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*Homage to Bach –
Music: A Vertical World
of Direct Experience*

An homage to the legacy of the music of Johan Sebastian Bach and in honour of the spirited musician Paolo Knill.

Prelude

There must have been a world before the
Trio sonata in D, a world before the a-minor Partita
But what was that world?

A Europe with large empty rooms without echoes
Everywhere unknowing instruments,
Where *Musikalisches Opfer* and *Wohltemperiertes Klavier*
never walk over the keyboard.

Desolate churches

where never the soprano of the Easter Passion
twines around the more gentle movements of the flute
in helpless love,
where old woodcutters with their axes are heard
where the fresh sounds of strong dogs are heard in winter time
and – like a clock – skates bite in glassy ice,
the swallows tumble in the summer air,
the child listens to the seashell,
and nowhere Bach, nowhere Bach.
The skating-silence of the world before Bach.

(Lars Gustavsson, 1982, "The silence of the world before Bach."
In Wikström, 2000, p13. My translation).

In the summer of 1991, I came to Sanner, a pastoral village in Norway, to teach for the first time at the summer school for the Swedish and Norwegian Institutes of Expressive Arts Therapy. This was also the first time I met Paolo Knill. It marked the beginning of a kindred musical friendship. Paolo and I have continued to meet and play together annually. One of the first pieces we worked on was a composition by Johan Sebastian Bach, Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor. I have a particular strong relationship with this immense piece. As a practitioner of the Bonny Method of Guided Imagery and Music (GIM), the Passacaglia in C, in the orchestral version of Stokowski, is one that I frequently use for clients needing to be held in a strong but gentle manner, or needing to experience the depths and peaks of musical and psychic beauty, or simply longing to feel empowered.

Paolo Knill made an arrangement of this extraordinary piece. He named it "Bachacaglia in C." It starts with the original Passacaglia melody line in unison for flute and piano. This theme is eight measures long (middle c, up a fifth to g, then moving step-wise down and up; e flat, f, g, a flat, f, g, d, e flat, b, c, f, g, g, and ending at c an octave lower). The theme is woven polyphonically throughout the arrangement. In some parts the baroque structure eases into a swinging quick and elegant rhythmic beat. In other parts it softens in a slow jazz ballad with touches of oriental tonality. In the finale the tight baroque form returns and finishes with the theme of the Passacaglia. This piece has become a cornerstone in our music-making.

The presence of Bach's music has followed my entire life. His devotion, discipline, clarity of structure, ability to arrange complex melodic lines into beauty, and most importantly his passion, have become guidelines in the art of living. Virtually no musicians or music lovers in the last 250 years have been unaffected by the music of Bach. His compositions are undoubtedly the most intellectually and technically challenging of all music, and they have the most profound and moving effect on the listeners.

Much has been written about the work of Bach. His compositions have been analyzed and described by scholars since his death. But very little is known about the man himself. What kind of man was Bach? He poured out music for us all to listen to, but his face is strangely turned away. There are only some letters left; and they all deal with practical matters, such as instruments needing care, complaints of working conditions, applications,

travel descriptions, formal notes concerning pupils. Mozart, Beethoven, Handel and others left numerous letters of correspondence behind for the world to gain deeper understanding of their lives and how their minds were working while composing great music. There is hardly any written material left from Bach for us to hear his own voice regarding the music itself. What did he think of his music? Did he experience any particular joy or torment in the act of composing? Maybe his answer to us today simply is, "It is all there in the music, just listen."

Meditations:

On the musical form

Johan Sebastian Bach was the master of polyphonic music. He belongs to the Baroque era, with its use of basso continuo and counter-point. Bach perfected the fugue, the improvisational style of inverted melodies and imitations. The music which would follow after Bach was more homophonic in form, with a clear melodic part on the top, accompanied by less pronounced lower parts. The music of Bach is not seductive; rather, it can be experienced as severe and strict. Generally the most obvious way of listening to music is to follow the melody line in a horizontal manner, as in homophonic music. To appreciate Bach to the fullest, however, requires a different kind of listening. At times it is difficult to distinguish a melody or tune. One must begin to listen in vertical ways. In his music there are many self-sufficient melodic lines playing at the same time. These parts are equally important. They create a web of intricate sound-weaving. The temporal quality is utilized to its fullest, shaping a musical landscape that soars with complexity, vitality, and aliveness.

The term "counter-point" derives from the theory of how to compose with one or more "counter-parts." In other words, different melodies are played in such a way that they create a harmonious whole. The passacaglia, originally a Spanish dance, is a musical form consisting of variations over a theme, usually eight measures long and in a 3/4 tempo. The theme is repeated over and over in the bass line. The fugue, on the other hand, is rather considered a form-principle than one particular musical form. It consists of a number of independent parts, varying from two to five. The theme, which usually has a distinct characteristic melody, is first presented alone. The theme is then taken up by the second part while the first moves more freely. The theme can move to another key. When all the parts have presented the

theme, the exposition is completed; and then the theme is "played with" in all kinds of ways. It can be changed rhythmically, transposed to other keys, inverted, played "backwards." Near the end of the fugue, the tension builds; then it ends with a coda.

Bach's fugues and preludes are particularly interesting for jazz musicians. One reason his music is suited for jazz is the way the bass lines are written. This is called "basso continuo;" it derives from a system of notation developed in the late 1500s for cembalo and organ. A specific numerical code was written under the notes depicting what to play. It is very much like the "walking bass" in jazz. In jazz, you have a few notes; each musician interprets the music in his way. This was also the way Bach notated his music: interpretation was up to the musician.

Bach states: "Basso continuo is the most complete foundation for music. It is played with both hands. The left hand plays the prescribed notes, while the right takes con- and dissonances so that it becomes a harmony of sound in honour of God and a timely enjoyment for the mind. As with all music, basso continuo should serve God and release the mind. If this is not respected, there is no music but instead devilish noise and quarrel." (Sandved, 1955 p 878, my translation).

On some compositions

The Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor was composed in Weimar in 1716 – 17 and marks the climax of organ works created during this time. The melody is introduced by itself in the eight-measure theme. Bach matches the rising line of the melody with falling steps, and the sound is surrounded by an aura of solemnity.

The often-performed six Brandenburg concerts are each composed in Concerto Grosso style, a typical form for the Baroque era. The whole concert moves between the larger orchestra (tutti) and a smaller solo orchestra (concertino). The tutti and the concertino are equal musical partners, and the aim is to bring forth contrasting groups of sounds and timbre. With imaginative and artistic skill, Bach broke up the traditional Concerto Grosso form into a new structure where each line has its own clear voice. At times it is like a battle where the parts come together and fight from different positions. The music sounds like a life and death combat. The contrasts between soli and tutti parts have such richness, elegance, power and gentleness that these compositions

must be considered the height of Bach's orchestral production.

In 1723 Bach moved with his family to Leipzig where he worked as cantor in two of the great churches of the city and where he stayed until his death in 1750. This is considered his period of church music in which many of his great religious compositions were composed. Famous organ compositions of this time were *The Art of the Fugue* and the second part of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. The later was a revolution for the tuning system. This huge work consists of 48 preludes and fugues composed in two sections. Each section has 24 preludes and fugues in all the major and minor keys. Just listen to them. They are all completely different in character. For example, begin with the first one, the glimmering prelude in C major, then jump to the funny prelude no. 21 in B flat major, then go back to the fugue in C minor – can you hear the swinging jazzy tunes?

One of the most performed works is "The Saint Matthew Passion," written in 1728-29 for soli, double-choir, two organs, cembalo, and two orchestras. It is considered one of the foremost pieces of art in Protestant church music, written for a very specific type of believer. But the musicality of Bach's work is such that one does not have to be a believer in the Christian God, nor a Lutheran, nor a trained organist, musician, or singer to be affected by this music. The music holds great power and beauty for us all to take in. It gives a deep understanding of the human condition. The work consists of three large parts; each of these is divided into many scenes portraying biblical events. The Passion moves between different biblical texts in the Gospel. The tenor tells the story. Other vocal actors enter the scene, depicting events and meeting in dramatic musical discourses. Now and then there are lyrical parts, voicing the feelings of the Christian who witnesses the story of suffering.

The skill that Bach perfected to virtuosity and which gave him considerable fame was the art of improvisation. He would begin with a theme, his own or one given to him, sit down at the organ or clavier and begin to weave a stunning tonal art. But Bach also possessed another remarkable skill: after improvising, he sat down and wrote out the composition just performed with all its parts.

On the existential conditions of Bach's music

The home of the Bach family must have been a musical

workshop. His wife, Anna Magdalena, his pupils and his children acted as copyists for him. It is difficult to imagine the scene where Bach was working so hard at composing, while Anna Magdalena was producing twelve children in fifteen years. As was all too typical of that time, eight of the children died. Child mortality was high at this time, so one considered each child who survived a gift of God. Perhaps one also accepted the death of a child as God-given. Bach lived with this fate; almost each year there was a birth of one child and the death of another. To lose a beloved child makes a tremendous difference in one's life, no less tragic for people at that time than for us today. For Bach and the people of his era, life and death became closely interwoven. It is likely that this contributed to the depth and the emotional power of his music.

I find Bach's music exceptional in shaping existential questions in sound. He faces suffering without looking away. He sings with grace and soars with exuberance. The qualities and feeling states become direct experiences for us as we listen. As it is written in the last choral part of the Saint Matthew Passion, "*Wir setzen uns mit Tränen nieder*" (We sit down with tears in our eyes).

Many of the Bach cantatas, perhaps foremost his Passions, express the condensed center of suffering, "long before Nazism, fascism, Maoism or the terror of Bosnia, Bach gave musical form to the screaming horror of humanity. Jesus Christ, the human image of god, is dying and calls out: '*Eli, Eli lema sabaktani*' – my God my God why have you abandoned me? – then he gives up his last breath and dies. The horror shared by every one, that it is all in vain, is found in the history of the Passion; the humiliation, the fear, but also our own hate: '*Kill him!*'" (Wikström, 2000, p 61. My translation).

Music as direct experience

Music is immediate.

Music is the fullness of time.

Music shapes lived experiences.

Music is a time-hologram

holding knowledge of humanity.

Music is ambiguous and holds varying interpretations.

Music gives freedom to opposites of form to co-exist.

Music exists in the moment, in space,

and moves through life-death cycles.

Music directs us to walk into the future with beauty.

The ability of music to bring about direct experience is the essence of both making music and enjoying music as a listener. Bach is a great master in providing such experiences. Here only the moment exists. His world of sound is a visit in a timeless dwelling place. It is a realm where there is room for needs, suffering, longings, wishes, love and hate. It can be a huge and majestic-sounding dome. At other times, it is light and fluffy as a feather. The music opens gateways to other dimensions of existence. It is as though music transcends time; yet the paradox is that time is very much present in music-making. Playing or listening to music deals with producing and experiencing vibrations that are expressed temporally. Many composers give exact instructions of the use of time. This was not the case, however, with Bach. His notations hardly give any ideas of time, phrasing, or how to interpret the music. He probably simply thought that the musicians should know how to play. Yet he is very precise with the art of temporal shaping. It is the core of his music.

In music-making, I am involved on many levels. Music-making is a kinaesthetic activity, an emotional experience, a cognitive/intellectual process, an interpersonal event, and, from my perspective, also a spiritual practice. Involvement in music provides complex sensory experiences. Husserl (1965) describes direct experience as being concerned with a phenomenon. In its simplest forms, experience is a tool for flooding light onto a phenomenon to examine the appearances of things through perceiving, imagining and understanding.

In the words of Herbert Marcuse, "The truths of the imagination are first realized when phantasy itself takes form, when it creates a universe of perception and comprehension – a subjective and at the same time objective universe. This occurs in art. The analysis of the cognitive function of phantasy is thus led to aesthetics as the 'science of beauty:' behind the aesthetic form lies the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason" (Marcuse, 1962. 130).

The music of Bach requires a relationship. It creates a dialogue. As a listener or performer, you enter a sounding universe. The music carries intensity and passion. In the soft gentle parts as well, there is an engagement and a strong vibrational presence.

Bach, music, mythology and spirituality

Music cannot be understood by logic. Music speaks through the irrational, through feelings, and through intuition. Music presents an implicit reality. Music "grabs us" by revealing something of the mystery that is alive and within reach in our present lives. Music speaks of soul, beauty, love and the ever-turning cycles of life and death. Music does not judge. In music as in myth, destructive, gruesome, mean qualities can be found in addition to the qualities of love, beauty, healing, and growth. Everything that a human life may contain is all there in music, as it is in myth.

Joseph Campbell, one of the foremost researchers into mythology, has summarized the psychological functions of myth. I see parallels in the way Campbell describes these functions of mythology with how the functions of music for humanity can be understood. In this context my aim is to view Bach and his musical cosmology in this frame. In the description that follows, I have replaced the word "mythology" with "music," meaning the music of Bach:

The first function of music is what I have called the mystical function, to waken and maintain in the individual a sense of awe and gratitude in relation to the mystery dimension of the universe, not so that he lives in fear of it, but so that he recognizes that he participates in it, since the mystery of being is the mystery of his own being as well. The second function of living music is to offer an image of the universe that will be in accord with the knowledge of the time, sciences and the fields of action of the folk to whom music is addressed. The third function of living music is to validate, support, and imprint the norms of a given specific moral order, that namely of the society in which the individual lives. The fourth function is to guide the individual stage by stage, in health, strength, and harmony of spirit, through the whole foreseeable course of a useful life. (Campbell, 1972, pp. 214 - 215).

Bach lived a devoted Christian life. He was strongly influenced by the orthodox theologian, Martin Luther. The mystical function, or mysteries, of the orthodox Lutheran practice, dealt

with the Sacraments and the knowing of grace and salvation as actual realities. This practice meant that the most essential was not the feelings but the objective truths that the actual God had disclosed and continues to do so in the sacraments. This was the air that Bach was breathing. He lived with the annual cycles of life and death in the ecclesiastical year. His music was composed in service of God. It contains a "matter of fact" quality, far from the emotionally eruptive music of Beethoven. Bach's music was to be performed with gratitude and in dialogue with the God who is always available:

Perhaps the black hole from which the music of Bach emerges is also the source of creation and grace. The subject is not the one who imagines. Through Bach, divinity is given to us. The human individual is the subject of care. We listen to preludes and a Saraband in A minor from the English Suite. It is certainly beautiful. In the knowing of something else, the source of divinity is concealed. In the theology of Bach, this knowing was a given. (Wikström, 2000, p 44. My translation).

Bach's music can be understood as prayer, the way to communicate with the divine. The music is also the actual voice of God. As such it is an embodiment of Holy Communion. Its aim is care and compassion. Certainly the music was meant to provide guidance, especially in times of bewilderment and despair. Just listen to the Passions, the Christmas Oratorio, the B minor mass, the A major Mass, the Toccata and Adagio in C, the Magnificat in D. All reveal the presence of God in the midst of despair.



Music is a phenomenon in its own right. Or as Boulez is purported to have said about the motif of Wotan's spear in *The Ring*, "The motif for the spear is not a symbol for the spear. It is the actual spear, and as such it is thrown right into our unconscious." One can say that music is both abstract and concrete. Music is present in the moment, pregnant with stories and feelings of past events, while also projecting us into the next moment and beyond. Through the Bach cantata and the Passacaglia in C, images of life, with all its dualistic possibilities, arrive immediately. Bach's vertical world of polyphonic composition provides us the direct experience of the heights and depths of human existence. One can only listen. And respond.

Postlude

*Bachacaglia in C by Paolo Knill –
Evoked images in haiku form*

Flute, piano shapes
language of immediacy
Held by lower C

Silk, powder-white wigs
Nude wrists under thick brocade
Embracing courting

A time gate opens
bouncy, swinging jazzy flow
Beam me down – let's dance

Spacious temple dome
Oriental lullaby
Cradle of music

Sonorous beauty
Evoked blues companion sings
Mourning children's death

Tempest-tossed rhythms
Fluttering flute song weaves hope
piano matrix

Crystallized beauty
master of temerity
Bachacaglia

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- Sandved, K. *Musikens Värld*. Göteborg: AB Musikens Värld Förlag, 1955.
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SUGGESTED MUSIC FOR LISTENING

- Six Brandenburg Concertos
Concert for two violins and orchestra (Double concert)
6 solo sonatas for violoncello
6 sonatas for flute and piano
The Well-Tempered Clavier, 48 preludes and fugues.
Passacaglia and Fugue in C-minor for organ
Tocatta and Fugue in D-minor
Coffee Cantata, *Schweigt stille*, No 211
Christmas Oratorio
Saint Matthew Passion
The Art of the Fugue
Ein musikalisches Opfer
B-minor mass
Goldberg Variations (for piano)