

Eighteenth-century Coffee-House Culture: A New Context for Bach's Music?

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Historical information about Johann Sebastian Bach has always been sparse. Many aspects of Bach's life remained remarkably obscure even to his contemporaries and members of his own family. When the eighteenth-century composer and theorist Johann Mattheson approached Bach for a biographical summary, his request went unheeded, and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach famously spoke of the 'inevitable gaps' in accounts of his father's life.¹ It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Bach's personality has been at the centre of numerous scholarly debates and developing a well-founded picture of Bach remains a central concern for Bach scholars today.

When Alfred Dürr and Georg von Dadelsen presented their revised chronology of Bach's church cantatas in the late 1950s, for example, the musicologist Friedrich Blume likened their findings to nothing less than a scholarly earthquake. Speaking at a conference of the *Internationale Bach-Gesellschaft* in 1962, Blume declared that the traditional *Bachbild*, carefully cultivated by nineteenth-century musicologists such as Philipp Spitta and Carl Bitter, had been shaken to the core.² Blume launched a fierce attack on the traditional understanding of Bach as a devout Lutheran, whose musical

¹ For the significance of Mattheson's request for biographical material and C.P.E. Bach's remark on 'inevitable gaps' to Nikolaus Forkel see Hans-Joachim Schulze, 'Über die „unvermeidlichen Lücken“ in Bachs Lebensbeschreibung', in Reinhold Brinkmann (ed.), *Bachforschung und Bachinterpretation heute: Wissenschaftler und Praktiker im Dialog* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1981), pp. 32–42. C.P.E. Bach's letter was transcribed and reprinted in Hans-Joachim Schulze, *Dokumente zum Nachwirken Johann Sebastian Bachs, 1750–1800* (Kassel, London, Leipzig: Bärenreiter, Deutscher Verlag für Musik, 1972), p. 290.

² A transcript of Blume's address was published as Friedrich Blume, 'Umrisse eines neuen Bach-Bildes', *Musica* (1962) 16, 169–176. For an English translation, see Friedrich Blume, 'Outlines of a New Picture of Bach', *Music & Letters* (1963) 44/3, 214–27.

greatness could not be separated from his Protestant faith, Christian doctrine and divine truth.³

As an alternative, Blume advocated a secular vision of Bach as a 'disinterested' transmitter of 'abstract' music theory and a 'preserving guardian' (*Bewahrer*) of old musical traditions.⁴ By invoking both the alleged universality and autonomy of musical principles in Bach's music, Blume hoped to overcome the traditional dichotomy between secular and sacred music. However, given the political situation in a divided post-war Germany (and the ideological desire of the East German authorities to align Bach's music with the materialist values of a Marxist-Hegelian Enlightenment), it is not surprising that Blume's strategy proved less than effective. After all, his compromise rested on exchanging one musicological trope, dating from the nineteenth century (Spitta and Bitter's *Bachbild*) with yet another construct of the Romantic era ('absolute' music).

Although the scholarly camps in the *Aufklärer*-versus-Cantor debate never aligned themselves neatly according to political blocs (as Friedrich Blume's stance perhaps illustrates), Marxist historiography undoubtedly acted as a polarising influence. Much twentieth-century Bach scholarship has been overshadowed by the need to negotiate Soviet policies and cultural ideology.⁵ What's more, Blume's emphasis on the 'absolute' quality of Bach's music complemented the general musicological priorities of German post-war scholarship, which was firmly centred on style criticism and creative chronology. Even the call for a secular *Bachbild* achieved little to further a more comprehensive understanding of one of Bach's most important secular performance venues in Leipzig, Gottfried Zimmermann's coffee house.

Given this traditional methodological myopia, it is significant that Bach's more recent biographers, such as Christoph Wolff and Martin Geck, have moved decisively towards re-evaluating the creative importance of Bach's performances with his Collegium Musicum.⁶ Christoph Wolff has characterised Bach's musical gatherings in Leipzig's fashionable Catharinenstrasse as 'a bourgeois emulation of the courtly practice of *musique de table*', which is an intriguing hypothesis.⁷ Its strength mainly

³ For a comprehensive summary of the ensuing debate see Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen, 'Universalität und Zersplitterung. Wege der Bachforschung 1945–2005', in Michael Heinemann and Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen (eds.), *Johann Sebastian Bach und die Gegenwart* (Köln: Verlag Dohr, 2007), pp. 117–57.

⁴ Blume, 'Outlines of a New Picture', p. 226; also Blume, 'Umriss', *passim*.

⁵ For a useful introduction to the topic, see Meinrad Walter, 'J. S. Bach und die Aufklärung? Kritische Bemerkungen zum Bachverständnis der DDR-Musikwissenschaft', *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* (1985), 42/4, 229–40.

⁶ Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Wolff, 'Bach's Leipzig Chamber Music', *Early Music* (1985), 13/2, 165–75; Martin Geck, *Bach: Leben und Werk* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 2000).

⁷ Wolff, *Bach*, p. 352. For an account of the architectural prestige of Leipzig's *Catharinenstrasse* (or 'Cather-Straße'), see Iccander [Johann Christian Crell], *Das in gantz Europa berühmte, galante und sehenswürdige königliche Leipzig* (Leipzig: bey August Martini,

derives from integrating Zimmermann's venue into a wider socio-cultural framework, centred firmly on the priorities and conventions of aristocratic authorities. Understanding Bach's secular performances primarily as an imitation of courtly ceremony and protocol, however, risks ignoring the specific characteristics of Leipzig's coffee-house culture. While Bach's audience undoubtedly perceived the musical pursuits of aristocratic patrons as socially superior, the close ties between coffee houses, mercantile enterprise and Leipzig's trade fairs may well have created an environment in which musical expertise and the intellectual exchange of ideas played a more significant role than they did in the power-driven circles of the nobility.

The recent debate surrounding the notion of an emerging public sphere during the early Enlightenment also requires us to rethink musicological tropes, which imply a gradual 'emancipation' of middle-class culture from aristocratic models. Timothy Blanning, for example, recently challenged Peter Schleuning's more traditional assertion that the cultural dominance of the symphony heralded the beginning of commercial concerts and signified the political ascendance of affluent citizens in the second half of the eighteenth century.⁸ In this context, it is important to note that the socio-political depiction of coffee houses as the cradle of an enlightened public sphere does not, in fact, work in favour of Bach's performance venue at Zimmermann's. Numerous historians, including Philipp Spitta, considered Leipzig's coffee houses as little more than 'early' stages in the development of public concerts, which effectively reduces them to noisy and tobacco-stained ancestors of Leipzig's famous Gewandhaus.⁹

But is this faith of nineteenth-century authors in the cultural superiority of their own performance culture historically sustainable? Do the opening lines of Bach's Coffee Cantata, 'Schweiget stille, plaudert nicht', for example, really indicate that Bach's music had to compete with the din of constant coffee-house chatter? What implications does Bach's social involvement with the members of his Collegium at Zimmermann's have for our current *Bachbild*? (Johann Christoph Gottsched, Leipzig's 'literary pope' and Bach's occasional writing partner, is known to have frequented Leipzig's coffee houses, and Christian Friedrich Henrici may even have been a member of Bach's Collegium.¹⁰) To address these specific lacunae in our knowledge of Bach, it is worth returning to C.P.E. Bach's remark on the 'inevitable gaps' and to Bach's early biographers.

1725), p. 30.

⁸ Timothy C. W. Blanning, *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 162–3.

⁹ Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (Leipzig, 1873), II, p. 497.

¹⁰ Katherine R. Goodman, 'From Salon to Kaffeekranz' in Carol Baron (ed.), *Bach's Changing World: Voices in the Community* (Rochester, N.Y., Woodbridge: University of Rochester Press, 2006), p. 205. Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1873), I, p. 169.

In an article published in 1884, Philipp Spitta proposed a remarkably lucid strategy for plotting a musicological course through some of the uncharted territory in our mental maps of eighteenth-century Leipzig. Spitta points out that by paying close attention to the creative personalities Bach chose to work with, such as Christian Friedrich Hunold and Mariane von Ziegler for example, fresh insights may be gleaned into his own views and social surroundings.¹¹ This astute grasp of the musicological significance of Bach's creative environment seems almost perplexing, especially in view of Blume's effort to replace Spitta's late-Romantic *Bachbild* with that of an 'absolute' musician. What's more, it also raises the prospect that a more comprehensive understanding of Bach's role in Leipzig's eighteenth-century coffee-house culture will help to overcome some of the traditional limitations inherent in both 'Romantic' and 'abstract' approaches to Bach's music.

¹¹ Philipp Spitta, 'Über die Beziehung Sebastian Bachs zu Christian Friedrich Hunold und Mariane von Ziegler', in *Historische und philologische Aufsätze, Ernst Curtius zu seinem siebenzigsten Geburtstage gewidmet* (Berlin: A. Ascher & Co., 1884), pp. 404–34.