

What Bach's music means to me

Bach has been, and will always be, part of my life. It is something like a personal oxygen. I grew up in a musical household, in which Bach was always being played; my mother would be practising preludes and fugues, and my father would be practising some of the music for solo violin. As a child, I would fumble through the Bach pieces in the elementary piano books. At school, in the choir, I sang in the B minor Mass, with that huge striding Sanctus sending us out into the evening, shouting its theme. As a student, I met others with the same enthusiasms. We would play through the Brandenburgs with gramophone backing; we tried the Double Concerto on two flutes, just to be part of that wonderful music. We worked our way through the cantata 'Actus Tragicus'. We played trio sonatas, and the sonata for two flutes. We heard the great baroque ensembles of the day, like the Stuttgart Chamber Players; we heard the cantata concerts of the London Bach Society, and I fell passionately in love with the Chaconne from the D minor partita. With colossal impertinence, I transcribed it for a motley of instruments that my friends played; I heard my attempt once, and immediately threw a year's work in the dustbin. Later, my uncle played the Chaconne to me. He had been a pupil of Leopold Auer at the St Petersburg Conservatoire, in a class which produced such virtuosi as Elman, Heifetz, Milstein, Zimbalist and so many others. All students entering the examination for the Gold Medal were expected to be able to play all the Bach unaccompanied sonatas and partitas from memory and, at the examination, Auer would select which one a candidate had to play by sticking a pin in a list. My uncle had to play the D major partita, and won the Medal. I have never forgotten that evening when, old and frail — and with just the two of us present — he played the Chaconne with the intensity almost of a prayer.

Sometimes, I hear the B minor Mass or the St Matthew Passion and I think, yes; this is the summit. This is the greatest of

Bach. And then I hear the Chaconne, or that incredible prelude from the E major partita, and I think the same. Bach is indestructible; whether it be synthesiser or Swingles, Jacques Loussier or those bloated orchestral transcriptions by Stokowski — the music emerges with greatness unchanged, driving you back to the original. It encompasses the beauty of both joy and tragedy, and that same beauty disguises its bewildering technical complexity. It encompasses tranquillity and demonic energy; monumentality and intimacy allied to simplicity. It is music, much of which is integral to Christian worship yet its universality speaks to everyone irrespective of belief. During the recent Radio Three 'Bachathon', the music was interspersed with comment from the great and good on what Bach meant to them. Julia Neuberger said, quite simply, that Bach's music 'makes the heart sing', as it does mine.

Michael Lasserson

Radio 3's recent broadcast of Johann Sebastian Bach's entire known output



lasted about 10 days and was billed as the longest continuous programme ever broadcast. I thought I would dip into it from time to time, as I had with their similar Beethoven broadcast in the summer. But I found myself listening to longer and longer stretches, often in the car on the way into work (usually it is the Today programme), and I even went to the extent of leaving the radio on in the kitchen so that I would miss fewer seconds of glorious music when I returned home.

At the heart of Bach's output are more than 200 cantatas written for liturgical use. They are music by a man who believed sincerely and wholeheartedly in his Lutheran faith, a man for whom God and Jesus Christ were daily presences in his life. It is curious that I, a Jew, who, to the despair of my mother, am now a firm atheist (of the Dawkins persuasion), am forced temporarily to suspend my disbelief while I listen to a Christian religious work by Bach. One evening I heard Janet Baker sing Cantata No 169 in the old recording conducted by Yehudi Menuhin. It includes the lines:

*Gott soll allein mein herze haben;
Ich find in ihm das höchste Gut
[God all alone my heart shall master,
I find in Him the highest good ...]*

I always shiver when I hear that. Someone observed that Bach's achievement is to make the listener feel what it is to be a believer even though at all other times he or she is a convinced sceptic. That is only part of the truth about him. He was not some pious holy ascetic, but a complex, brilliant and energetic man who suffered terrible grief at the death of his first wife and of several of his children. He quarrelled with his employers, colleagues and rivals, delighted in his instrumental and compositional skill, and seems to have been passionately in love (in a full sexual sense) with his second wife, Anna Magdalena, whom he married when she was 19 and he 35, and who bore