

## A Missed Opportunity: Reflections on *Written by Mrs Bach*

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Suicide, destruction of property and extramarital relations are among the highlights of the award-winning film<sup>1</sup> devoted to Martin Jarvis and his ideas about Anna Magdalena Bach (1701–1760) as the unnamed composer of some of her husband’s works.<sup>2</sup> The book on which the film is based gives a more detailed account of the evolution of the ideas that gave rise to the sensational claims.<sup>3</sup> The genius of the publicity machine behind the world press announcements of Jarvis’s discoveries, in April 2006,<sup>4</sup> and the release of the film in December 2014 have put his ideas before millions of readers and viewers, and elicited reactions ranging from anger and confusion to sadness.

My decision to undertake this analysis of *Written by Mrs Bach* was not taken lightly. I had to weigh up the pain of writing critically about the well-meant research effort of an acquaintance, against the temporary relief but longer-term discomfort of remaining silent.<sup>5</sup> I offer this analysis in the hope that it might help clarify some of the confusions and defuse some of the widely-felt frustrations.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by Alex McCall. Produced by Glasgow Films in association with Looks Films ©Written By Mrs Bach Ltd 2015. It won Award of Excellence at the Indie Festival, California [theindiefest.com](http://theindiefest.com) and is currently a finalist of the New York Festival in the category United Kingdom Arts, [www.newyorkfestivals.com/tvfilm/main.php?p=2,3,16](http://www.newyorkfestivals.com/tvfilm/main.php?p=2,3,16) (accessed 15 March 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Jarvis suggests that Anna Magdalena Bach was the composer of the Cello Suites (BWV 1007–1012), the Aria of the Goldberg Variations, (BWV 988/1), and the C-major Prelude (BWV 846/1) from *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book 1.

<sup>3</sup> Martin Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach: The amazing discovery that shocked the music world* (Australia: ABC Books, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Many articles are still available online, for example [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1516423/Bach-works-were-written-by-his-second-wife-claims-academic.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1516423/Bach-works-were-written-by-his-second-wife-claims-academic.html) (accessed 19 February 2015).

<sup>5</sup> I first met Martin Jarvis in 1974 at the Royal Academy of Music, where, under my maiden name Ruth Ballard, I studied the clarinet for four years (1974–8). In 2006 I was approached by Swedish Radio to comment on Martin’s claims, and so remade contact with him via email requesting some background material for the radio interview. We then met at the Third J. S. Bach Dialogue meeting at Oxford in 2008. I edited *Understanding Bach* 3 (2008), in which his article appeared in the non-peer-reviewed Young Scholars’ Forum. When invited to contribute to the *Written by Mrs Bach* film in November 2013 I felt constrained to do so in view of our history, although I made it clear to the director that I consider Martin’s ideas and interpretations to be flawed and untenable.

<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to John Butt, Nobuaki Ebata, Stephen Roe, Peter Smaill, Yo Tomita and Peter Wollny for suggesting improvements to this article during its gestation period.

## Women written out of history

The idea of Anna Magdalena as a composer appeals to a modern sense of gender equality and to the widespread desire to raise the status of misrepresented women of the past. In recent times many scholars have worked actively and successfully to redress the gender imbalance that is so deeply established in the histories of music. It is undisputed that women throughout the ages have played a vital role in society, often standing behind the success of many a famous male counterpart, yet for various reasons their role has been silenced, whether due to the paucity of surviving documentation or the skewed perspective of the narratives.

It would be wonderful if we knew more about the level of musical accomplishment of the women in Bach's life, and the extent to which they contributed to Bach's activities. We know that the Bach household, which included many women, became a veritable cottage industry of copyists during the weekly rhythm of cantata preparations, particularly in the first couple of years in Leipzig. We know about Bach's male students through school registers at the boys-only St Thomas School,<sup>7</sup> but we do not know much about the education or level of achievement of Bach's female students, if he had any. Did he teach his daughters? Did he actively help Anna Magdalena to develop her musical skills? Was she able to maintain her singing career in Leipzig? Was she known as Bach's wife, mother of his children, or as an accomplished woman and musician in her own right?

Those leading the task of rewriting the history of women have a responsibility to do so with integrity. A necessary starting point in such an endeavour is to ensure that any new insight is logical, based on fact and accurately communicated. To do otherwise is a disservice to the cause. Jarvis's claim that Anna Magdalena and not her husband was the composer of the Cello Suites is a case in point. That the 'simpler' Cello Suites are allegedly not up to the 'complex and intellectually challenging' musical standard of the Unaccompanied Sonatas and Partitas for Violin<sup>8</sup> forms part of his argument for Anna Magdalena as its composer. Clearly he did not intend to suggest the 'inferior therefore female' implication in this argument.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Bernd Koska, 'Cantors, Schoolmasters, and Directors of Music: New Research on Bach's Students', *Understanding Bach*, 10 (2015), xxx-xxx; Michael Maul, "'welche ieder Zeit aus den 8 besten Subjectis bestehen muß": Die erste "Cantorey" der Thomasschule Organisation, Aufgaben, Fragen', *Bach-Jahrbuch*, 99 (2013), 11-77.

<sup>8</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 12-13: 'The violin works appear complex and intellectually challenging; by comparison, the cello (viola) works appeared to be rather simple'; 'Over the ensuing four years I studied all the movements of some of the Cello Suites and some movements from others, but the thought would not go away – from my understanding of Bach there was something wrong with the sound and structure of the music, charming and haunting though it was.'

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Tim Cavanaugh, 'Back to Bach: Lies do not Empower Women', 2 November 2014, [www.nationalreview.com/corner/391688/back-bach-lies-do-not-empower-women-tim-cavanaugh](http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/391688/back-bach-lies-do-not-empower-women-tim-cavanaugh) (accessed 11 February 2015).

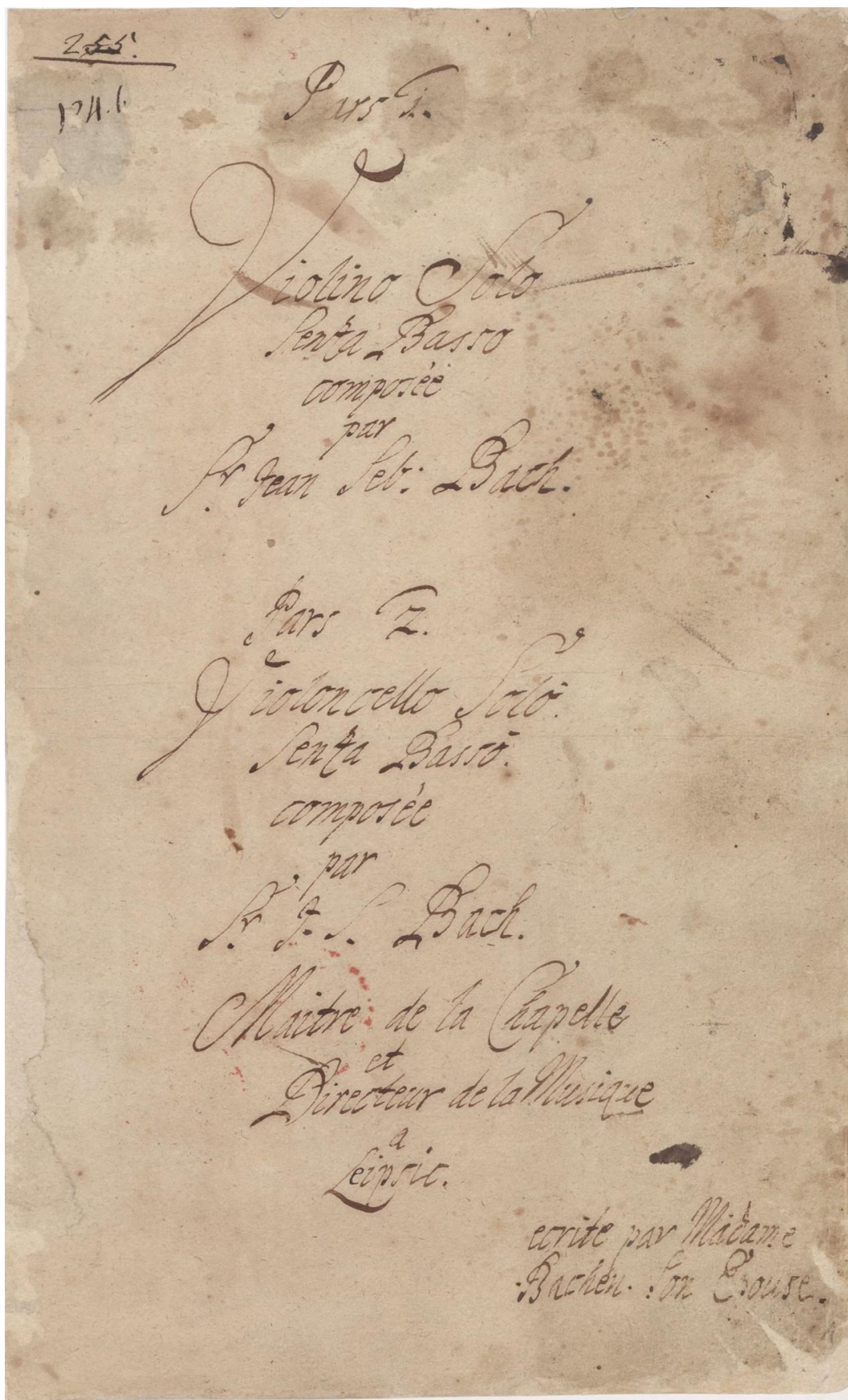


Image 1: The overall title page of the manuscript copy of the Violin Solos and Cello Suites in the hand of G. H. L. Schwanberg, presently held at the Musikabteilung, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin, D-B, Mus. ms. Bach P 268, f. 1r.



*'Ecrité par Madame Bachen son Epouse'*

Getting source evidence lined up correctly is also fundamental to the success of a new scholarly insight. Jarvis's conjecture that Anna Magdalena composed the Cello Suites hangs on the interpretation of a single phrase on a title page written by Georg Heinrich Ludwig Schwanberg (1696–1774).<sup>10</sup> Anna Magdalena made a two-part copy of her husband's collection of the Six Solos for violin (BWV 1001–1006), Berlin library shelfmark P 268, and his Six Suites for solo cello (BWV 1007–1012), shelfmark P 269, for Schwanberg, for which he then made his own title pages. Nowhere in his overall title page (Image 1), nor in his title page for the Cello Suites,<sup>11</sup> is there any suggestion that the composer was anyone other than J. S. Bach. His phrase 'composée par Sr J. S. Bach' (composed by Mr J. S. Bach) is written three times<sup>12</sup> – a detail that Jarvis fails to emphasise.

Tucked away at the bottom right hand corner of Schwanberg's overall title page is the all-important phrase 'écrite par Madame Bachen Son Epouse',<sup>13</sup> meaning 'transcribed by Mme Bach, his wife' although translated by Jarvis as 'written by Mrs Bach, his wife' (Image 2).

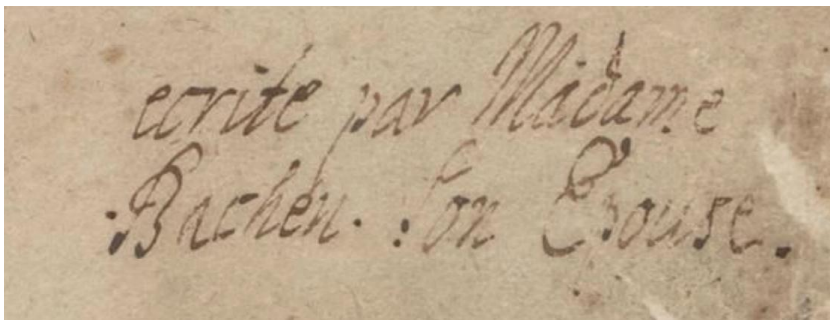


Image 2: Detail from the overall title page in Schwanberg's hand, P 268.

Basing his translation on *Le Petit Larousse, Grand Format* (2006),<sup>14</sup> Jarvis points out the ambiguity of the word 'écrite',<sup>15</sup> which in modern English implies 'to compose/create'.<sup>16</sup> Choosing a dictionary from 2006 to interpret French words written 275 years earlier by a German speaker illustrates Jarvis's limited understanding of the evolution of language and of historical method.

<sup>10</sup> There are two commonly-used variants of the spelling of his surname: Schwanberg (*BDok* II, no. 239, the form he used to sign his name), and Schwanenberger (*BDok* II, nos. 224 and 248).

<sup>11</sup> [www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource\\_source\\_00001200](http://www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_source_00001200)

<sup>12</sup> It is written twice on the joint title page, and once on the title page of the Cello Suites, in three variations: 'composée par Sr. Jean Seb: Bach' and 'composée par Sr J. S. Bach' on the joint title page as the cover of P 268, and 'composées par Sr J. S. Bach' on the title page of the Cello Suites, P 269. There is no surviving single title page for the Violin Solos in Schwanberg's hand.

<sup>13</sup> [www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource\\_source\\_00001199](http://www.bach-digital.de/receive/BachDigitalSource_source_00001199). The word 'écrite' lacks the customary acute accent over the first 'é'. A faded line resembling an acute accent can be seen in the manuscript, but when zoomed it becomes clear that this is part of the fabric of the paper.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Jarvis, 'Did Johann Sebastian Bach write the Six Cello Suites?', PhD diss., Faculty of Law Business & Arts, Charles Darwin University, 2007 [[espace.cdu.edu.au/view/cdu:6548](http://espace.cdu.edu.au/view/cdu:6548), accessed 15 February 2015], 351 (hereafter Jarvis diss.); Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 255.

<sup>15</sup> Jarvis diss., 351; Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 238.

<sup>16</sup> Jarvis diss., 350; Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 255.

To **compôse**, etwas zusammensetzen, aufsetzen, verfas-  
sen, componiren, schreiben, machen, *composer*. To com-  
pose one's self, sich fassen, sich ernsthaftig aufstellen, *se com-  
poser, prendre un air serieux*. To compose one's self to  
sleep, sich bemühen zu schlaffen, *se disposer à dormir*. To  
compose a man's passion, einen ergrünten menschen begü-  
tigen, besänftigen, erweichen, seinen zorn stillen, *appaier  
la colere de quelcun*. To compose a difference, einen  
streit entscheiden, schlichten; *accommoder, decider un dif-  
ferend*. To compose, one's affairs, seine geschäfte in  
eine ordnung bringen, *mettre ordre à ses affaires*.

Compôsed, zusammengesetzt, aufgesetzt, *ic. composé, &c.*  
A composed countenance, ein eingezogen, still, beschei-  
den, ernsthaftes ansehen, *un air composé ou serieux*. He  
is composed for his end, er hat sich zum tode bereitet, *il  
est préparé à la mort*.

Compôsing, das zusammensetzen, *ic. l'action de compo-  
ser, &c.* Compôsing-stick, der winkelhacken, darein die  
buchdrucker die buchstaben setzen, *composeur*.

Compôsite, zusammengesetzt, *composé*.

Composition, die zusammensetzung, composition;  
auffatz, verfassung; der vertrag, vergleich, die vergleichung,  
*composition*.

Image 3: Ludwig's Dictionary English-French-German (Leipzig, 1706), s.v. 'To Compose'

To **write**, etwas schreiben; etwas aufsetzen, aufzeich-  
nen, schriftlich verfassen, *écrire*. Write me word, berich-  
tet mich, thut mir zu wissen, *mandez moi*. To write him-  
self, sich schreiben, einen nahmen oder titel geben, ausge-  
ben für, *se qualifier*. To write back, to write back again,  
einem wieder schreiben, antworten, *récrire*. To write  
over again, etwas wieder schreiben, ins reine überschreiben,  
bringen, *récrire, mettre au net*. To write down, etwas auf-  
zeichnen, aufsetzen, *mettre par écrit*. To write after,  
schreiben nach einer vorschritt, nachmahlen, nachahmen,  
*copier*. To write out, etwas abschreiben, aufschreiben;  
ganz hinaus schreiben, *transcrire, copier; écrire tout*.

Writer, ein schreiber; ein scribente, uhrschreiber, schrift-  
verfasser, *écrivain*.

Image 4: Ludwig's Dictionary English-French-German (Leipzig, 1706), s.v. 'To Write'

Christian Ludwig's English-German-French dictionary published in Leipzig in 1706 makes clear that the word 'to compose' (Image 3) does not incorporate the meaning of the French 'écrire'.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand the entry for 'to write' (Image 4) can be expressed by the word 'écrire', in its slightly overlapping sense of 'schriftlich verfassen', while its prime and specific meaning is 'to write down'

<sup>17</sup> A Dictionary English, German and French ... / English-Teutsch-Frantzösisch Lexicon ..., Verfertiget von M. Christian Ludwig (Leipzig: Thomas Fritschen, 1706), s.v. 'To Compose', etwas zusammen setzen, aufsetzen, verfassen, componiren, schreiben, machen, *composer*.

*mettre par écrire*, and ‘to write out’ as in *transcrire, copier, écrire tout*.<sup>18</sup> Schwanberg’s ascription ‘écrite par Madame Bachen Son Epouse’, juxtaposed as it is with the three occurrences of ‘composée par Sr. J. S. Bach’, leaves no doubt that he was referring to Anna Magdalena as the copyist or transcriber.

Invited to respond to this point in the film, Jarvis ignored the 1706 documents:

The fact of the matter is that the manuscript describes Bach as the person who put it together—*composer* means to put together and not to compose the music. *Écrire* is the verb that I understand from the Paris Conservatoire was the verb used to describe the composer.<sup>19</sup>

Taking the case a step further, let us imagine that Schwanberg was not fluent in French—a plausible scenario. He may have turned to a widely available German-French dictionary as he prepared to write on the title page of his treasured manuscript. The 1719 Leipzig edition of J. L. Fritsch’s German-French dictionary<sup>20</sup> would have served the purpose well and assured Schwanberg that the German words ‘schreiben’,<sup>21</sup> (Image 5), ‘Copey, Abschrift’ and ‘Copist’ (Image 6)<sup>22</sup> were all translated into French by words based on the verb ‘écrire’. He could also have double-checked this by referring to the French-German section of the same dictionary, to discover that the verb ‘Escrire’ [sic] was the synonym for ‘schreiben’ (Image 7).<sup>23</sup> Similarly, had Schwanberg any doubts about how to translate the German word ‘Componist’ he would have found the French ‘compositeur’ (Image 8),<sup>24</sup> and so with all confidence he could make a title page using the verbs ‘composer’ to describe Johann Sebastian Bach as the composer of both violin and cello collections, and ‘écrire’ to describe Anna Magdalena as the copyist.

For completeness’ sake, let us imagine that Schwanberg really did intend to reveal Anna Magdalena as the true composer of the Cello Suites when he wrote ‘écrite par Madame Bachen’ on the joint title page. If so, he would have been naming Anna Magdalena as the true composer of the Violin Solos too.<sup>25</sup> Jarvis intimates as much in his book. While not quite claiming it outright,<sup>26</sup> he describes the extant autograph manuscript of the Violin Solos, P 967, which is signed and dated ‘Joh: Seb: Bach ao. 1720’ as ‘the supposed 1720 Autograph in Bach’s hand’,<sup>27</sup> asserting that ‘there now appears to be very strong evidence of her [Anna

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., s.v. ‘To write, etwas schreiben; etwas aufsetzen, aufzeichnen, schriftlich verfassen, *écrire*. To write down, etwas aufzeichnen, aufsetzen, *mettre par écrit*...To write out, etwas abschreiben, ausschreiben; ganz hinaus schreiben, *transcrire, copier; écrire tout*.

<sup>19</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by Alex McCall, ©WrittenbyMrsBach, 2015, at 00:40:40–00:40:59.

<sup>20</sup> Johann Leonhard Fritsch, *Nouveau Dictionnaire Des Passagers François-Allemand et Allemand-François, Oder neues Frantzösisch-Teutsches und Teutsch-Frantzösisches Wörter-Buch*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Leipzig: Joh. Friedrich Gleditsch, 1719).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 493 in the German-French section.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 140 in the German-French section.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 670 in the French-German section

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 139 in the German-French section.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 12–13. See note 8 above.

<sup>26</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 249–257.

<sup>27</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 164.



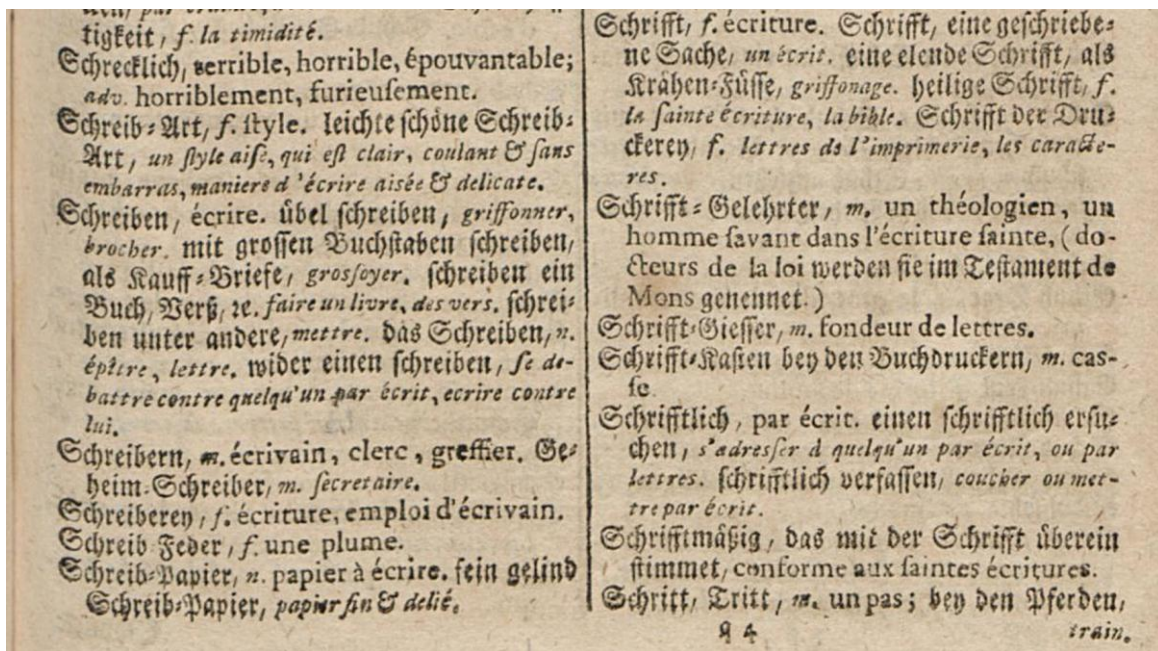


Image 5: Fritsch's German-French dictionary (Leipzig, 1719), s.v. 'schreiben'

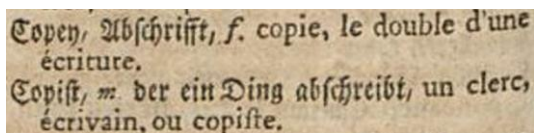


Image 6: Fritsch's German-French dictionary (Leipzig, 1719), s.v. 'Copeny, Abschriftt' and 'Copist'

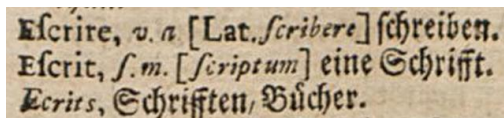


Image 7: Fritsch's German-French dictionary (Leipzig, 1719), s.v. 'escrit' (sic!)

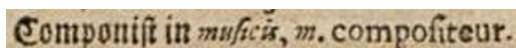


Image 8: Fritsch's German-French dictionary (Leipzig, 1719), s.v. 'compositeur'

Magdalena's] substantial involvement in the production of that manuscript too [P 967],<sup>28</sup> and contending that the copy of the Violin Solos that she made for Schwanberg, P 268, 'is not a copy of the 1720 Autograph'.<sup>29</sup> Besides the obvious source problems this creates,<sup>30</sup> Jarvis is contradicting his premise that there is a fundamental difference between the 'complex and intellectually challenging' Violin Solos and the musically 'simpler' Cello Suites, which indicates two different composers.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>29</sup> Jarvis diss., 2; Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 251.

<sup>30</sup> As Tomita points out, this conclusion originates from Jarvis's misreading of Bach's handwriting. See 'Introduction', in Yo Tomita (ed.), *Bach* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), xxviii n.58. Besides, a signed, dated autograph is generally accepted as a fundamental reference from which handwriting formation, watermarks, rastrum usage, musical style etc. are taken. If a signed calligraphic autograph manuscript is not considered an authentic model for Bach's handwriting, what is?

<sup>31</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 12-13. See note 8 above.

This indisputably illogical and untenable translation of 'écrite par Madame Bachen' as 'Written by Mrs Bach' has been paraded internationally in the title of the film, book and press releases so as to advertise the claim that Anna Magdalena was a composer, and that her compositions included her husband's Cello Suites (BWV 1007–1012), the Goldberg Aria (BWV 988/1) and the famous C-major Prelude (BWV 846/1). Jarvis admits that: 'It is not at all clear why Schwanenberger<sup>32</sup> decided to write the words, as they were not essential, so we can safely assume that he had a reason for doing so.'<sup>33</sup> Indeed so. Perhaps it is in this very title page that we find the gender-affirming clues the film was so desperately searching for. Knowing the Bach family as he did,<sup>34</sup> might Schwanenberger have been graciously distinguishing Anna Magdalena, the woman, artist, singer, mother, wife, and copyist, from her husband, the composer, organist, and *pater familias*, as a compliment to the beauty of her script, in admiration or recognition of her creative accomplishments, or as a simple indication that he appreciated her collaboration in making time to complete this copy?

### Forensic Document Examination and Bach studies

Over the years scholars have become increasingly frustrated with the limitations of traditional methods of musical handwriting analysis because these methods depend upon the expertise of fallible scholars who write down only a fraction of their vast knowledge. Consequently the Bach community has been searching for more transparent and more durable techniques of handwriting analysis. The potential for Bach scholarship of digital imaging and data collection, for example, has been discussed since before 2002.<sup>35</sup> Masahiro Niitsuma, a young computer scientist, has made promising inroads in this area with his handwriting analysis of Bach's scores, developed first at Queen's University, Belfast.<sup>36</sup> Other digital research projects with exciting potential include the detection of composer identification and musical plagiarism researched by Christof Weiß of the Semantic Media Technology group at the Fraunhofer Institut, IDMT, in Thuringia.<sup>37</sup> Jarvis's idea of applying Forensic Document Examination (FDE) to Bach studies was therefore welcomed initially because although, like traditional methods, it is a manual technique with an element of subjective human fallibility, it held the promise of a new solution to an old problem.

Needless to say, the development of any new technique and the concomitant formation of a new theoretical framework requires the highest level of critical

<sup>32</sup> See note 10 above for the spelling variants.

<sup>33</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 256.

<sup>34</sup> *BDok* II, no. 248, 183. Schwanenberger was named among the godparents for the home baptism on 10 October 1728 of Regina Johanna Bach, daughter of Johann Sebastian and Anna Magdalena Bach.

<sup>35</sup> Yo Tomita, 'Breaking the Limits: Some Preliminary Considerations on Introducing an e-Science Model to Source Studies', *Musicology and globalization: proceedings of the International Congress in Shizuoka 2002 in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Musicological Society of Japan* (Tokyo: Nihon Ongaku Gakkai, 2004), 233–7.

<sup>36</sup> Niitsuma is currently Assistant Professor at Ritsumeikan University, Japan.

<sup>37</sup> Fraunhofer Institut für Digitale Medientechnologie, [www.idmt.fraunhofer.de](http://www.idmt.fraunhofer.de) (accessed 12 February 2015).



assessment, the setting up of prototypes, the running of negative tests, the analysis of results measured in broader contexts and so on, until its level of reliability or its limitations can be fully and accurately assessed. When preliminary results fly in the face of black-and-white documentary evidence, one must proceed, if at all, with extreme caution lest a system is constructed and interpretations formed on flawed foundations.

The use of FDE has so far led to some astounding claims, positioning Anna Magdalena's handwriting on Bach's scores as early as 1713, as the copyist of the canon BWV 1073<sup>38</sup> and as scribe of the song text in BWV 1127,<sup>39</sup> when she would have been twelve or thirteen years old. Great fluency of penmanship can certainly be acquired by this age and the idea that the talented soprano Anna Magdalena Wilcke was working alongside her future husband at such an early age is alluring. However, these ideas and interpretations are misleading because they lack any external documentation, and are based solely upon the results of a relatively untested handwriting analysis technique. Were the FDE technique developed far beyond its present state, with full regard to the source and documentary evidence, one can imagine that, at some future point, it might possibly be able to shed light on manuscript studies and on unknown corners of Bach's biography.

### Information and misinformation

'Distinguished musician and forensic anthro-musicologist Professor Martin Jarvis has spent 25 years investigating his theory that Anna Magdalena could have been a composer'<sup>40</sup> is how the protagonist is introduced in the film. Embroidering the press releases, the media have helped create the myth of 'an academic who has spent more than 30 years looking at Bach's works claims that Anna Magdalena Bach ... actually wrote some of his best-loved works, including his Six Cello Suites'.<sup>41</sup>

Although it is a long time since the title 'professor' was a distinction awarded to the leading scholar in an institution of higher learning, academic titles and a university position still confer an authority on their holder. In an ideal world, Jarvis's thesis would have been considered equally on its merits had he marketed himself as a doctoral student or as an amateur sleuth. As it is, his frequently-cited title and university position have helped persuade representatives of the media, and even librarians,<sup>42</sup> that his results are based on years of research, and worthy of international recognition.

Details in the book trace his research journey:

<sup>38</sup> Jarvis, *diss.*, 132f.; Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 105.

<sup>39</sup> Jarvis, *diss.*, 397f.; Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 109.

<sup>40</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, at 00:02:10–00:02:20.

<sup>41</sup> [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1516423/Bach-works-were-written-by-his-second-wife-claims-academic.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1516423/Bach-works-were-written-by-his-second-wife-claims-academic.html) (accessed 10 February 2015).

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 184–9. Shockingly in 2004, while a doctoral student, Jarvis gained access the original manuscript of Anna Magdalena's 1725 notebook at the Berlin Staatsbibliothek. This is a privilege afforded to few senior Bach scholars, let alone an individual in the early stages of doctoral studies.

By the end of 2001, despite my exhaustive musical and linguistic examination of the Cello Suites, I was still unable to fully persuade my colleagues that Bach was not the composer.<sup>43</sup>

By the middle of 2002:

I had started to write the research up, with a view to publishing a book ... I was trying to track down a particular text about Bach's handwriting – *die Notenschrift Johann Sebastian Bachs* by Yoshitake Kobayashi ... as I considered the book important to my research. I decided to seek access to it through the university's inter-library loan system and duly filled in a form on the computer. In less than a couple of hours I had a phone call from ... the inter-library loans officer, to say that there was a copy of the book in our own library! I could not believe my luck and rushed up to meet Barbara.<sup>44</sup>

I was greeted by Barbara who was very excited to show me exactly what she had found. As we moved into the music collection she pointed out a large number of A4-sized nondescript brown texts dispersed among the other music books ... Bärenreiter's aim was to produce an accurate set of Bach's works; consequently, each work or collection of works is accompanied by a text called the *Kritischer Bericht*, which contains supporting scholarly commentary and critical analysis. In my many visits to the library, though I had noticed these brown-covered books, I had not given them any thought, perhaps because they have very indistinct lettering on their spines, which is close to unreadable. Or perhaps I'd always been distracted by the marvellous sea view. In any event, I'd had no idea what they were.<sup>45</sup>

The critical reports (*Kritischer Bericht*) of the New Bach Edition (*Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, abbreviated as *NBA*) are the starting point for any serious study of Bach's work, whether for practical musicians or scholars. Similarly Kobayashi's volumes in the *NBA* series are the starting point for anyone investigating Bach's handwriting.<sup>46</sup> That Jarvis had not known about, seen, or read this essential secondary source material<sup>47</sup> shows the misleading nature of the claims about the length and depth of his research. How, in 2001, can this have been an 'exhaustive and linguistic examination of the Cello Suites',<sup>48</sup> or 'a quarter of a century of intense study' as the film trailer claims,<sup>49</sup> without thorough study of the critical report of the Cello Suites? Even if the research had been intensive since 2002, when he found the *NBA* sources, there is still a credibility gap.

<sup>43</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>46</sup> Yoshitake Kobayashi, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke (NBA)*, Series 9: Addenda, Volume 2: *Die Notenschrift Johann Sebastian Bachs: Dokumentation ihrer Entwicklung* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1989). In 2007 he produced the concluding volume with Kirsten Beißwenger, Series 9: Addenda, Volume 3: *Die Kopisten Johann Sebastian Bachs: Katalog und Dokumentation*.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>49</sup> *Mrs Bach Promo.mov* at [youtu.be/KDQI5XRZwfo](http://youtu.be/KDQI5XRZwfo) (accessed 16 February 2015).

The book is riddled with similarly questionable assertions: ‘To date, no scientist has challenged any of my handwriting or music-calligraphy conclusions’;<sup>50</sup> ‘I would certainly discover before too long that there is a strong resistance to a full investigation and exposition of Johann Sebastian Bach’s life and works’.<sup>51</sup> Jarvis could be forgiven for holding this view in 2001 since, on his own admission, he did not see the Kobayashi volumes until mid-2002.<sup>52</sup> But in a book published nine years later, this statement demonstrates a serious error of judgement. One has to ask what he thinks has motivated the Bach community over the past 130 years, from Spitta in the nineteenth century to the vision in 1950 for a new advanced scholarly edition of Bach’s works (*NBA*). And what motivated the scholars who put that vision into practice and produced the *NBA* over the next sixty years if it was not to pursue and facilitate for others ‘a full investigation and exposition of the life and works of J. S. Bach’?

## Methodological problems

Jarvis set out to prove the validity about an idea he first conceived in the 1970s:

All this evidence was leading me towards one conclusion—or, rather, confirming the one I’d already formed years before: there does not appear to be any compelling evidence of Johann Sebastian Bach’s musical or linguistic fingerprint in the manuscript of the Cello Suites. It is therefore unlikely that he was the composer.<sup>53</sup>

‘I immediately became convinced that this was not a copy of someone else’s music, but her own composition’ (2001).<sup>54</sup> This was before he had read the contents of the *NBA* critical reports,<sup>55</sup> or Kobayashi’s fundamental tomes on handwriting.<sup>56</sup> Yet still he believed that by the end of 2001 he had made ‘an exhaustive musical and linguistic examination of the Cello Suites’.<sup>57</sup>

There is no evidence that this limited critical tendency improved markedly during his doctoral research or afterwards. Even when encouraged, he chose to

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 177. This statement was published in 2011, after he had received multiple criticisms of his work, including feedback from leading Bach scholars. Criticisms were documented in the open access Dialogue Report 2008, [www.bachnetwork.co.uk/dialogue-meetings/dialogue-meeting-2008](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/dialogue-meetings/dialogue-meeting-2008) and after Tomita’s article (see notes 58 and 59), and also in open access blogs.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>53</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 55.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> *Johann Sebastian Bach: Neue Ausgabe sämtliche Werke*. [Johann Sebastian Bach: New Edition of the complete works.] Each volume is devoted to one or more works of Bach, and is accompanied by a critical report (*Kritischer Bericht*) in which the volume editor gives a detailed description of the primary sources on which the edition is based, a description of the other major surviving sources, a discussion of conflicting or alternative readings of unclear passages, and a justification for his editorial choices.

<sup>56</sup> See note 46. Kobayashi, *NBA*, 9/2 and 9/3. Study of these volumes would have given Jarvis copious handwriting examples against which to test his forensic results, and prevent him from pursuing his unsubstantiated claims.

<sup>57</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 75.



ignore the advice of experts who encouraged him to run essential tests on the manuscripts of Bach's music,<sup>58</sup> particularly those by copyists such as Christian Gottlob Meißner (1707–60) and Bernhard Christian Kayser (1705–58), whose handwriting was similar to Bach's,<sup>59</sup> and whose copies, like P 269, had been mistaken for Bach's own by scholars in the late nineteenth century.

In addition to his FDE studies, Jarvis began to generate and uphold sensational claims with no historical or documentary basis; Maria Barbara's clinical depression and suicide, for example or, embroidered further, that her 'suicide' was because Johann Sebastian was having a 'nefarious relationship' with Anna Magdalena.<sup>60</sup> Spun from ideas found in secondary biographies of Bach rather than primary documents, such claims demonstrate lack of knowledge of the social codes of the period. In the film an eminent social historian states clearly that a home wedding was perfectly normal for a second marriage,<sup>61</sup> correcting Jarvis's evidence-less notion that 'there was some impediment to him marrying in church' because of 'something considered, at the time, to be unsavoury in his relationship with Anna Magdalena'.<sup>62</sup> Given the opportunity to respond to the social historian's point, Jarvis avoided admitting his error or changing his mind in light of what was, to him, new information.<sup>63</sup> The film's illustration of the wilful destruction of Anna Magdalena's property, showing unnamed relatives feeding a bonfire with sheets from diaries and music manuscripts, is similarly misinformed. There is no documentary trail to suggest that either Johann Sebastian or Anna Magdalena kept diaries. We suspect that many of Johann Sebastian's music manuscripts are missing, but no sources suggest they were deliberately destroyed.

The fanciful conjectures around the person of Anna Magdalena are symptomatic of Jarvis's general inability to engage with primary and secondary source materials. Without this basic procedure in place, what confidence dare one place in the reliability of his FDE results?

## Training

As a student on the vocational Performers' Course in the 1970s, Jarvis received the Professional Certificate, shown as Prof. Cert. (RAM) on his staff profile.<sup>64</sup> This qualification is described in the Gulbenkian Foundation report of 1978<sup>65</sup> as 'leading to a completion of course certificate',<sup>66</sup> and was awarded for proficiency in a principal and second study instrument, orchestral training, and basic harmony

<sup>58</sup> At the Third BNUK Dialogue Meeting in Oxford in January 2008. See note 50 above.

<sup>59</sup> Yo Tomita, 'Anna Magdalena as Bach's Copyist', *Understanding Bach*, 2 (2007), 59–76, esp. 71.

<sup>60</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 228.

<sup>61</sup> Professor Melanie Unseld, *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, at 00:28:45–00:29:00.

<sup>62</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 228.

<sup>63</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, at 00:29:00–00:29:12.

<sup>64</sup> Professor Martin Jarvis OAM, CM, PHD, PROF CERT (RAM), FIMT, FRSA [www.cdu.edu.au/creative-arts-humanities/staff-profiles/martin-jarvis](http://www.cdu.edu.au/creative-arts-humanities/staff-profiles/martin-jarvis) (accessed 10 February 2015).

<sup>65</sup> *Training Musicians: A Report to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation on the training of professional musicians 1978* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 1978), particularly §103–§124.

<sup>66</sup> *Training Musicians*, §109, 70.

and aural skills. There were no academic essays or written assignments<sup>67</sup> as the course was not designed to equip the student for research in the humanities.<sup>68</sup> Nowadays<sup>69</sup> a graduate from either conservatoire or university degree is obliged to take an appropriate Master's course before being allowed to pursue a PhD. Jarvis, it seems, was allowed to bypass this stage.<sup>70</sup> Innate ability and practical experience in the music profession notwithstanding, there is no way around the years of groundwork required to acquire the technical tools<sup>71</sup> and language skills fundamental to read, understand and begin to interpret Bach sources. On his own admission, Jarvis's German is 'very weak',<sup>72</sup> and his French 'basic schoolboy stuff, useful for ordering a cup of coffee but not much else'.<sup>73</sup>

## Hidden agenda

Chapter Seven 'The Scholars Get a Chance to Throw Rocks' reveals an under-text that pervades both film and book and that sadly detracts from what should have been the main focus on FDE. Email transcriptions show that leading Bach scholars were open to consider Jarvis's new techniques for analysing handwriting,<sup>74</sup> and that his new ideas were heard with an interest that went beyond polite duty. He was offered both encouragement and suggestions where areas of weakness could be improved. This generous advice was not always met with gratitude and respect:

Professor Wolff was clearly unhappy that I had challenged his work on the 1713 Perpetual Canon for Four Voices, which he had undertaken many years beforehand. This is possibly why he mentioned 'the pertinent NBA critical report' – I was blissfully ignorant of it being his work when I sent my research findings to him!<sup>75</sup>

<sup>67</sup> *Training Musicians*, §108, 70. The entrance requirements for the Performers' Course was five O levels or equivalent at pass level, with no need for A levels. Many students nonetheless arrived with highest grades in three or four A level subjects.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, §108, 'a student on a performers' course not leading to a degree equivalent, and without 2 'A' levels depends on a discretionary grant ...'. Nowadays the Professional Certificate is worth 60 transfer credits at the Open University Level 1, or Level 2, while a Bachelor of Arts from the Open University requires 360 credits; the L.R.A.M. is worth 65 transfer credits at level 2, and a G.R.S.M. qualification worth 240 credits. [www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/my-previous-study/professional-qualifications/bodies/royal-academy-music](http://www.open.ac.uk/study/credit-transfer/my-previous-study/professional-qualifications/bodies/royal-academy-music) and [www.open.ac.uk/courses/qualifications/qd](http://www.open.ac.uk/courses/qualifications/qd)

<sup>69</sup> In the 1970s the division between university and conservatoire was such that a student with three or four years conservatoire training was obliged to begin again from Year 1 of a university music degree.

<sup>70</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, 91: 'It was later that year that the Northern Territory University was to change its name, as the result of a merger, to Charles Darwin University. The Vice-Chancellor of the new university was Professor Helen Garnett PSM. She was very enthusiastic about my research, and as a result I was enrolled as a PhD candidate and granted a fee waiver.'

<sup>71</sup> For example, techniques in historiography, critical thinking, contextualisation, hermeneutics, sources etc.

<sup>72</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 185.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 179–212.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 199.

*'Beliefs and bank balances could go up in smoke'*

Running through the film is a claim about the effect of Jarvis's discoveries on the financial aspects of rare Bach manuscripts. The original version of the film, screened in late 2014 at BAFTA and broadcast on SRF and MDR in Germany, expressed this strongly:

Narrator: J. S. Bach is big business and big business means big money, and that means vested interest. Allegedly genuine Bach documents have huge value to certain people and organisations. Martin's research could seriously devalue this specialist market place.<sup>76</sup>

Narrator: The very authenticity of some Bach signatures may now be called into question. Fingers could be badly burnt. Beliefs and bank balances could go up in smoke.<sup>77</sup>

In response to public feedback these dramatic assertions were toned down for the definitive version of the film, becoming:

Narrator: If Martin's research challenges the very autographs on Bach's documents, it will devalue manuscripts held by collectors all over the world.<sup>78</sup>

Narrator: So it now seems possible that some Bach signatures on Bach manuscripts are not actually his. This has huge implications, not only for the owners of these manuscripts, but also for music history itself.<sup>79</sup>

Although to the layman these financial claims sound reasonable, they too turn out to be entirely unfounded. Worldwide Head of the Department of Books and Manuscripts at Sotheby's, Dr Stephen Roe, explains:

If something is in Bach's handwriting it is obviously very valuable: Anna Magdalena, valuable yes, but less so. However, there being no autograph of the Cello Suites, her copy of them might be close in value to a full autograph as it is the only thing 'available' and the next best thing. So I don't believe there would be a lot of difference in price ... But the manuscript is not available, and unlikely ever to be so, and therefore its financial value only really comes into play only in matters of insurance, if, for example, it went on exhibition or on loan.<sup>80</sup>

One could then argue that a non J. S. Bach attribution would delight the librarians as the insurance premium would be lower – rather than 'bank balances going up in smoke', the library, in this case, would be better off.

<sup>76</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, original version at 00:11:12–00:11:28.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 00:47:11–00:47:25.

<sup>78</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, at 00:11:45–00:11:55.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, at 00:48:35–00:48:48.

<sup>80</sup> Private correspondence, 1 March 2015, reproduced with permission. Stephen Roe's ability to comment on this can be assessed by the fact that in the 35 years he has spent at Sotheby's, more Bach manuscripts have passed through his hands than through the hands of any other auctioneer since the nineteenth century.



Why did Jarvis not check his facts before making these controversial assertions? What made him assume that copies with Anna Magdalena's rather than Bach's writing would plummet in value?<sup>81</sup>

*'They banned us'*

The statements in the film about the monetary value of Bach manuscripts 'to certain people and organisations' carry a hefty punch when followed immediately by Jarvis's alleged exclusion from the Leipzig Bach-Archiv, where rare Bach manuscripts are greatly prized.

Narrator: They were banned from access to research materials held at the Bach Archive. Then it got worse. Senior staff there also refused to give interviews or discuss any of Martin's theories.

Jarvis: Well I am very surprised and very disappointed that they banned us. They have much to gain from what I have discovered and I can't see what they have got to lose, to be honest.

Harralson:<sup>82</sup> The whole point of an archive is to give scholars and researchers access to documents to study and for research purposes. I find that disappointing and disheartening.<sup>83</sup>

This scene, unsupported as it is by background information, needlessly casts the reputation of the Leipzig Bach-Archiv in a negative light. The Bach-Archiv did not ban Jarvis personally from the library – everybody is welcome to work with the materials there, and had he or Harralson requested to read a specific source,<sup>84</sup> it would have been provided, just as for any other visiting reader.<sup>85</sup> The 'ban' had to do with filming in the Bach Museum. As a result of a disagreement with a representative from Look Films, the directors of the Bach-Archiv decided not to allow footage for this documentary to be filmed on their premises. The same conditions were still in place when I requested permission to film there in November 2013. Far from being 'banned', I was a guest researcher at the Archiv at the time, and contributed to *Written by Mrs Bach* with the full knowledge and support of the Bach-Archiv directors Christoph Wolff and Peter Wollny. And it all worked well. Instead of views of a library desk and copies of the Cello Suites, we used images from the open access [www.bach-digital.de](http://www.bach-digital.de) site with views overlooking Nikolaikirche.<sup>86</sup> In Jarvis's case the decision led him to discover original Bach documents in Cöthen and Weimar.

<sup>81</sup> He clearly did not intend to suggest the 'less-valuable-because-written-by-a-woman' implication of his assertion.

<sup>82</sup> Heidi H. Harralson contributed to the film as the expert in forensic handwriting.

<sup>83</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, at 00:12:10–00:12:44.

<sup>84</sup> They did not request to see specific materials, nor, it seems, did Jarvis know what original manuscripts are held at the Bach-Archiv. 'To this day they [Jarvis and Harralson] have no idea what would have been available for them to examine.' Email correspondence with Alex McCall, 2 March 2015, cited with permission.

<sup>85</sup> Email correspondence with Peter Wollny, 3 March 2015, cited with permission.

<sup>86</sup> *Written by Mrs Bach*, directed by McCall, in shots between 00:38:10 and 00:40:40.

## Peer review

We live in the age of the democratisation of knowledge, where the individual, no matter what level of education or research expertise, is welcome to bring creative ideas to the table, have these ideas taken seriously and evaluated by experts.<sup>87</sup> These new conditions make the peer review procedure increasingly essential.

This article names numerous errors that could have been prevented had Jarvis listened to the advice of experts in the field, or checked his facts or been more careful when interpreting them. Additionally he chose to adopt a defensive style towards those who do not agree with his views. In his description of the BNUK Dialogue meeting at Oxford in 2008, for example, at which he was afforded time to respond to Tomita's paper, in addition to a full slot in the Young Scholars' Forum<sup>88</sup> he wrote that 'it did demonstrate just how far academics will go to protect their turf'.<sup>89</sup>

An organisation such as BNUK has an important role to play in reviewing the latest scholarship. It provides research scholars with the opportunity to discuss new ideas in the friendly and open-minded atmosphere of Dialogue meetings, and to encourage deeper exploration in areas possibly not previously considered in order that the research might attain the highest international standards. Frequently such assistance goes beyond the Dialogue meeting,<sup>90</sup> when for example an invitation is issued to submit an article for the journal *Understanding Bach*.<sup>91</sup> Main articles in the journal undergo a strict peer review, while reports and articles in the Young Scholars' Forum are processed in-house, with numerous explanatory emails passing between the scholar and editors during the editorial processes. Whether or not the scholar acts upon the freely-given advice is out of the control of BNUK.<sup>92</sup>

## Conclusion

The successful publicity behind the *Written by Mrs Bach* phenomenon was named at the beginning of this article. The response to the film shows how passionately musicians and scholars care about what is or what is not true about Bach's music. Unfortunately, instead of joyfully taking our understanding of Bach and his music further, the content of the documentary has caused many scholars and journalists to waste precious time engaging with ideas that should never have left the tutorial room. It was a missed opportunity.

<sup>87</sup> Ruth Tatlow, 'Challenging Virtuality', *Understanding Bach*, 7, 57–60. [www.bachnetwork.co.uk/ub7/UB7\\_Tatlow.pdf](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/ub7/UB7_Tatlow.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> [www.bachnetwork.co.uk/dialogue-meetings/dialogue-meeting-2008](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/dialogue-meetings/dialogue-meeting-2008).

<sup>89</sup> Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 211.

<sup>90</sup> [www.bachnetwork.co.uk/dialogue-meetings](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/dialogue-meetings).

<sup>91</sup> [www.bachnetwork.co.uk/understanding-bach](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/understanding-bach).

<sup>92</sup> Yo Tomita, 'Anna Magdalena as Bach's Copyist', *Understanding Bach*, 2 (2007), 59–76, to which Jarvis has yet to respond, although his reaction to the meeting is recorded in Jarvis, *Written by Mrs Bach*, 210. In the case of Jarvis the email stream and workload was such that Yo Tomita decided to submit his work to public scrutiny in article form: [www.bachnetwork.co.uk/ub2/tomita.pdf](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk/ub2/tomita.pdf). Tomita gave an updated version of the same in 2009 at the conference 'Women's Influence on J. S. Bach's Music: Poets, Mothers, and Performers' on 16-17 October 2009 at Yale Institute of Sacred Music, New Haven, CT, USA as a result of further refinements of the evidence.

'I am sorry you have to deal with this', Harvard professor Christoph Wolff, one of the preeminent living Bach scholars, tells National Review Online. 'I am sick and tired of this stupid thesis. When I served as director of the Leipzig Bach Archive from 2001 to 2013, I and my colleagues there extensively refuted the basic premises of the thesis, on grounds of documents, manuscript sources, and musical grounds. There is not a shred of evidence, but Jarvis doesn't give up despite the fact that several years ago, at a Bach conference in Oxford, a room full of serious Bach scholars gave him an embarrassing showdown.'

'It seems that he examined neither the great corpus of Bach sources nor the validity of methodology and research outcome by Dr Georg von Dadelsen of The University of Tübingen and Dr Yoshitake Kobayashi of Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Institut in Göttingen, Germany', Tomita tells National Review Online. 'They are revered Bach scholars who founded the new chronology of Bach's works through the identification of copyists, which took them and their followers several decades to perfect. It is simply impossible for a scholar who is so isolated in a corner of Australia (Darwin) where there are no resources to carry out such an extensive research in less than a decade.'<sup>93</sup>

However, soon the buzz surrounding *Written by Mrs Bach* will die down and this lamentable episode forgotten. As we look forward, let us ensure that the next prize-winning Bach film highlights research worthy of international attention. Imagine the positive effects of a film based on insights and discoveries meriting the accolade 'world leading', rather than 'leading the world astray'. Imagine a film that motivates Bach fans to brush up their German and explore the many outstanding open-access Bach resources available today, including his manuscripts on [www.bach-digital.de](http://www.bach-digital.de), books that he may have owned or read on [www.vd17.de](http://www.vd17.de), [www.vd18.de](http://www.vd18.de), and the limitless treasures in the universal encyclopaedia [www.zedler-lexikon.de](http://www.zedler-lexikon.de).

The Cello Suites, composed by Johann Sebastian Bach, copied by Anna Magdalena Bach, are enjoyed for what they are by all who practise, perform or listen to them. The beauty and grandeur of the music are unaffected by their authorship, and even though authorship may matter a great deal to some, it was surely less troubling to Bach and his wife. Each knew what the other did or did not do in their household, and why. We have it clearly documented that in the 1730s Bach believed the ultimate end or final goal of all music to be none other than the honour of God and the renewal of the soul.<sup>94</sup> With this inspiring motivation, let us move on, rebuild the reputation of Anna Magdalena and continue to explore the depths and riches of Bach's compositions.

<sup>93</sup> Tim Cavanaugh, 'Bogus Bach Theory gets Media Singing', 29 October 2014, [www.nationalreview.com/article/391379/bogus-bach-theory-gets-media-singing-tim-cavanaugh](http://www.nationalreview.com/article/391379/bogus-bach-theory-gets-media-singing-tim-cavanaugh) (accessed 11 February 2015).

<sup>94</sup> Pamela L Poulin (ed.), *Johann Sebastian Bach: Precepts and Principles for playing the Thorough-Bass or Accompanying in Four Parts. Leipzig, 1738* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 11. Manuscript probably in the hand of St.Thomas alumni C. F. Richter, with title page and corrections by Bach's student C. A. Thieme (1721–1795).