

On Bach

From Musical Thought by Carlos Chavez HUP 1961 p. 22-23

Victor Hugo: "Supreme Art is the Region of Equals. Any masterpiece is equivalent to another. ... Like water, which, heated to one hundred degrees, cannot increase in heat ... human thought reaches in certain men its fullest intensity. The human spirit has a summit. This summit is the ideal. ... Among human things and as a human thing, art is a singular exception. The beauty of art consists in not being susceptible of improvement. ... A masterpiece exists once and for all. The first poet to arrive, arrives at the summit. You will climb after him, just as high, no higher.

They succeed, but not replace one another. ...

The frescoes of the Sistine Chapel do absolutely nothing to the metopes of the Parthenon." Etc.

p. 23-4

Chavez: In music does Mozart constitute progress over Bach; Beethoven over Mozart; Brahms over Beethoven; Debussy over Brahms; and so forth?

Indeed the answer is no; there is no progress from one to the other; they are all equally great and immortal.

Why start with Bach? ...we call no composers before him immortal

Music is slower than the other arts – or faster. The other arts have not progressed much in 2500 years. In that time music has undergone innumerable and often violent changes. Master poets, painters, sculptors, architects have lasted thousands of years, master musicians only hundreds. "Great master musicians burn quickly."

[This may have something to do with access. Without recordings, great music is still dependent not just on the listener but on performers. Even with recordings, the listener is required to invest time and focus in the experience. Otherwise it's just Muzak. Music is also dependent on repetition and memory – have you heard that little melody before? Is it the same as the first time or different? Did the harmony change? And all in the enclosed time of performance.]

Ingredients of Baroque Style

1. Concentrated single affective goal
2. Consistent rhythmic figures
3. Consistent melodic contours
4. Ornaments as structural components
5. Sequences
6. Adherence to text

from Manfred Bukovzer's Music in the Baroque Era W.W. Norton 1947

Bach is known as the Fugue master and also master of Counterpoint.

Bach was an assimilator and inventor: Fusion of French and Italian and German styles – who plays what, inclusion of dances, structural changes, ornamentation choices

On Bach's Inventions: 15 of them, in Fugal style, not strict fugue (see counterpoint definition)

“Invention” because that gave him freedom to tinker with his material.

Read this part only if you feel like it

Invention #3 (It'll be easy to see these when we get together)

1. Affective ingredient: playfulness – not always a dour and serious dude.

2. Consistent rhythmic figures -

Melodies are mostly 16th notes – like the very beginning.

Accompaniment mostly 8th notes mm. 5-8 (slower)

Cadences – three 8ths followed by dotted-8th-16th-8 measure LH

also consistent.

3. Consistent melodic shapes

Three melodic shapes

With humor: in 19-22 LH goes down and then veers off into a new melodic figure, fakes a restart, then dutifully comes back in for the cadence

4. Ornaments: trills signal section endings – breathing spaces for us listeners.

mm. 26-31 trills as sustained notes (piano can't sustain a pitch)

5. Sequences:

Sequence #1 (melodic upward starting in 12, 14, 16, 18) also playful in that the sequence alternates RH LH

Sequence #2 (melodic downward 19 – 20 – 21 - ↓ 22)

Sequence #3 (harmonic down the circle of fifths) (also alternating RH and LH)

m. 24-5 RH scale and loop starting on F# (b minor scale)

m. 26-7 LH scale and loop starting on B (e minor scale) down a fifth

m. 28-9 RH scale and loop starting on E (A major scale) down a fifth

m. 30-1 LH scale and loop starting on A (D major scale) down a fifth after which he messes with it – the “Invention” concept

Plus: Not a single casual or wasted note, so much so that a single note may serve in more than one capacity, often as the end of one thing, and the beginning of another.

Overall harmonic structure is symmetrical

D maj, **A** maj (V) **E** minor (V of V), **B** minor (V of V of V), **E** minor (back down), **A** major (back down) **D** major (back home)

All this by way of saying that this Bach Invention has all the ingredients of Baroque Style, plus his own characteristic compactness, ingenuity, and humor,

Three very different versions:

Andras Schiff

www.youtube.com/watch?v=3lk1REA_IsQ

Tsvi Erez

www.youtube.com/watch?v=uz6KfokGdwE

Glenn Gould

www.youtube.com/watch?v=oVGgrsPCwKw

Definitions:

1. Counterpoint: two or more melodies that sound together - different from fugue in that the second melody does not have to echo the first
2. Sequence: two types
 - Melodic: restatement of a passage at a higher or lower pitch
 - Harmonic: rotating through the circle of fifths
3. Fugue – (from “fuga”: chase) A specific procedure for writing counterpoint, with a theme (subject) that’s repeated, a second theme (countersubject) that goes on at the same time as one of the repeats, theme starting on a new pitch (Answer), overlapping (stretto), and sections without the theme (episodes).