

## What Would Bach Do Today?

or

## WWJD: What Would Johann Do?

Paul Grime

During the initial planning for this conference, I found myself continually raising the concern that we not allow the entire event to be simply a reveling in the glories of the past. Don't get me wrong. The genius that is evident in Bach's music continually fascinates me. Likewise, I will never grow weary of the sheer beauty and delight that his music brings. So with a conference theme of "Bach—Still the Evangelist," it was a given that our time together would include a heavy dose of Bach and his music.

The concern I continually raised, however, was that the conference could not be only about Bach, even though I know that many of you would probably have been quite satisfied had we done just that! But that's why, in addition to a heavy dose of Lutheran chorales, a number with Bach harmonizations, we've also ventured into other realms of the church's song, including an Appalachian folk tune sung in canon, that gorgeous tune by Peter Cutts that we sang yesterday morning to the paraphrase of 1 Corinthians 13 (*LSB* 695), and even the Taizé response "O Lord, Hear My Prayer" (*LSB* 780) that flowed inconspicuously out of the first stanza of Luther's Lord's Prayer hymn.

Because of my insistence that the conference not simply become a Bach lovefest, the other planners directed my complaint back at me by giving me the assignment of addressing the question "What Would Bach Do Today?"—hence, the reason I stand before you now. The

assignment seemed intriguing at the time, but in wrestling with the question, it has become increasingly clear that in some ways it's an impossible task. We all realize that there's no way of knowing what Bach would really do were he an active church musician today. Our contexts are so different. Nevertheless, the approach Bach took in honing his craft does, I believe, offer us some insights that may be of assistance to musicians—and pastors—as they lead the congregation's song nearly three centuries later.

### **The Landscape of Bach's World**

To begin our inquiry, let's first consider the times in which Bach lived. Born in Germany in the final quarter of the seventeenth century, Bach entered a world that was finally beginning to recover from the devastation of the Thirty Years' War. Economic development coincided with the expansion of trade throughout Europe, with Saxony at the crosshairs of trade routes that would develop into an extraordinary exchange not only of commerce but also of information and ideas.<sup>1</sup> The implications for the development of musical styles will be considered later.

Among the many consequences of the Thirty Years' War was a religious realignment in Germany. Whereas the Peace of Augsburg in 1555 had brought about the protection of Lutheranism in those territories that were ruled by Lutherans, the Peace of Westphalia that brought about the end of the Thirty Years' War in 1648 granted official recognition to Calvinism and also opened up the possibility of rulers converting to a differing confession without requiring their subjects to convert with them. The practical effect of this arrangement was an increase in

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<sup>1</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 16.

religious pluralism and tolerance.<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the course of Bach's career he worked among the Calvinists in Cöthen, the Pietists in Mühlhausen, and orthodox Lutherans in Leipzig.

Simultaneously developing in Leipzig and other places around Germany were the initial evidences of what would soon become a major movement in the world of thought—the Enlightenment. Leipzig, with its renowned university, was certainly no stranger to the never-ending exchange of new ideas and scientific discoveries that became the hallmarks of this movement. Spending more than half of his professional career in Leipzig, Bach certainly rubbed shoulders with many of those who were espousing these progressive trends in philosophical thought, even though he himself was never a member of the university faculty.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of Leipzig as an incubator of progressive thought cannot be over-emphasized. By the end of the seventeenth century, for example, Leipzig had become the publishing center for all of central Europe.<sup>4</sup> Its regular book fairs, held as many as three times a year, drew visitors from throughout Europe. These fairs were important for the widespread dissemination of new ideas. For Bach personally, they were an opportunity for presenting newly composed works that demonstrated his own abilities and forward-looking perspective as a composer.

So what does this admittedly brief depiction of Bach's world tell us about what he might do today? Consider, once again, Leipzig, the place where all of Bach's talents coalesced to produce his greatest works. This was a cosmopolitan city, perhaps not unlike New York City or Chicago in our own day. Leipzig was at the forefront of the latest trends, an environment in

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<sup>2</sup> Carol K. Baron, "Tumultuous Philosophers . . . : The Religious World Bach Inherited," in *Bach's Changing World: Voices in the Community* (Rochester, N. Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Wolff, 310.

<sup>4</sup> Baron, 49.

which Bach thrived. He was not afraid of being challenged in his professional development in the eighteenth century, nor would he be, I presume, in our time.

As for implications for twenty-first-century church musicians, Bach's example would suggest that they too should be widely read, conversant in the latest developments in philosophical and political thought. Though Bach never had the benefit of a university education, his inquiring mind kept him from ever becoming content with his own personal growth and advancement. Such an attitude in our current church musicians would certainly be welcome and beneficial.

### **The Musical Landscape of Bach's World: Designing New Instruments**

When it comes to the musical world in which Bach lived and moved, here he was even more at the forefront of the latest developments, assimilating and synthesizing musical styles like no one else. For my first example, I turn not to the music itself but to the interest Bach took in the musical instruments with which he and his musicians made their music. Bach proved to be at the forefront when it came to experimenting with a variety of instrumentation, especially for use in his cantatas. As the Bach biographer, Christoph Wolff, puts it, "Bach's unbowed spirit of discovery continued to spur his exploration of new instrumental sonorities and combinations."<sup>5</sup> For example, as soon as he was able, Bach began making use of the new lower-voiced oboe d'amore and oboe da caccia. He also had his hand in the development of the contrabassoon and the viola pomposa. Likewise, from the spring of 1724, Bach made the switch from the ubiquitous recorder to the transverse flute. When you think about it, that was a radical departure from what had been a commonly heard sound for centuries.

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<sup>5</sup> Wolff, 273.

Bach had very close connections with a number of instrument makers, sometimes serving as a broker who facilitated sales of instruments to individuals who respected Bach's judgment. He was without peer as an organ consultant, assisting in the design and testing of many a new instrument. He played a significant role in the design of the new lute-clavier instruments. And perhaps most significantly, Bach worked with the organ builder Gottfried Silbermann in the design of the first fortepianos—the precursor to the modern-day piano. After hearing of Bach's critique of his earliest models, Silbermann did not sell any pianos for nearly a decade while he worked at correcting the weaknesses that Bach had pointed out.<sup>6</sup> Again, the radical contrast between the harpsichord or organ and the newly designed fortepiano, demonstrates that Bach was not content simply holding on to the instruments of the past. He wisely saw the potential in the new tonal colors produced by these instruments and was quite happy to be the first to put them to use.

So what would the inquisitive instrument designer Johann Sebastian do in our present age? He would likely be as curious and adventuresome as he was two-and-a-half centuries ago. Imagine the percussion instruments from other lands that he might acquire for his personal collection. Would he bring any new insights into the world of organ building? Perhaps it might be some exotic flute or reed stop that he would design in collaboration with an organ builder. And pushing the envelope just a bit, how would Bach react to the electronic synthesizer? Would he automatically rule out its use, or might he find ways to incorporate it in some judicious fashion? I don't think we can be so quick or certain to assume that Bach would not be interested in exploring these possibilities.

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<sup>6</sup> Wolff, 412–13.

## **The Musical Landscape of Bach's World: Knowledge of Contemporary Musicians**

Bach's unparalleled mastery of his craft went far beyond his interest in musical instruments. Throughout his career, he used his own funds to purchase musical scores of the best known German, French, and Italian composers—not only the old masters of previous generations but also contemporaries of Bach. A list of just a few of the more familiar composers whose music Bach knew includes:

- Germans such as Dieterich Buxtehude, Georg Böhm, Johann Pachelbel, George Frideric Handel, and Georg Philipp Telemann;
- Frenchmen such as François Couperin, Pierre Du Mage, Nicolas de Grigny, and Louis Marchand;
- Italians such as Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, Girolamo Frescobaldi, Giuseppe Torelli, Tomaso Albinoni, Arcangelo Corelli, Antonio Vivaldi, Alessandro and Benedetto Marcello, and Giovanni Pergolesi.

Bach made it his business to acquire music representing the latest styles and consciously incorporated these newfound compositional techniques into his vast musical vocabulary.

Christoph Wolff has surmised that Bach's personal library equaled that of the most avid music collectors in Europe, especially with regard to the “quality, breadth, and depth” of keyboard and instrumental music in his possession.<sup>7</sup>

What, exactly, did Bach do with these musical scores that represented such a diversity of styles? Obviously he studied them. He was continually in search of new musical techniques. A careful study of his work reveals that in most cases he not only learned the new techniques of various composers but often advanced and perfected them as only Bach could. In some cases, he actually reworked the compositions. Some of you are probably familiar with the several instrumental concertos by the Italian master Antonio Vivaldi that Bach transcribed for the organ. While remaining true to the composer's intent, Bach was able to adapt them in a way that made

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<sup>7</sup> Wolff, 333.

them idiomatic to the keyboard. With still other works Bach would make adaptations, such as adding an additional instrumental part, thus creating a denser texture. Far from being viewed as pilfering another composer's work, such a practice was more akin to paying the composer a compliment. In the process, however, Bach's own skills as a composer were being continually enhanced.

How might such a mindset work in today's setting? Obviously, Bach would be well-versed in the wide range of compositional techniques at play in our day. He would be familiar not only with the music of the old masters but also with that of his contemporaries. He would likely have read many of the latest books on music history and theory. He would be, by all accounts, a well-rounded musician.

This is one of the points, however, where a potential disconnect exists between Bach's world and our own. The diversity of musical styles in our day dwarfs any differences that existed in the eighteenth century. Yes, there were stylistic differences back then, especially between various nationalities. But when compared with our own age, the differences were minor. If Bach were on the scene today, he would have to contend with such divergent styles as Impressionism, twelve-tone serialism, minimalism, electronically-generated sounds, and truly avant-garde approaches to composition.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> If I had to choose a twentieth-century counterpart to Bach, it would be Igor Stravinsky. Here was a composer who was both in the forefront of new trends in composition and also able to synthesize a wide range of musical styles and techniques. Though not a church musician, he also composed sacred music, including a setting of the Western Mass and his *Symphony of Psalms*.

## **The Musical Landscape of Bach's World: Secular vs. Sacred Music**

This is the point where we need to address a more specific point of divergence between Bach's world and our own. I'm referring to the relationship between sacred and secular music. It is well documented that Bach and his contemporaries regularly composed music for both realms. Indeed, Bach's employment at the court in Cöthen for the six years prior to his final move to Leipzig required him to compose almost exclusively for non-religious settings. Even in Leipzig, Bach's official duties included composing for civic events at various times throughout the year. In addition, he sought out opportunities to compose and lead music outside of the church, as evidenced by his twelve-year directorship of the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig.

Stylistically, the differences between Bach's sacred and secular music are minimal. In fact, it was not uncommon for Bach to parody his secular music for sacred use. Unlike his church cantatas, which could be repeated when a particular Sunday in the church calendar rolled around each year, his secular cantatas were almost always written for specific occasions, making them unsuitable for repetition at a later time. In many cases, Bach took these compositions and reworked them using sacred texts. Sometimes the changes were significant, other times not. Either way, Bach had no difficulty moving from one realm to the other, often with only minor adaptations being necessary.

## **Demise of Sacred Influence**

In our own age, the relationship between sacred and secular is a little more complicated. A little history is needed to understand why. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance the development of Western music was totally intertwined with the church. New developments in

composition were driven by the church. In the seventeenth century, the rise of Italian opera and the ushering in of what we know as the Baroque era signaled that the church was no longer the sole proponent of music. Very quickly the royal court became a major player. By the end of the eighteenth century, churches in Germany began scaling back their elaborate systems of cantors and choirs. For example, when Bach's son, Carl Philip Emmanuel, died in 1788, his position as cantor in Hamburg was essentially eliminated, the very position that had previously been occupied by Telemann for over forty years.<sup>9</sup> From this point on, the most notable composers either worked under the patronage of a court—like Haydn's early years at the Esterházy court—or struck out on their own as freelance artists—like Haydn's later years in London and Vienna, or, most notably, Beethoven.

Because the church has seldom played the same role she once did as a major patron of the arts, her influence in the development of musical composition has, understandably, waned. The church's composers have, for the most part, focused their energies on writing music for the church and have not ventured significantly into the secular realm. There are, of course, exceptions to the stereotypes that I am painting. My point, however, is that Bach would find a very different world were he to be among us today, with a divide between sacred and secular that has grown quite wide over the centuries.

What does this all mean for twenty-first-century church musicians? With Bach as their model, it might suggest that our musicians would be enriched by increasing their exposure to and interaction with the current wide variety of musical styles. This doesn't necessarily mean that we should suddenly hear Kyries written in the style of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* or an Offertory of silence like John Cage's *4'33"*. What it does mean, however, is that composers would benefit

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<sup>9</sup> Tanya Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety: Religion, Society, and Music in Leipzig, 1650–1750* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2007), 221.

from an ever-increasing palette of musical ideas to put to use as they go about their task of writing for a new generation.

## **Global Music**

Another area worthy of exploration by the modern-day church musician is what is commonly referred to as global music. The concept of globalization is not limited only to the economic realm. In recent decades we have had opportunity to become familiar with musical traditions from all over the world. This has especially been the case within the church. Those nations to whom we took the Gospel over the past centuries have in recent times been producing their own church music. A burgeoning song tradition has risen up in many lands, songs which are now reaching our shores.

Were Bach a practicing church musician today, it's quite plausible that he would make the effort to become familiar with these new traditions. And perhaps he might even mix the old with the new, as we heard last night at the beginning of the hymn festival, where the first stanza of Luther's "Vater unser" was seamlessly joined with the simple Taizé response, "O Lord, Hear My Prayer." But not content to leave the Taizé composition alone, Bach might have done what our cantor did last evening, composing independent melodies echoing Luther's hymn tune that were added above the congregation's singing. If there's one lesson we can learn from Bach, it is that the church's musical heritage is so rich that it is capable of constant reworking and adaptation.

## Rise of Pop Culture

There is, however, another element in our modern musical landscape that needs to be taken into consideration—namely, the pop culture. Ever since the advent of the transistor radio in the early 1960s, life has not been the same in the world of music. All of a sudden, the enjoyment of music wasn't limited to a stationary piano, or a radio or record player plugged into the wall. Now you could take your music with you, whether you were walking in the park or sunning yourself on the beach. As units were mass produced and prices fell, teenagers could each have their own radio and retreat to their bedrooms to listen to *their* music.<sup>10</sup>

The advent of the transistor radio coincided with the invasion of the Beatles and soon a plethora of other rock bands. The need or desire for individuals to learn how to make music on their own slowly but surely began to diminish. Or perhaps it just shifted. While in the past, millions of children learned to play the piano or another instrument, suddenly it was all the rage to play the guitar. Would-be rockers learned to strum a few chord progressions, found someone who could do the same on the piano, and engaged the services of drummers who could beat the living daylights out of a trap set. How many family garages were suddenly transformed into practice studios from which the next great band just might emerge?

The effects of pop music are more profound than we could have ever imagined. It is all-pervasive and simply overwhelming. No matter where you turn, pop music is there in abundance. And to the surprise of many, it eventually found its way into our churches and asserted itself with a vengeance. The Contemporary Christian Music movement is itself a multi-billion dollar industry, replete with recording artists and charts of the latest “top 40.” Many of our laypeople listen to this music daily and have become deeply attached to it.

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<sup>10</sup> If you do the calculations, you will discover that those teenagers are the leading edge of the generation we refer to as the baby boomers.

How would Bach react to this situation? It's highly unlikely that he would simply imitate the style and produce his own pop music. Given how highly Bach developed his compositional craft, I don't think he would find pop music to be particularly challenging or engaging. Perhaps he might make an attempt or two to "improve" an existing composition, adding a voice part in one place or a canon at another suitable place. The improved version, however, might not appeal all that much to those have an affinity for this style of music, so it's possible that Bach might not proceed along this path for very long.

That last point brings up something, however, that we ought to consider. The baby boomer generation that cut its cultural teeth in the 1960s is very much tied to the pop culture. Just consider how so many of the rock bands from that era are still performing the same songs they wrote over forty years ago.<sup>11</sup> The younger generations, in contrast, are much more eclectic in their choice of music. To be sure, they certainly still gravitate toward pop and rock music. But they are also much more open to other styles of music. Perhaps they would be more receptive to a Bach-like "improvement" to some of the music they hold dear, even one day being able to acknowledge the ability of well-crafted music to serve as a more fitting vehicle for the Gospel.

### **Pervasiveness of Serious Music**

This raises yet another point that demands our consideration. Proponents of pop music in our churches contend that classical music is only preferred by a very small sliver of the general population, something like two percent. They then go on to equate serious church music with

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<sup>11</sup> Given that so many of that generation simply can't let go, it's rather refreshing to see someone like Sting venture into new territory, as he has done recently by performing the songs of John Dowland, a late sixteenth-century English lutenist and song writer.

classical music and ask why this should be the only music sanctioned for use in the church, especially when it is not the preferred “heart language” of the great majority of people.

I count at least two fallacies with this kind of thinking. First, the term “classical” music conjures up a particular image that is not all that descriptive of the music of the church. Certainly there is an overlapping portion of church music that is also performed in the concert hall. But the vast majority of the church’s music composed over the centuries was written specifically for the church and should not be confused with music for the concert or recital hall. If we need to find a word that conveys what these two types of music share, then perhaps we might want to refer to it as “art” music, or even “serious” music.

In light of this distinction, the second fallacy that needs debunking concerns the argument that classical music only appeals to a small segment of the population. I think the appeal factor is closer to 100 percent; it’s just that most people don’t often realize it. A few weeks ago, I saw the sixth Harry Potter movie. This is the movie where the fatherly Dumbledore dies. As the students at Hogwarts gather around his lifeless body, the soundtrack is brought to a fevered pitch, music filled with pathos as heart-wrenching suspensions tug at the listener’s gut. This is not pop, soft rock, or easy-listening music. It’s serious, well-crafted music. I doubt anyone watching the movie would leave the theater saying, “The movie was great; I just don’t like that style of music.” To be sure, the soundtrack is tied to a powerful storyline. The fact that the music serves the plot—the text, if you will—demonstrates what a serious composer is capable of when he or she hones the skills necessary to create well-crafted music.

## Importance of the Text

This example now brings us back full circle to Bach and to a consideration of other aspects of his art, particularly the attention that he gave to the texts with which he worked. The new musical style that reached its highest level of maturity in the music of Bach had its roots in Italian opera in the early seventeenth century. A hallmark of this new style was a compositional technique known as recitative. In essence, recitative provided composers a vehicle for singing large sections of texts in an efficient fashion. Coupled with these recitatives were arias, solo songs—sometimes duets—that featured shorter texts that received more elaborate musical treatment.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, this new form of composition had been fully adapted by German composers for use in the church. By the time Bach began writing his cantatas, the cantata texts had reached a level of development that expanded on the Italian model by incorporating two other features into the pairings of recitatives and arias—namely, chorale texts with their melodies, and occasional biblical quotations. In the compositional hands of Bach, these texts received expert treatment, as never before and perhaps never since. An examination of his attention to textual details reveals a sensitivity and imagination that often brings the texts to life in ways one might not otherwise have imagined. Every cantata is filled with Bach's interpretive surprises:

- violinists and cellists plucking their strings to evoke the image of Jesus knocking at the door of faith;
- a flute melody as playful as a bird in a spring shower, coupled to a text that speaks of the joy of one redeemed by Christ;
- sharp chromaticisms set to words that speak of Christ's pain and suffering;
- the musical accompaniment suddenly fading away in order to symbolize death, or, as we heard in Cantata 106 on Sunday evening, the accompaniment quietly rocking back and forth on the word that spoke of death as a slumber.

Both Bach's choice of texts and particularly his treatment of these texts reveal a skilled musician who was at the same time thoroughly equipped to interpret the texts theologically. One cannot walk away from the performance of a cantata by J. S. Bach and not recognize how significant the text was for him.

How might this insight manifest itself were Bach alive today? No doubt he would be just as intent on giving careful attention to the text. And he would likely demand no less of other church musicians. That would suggest, first of all, that it is incumbent on our church musicians to seek theological training. They especially need to be well-versed in the distinctive tenets of our Lutheran Confessions, including such topics as the centrality of the cross and justification by grace, the distinction between Law and Gospel, and the role of the means of grace.

Just as church musicians need to pay attention to the texts used in worship, so do pastors need to learn how well-crafted music is capable of revealing a depth of meaning in a text that might otherwise go unnoticed. I have no doubt that in our day Bach would insist that his pastors be well-schooled in the art of music. Whether he would have any success . . . well, even Bach didn't always bat one-thousand.

### **Choosing Texts for Worship**

This discussion about sensitivity to texts actually begs a previous question: what texts ought we be using in worship? With the advent of the "worship wars" nearly three decades ago, the church found herself confronted with new genres of texts that were heavy on subjective expression and, not surprisingly, less concerned for an objective proclamation of Law and Gospel. In reality, this was nothing new. Think of those *Hymns You Like to Sing* booklets that sat

for generations in the pew racks of many of our congregations. It's just that, all of a sudden, we were inundated with a new song repertoire that seemed to be ubiquitous.

In response, we hunkered down and did our homework. We recovered that lovely German word—*Gottesdienst*—in order to make it clear that any response of the worshiper was only secondary to God's initial action by which He comes to us through His means of grace. We stressed the strengths of the objective character of the texts of the Lutheran chorales, implying that other texts were less desirable in the Lutheran liturgy.

In the process, I wonder whether we committed the classic error of driving the car off one side of the road in order to avoid running off the other side. What I mean is this: in order to guard against the subjective and sometimes synergistic language of many of the contemporary praise choruses, we overcorrected by giving the appearance of rejecting any text that used a more subjective, heartfelt language. The problem with this approach is that much of our classic hymnody uses this very language. Just listen to the first lines of some very familiar hymns:

- Martin Schalling: "Lord, Thee I Love with All My Heart" (*LSB* 708)
- Johann Scheffler: "Thee Will I Love, My Strength, My Tower" (*LSB* 694)
- Paul Gerhardt: "Jesus, Thy Boundless Love to Me" (*LSB* 683)

The language of these and other hymns is very personal, warm, and introspective. Plenty of other examples could be shown to demonstrate that orthodox Lutherans held on to a rich piety that was replete with expressive language, language that frequently spoke quite intimately of the believer's relationship with Christ.

It was in this context that Bach arrived on the scene in the first half of the eighteenth century. The first cantata texts patterned after the Italian models of arias and recitatives were published in 1700 by Erdmann Neumeister, an orthodox Lutheran pastor in Hamburg, whose

liturgical texts were rich expressions of Lutheran piety at its best.<sup>12</sup> Unique to his approach were texts that went beyond the mere presentation of biblical texts; here the arias and recitatives provided commentary and interpretation. Soon others followed suit, with the further development of anchoring the cantata texts with Lutheran chorales.<sup>13</sup>

The texts that make up these commentaries are noteworthy for their expressiveness. Consider this example from Cantata 80, which is based on the chorale “A Mighty Fortress”:

Come into my heart’s abode,  
Lord Jesus, my desire.  
Drive out the world and Satan,  
And let thy image shine renewed within me.  
Be gone, vile horror of sin!  
Come into my heart’s abode,  
Lord Jesus, my desire.

From Cantata 140, which is based on the chorale “Wake, Awake,” Bach sets the following text for soprano and bass in a dialogue that ensues between the soul and Christ:

My beloved is mine!  
And I am yours!  
Love shall by naught be sundered!  
I will join thee—  
Thou shalt join me—  
To wander through heaven’s roses,  
Where pleasure in fullness, where joy will abound!

Finally, from Bach’s Ascension Oratorio, which is based not on a chorale but on the biblical account of the ascension from Acts 1, the following recitative and aria:

Ah, Jesus, is your departure so near?  
Ah, has the time now come when we must let you leave us?  
Ah, see how the hot tears roll down our pale cheeks,  
How we long for you,  
How much we need comfort.  
Ah, do not leave us yet!

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<sup>12</sup> Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, rev. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), 371.

<sup>13</sup> Wolff, 255.

Ah, stay then, dearest life,  
Ah, do not leave me so soon!  
Your farewell and early parting bring me the greatest pain,  
Ah yes, do stay longer here,  
Or I will be surrounded by grief.

The heartfelt language of these texts is almost palpable. In setting them to music, Bach made use of the latest musical expressions in order to draw careful attention to the texts. What's important to note is that while the texts give the appearance of a certain subjectivity, the objective proclamation of the Gospel consistently shines forth. Like the chorales with which they are paired, these texts always have Jesus and His saving benefits at their heart

As for what Bach would do today, perhaps he would tone down the subjective/personal language in his texts in order to highlight the objectivity of the Gospel. Still, much of the confusion that we experience today also existed at the time of Bach in the controversies between the orthodox and Pietist camps, and that did not prevent Bach from making use of these warm and introspective texts. In some ways, Bach's cantatas demonstrated a way of bridging the divide between those who were keen on handing down the church's rich liturgical tradition and—in the Pietist camp—those who sought a more heartfelt language.

### **The Lutheran Chorale at the Center**

Finally, any discussion of what Bach did back in his own century and what he would likely do were he here among us today must take into consideration his use of the Lutheran chorale in his church music. As Robert Bergt made plain yesterday in his presentation, the chorale was absolutely at the heart and center of Bach's compositional efforts. The people's familiarity with the chorales gave them an immediate connection with the newly composed cantatas. In fact, the use of chorales in the cantatas likely helped to soften the opposition of some

who questioned the appropriateness of using compositional techniques that were drawn from the secular world of Italian opera. Those debates, which erupted with full force at the very end of the seventeenth century, were still being heard in some quarters as late as the 1730s, up to a decade after Bach's incredible output of cantatas in the mid 1720s.<sup>14</sup>

That little tidbit of historical data actually provides us, I believe, with a good clue as to what Bach would do in our own day. If you think about it, Bach was quite progressive for his time. Rather than stay with older compositional forms, he adopts and adapts and refines and improves the very latest musical styles. Despite opposition from the Pietist camp—and even from some in the orthodox camp—Bach presses forward, always placing his considerable skills into the service of the Gospel.

### **Ingredients for a Successful Lutheran Cantor**

In this regard, Bach was really no different from his predecessors in the Lutheran cantorate. As Carl Schalk has demonstrated in his 2001 monograph, *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524–1672)*, the most significant Lutheran composers in the first 150 years of Lutheranism led the way in showing the church how to appropriate new musical styles in a responsible manner for use in the church. Characteristics that Schalk sees in these composers as being essential to their success include the following:

- All were musicians highly trained in their art and craft.
- All were musicians involved, in varying degrees, in the secular musical life of their day.
- All were musicians who wrestled in various ways with the challenges and implications of a “new” musical style for the church.
- All were musicians who found the liturgy and the worship of God's people to be the most natural and appropriate context for the great part of their music.

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<sup>14</sup> Kevorkian, 136–38.

- All of these musicians were influential as teachers.<sup>15</sup>

Of particular interest to our current situation is that third point concerning how these composers wrestled with developing a new musical style appropriate for the church. The approach they didn't take was simply to discard everything they had learned and practiced previously and then to write only in the new style. Rather than turning their backs on the tradition, each composer used the tradition—chiefly the Lutheran chorale—as a foundation onto which the latest compositional techniques were built.

These descriptions obviously apply quite well to Bach. Furthermore, they give us more than a few clues as to how Bach would carry on were he among us today. I doubt that he would be shy or timid with regard to the music he wrote for the church. I doubt that any style would be off limits, though Bach would bring his considerable skills to bear in molding and shaping whatever approach he took. Recognizing the importance of the church's heritage, he would build on that tradition, perhaps sometimes pushing it to the limits. The texts would be of paramount importance to Bach, since proclamation is always what the church is about. The chorale would likely be the launching pad for anything that Bach wrote, though by "chorale" I don't think he would limit himself to only one slice of the eclectic pie of congregational song that has grown over the centuries. Just as Bach drew upon the most recent texts of poets in his day, so would he recognize the genius of Christian poets in our day, even some who are not Lutheran!

## **Conclusion**

Whether God will ever again bless the church with another genius like Johann Sebastian Bach no one can say. Perhaps such inspiration will not be seen this side of heaven. But that gives

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<sup>15</sup> Carl Schalk, *Music in Early Lutheranism: Shaping the Tradition (1524–1672)* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2001), 181–84.

us no excuse not to roll up our own sleeves and get to work. God has blessed us with a variety of gifts that are just waiting to be pressed into service for the sake of the church. It does us no good to wring our hands or look over our shoulders to see where the next attack may be coming from. Nor will it be productive to limit ourselves, avoiding certain styles or texts out of fear that some might see us as capitulating. We need to encourage budding composers to hone their skills, and give freedom to our proven composers so that they, like Bach, can press on to the next level, to that new insight. Will they always be successful? No. Even Bach likely had a composer's scrap heap. But it will only be through trial and error that we will be able to press on to that next fresh expression of the grace of God, using His incredible gift of music to awaken faith in our generation and the next. Bach would expect nothing less!