

# Johann Sebastian Bach: Some Theological Perspectives

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[This lecture was presented to the students and faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary on September 27, 1985, by Professor Engel of the Music Department at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, as part of the seminary's Bach tercentenary observance.]

The 300th anniversary of the birth of Johann Sebastian Bach has brought forth a world-wide surge of interest in the music of this small-town German organist. Hundreds of performances involving thousands of performers have recreated Bach's music for millions upon millions of people. No other composer has ever been accorded such attention as this Lutheran composer, relatively unknown in his day. Even *Newsweek* a few months back honored Bach with a front page picture and greeted him with "All hail, Mighty Bach."

Undoubtedly there are many who wonder, Why all the fuss? His music seems rather dull and certainly is out of date. What is it about this man that warrants such admiration?

Despite a rather ordinary, simple everyday existence, the accomplishments of this man are truly extraordinary. Even a brief overview of his work reveals an extremely fertile mind, a genius of the first rank.

There are some admirers in our day who seem to be taken up mostly by the fantastic output of Bach's writing. Others seem to marvel at his compositional mastery, his skill in handling the technicalities of music, the canonical devices, the intricate counterpoint, the formal designs and the number relationships within his compositions. These facts of Bach's writing are truly fascinating studies. But one ultimately asks, Is this the real Bach?

A few months ago an education channel on television featured a special Bach anniversary program. Professional soloists were called upon to teach young singers how to interpret certain of Bach's arias. Much time was devoted to the techniques, the facial expressions, even the bodily movements involved in performance, seldom relating any of this to the message of the text. Only once, and then on the side, came a comment concerning the text from one of the professionals during a discussion of an aria concerning death, and even that comment questioned Bach's belief in a life beyond the grave.

Proper evaluation, interpretation and appreciation of Bach's art, as with the art of any composer, best begins with a broad understanding of the composer's intentions, his motives, his roots. We should know "where he's coming from." An understanding of these matters will most certainly provide the listener with deeper insights into any composer's musical expressions. This is especially true when one considers the circumstances which engendered Bach's liturgical compositions.

But, then, it is easy for one in this pragmatic, technological age to circumvent aesthetic values and to be taken up with the peripheral here and now. There has been, for example, since the mid-50s an on-going investigation into the performance practices and performance conditions which surrounded the first performances of Bach's music. The results of these investigations have at times brought about performances strangely out of focus. Alfred Mann in his recent "Bach Studies" in the *American Choral Review* recounts:

A distinguished New York performance organization announced that it was the only one in the city that presented Bach's cantatas in a STONE church, thus recreating the true situation for Bach performance (p 59).

Later in the article he continues:

The quest (for authenticity) has continued especially in the recording industry...attempting to match the precise specification of instruments, performance forces, timbre and texture of sound, and in some cases even the seating arrangement used in 18th century performance (p 59).

It should be stated, however, that performance authenticity is not at all an unworthy project for investigation, but all too often it is paraded before the listener as the ultimate in the appreciation of Bach's music.

Henry Drinker, who translated into English many of the cantatas of Bach, expecting criticism for such translations, comments in the preface of his book that the only really authentic performance of Bach's works would have to take place in St. Thomas' Church in Leipzig with twelve to sixteen boys, besides, of course, being done in German. And we might well add, it is very likely that Bach's instrumentalists for lack of proper practice time were responsible for a good number of incorrect notes. Obviously, somewhere one must draw the line on authenticity.

Akin to all this is the insatiable desire on the part of some performers to "interpret" Bach. Of course, music by its very nature must be recreated by a performer, or a group of performers. One becomes aware, however, in our day of the growing desire on the part of many performers to find a unique interpretation. "My performance must be faster than any other, or louder, more ornamented, phrased here or there. At least it must be different so that it has my individualistic stamp." As a result, as listeners we begin to attend concerts to hear how the performer performed. What the composer had to say may well take on a secondary role.

An interpretation of Bach must begin with Bach. An interpretation of Bach's religious music must begin with Bach's religious convictions. Where *is* he coming from? Alas, here too, not performers, but historians have attempted to create barriers.

Since the '60s, after the presentation of Friedrich Blume's essay, *Outlines of a New Picture of Bach*, one has become aware of an effort, rather widespread, to question, and cast doubt upon, Bach's real religious motivation. Was he really the devoted, faith-inspired composer the earlier biographers, Spitta, Besch, Gurlitt and others had so carefully depicted? Blume, a noted scholar and editor of Bach's works, comes to the conclusion that "numerous works, the oratorios, masses, cantatas, which we have grown deeply to cherish as professions of Christian faith ... were not written with the intention of proclaiming the composer's Christian faith ... still less from a heartfelt need to do so."

Admittedly, there are facts of Bach's life which may lead one to assume that his attitude toward the church was somewhat indifferent, and that his primary concern at times seems prompted by position and economic advancement. His move out of the Lutheran church in 1717 to accept a position at the Calvinist court of the Duke of Coethen is often heralded as the prime example of this attitude of indifference on Bach's part.

Guenther Stiller in his exhaustive work on Bach takes issue with Blume on many points. On this matter Stiller points out that the situation in Weimar prior to 1717 was certainly not pleasant. Bach had been promised the position of Kapellmeister when the position became available. The man who was Kapellmeister at that time was quite elderly and had been ill. When the man died in 1717, the duke bypassed Bach and granted the position to a man of lesser talent. There was little reason for Bach to stay on. He could not fulfill that which he had hoped to accomplish. The position at Coethen offered an out.

The Duke of Coethen was a child of a mixed marriage, having a Lutheran mother and a Calvinist father. The Lutheran mother of the duke had in her day insisted on the establishment of a Lutheran church and a Lutheran school in Coethen. Bach was assured that, should he accept this position, he could hold membership in the Lutheran church and his children could attend the Lutheran school. This he did, and there is some evidence that he made certain efforts to help the Lutheran church in its musical endeavors.

There is some indication also that Bach was seriously concerned about this lack of close association with his church. He made an effort several times while in Coethen to return to full-time service in the Lutheran church. His concern for liturgical order and Lutheran hymnody narrowed his prospects, however, for by 1720 liturgical worship had deteriorated severely in most of the churches of Germany. An active liturgical life was still very much a part of the parishes in Hamburg and Leipzig. The Lutheran chorale was still an integral part of every service in both cities. It was to these two churches that Bach made application, hoping to gain the position of cantor.

When the opportunity came to return to full-time service as cantor in the Lutheran church in Leipzig, Bach regarded this as a call from the Lord back into the full-time ministry of music. Upon his arrival in Leipzig

in 1723 he immediately immersed himself once more in the tasks of composing cantatas, motets and passions for the worship services. The first five years in Leipzig were some of the most productive of his entire career.

The clearest picture we have of the Lutheran Bach is not so much gained from his biographers as directly from his music. A careful study of his works reveals a devout, orthodox Lutheran. His devotion as well as his profession of faith is laid bare in the cantatas and in the passions. Here one finds a personal relationship with his Lord clearly expressed. William Scheide in his essay, *J. S. Bach as Biblical Interpreter*, states:

Bach's music is the expression of a uniquely purposive, living, spiritual activity. It is that quality that validates all of his work, that gives it ultimate significance ... and dominating the picture is the figure of Jesus. The impulses which led him to create his portrait of Jesus were those which lay deepest in his spirit.... It is hard to find a face of Christ painted or modeled that expresses the power of Bach's conception (p 35).

It is unfortunate that the cantatas of Bach which best portray this personal relationship remain relatively unknown among us. The cantatas, as several historians state, are truly the forgotten works of Bach.

For Bach to remain a devout, orthodox Lutheran called for a strong determination on his part to face up to the "lions in the path" which had crept into German Lutheranism in his day. In the late 17th century the Lutheran church had become hidebound in orthodoxism. The stress on doctrine had led to a neglect of the Christian life. The Pietists, on the other hand, reacted against this spiritual lifelessness by stressing personal piety, holiness and private devotion. Many were waiting for some sudden, inner illumination from the Lord. Eventually orthodoxy had become synonymous with spiritual deadness, Pietism synonymous with spiritual life. When these two attitudes exist in close proximity, it seems the worst of both comes to the surface. Bach was confronted with and attempted to avoid both extremes. Leaver states that Bach and his cantata writers, especially Neumeister, "shared a common concern for both orthodoxy and the vibrant devotional life."<sup>1</sup> It was this that Bach attempted to share through his gift of music with the Leipzig congregation. Pietists did not have a monopoly on piety; the orthodox Lutherans did not have a monopoly on doctrine.

Bach's attitude toward Pietism is evident in his reaction to the pastor and the congregation at Muehlhausen. As a young man he accepted a position as minister of music in this congregation, perhaps without fully realizing the degree to which Pietism had infiltrated it. He soon found himself at odds with the pastor, Johann Frohne. At the same time he developed a very close friendship with Frohne's orthodox opponent, Pastor Georg Eilmar, at St. Mary's Church in the same town. His letter of resignation, which was submitted within a year, indicated his frustration with the stand of the church and his dissatisfaction with the congregation's lack of cooperation and appreciation for his musical efforts among them. The Pietists, like the Puritans later, admitting only the simplest forms of art within their worship, certainly frowned upon the more elaborate counterpoint of this young Bach.

In this same document of resignation, it should be noted, Bach outlined the determined purpose of his life's work as being his intention to promote the music of the divine service toward what should be its very end and purpose, a regulated church music to the honor and glory of Almighty God.<sup>2</sup> There was no doubt as to "where Bach was coming from"!

Bach's opposition toward rationalism, on the other hand, is witnessed in his dispute with his immediate overseer in Leipzig, Johann Ernesti. Ernesti's attitude toward the study of Scripture conformed to the standards of classical studies, "that is, a cold, detached and largely philological investigation. For Bach it was an entirely different pursuit, that is, a warm, reverent, personally applied study of the Scriptures."<sup>3</sup>

In this connection it is noteworthy that Bach's library at the time of his death included 52 titles written by Lutheran and orthodox Lutheran theologians. He owned only one volume by the Pietist Spener. Many of his volumes were practical devotional works and collections of sermons. His personal Bible commentary, now in the library of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, contains a good number of personal marginal comments. Finally, one often finds in Bach's manuscripts, secular as well as sacred, the initials, "J. J. J.," *Jesu, Juva*, "S.D.G.," *Soli Deo Gloria*, or "I.N.I.," *In Nomine Jesu*. Bach knew, and openly admitted, the source of his special gifts.

The genius of Bach, especially as cantata and Passion composer, lay particularly in that ability to bend, or manipulate all the parameters of music so as to communicate the Word clearly and most effectively to the listener. Melody, tempos, rhythm, texture, timbre, harmony—all these parameters of music were carefully determined to express as directly as possible the emotional content of the moment.

The parameters of music are metaphors, or, at least, metaphoric. Music, collectively, is metaphor. Individually and collectively these parameters are set forth to suggest extra-musical meaning. These elements of music portray or intimate to the listener certain states of mind or emotions. Whether the source of this is by reason of experience, association or conditioning, it is a fact well established throughout the history of art.

The language of all art is the metaphor. The metaphor is, in its widest sense, a symbol which suggests. The purpose of all metaphoric language, whether it be in poetry, literature, music, painting or sculpture, is to raise one's thinking to a more sublime level by means of suggestion. Art does this very powerfully, many times better than prose.

The Lord used art, especially in the form of poetry, to do this very thing, to appeal to our senses by means of metaphor so as to challenge us to raise our level of perception.

The Lord is a Rock.

The Lord is my Shepherd.

Your sins shall be whiter than snow.

Metaphors, and there are hundreds more, are means by which the Lord communicates some of the most profound concepts of theology. Picasso once stated, "Art is a lie whose purpose it is to explain a deeper truth." Art is a purposeful exaggeration which forces us to think beyond the surface of the symbol in order to perceive a more important message. We cannot think that God is really only a stone, nor that the Lord is merely a caretaker of sheep. David knew this, and God, who told him what to write, also knew it. Even a child upon hearing such a statement realizes one cannot stop at the surface of the statement. The metaphor challenges us to gather from within our total experience the meaning behind the symbol. And it is true that the older we grow, the broader our experiences in life, the more enriched the meaning of the symbol becomes. There is never, therefore, an end to the meaning of the symbol. Therein lies the power of metaphor; therein lies the power of all art.

Bach, and Luther before him, well understood that music is not just pretty sounds to "beautify the service." (That oft-used phrase might well be put to rest.) Music can be used, and should be used, as Picasso stated, to explain deeper truths. And music has the power to do so. What was it that Luther claimed? "Next to theology, only music has the power to sway the heart of man." Is it also no wonder that the Lord so often exhorts us in Scripture to use this wonderful source of power?

And now one must say: There has never been a composer who so thoroughly used this power of music to reach the hearts of people with the gospel of Jesus Christ as did Bach. And he has been doing this for centuries now—whatever his motives. He has rightfully been acclaimed, therefore, one of the greatest preachers of all time. One has but to hear his music with heart and mind to agree with the point which Professor Volz makes in his article, "Music as Preaching," "Certainly one of the best examples of suiting text to music is in the works of J. S. Bach, where almost every note or harmony carries with it a theological meaning" (p 10). It was during his early professional years that the young Bach struggled to find a more definitive direction and goal for his ministry of music within the church. Except for a few of the larger parishes in which fine musicians were serving, music was sadly neglected. Choral music in many churches was often limited to a single traditional Latin motet sung as the introit within the service.

Bach's visit in 1705 to the famous Dietrich Buxtehude helped to strengthen his convictions concerning the place and purpose of music within the worship service. Here in Luebeck Bach first heard the Advent cantatas which Buxtehude had especially composed for the purpose of proclaiming and explaining the theme of the Advent services. The texts for these cantatas were taken from the pericopes for the day and other appropriate Scriptures. Familiar chorales were included.

The idea of a church musician composing and organizing music for organ, orchestra and choir suited specifically to the Sunday propers served as a tremendous inspiration for the young man. Music's role in the service was not to decorate, but to proclaim. Here was purpose, definition, direction for the serious church composer. Could this not be done for all Sundays? The Calvinists, the Catholics, and even the Pietists would most certainly disapprove, but music had a definite place within the liturgical structure of the Lutheran service. In his lifetime Bach was to compose over 300 cantatas.

It is unfortunate that we so seldom have opportunity in our day to hear the Passions and cantatas of Bach in their original liturgical settings. Leaver is so bold as to state that Bach's music "cannot fully be understood if it is divorced from its liturgical and theological context."<sup>4</sup> We certainly must agree that, heard in the context of the Sunday service for which it was intended, the cantata most assuredly would have much greater theological impact. How can one fully grasp the text of Bach's cantata, *Wake, Awake, for Night is Flying*, except it be realized in the context of the liturgical thoughts which surround the final Sunday of the church year in anticipation of the Advent season?

Bach's sacred music finds its only proper setting within the Lutheran liturgical service. The Passions set by Bach were musical settings of the traditional readings prescribed in the Lutheran churches for the Holy Week services. The chorale preludes of Bach are musical meditations on the hymn texts and melodies to be used within a worship service. The cantatas were composed primarily to explain the principal message of the pericopes of a particular Sunday. Concert performances of these works, excellent though they be, deprive the listener of an essential part of the worship experience originally intended.

For what Bach desired most in his ministry of music—communicating the Word to the Leipzig parishioners—the cantata and the Passion were simply the most convenient avenues of expression. The structure and form of the cantata provided the finest means for musical communication. The length of the cantata, twenty to thirty minutes, was not considered unduly long by the 18th century churchgoer, who expected worship services to last two hours or more. The sectional forms of the cantata, choruses, chorales, recitatives and arias, gave ample opportunity for exposition, emphasis, meditation and participation.

The opening chorus of the cantata, often utilizing a familiar chorale melody and text, served as both introduction and general theme for the entire composition. It was most frequently performed by the entire ensemble of instruments and voices.

This was followed by a series of recitative-aria alternations, each pair sung by the same soloist. In one sense they belonged together, for the aria reflected upon an event or thought engendered in the recitative. The recitative was story-like, expository in character, with a minimum of repetition, and was accompanied simply with cello and keyboard. The texts, essentially narrative in style, from an artistic viewpoint could not bear extensive musical elaboration. In effect the recitatives served as introductions and links to the arias.

The arias were much more melodious. Using only a phrase or two of text they were set to more ornate, memorable melodies and were colorfully orchestrated. The text was one worthy of reflection, meditation and personal application. There was an obvious effort here by the composer to lay the text with the tune upon the heart of the listener.

In all but eleven of the cantatas Bach concluded with a chorale. From the Lutheran hymnal Bach excerpted that single stanza which best summed up what he hoped would be the congregation's response to the entire cantata. It was the chorale which drew the congregation into the cantata itself. Here was a tune and a text which they immediately recognized and in which they could participate. Whether this participation was active or passive, recent studies disagree. But surely, heard in the context of the cantata, the chorale took on deeper meaning for the parishioner.

There was no parameter in the art of music which the master overlooked in his determined effort to communicate the Word clearly and emphatically. With melody, harmony and rhythm, also the architecture, the formal aspect of music, presented a great challenge to him. In a number of secular multi-sectional works the pattern of the entire opus was designed primarily for the sake of good order. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is organized according to keys and modes. The *Inventions* are ordered similarly.

The formal patterns within a number of sacred works of Bach are organized so as to emphasize important theological elements within the work. Examples of this are evident in Cantata No. 4, *Christ Lag in Todesbanden*, and in portions of the St. Matthew Passion. In the motet, *Jesu, Meine Freude*, Bach alternates five texts from Romans, chapter 8, with six stanzas from Johann Franck's chorale, *Jesu, Meine Freude*. The 11 parts of the entire work are arranged symmetrically so that the primary emphasis of the entire compositions falls on the central fugue, much like a pyramid. Parts 1 and 11 are identical chorales; parts 2 and 10 are matched; parts 4 and 8 are similar; parts 3 and 5 are balanced by 9 and 7 respectively, forming a cross. Bach in this manner placed primary emphasis on the theological crux of the entire funeral motet: "Ye are not of the flesh, but of the Spirit, if it be that the Spirit of God dwell in you." From a purely formal perspective, this is a truly amazing structure. But form for form's sake, just as art for art's sake, was of little importance in Bach's sacred works. Bach had greater concerns.

In his cantatas and Passions Bach at times reaches points of high drama. To the assumed tastes of those already enamored with the encroaching Enlightenment, Bach's word painting and at times even his subject matter were inelegant and distasteful. Sheltering themselves behind a facade of human reason, this "enlightened" society avoided all that which appeared intimidating or irrational: death, devil, hell, eternity and the like. This move toward the less complicated, less emotional, and more genteel way of life even captured Bach's own sons who showed little interest in their father's music in his last years.

This movement never seemed to deter Bach in his efforts to portray biblical truth. His cantatas, reflective of the staunch, conservative Lutheran liturgical life in the Leipzig congregation, continually included many biblical references to these subjects. His cantata, *God's Time Is Best*, is an excellent example of the faithful Christian's approach to death. It is hardly funereal. With the exception of the final chorale, the entire cantata is comprised of biblical texts.

There is a section in this cantata in which Bach assigns to the bass a joyous melody in vigorous rhythm with the words of Christ, "Today, today, thou shalt be with me in paradise!" After a number of repetitions of the phrase the listener becomes aware of still another melody in the background. In long, sustained notes presented by the altos is Luther's chorale, *In Peace and Joy I Now Depart*. These two texts move on, each with its own rhythm, one jubilant, the other most serene. In no other art can two independent and contrasting elements be so superimposed. Superimposed they surely should be, in the mind of the Lutheran Bach, for the first statement gives absolute credence to the second. And lifted beyond, the faithful listener is granted time to reflect upon that relationship.



Even key centers and tonality were not left to whim or chance in Bach's cantata and Passion composition. If key center, mode or modulation could possibly relate with greater clarity the text before him, Bach made use of the opportunity. The more joyous, energetic texts were more often set forth in major keys with great preference toward the sharp majors. The flat keys, especially the minor flat keys, were reserved for the more solemn accounts.

Bach seems especially sensitive to key relationships in the Passion settings. A single example must suffice. The early part of the St. Matthew Passion is generally presented in keys of one or two sharps. The first swing toward flat tonalities begins with the text, Matthew 26:20, "Now when even was come . . .," where the flat keys and minor tonalities indicate not only the impending darkness but also the approaching intensity of the betrayal. Bach from this point moves more deeply into the minor flat keys until at the moment of the betrayal he reaches B-flat minor. Still later, at the words (v. 46) "*Eli, eli . . .*" once more the B-flat minor is evident. Finally, at the words, "My God, my God . . ." Bach reaches the remote key of E-flat minor, one of the rare cases of the use of the six-flat minor key in all his music. One notes also that in both the St. John and the St. Matthew Passion nothing but flat keys are used after the death of Jesus with the exception of slight references to the dead rising from their graves.

With the inception of opera at the beginning of the 17th century, an increasing number of symbolic and rhetorical figures were introduced into musical composition. Human temperaments, passions, moods, human activities, animate and inanimate objects, natural events appeared, as it were reflectively, in musical motivic

symbols. One finds in the 18th century, as a development of this process, a wide array of musical figures describing joy, peace, anger, angels, devils, laughter and the like.

One dare not assume, however, that there was but one motive to describe joy, or but one musical symbol for peace. We are all acquainted, for example, with the various ways in which Handel depicts the phrase, “the crooked shall be made straight,” or the manner in which he sets forth the single word, “rejoice.” Even within the same composition Handel does not remain with a single representation.

Bach made extensive use of such symbolic figures in his writing both for organ and voice. In the Orgelbuechlein choral prelude, Da Jesus an dem Kreuze Stand, we find excellent examples of suspensions. The hanging and the implied downward pull are aptly described thereby. In addition, a little four-note figure  is used to describe the cross:  These two devices are used together in every measure of this beautiful prelude. C. S. Terry makes a fine study of such figure usage in his excellent little volume on the Passions of J. S. Bach.

The mere recognition of these elements should not, however, be equated with the ultimate in the appreciation of this music. For worthiness in music is certainly not dependent upon the simple use and repetition of such devices. If it were, all compositions utilizing similar figures would be equally worthy and effective. These little figures served merely as a springboard to spur on Bach’s musical imagination. The thrust of the entire composition is of greater import than the mere recognition of these *Affekte*, as they were called. When one is enwrapped in the entire context of the composition, its rhythm, harmony, tempo and dynamic level, one gains a fuller realization of the composer’s communication and thought.

There are many examples of Bach’s use of figures descriptive of the text. Some are truly rather naive; but then, as we have indicated above, Bach was writing for the parishioner in the pew in Leipzig. He expected them to be able to recognize some of these *Affekte*, but what happened to them in the course of the entire composition was the level which Bach certainly wanted them to reach.

In part III of the *Clavieruebung* Bach reaches great heights of profundity in the setting of the chorales based on the Six Chief Parts of Luther’s Catechism. A longer and a shorter organ choral prelude is presented for each of the six parts. These twelve preludes are preceded by a majestic Prelude in E-flat, and the entire work is concluded with a triple fugue also in E-flat major. The fugue is obviously descriptive of the Trinity. Written in the key of three flats, one finds three distinct, yet complete fugues. Each fugue has its own meter, 2/4, 4/4, 12/8, and each is constructed about its own characteristic theme. The first of these, reminiscent of the hymn tune, *O God, Our Help in Ages Past*, is a monument of strength. It moves nobly, majestically, in quarter notes throughout—a powerful statement descriptive of the Creator. The second fugue theme is altogether different. Without pedals, a quieter, much more graceful theme is set out in diatonic 16th notes as Bach was wont to do in his description of the Savior in other of his compositions. The second theme is joined by the first subject which, as Keller points out, “lifts it up and draws it to itself.”

The third theme is highly energetic, full of life and fire; it literally leaps. Surely here is a fine symbolic description of the life-giving Spirit. This theme is also joined shortly by the first subject, “each permeating the other most deeply” (Keller). The second subject, with its ever-moving diatonic gracefulness, is implied by the ever-present 16th note patterns which accompany the other two themes. Independent as these three subjects were in their original presentation, one becomes aware in these final pages that, though they are quite distinct, they can be strangely joined, one with the other. With the metaphoric language of music, Bach attempts through the power of suggestion to bring the unfathomable closer to the finite mind of man.

It is certainly true that today we hear the Bach keyboard works performed frequently and sensitively. The keyboard works of Bach have become standard repertoire for the working organist and the keyboard recitalist. But what of the chorale works, especially the cantatas? We have been blessed in our day with excellent recordings by fine choral organizations of most of the cantatas, but they are no longer heard in the liturgical worship settings for which they were intended.

It was once assumed that Bach’s cantatas required great instrumental and choral resources. A closer examination will prove otherwise. The choral directors within our parishes should be encouraged to seriously

consider these great masterworks of Lutheran music. Surely if an entire cantata is not feasible, a single movement or portion of a cantata or Passion might be within the grasp of a parish choir.

Our parishioners need music of greater conviction and stronger message. In our day we are being inundated with choral music which has little to say, and says it rather feebly. Robin Leaver comments,

Music in our churches either suffers from a surfeit of art on the one hand or a surfeit of simplicity on the other. Either artistic professionalism stifles any sense of proclamation, or simplicity encourages a sense of superficiality. Perhaps the latter should give us cause for most concern since it has become so widespread in recent years....Music has a prophetic function of forthtelling, proclaiming the Word of God.<sup>5</sup>

It is certainly within such an age as ours, when music from the organ and the choir is so frequently regarded simply as that which makes the service more pleasant, or “beautifies the service,” that we need to return to a function of music in worship proclaimed by Luther and exemplified in the works of the master, Johann Sebastian Bach. In his essay, “Lutheran Theology as Reflected in the Life and Works of J. S. Bach,” Buszin writes,

The orthodoxy of Johann Sebastian Bach was certainly neither cold nor dead. On the contrary, it teemed with spiritual life, it proclaimed aloud to all men Jesus Christ and Him crucified.... Bach is indeed an eloquent preacher of the Gospel. Like the Gospel, his music is rank foolishness to many people; but it is not rank foolishness to those who heed its message. Some people may not understand Bach’s musical language, but if they believe the Gospel, at least the texts will mean much to them. They fail to understand the music because they have conditioned their ears to the musical slang of the other types which make no attempt to bespeak the native beauty of the Gospel as did the music of Bach. The problem is not merely a cultural or a musical problem; it is likewise, and just as forcefully, a spiritual problem. The world may enjoy Bach for aesthetic reasons only. For that reason Bach’s days are likely to be numbered among the children of the world, for the Gospel is foolishness to them and Bach’s proclamation of the Gospel will also be foolishness to them. Bach’s music must be sung and played as an expression of faith if it is to be performed in keeping with the spirit and wishes of Bach; it must be heard also as an expression of faith if it is to do good to the soul (p 921).

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<sup>1</sup> Robin Leaver, *J. S. Bach as Preacher*, p 12. Leaver's study of Bach's copy of Calov's Bible commentary will soon be published by Concordia Publishing House.

<sup>2</sup> Schrade, Leo, *The Conflict Between the Sacred and the Secular*, p 9.

<sup>3</sup> Leaver, p 13.

<sup>4</sup> Leaver, p 36.

<sup>5</sup> Leaver, p 41,42.