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What Would Bach Do Today?

Paul J. Grime

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) was arguably the greatest composer of all time. Certainly that is true of the music that he composed for the church. That we Lutherans are able to claim him as one of our own should be a big deal. And so, we fete him from time to time, especially when significant anniversaries roll around, such as the one that marked the 250th anniversary of his death in the year 2000. In the interim, we promote the music of Bach, all the while recognizing that much of it remains out of reach of the skill level of musicians in most of our congregations.

Beyond the vast *oeuvre* that Bach left to us, what else, if anything, does the great master have to offer to the church today? What can we learn from his life, his interactions with others, and his insatiable desire to improve his craft? Far from being an out-of-touch model for the 21st century musician, this paper will demonstrate that we have much to learn from Bach, not so much through imitation but rather by way of inspiration.

I. The Landscape of Bach's World

To begin our inquiry, we must first consider the times in which Bach lived. Born in Germany in the final quarter of the 17th century, Bach entered a world that was finally beginning to recover from the devastation of the Thirty Years' War. Economic development coincided with the expansion of trade throughout Europe, with Saxony at the crosshairs of trade routes that would develop into an extraordinary exchange not only of commerce but also of information and ideas.¹ The implications for the development of musical styles will be considered later.

Among the many consequences of the Thirty Years' War was a religious realignment in Germany. Whereas the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 had brought about the protection of Lutheranism in those territories that were ruled by Lutherans, the Peace of Westphalia that signaled the end of the Thirty Years' War granted official recognition to Calvinism and also opened up the possibility of rulers converting to a differing confession without requiring their subjects to convert with them. The practical effect

¹ Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2001), 16.

of this arrangement was an increase in religious pluralism and tolerance.² Thus, in the course of Bach's career, he worked among the Pietists in Mülhausen, the Calvinists in Cöthen, and orthodox Lutherans in Leipzig.

Simultaneously developing in Leipzig and other places around Germany were the initial evidences of what would soon become a major movement in the world of thought—the Enlightenment. Leipzig, with its renowned university, was certainly no stranger to the never-ending exchange of new ideas and scientific discoveries that became the hallmarks of this movement. Spending more than half of his professional career in Leipzig, Bach certainly rubbed shoulders with many of those who were espousing these progressive trends in philosophical thought, even though he himself was never a member of the university faculty.³

The significance of Leipzig as an incubator of progressive thought cannot be over-emphasized. By the end of the 17th century, for example, Leipzig had become the publishing center for all of central Europe.⁴ Its regular book fairs, held as many as three times a year, drew visitors from across the continent. These fairs were important for the widespread dissemination of new ideas. For Bach personally, they were an opportunity for presenting newly composed works that demonstrated his own abilities and forward-looking perspective as a composer.

So what does this admittedly brief depiction of Bach's world tell us about what he might do today? Consider, once again, Leipzig, the place where all of Bach's talents coalesced to produce his greatest works. This was a cosmopolitan city, perhaps not unlike New York City or Chicago in our own day. Leipzig was at the forefront of the latest trends, an environment in which Bach thrived. He was not afraid of being challenged in his professional development in the 18th century, nor would he be, one presumes, in our time.

As for implications for 21st-century church musicians, Bach's example would suggest that they too should be widely read, conversant in the latest developments in philosophical and political thought. Though Bach never

² Carol K. Brown, "Tumultuous Philosophers, Pious Rebels, Revolutionary Teachers, Pedantic Clerics, Vengeful Bureaucrats, Threatened Tyrants, Worldly Mystics: The Religious World Bach Inherited," in *Bach's Changing World: Voices in the Community*, ed. Carol K. Brown (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 39.

³ Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 310. See also Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig*, trans. Herbert J.A. Bouman, Luther Poellot, and Hilton C. Oswald; ed. Robin A. Leaver (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1984), 31–35.

⁴ Brown, "The Religious World," 49.

had the benefit of a university education, his inquiring mind kept him from ever becoming content with his own personal growth and advancement. Such an attitude in our present-day church musicians would certainly be welcome and beneficial.

II. The Musical Landscape of Bach's World

Designing New Instruments

When it comes to the musical world in which Bach lived and moved, here he was even more at the forefront of the latest developments, assimilating and synthesizing musical styles like no one else. Before turning to his musical output, it is instructive to consider a less obvious matter—namely, the interest Bach took in the musical instruments with which he and his musicians made their music. Bach was a leader when it came to experimenting with the use of a variety of new instruments, especially for use in his cantatas. As the Bach biographer, Christoph Wolff, puts it, “Bach’s unbowed spirit of discovery continued to spur his exploration of new instrumental sonorities and combinations.”⁵ For example, as soon as he was able, Bach began making use of the new lower voiced oboe d’more and oboe da caccia. He also had his hand in the development of the contrabassoon and the viola pomposa. Likewise, from the spring of 1724, Bach made the switch from the ubiquitous recorder to the traverse flute. Considering that the sound of the recorder had for centuries been in the ears of composers and performers alike, the shift to a new instrument—the precursor of the modern flute—was a significant departure.

Bach had very close connections with a number of instrument makers, sometimes serving as a broker who facilitated the sale of instruments to individuals who respected Bach’s judgment. He was without peer as an organ consultant, assisting in the design and testing of many new instruments. He played a significant role in the design of the new lute-clavier instruments. And perhaps most significantly, Bach worked with the organ builder Gottfried Silbermann in the design of the first pianofortes—the precursor to the modern-day piano. After hearing of Bach’s critique of his earliest models, Silbermann did not sell any pianos for nearly a decade while he corrected the weaknesses that Bach had identified.⁶ Again, the radical contrast between the harpsichord or organ on the one hand and the newly designed pianoforte on the other demonstrates that Bach was not content simply to hold on to the instruments of the past. He wisely saw the potential in the new tonal colors produced by these instruments and was quite happy to be among the first to put them to use.

⁵ Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 273.

⁶ Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 412–413.

So what might the inquisitive instrument designer Johann Sebastian do in our present age? He would likely be as curious and adventuresome as he was two-and-a-half centuries ago. Imagine the percussion instruments from other lands that he might acquire for his personal collection. And what new insights would he bring into the world of organ building? Perhaps it might be some exotic flute or reed stop that he would design in collaboration with an organ builder. And, pushing the envelope just a bit, how would Bach react to the electronic synthesizer? Would he automatically rule out its use, or might he find ways to incorporate it in some judicious fashion? Given how Bach was at the forefront of employing new sounds in his day, it is certainly likely that he would demonstrate a similar willingness at least to investigate some of the sounds that modern technology offers in our own time.

Knowledge of Contemporary Musicians

Bach's unparalleled mastery of his craft went far beyond his interest in musical instruments. Throughout his career, he used his own funds to purchase musical scores of the best known German, French, and Italian composers. This included not only the old masters of previous generations but also a number of contemporaries of Bach. Just a few of the more familiar composers whose music Bach knew included:

Germans such as Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707), Georg Böhm (1661–1733), Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706), George Frederic Händel (1685–1759), and Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767).

Frenchman such as Francois Couperin (1668–1733), Pierre Du Mage (1674–1751), Nicolas de Grigny (1672–1703), and Louis Marchand (1669–1732).

Italians such as Giovanni Palestrina (1525/26–1594), Girolamo Frescobaldi (1583–c. 1643), Giuseppe Torelli (1658–1709), Tomaso Albinoni (1673–1751), Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713), Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741), Alessandro Marcello (1669–1747), Benedetto Marcello (1686–1739)), and Giovanni Pergolesi (1710–36).

Bach made it his business to acquire music representing the latest styles and consciously incorporated these newfound compositional techniques into his vast compositional vocabulary. Christoph Wolff has surmised that Bach's personal library equaled that of the most avid music collectors in Europe, especially with regard to the "quality, breadth, and depth" of keyboard and instrumental music in his possession.⁷

⁷ Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 333.

What, exactly, did Bach do with these musical scores that represented such a diversity of styles? Obviously he studied them. He was continually in search of new compositional techniques. A careful study of his work reveals that in most cases he not only learned the new techniques of various composers but often advanced and perfected them as only Bach could. In some cases, he actually reworked the compositions. For example, he transcribed several instrumental concertos by the Italian master Antonio Vivaldi so that a single performer could play them on the organ. While remaining true to the composer's intent, Bach was able to adapt the original compositions in a way that made them idiomatic to the keyboard. With still other works Bach would make adaptations, such as adding an additional instrumental part, thus creating a denser texture. Far from being viewed as pilfering another composer's work, such a practice was more akin to paying that composer a compliment. In the process, however, Bach's own skills as a composer were being continually enhanced.

How might such a mindset work in today's setting? Obviously, Bach would be well-versed in the wide range of compositional techniques in use in our day. He would be familiar not only with the music of the old masters but also with that of his contemporaries. He would likely have read many of the latest books on music history and theory. He would be, by all accounts, a well-rounded musician.

This is one of the points, however, where a potential disconnect exists between Bach's world and our own. The diversity of musical styles in our day dwarfs any differences that existed in the 18th century. Yes, there were stylistic differences back then, especially between various nationalities. But when compared with our own age, the differences were minor. If Bach were on the scene today, he would have to contend with such divergent musical styles as Impressionism, twelve-tone serialism, minimalism, electronically-generated sounds, and truly advent garde approaches to composition,⁸ not to mention jazz, big band, rock, easy-listening, rap, and a host of other popular music styles.

Secular and Sacred Music

This leads us to consider a more specific point of divergence between the world in which Bach lived and our own—namely, the relationship between sacred and secular music. It is well-documented that Bach and his

⁸ If we had to choose a modern counterpart to Bach, it would be Igor Stravinsky. Here was a composer who was both in the forefront of new trends in composition and also able to synthesize a wide range of musical styles and techniques. Though not a practicing church musician, he also composed sacred music, including a setting of the Western Mass and his Symphony of Psalms.

contemporaries regularly composed music for both realms. Indeed, Bach's employment as a court musician in Cöthen for the six years prior to his final move to Leipzig gave him the unique opportunity to hone his skills through the composition of a significant amount of instrumental music intended for use outside the church.⁹ Even in Leipzig, Bach's official duties included composing for civic events at various times throughout the year. In addition, he sought out opportunities to compose and lead music outside of the church, as evidenced by his twelve-year directorship of the *Collegium Musicum* in Leipzig.

Stylistically, the differences between Bach's sacred and secular music are minimal. In fact, it was not uncommon for Bach to parody his secular music for sacred use. Unlike his church cantatas, which could be repeated when a particular Sunday in the church calendar rolled around each year, his secular cantatas were almost always written for specific occasions, making them unsuitable for repetition at a later time. In many cases, Bach took these compositions and reworked them by replacing the secular texts with sacred. Sometimes the music was also significantly changed, other times not. Either way, Bach had no difficulty moving from one realm to the other, often with only minor adaptations being necessary.

In our own age, the relationship between sacred and secular is a considerably more complicated. A little history is needed to understand why. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the development of western music was totally intertwined with the church. New developments in composition were driven by the church. In the 17th century, the rise of Italian opera and the ushering in of what became known as the Baroque era signaled that the church was no longer the chief sponsor of music. Very quickly the royal court became a major player. By the end of the 18th century, churches in Germany began scaling back their elaborate systems of cantors and choirs. For example, when Bach's son, Carl Philip Emmanuel, died in 1788, his position as cantor in Hamburg was essentially eliminated, the very position that Georg Telemann, the famed contemporary and onetime competitor of Johann Sebastian, had previously occupied for over 40 years.¹⁰ From this point on, the most notable composers either worked under the patronage of the court—like Haydn in

⁹ See Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 187–235. For a fuller discussion of Bach's years in Cöthen, see the monograph by Friedrich Smend, *Bach in Cöthen*, trans. John Page; ed. and rev. Stephen Daw (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1985).

¹⁰ Tanya Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society, and Music in Leipzig, 1650–1750* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate), 221.

the court of Esterhazy—or struck out on their own as freelance artists. Some of the more famous early examples of the latter would include Mozart and Beethoven.

Because the church has seldom played the same role she once did as a major patron of the arts, her influence in the development of musical composition has, understandably, waned. The church's composers have, for the most part, focused their energies on writing music for the church and have not ventured significantly into the secular realm. Certainly there are exceptions to this stereotype. The point, however, is that Bach would find a very different world were he to be among us today, with a divide between sacred and secular that has grown quite wide over the centuries.

What does this all mean for 21st-century church musicians? With Bach as their model, it might suggest that our musicians would be enriched by increasing their exposure to and interaction with the wide variety of musical styles that exist. This does not necessarily mean that we should suddenly hear Kyries written in the style of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or an Offertory of silence after the likes of John Cage's *4'33"*.¹¹ What it does mean, however, is that composers would benefit from an ever-increasing palette of musical ideas to put to use as they go about their task of writing for a new generation.

III. The Musical Landscape of Our World

Moving beyond the various influences of Bach's own day, there are several new trends that have appeared in our time. Presenting both opportunities and challenges, they remind us that the church musician in every age must work within his or her God-given confines.

Global Music

One area worthy of exploration by the modern-day church musician is what is commonly referred to as global music. The concept of globalization is not limited only to the economic realm. In recent decades, we in the west have had opportunity to become familiar with musical traditions from every corner of the world. This has especially been the case within the church. Those nations to whom the western church took the Gospel over the past centuries have in recent times begun producing their own church music. A burgeoning song tradition has risen up in many lands, songs which are now reaching our shores.

¹¹ This was a controversial composition published in 1952 in which a three-movement work lasting four minutes and thirty-three seconds consists of total silence on the part of the performer(s). The "music" is actually made up of the sounds of the audience as individuals react to the non-performance.

Were Bach a practicing church musician today, it is quite plausible that he would make the effort to become familiar with these new traditions. He would undoubtedly fill his music library with collections of this new song from distant lands. Most likely, he would travel to those lands as well, familiarizing himself with the performance practices of different peoples. Back in his own study, he would likely follow his typical pattern of drawing on some of the new techniques that he discovered in an effort to enrich his own compositional palette. The result would like be a mix of the old with the new, such as taking a traditional chorale melody and combining it with a new melody or rhythmic pattern. If there is one lesson we can learn from Bach, it is that the church's musical heritage is so rich that it is capable of constant reworking and adaptation.

Rise of Pop Culture

There is, however, another element in our modern musical landscape that needs to be taken into consideration—namely, the pop culture. Ever since the advent of the transistor radio in the early 1960s, life has not been the same in the world of music. With that simple advancement, the enjoyment of music no longer was limited to a stationary piano or a radio or turntable plugged into the wall. Music was now available “to go,” whether one was walking in the park or sunning on the beach. As units were mass produced and prices fell, teenagers could each have their own radio and retreat to their bedrooms to listen to *their* music.¹²

The advent of the transistor radio coincided with the invasion of the Beatles and soon a plethora of other rock bands. The need or desire for individuals to learn how to make music on their own slowly but surely began to diminish. Or perhaps it just shifted. Where in the past millions of children learned to play the piano or another instrument, suddenly it was all the rage to play the guitar. Would-be rockers learned to strum a few chord progressions, found someone who could do the same on the piano, and hooked up with a drummer who could hold it all together while sitting behind a trap set. How many family garages were suddenly transformed into practice studios from which the next great band just might emerge?

The effects of pop music have been profound. It is all-pervasive and simply overwhelming. No matter where one turns, pop music is there in abundance. And to the surprise of many, it eventually found its way into our churches and asserted itself with a vengeance. The Contemporary

¹² It is worth remembering that those teenagers back in the early sixties were the leading edge of the baby boom generation.

Christian Music movement is itself a multi-billion dollar industry, replete with recording artists and charts of the latest Top 40. Many of our lay-people listen to this music daily and have become deeply attached to it.

How would Bach react to this situation? It is highly unlikely that he would simply imitate the style and produce his own pop music. Given how highly Bach developed his compositional craft, he would not find pop music particularly challenging or engaging. Perhaps he might go about his usual process of making “improvements” to an existing composition, adding a voice part in one place or a canon at another suitable place. The improved version, however, might not appeal all that much to those have an affinity for this style of music, so it is possible that Bach might not proceed along this path for very long.

That last point brings up something, however, that ought not be disregarded too quickly. The baby boomer generation that cut its cultural teeth in the 1960s is very much tied to the pop culture. Just consider the many rock bands from that era that still perform the same songs they introduced over 40 years ago. The younger generations, in contrast, are much more eclectic in their choice of music. To be sure, they certainly still gravitate toward pop and rock music. But they are also much more open to other styles of music. Perhaps they would be more receptive to a Bach-like “improvement” to some of the music they hold dear, even one day being able to acknowledge the ability of well-crafted music to serve as a more fitting vehicle for the Gospel.

Pervasiveness of Serious Music

This raises yet another point that demands our consideration. Proponents of pop music in our churches contend that classical music is only preferred by a very small sliver of the general population, something like two percent. They then go on to equate serious church music with classical music and ask why this should be the only music sanctioned for use in the church, especially when it is not the preferred heart language of the great majority of the people.

There are at least two fallacies with this kind of thinking. First, the term “classical” music conjures up a particular image that is not all that descriptive of the music of the church. Certainly there is an overlapping portion of church music that is also performed in the concert hall. But the vast majority of the church’s music composed over the centuries was written specifically for the church and should not be confused with the broader genre of classical music. If we need to find a word that conveys what these two types of music hold in common, then perhaps we might want to refer to it as “art” music, or even “serious” music.

In light of this distinction, the second fallacy that requires debunking concerns the argument that classical music only appeals to a small segment of the population. In truth, the appeal factor is closer to 100 percent; the problem is that most people are unaware of it. Case in point: consider the sixth of the Harry Potter movies in which the fatherly character Dumbledore dies. As the students at Hogwarts gather around his lifeless body, the soundtrack is brought to a fevered pitch, music filled with pathos as heart-wrenching suspensions tug at the listener's gut. This is not pop, soft rock, or easy-listening music; it is serious, well-crafted music. There is little chance that anyone watching the movie would leave the theater saying, "The movie was great; I just don't like that style of music." To be sure, the soundtrack is tied to a powerful storyline. The fact that the music serves the plot—the text, if you will—demonstrates what a serious composer is capable of when he or she hones the skills necessary to create well-crafted music.¹³

IV. The Textual Landscape—Then and Now

This example now brings us back full circle to Bach and to a consideration of another aspect of his art—namely, the attention that he gave to the texts with which he worked. The new musical style that reached its highest level of maturity in the music of Bach had its roots in Italian opera in the early 17th century. A hallmark of this new style was a compositional technique known as recitative. In essence, recitative provided composers a vehicle for singing large sections of text in an efficient fashion. Coupled with these recitatives were arias, solo songs—

¹³ A similar example of art music used in a film score is that of American composer Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Originally composed in 1936, it was used a half-century later in Oliver Stone's movie *Platoon*, a film that graphically portrayed the horrors of war in Vietnam. Toward the end of the movie as American soldiers are retreating with their wounded on several helicopters, the strains of Barber's *Adagio* quietly emerge. The music increases in volume to a fevered pitch as the main character, Chris, sees other soldiers on the ground below who have been left behind. The scene then shifts to close-ups of these soldiers as they are gunned down by the enemy. The sounds of war—machine guns firing and helicopters whirling—are completely drowned out by the gut-wrenching music, which fades away as the scene shifts back to the helicopters, now flying off in the distance, unable to attempt a rescue of the fallen comrades because of increasing enemy fire.

Barber's *Adagio* has been used in a number of other film scores. The composer himself recognized the adaptability of this piece when he produced a choral version of it in 1967, setting of all things the Latin text of the *Agnus Dei*. Perhaps no other piece of music in modern times has been so effectively used in such diverse settings—certainly a testament to Barber's musical craft.

sometimes duets—that featured shorter texts that received more elaborate musical treatment.

By the beginning of the 18th century, this new form of composition had been fully adapted by German composers for use in the church. By the time Bach began writing his cantatas, the cantata texts had reached a level of development that expanded on the Italian model by incorporating two other features into the pairings of recitatives and arias—namely, chorale texts with their melodies and occasional biblical quotations. In the compositional hands of Bach, these texts received expert treatment as never before and perhaps never since. An examination of his attention to textual details reveals a sensitivity and imagination that often brings the texts to life in ways one might not otherwise have imagined. Every cantata is filled with Bach's interpretive surprises:

violinists and cellists plucking their strings to evoke the image of Jesus knocking at the door of the believer's heart;

a flute melody as playful as a bird in a spring shower, coupled to a text that speaks of the joy of one redeemed by Christ;

sharp chromaticisms set to words that speak of Christ's pain and suffering;

the musical accompaniment suddenly fading away in order to symbolize death.

Both Bach's choice of texts and particularly his treatment of these texts reveal a skilled musician who was at the same time thoroughly equipped to interpret the texts theologically. One cannot walk away from the performance of a cantata of J.S. Bach and not recognize how significant the text was for him.

How might this insight manifest itself were Bach alive today? No doubt he would be just as intent on giving careful attention to the text. And he would likely demand no less of other church musicians. That would suggest, first of all, that it is incumbent that our church musicians receive theological training. They especially need to be well-versed in the distinctive tenets of our Lutheran confession, including such topics as the centrality of the cross and justification by grace, the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the role of the means of grace.

Just as church musicians need to pay attention to the texts used in worship, so do pastors need to learn how well-crafted music is capable of revealing a depth of meaning in a text that might otherwise go unnoticed. There can be little doubt that in our day Bach would insist that his pastors be well-schooled in the art of music, precisely so that they could collaborate in a fruitful way with their musicians.

This discussion about sensitivity to texts actually begs a previous question: what texts are most appropriate for use in worship? With the advent of the worship wars nearly three decades ago, the church found herself confronted with new genres of texts that were heavy on subjective expression and less concerned with an objective proclamation of essential Lutheran teachings, chief among them the doctrine of justification by grace for Christ's sake. In reality, this was nothing new. Long before the rise of the Contemporary Christian Music movement, many of our congregations supplemented their hymnals with small collections of songs with titles such as *Hymns You Like to Sing*. What was new was the fact that, all of a sudden, the church was inundated with a new song repertoire that seemed to well up from a bottomless pit.

In response, pastors and musicians hunkered down and did their homework. We recovered that lovely German word, *Gottesdienst*, in order to make it clear that any response of the worshiper was only secondary to God's initial action by which he comes to us through his means of grace. We stressed the strengths of the objective character of the texts of the Lutheran chorales, implying that other texts were less desirable in the Lutheran liturgy.

In the process, it may be that we committed the classic error of driving the car off one side of the road in order to avoid running off the other side. What I mean is this: in order to guard against the subjective and sometimes synergistic language of many of the contemporary praise choruses, we overcorrected by giving the appearance of rejecting any text that used a more subjective, heartfelt language. The problem with this approach is that much of our classic hymnody uses this very language. Consider, for example, just the first lines of several very familiar hymns:

"Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" (Martin Schalling)

"Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower" (Johann Scheffler)

"Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me" (Paul Gerhardt)

The language of these and other hymns is very personal, warm, and introspective. Plenty of other examples could be shown to demonstrate that Lutherans from the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy held on to a rich piety that was replete with expressive language, language that frequently spoke quite intimately of the believer's relationship with Christ.

It was in this context that Bach arrived on the scene in the first half of the 18th century. The first cantata texts patterned after the Italian models of arias and recitatives were published in 1700 by Erdmann Neumeister, an

orthodox Lutheran pastor in Hamburg whose liturgical texts were rich expressions of Lutheran piety at its best.¹⁴ Unique to his approach were cantata librettos that went beyond the mere presentation of biblical texts; here the arias and recitatives provided commentary and interpretation. Soon other authors followed suit, with the further development of anchoring the cantata texts with Lutheran chorales.¹⁵

The texts that make up these commentaries are noteworthy for their expressiveness. Consider this example from Cantata 80, which is based on the chorale "A Mighty Fortress."

Come into my heart's abode,
 Lord Jesus, my desire.
 Drive out the world and Satan,
 and let thy image shine renewed within me.
 Be gone, vile horror of sin!
 Come into my heart's abode,
 Lord Jesus, my desire.¹⁶

From Cantata 140, which is based on the chorale "Wake, Awake," Bach sets the following text for soprano and bass in a dialogue that ensues between the soul and Christ:

My beloved is mine!
 And I am yours!
 Love shall by naught be sundered!
 I will join thee—
 thou shalt join me—
 to wander through heaven's roses,
 where pleasure in fullness, where joy will abound!¹⁷

Finally, from Bach's Ascension Oratorio, which is based not on a chorale but on the biblical account of the ascension from Acts 1, consider the following recitative and aria:

Ah, Jesus, is your departure so near?
 Ah, has the time now come when we must let you leave us?
 Ah, see how the hot tears roll down our pale cheeks,
 how we long for you,

¹⁴ Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1973), 371.

¹⁵ Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 255.

¹⁶ J.S. Bach: *Six Favorite Cantatas* (recording); accompanying booklet, ed. Fabian Watkinson (New York: London Records, 1988), 15.

¹⁷ J.S. Bach: *Six Favorite Cantatas*, 20.

how much we need comfort.
Ah, do not leave us yet!

Ah, stay then, dearest life,
ah, do not leave me so soon!
Your farewell and early parting bring me the greatest pain,
ah yes, do stay longer here,
or I will be surrounded by grief.¹⁸

The heartfelt language of these texts is almost palpable. In setting them to music, Bach made use of the latest musical expressions in order to draw careful attention to the texts. What is important to note is that while the texts give the appearance of a certain subjectivity, the objective proclamation of the gospel consistently shines forth. Like the chorales with which they are paired, these texts always have Jesus and his saving benefits at their heart.

As for what Bach would do today, perhaps he would tone down the subjective/personal language in his texts in order to highlight the objectivity of the gospel. Still, much of the confusion that we experience today also existed at the time of Bach. The controversies between the Orthodox and Pietist camps did not prevent Bach from making use of these warm and introspective texts. In some ways, Bach's cantatas demonstrated a way of bridging the divide between those who were keen on handing down the church's rich liturgical tradition and—in the Pietist camp—those who sought a more heartfelt language.

V. The Lutheran Cantor and the Chorale

Finally, any discussion of what Bach did in his own century and what he would likely do were he here among us today must take into consideration his use of the Lutheran chorale in his church music. Simply put, the chorale was at the heart and center of Bach's compositional efforts. The people's familiarity with the chorales gave them an immediate connection with the newly composed cantatas. In fact, the use of chorales in the cantatas likely helped to soften the opposition of some who questioned the appropriateness of using compositional techniques that were drawn from the secular world of Italian opera. Those debates, which erupted with full force at the very end of the 17th century, were still being heard in some quarters as late as the 1730s, well after Bach's incredible

¹⁸ J.S. Bach: *Magnificat* (recording), (Hayes Middlesex, England: EMI Recordings, 1990), 19, 21.

output of cantatas in the mid-1720s.¹⁹

That little tidbit of historical data actually provides us with a good clue as to what Bach would do in our own day. When you think about it, Bach was quite progressive for his time. Rather than stay with older compositional forms, he adopted and adapted and refined and improved the very latest musical styles. Despite opposition from the Pietist camp—and even from some in the orthodox camp—Bach pressed forward, always placing his considerable skills into the service of the Gospel.

In this regard, Bach was really no different from his predecessors in the Lutheran cantorate. As Carl Schalk has demonstrated in his monograph, *Music in Early Lutheranism*, the most significant Lutheran composers in the first 150 years of Lutheranism led the way in showing the church how to appropriate new musical styles in a responsible manner for use in the church.²⁰ Characteristics that Schalk sees in these composers as being essential to their success include the following:

all were musicians highly trained in their art and craft;

all were musicians involved, in varying degrees, in the secular musical life of their day;

all were musicians who wrestled in various ways with the challenges and implications of a “new” musical style for the church;

all were musicians who found the liturgy and the worship of God’s people to be the most natural and appropriate context for the great part of their music;

all of these musicians were influential as teachers.²¹

Of particular interest to our inquiry is that third point concerning how these composers wrestled with developing a new musical style appropriate for the church. The approach they did not take was to simply discard everything they had learned and practiced previously and then to write only in the new style. Rather than turning their backs on the tradition, each composer used the tradition—chiefly the Lutheran chorale and the ways in which composers had treated it in previous generations—as a foundation onto which the latest compositional techniques were added.

These descriptions obviously apply quite well to Bach. Furthermore, they give us more than a few cues as to how Bach would carry on were he

¹⁹ Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society, and Music in Leipzig*, 136–138.

²⁰ Carl Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524–1672)*, (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), 181–184.

²¹ Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism*, 181–184.

among us today. Most likely, Bach would not be shy or timid with regard to the music he wrote for the church. No style would be off limits, though it is certain that Bach would bring his considerable skills to bear in molding and shaping whatever new styles he appropriated. Recognizing the importance of the church's heritage, he would build on that tradition, perhaps sometimes pushing it to the limits. The texts would be of paramount importance to Bach, since proclamation is always at the heart of the church's task. The chorale would likely be the launching pad for anything that Bach wrote, though by "chorale" he would not limit himself only to one slice of the eclectic pie of congregational song that has grown over the centuries. Just as Bach drew upon the most recent texts of poets in his day, so would he recognize the genius of Christian poets in our day, even among one who are not Lutheran! The same would undoubtedly be true of the new melodies that have enriched the church's song over the centuries.

VI. Conclusion

Whether God will ever again bless the church with the likes of another genius like Johann Sebastian Bach no one can say. Perhaps such inspiration will not be seen this side of heaven. But that gives us no excuse not to roll up our own sleeves and get to work. God has blessed his church with many gifted people who are just waiting to be pressed into service for the sake of the Gospel. It does us no good to wring our hands or look over our shoulders to see from where the next challenge to the church's tradition may come. Nor will it be productive to limit ourselves unnecessarily, avoiding certain styles or texts out of fear that some might see us as capitulating. The church needs to encourage budding composers to hone their skills. Concurrently, freedom needs to be given to our proven composers so that they, like Bach, can press on to the next level, to that new insight. Will they always be successful? No. Even Bach likely had a composer's scrap heap. But it will only be through trial and error that today's church musicians will be able to create that next fresh expression of the grace of God, using his incredible gift of music to awaken faith in our generation and the next. Bach would expect nothing less!