

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

the last of their 12 children when he was 57 years old.

All of these aspects of his life are reflected in his music, which is inexhaustible in its technical perfection, emotional power and intellectual strength. I had expected that listening only to Bach's music for a week and a half would become repetitive. Not a bit of it. I was astonished at its variety, exuberance and daring. One would hear perhaps a small group of the Two Part Inventions — slight, but ingenious, student pieces. Then perhaps would be one of the endlessly fascinating solo violin sonatas and partitas, each capable of inspiring different artists to ever more profound feats of interpretation and virtuosity. There is the brilliance of the Brandenburg Concertos, the grandeur of the organ works, the magnificence of the B minor Mass, the intellectual teasing of the Goldberg Variations. And that is just dipping a toe in the ocean.

What does Bach mean to me? If humanity and all our works were to be destroyed but just one thing saved to represent us, I would save the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Intelligent beings across the galaxy would say of us: 'they must have been a great and noble race'.

Toby Lipman

I remember the first time I ever played Bach seriously, when at school we performed the fifth Brandenburg Concerto. I was revelling in the experience of playing in a small chamber group for the first time and loving the baroque cleanness of it all, when I was overwhelmed by the harpsichord cadenza to the first movement. It still never fails to astonish, the way it starts simply and then builds through rhythmic and harmonic complexity, exploiting the instrument's versatility to the full (again something not

previously heard). Around the same time I was also introduced to the B minor Mass, when the Sanctus bowled me over with its majestic power, and which also amazes by its light-footed handling of the Nicene creed's linguistic difficulties.

All of which illustrates Bach's qualities. He probably never thought of himself as an artist, but as a master craftsman. John Eliot Gardiner's exploration of the sacred cantatas has reminded us of the sheer routine discipline of it: one new piece a week, with the parts written to suit whoever was going to be available that Sunday. Yet when we hear them now, Bach's own faith shines through with every note, in a way that is hard for modern listeners to share. The musicologists tell us of the mathematical patterns in the music, such as the structure of the Goldberg Variations (written, I always appreciate when I am listening to them late at night, for an insomniac), but that in turn never clouds the emotional impact, the ability to speak absolutely directly to our souls. Think of the transcendent bass aria 'Mache dich, mein Herze rein' ['Purify yourself, my heart'] that, at the end of the St Matthew Passion, always moves me to tears, or the television image of Maxim Vengerov walking through Auschwitz in the snow, playing the Chaconne from the D minor partita for violin in memorial to the victims of the Nazi holocaust.

Mozart, the 250th anniversary of whose birth arrives in 2006, will become the focus for much listening and debate this year. One reason put forward for his popularity is that he is very much a composer for our age, representing the moral relativism of post-enlightenment Europe in tune with the moral relativism of the late 20th century. The music of Bach, born nearly 70 years earlier, conveys a world of less doubt, a high point of order and certainty. We may not envy the certainty, but as a route to understanding it the music is without equal.

David Jewell