

# Introduction

*John Butt*

## The context and aims of the project

Twenty years ago it would have been relatively easy to predict the contents of a *Cambridge companion to Bach*: a basic introduction to the composer's life and works, fundamental information to enhance analysis and appreciation, perhaps also a summary of recent research and performance. While the present volume hardly represents a radical departure from this brief, the situation is now considerably more complex than it was in the 1970s. First, with the publication of the *New Grove dictionary of music and musicians* and several important monographs on the life and works of J. S. Bach, there is already a sizeable and reliable literature for readers of every level. Secondly, there is the mushrooming of published material throughout all fields of music scholarship: now it is virtually impossible to do justice to every slant, every area of study, even to every field of Bach's compositional output. Finally, there are the interesting issues concerning musicology that have come to the fore during the last decade or so: what actually is music scholarship? what are its aims? how much should we be catering for 'music appreciation'? what is the significance today of a 'great' composer?

Bach studies have, in fact, set the tone for much music scholarship during the last thirty years. With the spectacular revisions to the chronology of Bach's cantatas in the late 1950s by Alfred Dürr and Georg von Dadelsen, overthrowing many fundamental assumptions about Bach's creative life and ever-increasing piety,<sup>1</sup> the next two decades were dominated by a style of research that valued certifiable fact above critical judgement or informed opinion. Much has changed during the last decade or so: 'positivism' – as the activity of fact-gathering has, somewhat grandly, been named – has often been branded the occupation only of the dull and bibliographically-minded, while 'criticism' and – most importantly – interdisciplinary work are, to some, the direction for the elect.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, this attitude may not always take it into account that not all 'new musicology' achieves Olympian heights of insight and inspiration and that 'positivism', at its best, often produces information that is of enduring value, providing the basis for a wide range of interpretative

approaches. Furthermore, the vast majority of ‘newer musicology’ is concerned with music of the nineteenth century and beyond, the era in which musical culture becomes self-reflective and concerned with its own hermeneutic richness; in other words, only composers later than Bach have so far proved suitable objects for the (post)modern approaches. I suspect that many people who are attracted to Bach, as listeners, musicians or scholars, find it difficult to question what they see as the innate quality of his music. To the ‘Bach believer’ this music may seem to exist on its own terms, to a degree enjoyed by virtually no other repertory; only the plethora of attitudes towards Bach tend to be open for discussion and evaluation.

On the other hand, given that there is much new critical work on the Renaissance and early Baroque, it might not be too long before Bach is drawn into the ‘new musicological’ fold. There is a small but growing body of writing linking Bach’s career and compositional achievements to a specific cultural and social commentary,<sup>3</sup> and Adorno’s occasional use of Bach and the concept of counterpoint in his more abstract cultural theory has been emulated and developed in recent years by the work of Edward Said.<sup>4</sup> Bach has also made a tentative entrance into the field of gender studies.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, many readers will find these more radical approaches irrelevant – at best – to Bach studies and appreciation. Yet few could maintain that Bach is entirely unaffected by the turn against the factual and the certain. Indeed, it is almost ironic that a general concern with criticism and hermeneutics has engendered a return to something of the style of scholarship that was prevalent before the positivist revolution of the late 1950s. Eric Chafe’s recent book on allegory in Bach’s music can almost be seen as an update of the theological-hermeneutic approach of earlier scholars, such as Friedrich Smend.<sup>6</sup> At the very least, studies of this kind provide material for a type and level of debate that was all but impossible during the 1960s and 70s. Bibliographic, factual scholarship still provides the mainstay of Bach studies; indeed, the sources are still by no means comprehensively examined, and, if they were, each new generation would continue to bring new approaches and outlooks that might ask new questions and, indeed, find new ‘facts’. But the most productive sign of a newer approach to Bach scholarship is the widening of the field by scholars who have already proved their qualifications in studies of the sources and historical context.

One of the primary aims of this *Companion* is to show both the achievements of Bach research and the possibilities for further directions. It is designed to provide much of the background information for Bach’s career and social context together with proposals for the analysis and

### 3 Introduction

understanding of the music. The foremost purpose might be to offer a companion to ‘thinking about Bach’, the angles from which he and his music might be viewed. There is, after all, no extant study that attempts to summarise much of the current thinking on Bach and his oeuvre. We need an introduction to this great composer from perspective of the late twentieth century, something which will appeal to a wide readership, going beyond a basic biographical ‘life and works’ study.

*The Cambridge companion to Bach* draws on a remarkably rich consortium of Bach scholars – German, American and British – all commissioned to present material which summarises the current state of Bach research while pointing towards possible directions for further enquiry. The book is designed in three major sections: 1. the historical context of Bach, the society, beliefs and world-view of his age; 2. profiles of the music, and Bach’s compositional stance; 3. finally, influence and reception, a field that is central to cultural history today and one that is relatively new in Bach research. The bibliography provides an up-to-date, but critically selective list of the most important writings to appear since the *New Grove* publication; it also lists some of the more enduring writings from earlier years.

### Summary of chapters

The *Companion* begins with Malcolm Boyd’s examination of the phenomenon of the musical family, considering the extent to which this reflects the conception of music as a craft to be passed from one generation to another. This chapter provides a useful background to the Bach family as a whole and to the shape of Bach’s career with regard to the family tradition. In Chapter 2 Ulrich Siegele examines the shape of Bach’s Leipzig career within the political context of his age, showing how most of his conflicts with the school and town council stemmed from his attempts to fulfil an absolutist commission within a municipal city. It is impossible that Bach could have stood apart from the local and state political conflicts of his age. This angle, virtually ignored in the past, illuminates many aspects of his creative personality which are usually seen as belonging exclusively to the religious or ‘purely musical’ realms.

In recent years, the religious context of Bach’s career has regained something of its former status as a primary focus of Bach studies. However, there is not much reliable general information on the actual quality and shape of religious practice in Bach’s age; much previous writing is overly conditioned by the authors’ own confessional beliefs and thus often fails to recognise the diversity of Reformation traditions, even

within Lutheranism itself. In Chapter 3 Robin Leaver provides an overview of the Lutheran Reformation, a summary of the reformer's theological understanding of music and an investigation of the various musical implications of the liturgical reforms. The chapter concludes with an outline of the musical content and scope of the Lutheran liturgies.

In Chapter 4 John Butt considers Bach's attitude to music, his conception of both its manner of existence and its function. This approach not only complements the more usual religious explanations of Bach's creative stance but actually suggests that there may have been a conflict between his beliefs in the metaphysics of music and his religious orthodoxy. The following chapter examines some of the same attitudes in the light of three of the major rationalist philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. While it would be fallacious to posit a direct, influential link between Bach's musical thought and that of contemporary philosophers, the juxtaposition may show how Bach's conception of music may run parallel to certain attitudes to metaphysics and the nature of reality and, from the historical angle, that the beliefs and conceptions of a particular age can pervade more than one mode of creative thought.

Stephen Crist opens the second part of the study with a summary of the current state of research on Bach's early works (pre-Weimar), with special emphasis on their relationship to the musical traditions of seventeenth-century Germany. No field of Bach research has changed more over the past fifteen years or so, and the general picture of the early years that is emerging will greatly influence our picture of Bach as a musical personality. In all, this study does much to compensate for the bias towards 'late works' that is prevalent in so many studies of the greater composers.

In Chapter 7 Robin Leaver, building on the background of Chapter 3, provides a thorough survey of liturgical practice in Leipzig. After discussing the 'problem' of Bach's frequent reuse of music written for secular purposes within a sacred context (the issue of *parody*), he examines some of the major church music with special attention to how the various categories of church composition fulfil differing roles within the liturgy. Although there is hardly space to do justice to all fields (such as the vast majority of church cantatas), the information is presented in such a way that it can illuminate virtually any church composition by Bach. Werner Breig's study of the instrumental music in Chapter 8 shows the various biases in the stylistic categorisation and examination of Bach's instrumental music and proposes using Bach's own stylistic and generic distinctions as a starting point. He examines the varying functions and forms of the instrumental music throughout Bach's career, giving particular attention to his reworking of established genres.

## 5 Introduction

Richard Jones's examination of the keyboard music shows that the 'Clavier' is the medium through which Bach united his own study of music, composition, performance and instruction. The initial interest in keyboard performance and composition evidences the two contrasting pillars supporting so much of his compositional career, namely his facility in virtuoso improvisation, on the one hand, and his desire to create order in sound, on the other. This concise survey shows that Bach's development as a keyboard composer reflects much of his entire career as a composer.

In Chapter 10 Werner Breig looks at Bach's habit of arranging and transcribing music by himself and others. The insights we gain into Bach's work as editor and arranger give us a clue as to how he may initially have learned and developed as a composer. Moreover, given that he was still reusing earlier music in the very last years of his life, it seems that the impulses to arrange, transcribe, transfer and improve are all fundamental to his character as a composer *per se*.

Part II closes with an appropriately 'close reading' of Bach's music. Laurence Dreyfus, in Chapter 11, adopts an analytical stance that values the composer's intentions and mechanisms of composition above any purely abstract and formal results. Using some techniques and terminology from linguistics, he shows how Bach chooses to emulate the rigours of a highly intelligent machine which researches musical material for both its possibilities and its limitations. He shows that Bach's activity at the level of *invention* (as opposed to the formal layout and ultimate *disposition* of the material) is central to Bach's work as a composer and represents the area in which the supreme quality of his music resides. Far from being the anonymous transmitter of pure abstracted form, Bach emerges as a profoundly human figure.

Opening Part III, on Bach's influence and reception, Stephen Daw's study (Chapter 12) straddles the divide between those figures who were influenced by Bach during his lifetime, through his direct teaching, and the 'grandpupils' and collectors of his music in the latter part of the eighteenth century. The diversity and flexibility of his approach to teaching pupils of various abilities and backgrounds throughout his career provides an interesting window into his priorities and conceptions as a composer.

One aspect of Bach reception that is especially relevant to the present age is the variety of ways in which his music has been interpreted in performance. In Chapter 13 George B. Stauffer surveys the history of Bach performance, showing how each generation has performed Bach's music in its own way – a way that usually reflects the cultural ideology of the time. Stauffer gives particular attention to the development of the 'historical performance movement', the attitude that seeks to restore the styles

and methods of performance advocated by the composer. In the case of Bach, this can be traced back to the editions and writings of the mid-nineteenth century and to the rebellion against Romantic style in the first decades of the twentieth century. The chapter concludes with a look at the most recent trends in historical performance, which include the turn towards a more subjective approach to interpretation.

In Chapter 14 Martin Zenck summarises the parameters within which the history of Bach reception can be written, drawing particular attention to the problems involved: the ubiquity of Bach's influence, the mythologising of Bach and the question of the historical and ontological difference between Bach's perspective and our own. In fact, the history of Bach reception has been characterised by a constant reinterpretation of Bach's music: it has continually been brought into the present. In Chapter 15, rather than giving a sequential account of the entire history of Bach reception, Zenck offers several case studies of composers who have drawn on Bach's influence, showing – above all – that the most interesting composers are those who show their debt to Bach by changing and adapting his music rather than slavishly following his model.