



HONORED IN BERLIN: A wax likeness of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach stands in Berlin's Madame Tussaud's wax museum. CLEMENS BILAN/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

J.S. Bach: Music That Purifies the Soul

By TIMOTHY PORWIT
Epoch Times Staff

It's a shame that we don't get to play much music from the Baroque period (1600–1750) in my orchestral job. It almost seems as though the people responsible for making the decisions on programming don't want to have over half the personnel stay home, which is what would happen if we played a Bach orchestral suite or one of the Brandenburg Concertos.

On those rare occasions that we actually do play a Baroque piece, we always comment on how much we enjoy it in spite of the difficulties involved. It's as if the souls of the musicians and the audience were given a thorough cleansing.

This kind of spiritual cleansing, in my view, can be attributed to the completely different atmosphere and requirements made of music and composers, and art in general, from a bygone age.

Most of the important composers of the Baroque period, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) included, maintained close ties with the church. Composition was intrinsically connected to religious activity, such as the Mass—the music serving to heighten the spiritual uplifting of the parish while the confines of the religious doctrine defined the form and purity of the musical composition.

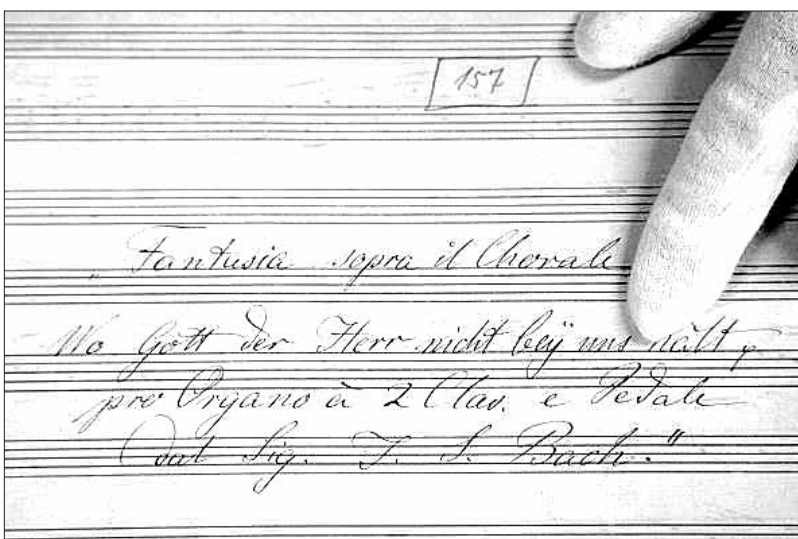
Nowadays the interdependence of religion and music exists only in a few works, having been superseded by a wide variety of forms that have evolved to serve musical expression in a secular society.

This is not to say that secular music did not exist in the Baroque period, but even this musical idiom had strict concepts regarding harmony and also had very clear rules regarding musical forms. Because of these guidelines, even secular works by composers from the Baroque period sound “pure” to our modern ears.

The six Brandenburg Concertos I mentioned before were secular pieces, but really are imbued with a kind of beauty that is truly heavenly.

BOTH SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS WORKS

There are many other secular works by J. S. Bach also worthy of mention,



LONG-LOST COMPOSITION: Music scientist Stephan Blaut presents a long-lost organ composition by Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) in 2008 at the Martin-Luther University in Halle, Germany. The piece, entitled “Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält” (“Where God the Lord does not stay by our side”), is the full version of an eponymous fragment of music that was long considered to be of uncertain origin, he said. The organ composition was discovered in a collection belonging to the 19th century Leipzig musician Wilhelm Rust that was being prepared for auction. JENS SCHLUETER/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

many of which he composed during his tenure as Kapellmeister in Köthen (1717–1723). “The Well-Tempered Clavier” is a famous keyboard piece (which I get out every now and then and have a go at parts of it to get the rust off of my piano fingers).

The six Cello Suites are very well-known. (I also play them on the bassoon; my apologies to the cellists, but it's very satisfying music to play when you're on your own).

The Partitas and Sonatas for solo violin are fabulous, and the Concerto for Two Violins is a masterpiece. Actually, all of these works are masterpieces. It's just that Bach has so many great pieces to his name that you would start to sound repetitive if you qualify all as master works.

Bach's career revolved around the Lutheran church. Most of the positions held throughout his life involved playing the organ or leading as concertmaster during church services, and composing new music to be played and sung at masses and other feast-day celebrations.

The 200-plus cantatas that survive to this day bear testimony to his in-

exhaustible dedication to producing religious music. Then, of course, you have the bigger important works such as the “St. Matthew Passion,” the “St. John Passion,” the “St. Mark Passion,” and the “St. Luke Passion,” all intended to be performed as part of the Good Friday services, and each based on its corresponding gospel.

The Mass in B minor is a late mature work. Curiously, it is his only musical setting of the entire Mass, since the Lutheran custom in his day was to only write a Missa brevis where the only parts of the Mass that get set to music are the Gloria and the Kyrie, in Latin.

The choir is and was an essential part of religious music, and four-part choral writing (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) permeates all of these works.

An outstanding characteristic of any choir is that the four voices can move together in harmony (as in a chorale), or they can become independent and each sing its own melody. When different melodies are combined together simultaneously within the rules of harmony, it's called counterpoint.

This is Part 1 of a two-part series.

Beauty of Musician's Soul Matches Her Playing

Cellist Nancy Green creates transcendent sound

By ERIC SHUMSKY

In today's world, we need to be brutally tough and hardnosed, it seems. We have no time for the weak or frail, for the hidden rose, the lovely sunset, the solitary shooting star, the isolated cry, or the touching whisper. Survival of the fittest seems to be where it's at.

Many people today are influenced by the aggressive-hype machine call PR. It is often ugly, cruel, and unjust. Of course, the lion is a beautiful animal, as is the tiger and the leopard. But we are endowed with a mind that is capable of reason. We have a great propensity for feelings. We can empathize with others. Don't these civilizing factors count?

In fact, isn't it time for the listening public (and musicians alike) to get excited when the musician's very being is congruent in beauty with his or her playing?

Cellist Nancy Green lives up to this statement in spades. She is one of the most sensitive people I know, highly conscious of everything around her. She plays just as she is: sensitive, thoughtful, and kind. She is a wonderful cellist.

Nancy studied with the great American teacher Leonard Rose, one of the most famous cello teachers of the past. She also studied with other cello greats, including Johannes Goritzki, Lynn Harrell, and the late Jacqueline Dupre.

Nancy has her own very beautiful sound that transcends levels other than the normally accepted vibrant sound. Her use of vibrato is masterful indeed, and she can easily raise the hairs and bumps on even the most cynical of critics. Simply put, her phrasing and artistry is incredibly sensitive.

I have heard from those around her that she is an excellent teacher too. But I can't imagine Nancy saying anything but constructive comments to better a student's playing; nothing would come from her that might hold back or belittle the work of another human being.

She is adamant about beauty in art and music but holds to her standards by holding a gentle wand over her students. I doubt



NANCY GREEN CHRISTIAN STEINER

Nancy could be a drill sergeant in the Marines or a referee for a prize fight or even a football or basketball coach—I think she would hate even thinking about it.

She performs only a limited number of concerts because her focus is upon recording. She has amassed a wealth of cello works and CDs, which is quite staggering.

HER UPBRINGING

Her father, Paul Green, who was a pioneer in fiber optic research, is a lover of music and has always been a tremendous fan of his daughter. He has an astonishing knowledge about the music of J.S. Bach and is an avid organist.

Nancy's father provided the inspiration in her early years and exposed her to music early on. Her parents both did all they could to nurture her and be positive with

great spirit. This kind of attitude is often missing in parents today—words and phrases used to uplift rather than put down.

In sum, with great heart and a love for music, Nancy Green is the embodiment of a gentle soul, of an artist whose intense focus upon producing beauty overrides any temptation for reflecting ugliness, a practice so prevalent today.

We are much better off for her contribution, for while nature produces beauty easily, it seems much harder to reproduce for human beings.

For more on Nancy Green, and to hear her music: www.nancygreencello.com

Eric Shumsky is a concert violist. For more information, see www.shumskymusic.com

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