

A Neophyte's Bach Handout

My Colloquy Choice: Bach's Piano (originally harpsicord) **Concerto in D minor BWM 974 2nd Movement. Adagio**

All of the information below is taken from 8 on-line sites, and does not include sources, footnotes, etc.

1600-1750: THE BAROQUE PERIOD

1. A name derived from the Portuguese "*barroco*," oddly shaped pearl, which became a convenient catch-all for one of the richest and most diverse periods in music history.
2. Bach's musical thinking is polyphonic – several voices that are played simultaneously but remain independent. **I LOVE this.**
3. Two personal characteristics that distinguish Bach's music, in general:
 - a) His fusion of the national Italian, French and German baroque styles which he transforms into a single unit. (Think above, Pachelbel, Vivaldi, Purcell, Hayden, etc.)
 - b) His perfect balance between polyphony and harmony.
4. While in early polyphonic writing there was the most complete independence between the musical voices, in Bach's they are intrinsically linked by harmonic rules, giving in their combination that complexity and grandeur that is the secret of his very personal style.

To put it another way that is easier for me to understand:

5. Homophonic music refers to music that has *one sound or line of melody* being played by multiple instruments at the same time. One instrument plays one note, and a second instrument plays a note NEAR IT in harmony. The key element of homophonic music is that it has one part or melody as the *dominant element*
6. Polyphonic music has two or more melodic lines.

And, really, on one level, don't we know ourselves to be and know others to be to greater or lesser degree a never-ending mixture of polyphony and harmony?

Birds singing their different songs in the early hours of spring.

A single line of Shakespeare in context can be interpreted in at least 4 different ways: “To be or not to be,” “I know not what I know,” “Then screw your courage to the hitching post and we will not fail.”

7. What was happening in Europe during the Baroque period of 1600-1750?
8. The introduction of Copernicus’s 16th century theory that the planets didn’t revolve around the earth *made the universe a much larger place*.
9. Galileo’s work slowly allowed people to use to the fact, and *better acquainted with the cosmos*.
10. Advances in technology, such as the invention of the telescope, *made what was believed to be finite seem infinite*. **Think mirrors looking at each other.**
11. Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza, and Locke *tackled the big questions of existence*.
12. Rembrandt and Shakespeare offered unheard of perspectives through their art. **Hamlet’s last word on existence: “The rest is silence.” Tell that to the Pope and Queen Elizabeth I, Hamlet. Rembrandt originated The Selfie. Self reflection. He was no Narcissus.**
13. European nations grew more and more involved with foreign trade and colonization, bringing us into contact (**euphemism, euphemism**) with *parts of the globe that were previously unfamiliar*.
14. Growth of a new middle class *breathed life into an artistic culture long dependent on the whims of church and court*.
15. Music was newly believed to be a potent tool of communication as borrowed from the Greeks and Romans; *music could arouse any emotion in its listeners to touch people’s lives*.
16. In 1605, the Italian composer Claudio Monteverdi defined a “first” and “second” practice: in the first, harmony and counterpoint took precedence over the text; in the second, the need to express the meaning of the words musically surpassed any other concern. It is the spirit of the second practice—using the power of music to communicate—that came to dominate the era.
17. A baroque score contains little (if any) information about elements like articulation, ornamentation or dynamics, and so modern ensembles need to make their own informed choices before each performance. **LOVE this.**

18. Bach's Piano Concerto in D minor BWM 974 - 2nd Movement. Adagio

19. Throughout much of the Baroque era composers only earned a living writing music if they were fortunate enough to be on the payroll of a political or religious institution. Mainly, churches as choirmasters, church organists, and composers. The musical needs of that institution, therefore, dictated the music the composer produced.
20. Bach wrote the number of cantatas he did not necessarily because he found the form inspirational, but because of the liturgical demands of the Leipzig church that employed him. And the demands of his large family to feed, clothe and to school in music.

21. Enter the anomaly: Alessandro Ignazio Marcello, 1673-1747

22. Born in Venice, he was an amateur of the sort who would normally have been a patron to other composers. A nobleman and the son of a Venetian senator, he published poetry and involved himself in all the arts.
23. He drew and painted, made globes, wrote poems, composed music, and played several instruments. Following a visit to Italy in 1729, the French philosopher Montesquieu wrote that Marcello was "a kind of madman" and "a jack-of-all-trades for the semi-talented."
24. Marcello published his music under his Venetian Arcadian Academy pseudonym, Eterio Stinfalico, which only fellow Academy members would likely recognize.
25. His D-minor Concerto for Oboe and Strings, now his best-known work, was printed in Amsterdam under that pseudonym in a 1717 anthology of twelve oboe concertos by different composers, and it was therefore attributed to other composers (and even to his older brother), including Vivaldi, for many years.
26. Marcello's concerto circulated in Northern Europe. The Duke of Saxe-Weimar may have taken a manuscript of the work back to Weimar in 1713. It is very possible that it was also performed as an oboe concerto in Weimar, or even in Köthen, where Bach moved at the end of 1717.
27. Alessandro wrote his concerto in C minor. Bach switched it to D minor. Bach's approach to the arrangements he drew upon was always to make them more interesting than the original. Nevertheless, the Italian character remains

unmistakable, making it one of the numerous examples of Italian-German symbiosis in Bach's work

28. Bach's keyboard transcription of the 2nd movement ("Adagio") was adapted by John Williams for inclusion in his score for Steven Spielberg's semi-autobiographical film *The Fabelmans*. It is heard during the entire three-minute sequence where Sammy Fabelman edits the footage he took of a family camping trip and uncovers the affair between his mother Mitzi and Bennie Lowey, his father Burt's loyal co-worker. The scene is intercut with Mitzi herself playing the piece on her piano while Burt sits on the couch, listening to it.^{[17][18]}

29. A BRIEF BACH BIOGRAPHY

30. Johann Sebastian Bach was born on 21 March 1685 in Eisenach in Thuringia, central Germany. He died in Leipzig in 1750.

31. Bach came from many generations of musicians, several of them important in the region as choirmasters, church organists, and court entertainers. Two sons from each marriage of his marriages became well known composers.

32. At the age of 9, he became an orphan. His mother died in 1694, his father later that year. He lived with oldest brother, also an organist. Bach had an excellent treble voice which made it possible for him to study at various churches and schools.

33. He married his second cousin and had 6 children. A year after she died, he married a church singer and had 13 children. He is known for passing on his musical dedication and love to his sons.

34. He had many jobs in many different churches. People often considered him arrogant, and difficult to work with. He once took a leave of a few weeks from church, walked 248 miles and was gone for several months to listen to Dietrich Buxtehude play the organ in Leipzig

(apocryphal).

35. An analysis of one of his famous portraits:

"...He had a rather massive head, a strong physique...the prominent nose, the fleshy cheeks, the outthrust chin, the severe lips. It is a tough, strong masculine face, the face of a man who will stand up for his rights. It is an uncompromising face: not the look of a fanatic, but certainly with the look of one who is determined to have his own way."

36. More famous as an organist than as a composer in his own lifetime, Bach's rich legacy encompasses sacred and secular works, notably cantatas, organ pieces, and concertos which influenced many later composers.

37. Very few pieces that were officially published during Bach's lifetime. One of the small number of works that were saved from obscurity include keyboard works like the "Well-Tempered Clavier", [Goldberg Variations](#) and 6 partitas.

38. Felix Mendelssohn was the first well-known figure that revived major works by Bach. In 1829, Mendelssohn reintroduced Bach's "Passion According to St. Matthew" to huge acclaim.