata and the concerto and by the propensity for elab-

orate and extravagant improvisation. Critics were equally sensitive to the differences between Italian and French opera and their vocal styles: between the unabashedly sensuous melody and pyrotechnical display of the Italian aria, on the one hand, and the infinitely more serious, restrained, declamatory airs to be heard in the French *tragédie lyrique*, on the other. And we often find among the composers of the time rather self-conscious efforts to juxtapose and contrast these styles in their music. François Couperin, for example, published a collection of instrumental pieces which he called *Réunion des goûts*—a title awkward to translate but readily understood as the union, or unification of national tastes—and which included, among other things, minuets written in the contrasting styles of the Frenchman Jean-Baptiste Lully and the Italian Arcangelo Corelli.

As for Germany, it not only was exposed to and absorbed the stylistic and cultural influences emanating from France and Italy, and elsewhere, but was deeply conscious of that fact and concerned about how it affected its own cultural "identity," if you will. Bach, it will be recalled, once remarked: "It is . . . somewhat strange that German musicians are expected to be capable of performing at once and *ex tempore* all kinds of music, whether it came from Italy or France, England or Poland. . . ." ⁷¹³

Now Bach's mastery of the various national styles went far beyond mere cosmopolitan versatility: the ability to write French suites, Italian concertos, German fugues, or Polish polonaises. Such skills—and we can add to them his familiarity with and command of an impressive array of historical styles encompassing the medieval *cantus-firmus* setting, the vocal motet of the Renaissance (referred to in Bach's day as the *stile antico*), and so on, on to the simple but modish *galant* manner of the younger generation—all of this "encyclopedic competence" represented for Bach little more than a point of departure. For Bach's unique accomplishment was not that he had cultivated and totally mastered each of these forms and conventions but that he succeeded in galvanizing them into a single, coherent whole. That is, in an age that had conceived of music in terms of individual national traditions, and discrete stylistic, functional categories, Bach had managed to create a genuine synthesis: to forge a genuinely *universal* style. The "universality" of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, for example, consists not only in its fusion of tonal and harmonic forces but also in that it constitutes a virtual compendium of the most important forms and styles of the era: dance types of all nations, Italianate arias, archaic motets, modernistic concertos, etc.—all developed in accordance with a single compositional principle: that of the venerable, and rigorous, fugue.

Or consider the finale of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, (Ex. 4.1). It is, of course, a concerto movement, or more strictly speaking, a concerto grosso movement, since it employs a group of soloists—

Example 4.1. BWV 1050/3, Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, mm. 1-11

a flute, a violin, and a harpsichord—in alternation and combination with an accompanying tutti ensemble. But the movement is not only a manifestation of the (Italian) concerto principle. It is, at literally the same time, a (German) fugue—in its texture; a (French) dance (a gigue)—in its rhythm, meter and tempo; and a da-capo aria (and thus indebted to the vocal as well as to the instrumental realm)—in its form.

But I can think of no more spectacular demonstration of Bach's powers of synthesis, his unparalleled combinatorial genius—all in the service, I submit, of a "universal" vision unprecedented in the history of Western music—than in one of his church compositions: specifically, in the opening chorus of the cantata *Jesu, der du meine Seele*, Cantata No. 78. Cantata No. 78 is "just another" Sunday cantata, part of a series that Bach had composed at the rate of about one per week over a period of approximately three years that had begun with his arrival in Leipzig in May of 1723. Cantata No. 78 was written in 1724 for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity, a day that fell on September 10. Since Bach had composed a new cantata the previous week (Cantata No. 33, first performed on the Thirteenth Sunday after Trinity, September 3, 1724), he most likely wrote Cantata No. 78 in the week beginning on Monday, September 4. I imagine that Bach spent at most three or four days engaged in the composition of the entire work, for he would have had to leave a couple of days for the writing out of parts and for at least one rehearsal, I should think, before the performance on September 10. In short, I doubt whether Bach could have devoted more than one day—it must have been Monday, September 4—to the composition of the chorus I am about to discuss.

The movement is normally described as a chorale-fantasy chorus because it is an elaborate setting, for chorus, of a German "chorale," that is, a congregational hymn—in this instance the chorale *Jesu, der du meine Seele* (Jesus, Thou my weary spirit), by the seventeenth-century poet, Johann Rist. Bach's approach to the movement is a conventional one in that he presents the traditional melody of the chorale—in the soprano part—as a *cantus firmus*, that is, set distinctly apart from the surrounding voices and instruments. In adopting the melody of the chorale Bach also adopts its form: the so-called *Barform*, consisting of a pair of lines or phrases that are repeated (the *Stollen*) and then followed by new material (the *Abgesang*). The form can be represented schematically as AAB. The melody of the chorale goes as shown in Ex. 4.2 (as notated by Bach in the final movement of BWV 78).

Example 4.2. Chorale melody: *Jesu, der du meine Seele*

Both the *Barform* and the *cantus-firmus* technique can be traced back to the Middle Ages: the *Barform* is found in the courtly love

songs of the German *Minnesänger* as early as the twelfth century; the *cantus-firmus* technique formed the basis of the earliest examples of Western polyphony dating from the eleventh century or even earlier.

The lower voices of the chorus, for their part, offer a polyphonic commentary, in imitative texture, as in a fugue, on each line of the text preceding its entrance, along with the official hymn melody, in the soprano *cantus firmus*. This is a compositional principle associated with the Renaissance motet of the sixteenth century, specifically, with that of the so-called *cantus-firmus* motet. (The imitation preceding the first line of the chorale goes as shown in Ex. 4.3.)

Example 4.3. BWV 78/1, mm. 15-23

Now these vocal episodes, each consisting of the *cantus-firmus* melody in the soprano and its polyphonic preview in the lower voices, are separated from one another by a refrain of sorts in the orchestra. This refrain, or ritornello, also appears at the beginning and end of the movement and thus provides a frame for the choral sections. The ritornello principle, in which a relatively constant theme or melody recurs in alternation with a succession of contrasting and changing episodes (such as the chorale phrases here), is the controlling formal idea of the mature baroque concerto of the early eighteenth century, as it was developed by Bach's slightly older Italian contemporaries, in particular Giuseppe Torelli and Antonio Vivaldi. The ritornello melody of our chorus, as it is presented at the outset of the movement, goes as shown in Ex. 4.4.

Example 4.4. BWV 78/1, mm. 1-7



A most striking feature of this melody is its rhythm, as depicted in Ex. 4.5.

Example 4.5. BWV 78/1, mm. 1-4: Rhythm



and also its regular phrase structure. Every phrase is exactly the same length; they are all four measures long. In short, the ritornello melody has the phrase structure of a dance and the rhythmic character, specifically, of the sarabande—one of the standard items in the contemporary French dance suite.

There is one further, crucial, structural element in this movement, one that pervades it virtually without interruption from beginning to end: the ever-recurrent phrase first presented in the bass but later appearing in other parts as well (see Ex. 4.6).

Example 4.6. BWV 78/1, mm. 1-4: Continuo



This is a *basso ostinato*—a relatively short phrase whose relentless repetitions provide the basis for the passacaglia or chaconne; essentially a set of variations on a dance pattern whose origins can be traced back to early seventeenth-century Spain. The particular *basso ostinato* Bach uses here with its rather mournful half-step descent from the tonic to the dominant is the so-called *lamento* bass frequently encountered in dirges and elegies in seventeenth-century opera. (The most well-known example today, no doubt—although it is inconceivable that Bach would have known it—is the lament “When I am laid in earth” from Henry Purcell’s opera *Dido and Aeneas*.)

In sum, *Jesu, der du meine Seele* is one of Bach’s most complex creations—a compositional *tour de force* that simultaneously observes or fulfills no fewer than five distinct principles of organization, some of which, one would have thought, were mutually exclusive—such as the combination of the repetitive *basso ostinato* with the ongoing *cantus-firmus* melody. At one and the same time the movement is a

modern Italian concerto—but based on a ritornello in the style of a sarabande from a modern French dance suite; it is a seventeenth-century passacaglia, that is, a set of variations; but it is also a polyphonic motet constructed both on “points of imitation” reminiscent of Renaissance church music of the sixteenth century as well as on a *cantus firmus* according to compositional principles extending back to the Middle Ages; on yet another level the movement is a German Lutheran chorale in *Barform*: AAB—writ very large indeed.

It is virtually impossible to imagine a grander, more comprehensive, more “universal” synthesis of historical and national styles than Bach has achieved in this movement—incorporating as it does elements of the secular as well as the sacred, the instrumental as well as the vocal; a movement whose frame of reference embraces both the Roman Catholic motet of the sixteenth century and the Lutheran chorale and whose procedures are indebted to the medieval *cantus-firmus* setting, the variation technique of the seventeenth-century passacaglia, and the modern Italian concerto and the French dance suite.

But Bach’s achievement here is not only prodigious, it is in fact prophetic in its objective of transcending the cultural limitations of geography and history, of place and time, in order to create—once again—a “universal” artwork. For the outlook of his contemporaries, you will recall, was confined by their predilection to conceive of and divide musical practices and traditions along national and other lines. The idea of a universal musical style—of music as a universal language—was not to emerge for another half-century: during the classical period, in the 1770s and 1780s. The composer Christoph Willibald Gluck spoke in 1773 of his wish to write a music that “would appeal to all peoples” and “wipe out the ridiculous differences in national music.” And he would have been gratified to read, a dozen years later, that his music represented “the universal language of our continent.” Joseph Haydn once remarked, “My language is understood in the whole world.”¹⁴ The ultimate form of this universal musical language, admittedly, was not that pursued by Bach. It was rooted rather in the formal conventions and procedures of the basically Italian sonata colored by folk music idioms imported from many national and ethnic traditions and enriched with sophisticated harmonic and contrapuntal techniques inherited from the Germans—above all from Bach. The new, more popularistic, more democratic aesthetic ideal demanded a lightness, simplicity, and immediacy of appeal far removed from Bach’s clearly contrapuntally inspired notion of a musical universality that was universal by virtue of being all-inclusive and all-encompassing: not so much a universal musical language as a musical “universe”—as Goethe had said: “as if the eternal harmony were communing with itself as might have happened in God’s bosom shortly before the creation of the world.”