

THE WORKMANSHIP OF BACH

BEFORE I begin to discuss a few details of Bach's workmanship, I wish to make one or two general observations upon his attitude to work.

If we read the life of Bach and the life of Wagner we become aware of a striking difference in their attitude to their work. Both are supreme artists, both are highly-skilled craftsmen, both are impelled by a noble desire to produce great and good music, but whereas Bach works for art only, Wagner works for art and self. Bach was the last of the simple-hearted mediæval craftsmen. And just as the carpenters and silversmiths made their wares because their neighbours wanted them, and made them beautiful because they loved their work, so Bach wrote nearly all his music because the community required it, and he made it perfect in proportion and design because he loved it. Nearly all that he wrote was born of the community's need. He was not the man to supply the work and then create the demand. Even the organ preludes and fugues, written to display his own technical skill, were born of the occasion's necessity. In those days a man was expected to play well and the music (what more natural than that it should be his own composition?) merely served to exhibit his skill. To devise a base analogy, we might say that a cricketer of the present day is successful in that he makes runs. A great batsman, call him Jack Brooke, makes incredible scores with bats of his own make. The spectators cheer his centuries and take for granted the bats, with which the centuries are compiled; of course they are good bats, say they, otherwise he could not make those tremendous scores. Not until Jack Brooke has been long dead do cricketers slowly realise that the great thing about him was not so much his run-getting, unprecedented though it was, but his bat-making.

This analogy takes us, as the immortal sergeant-major said, from the sublime to the perpendicular, but it is roughly true. Of Bach's other works, we know whence the actual orders came; the weddings, the funerals, the Church's Fasts and Festivals; the record is complete. I imagine that Bach's thoughts ran—"We shall want a new cantata next Sunday," then, with a heavy sigh, "I suppose I must settle down to work." Of course, it is probable that the works, called into

existence by some special occasion, were perfected at leisure, because Bach was too conscientious a craftsman to tolerate any glaring imperfections in his work.

Furthermore, there was something god-like in his fecundity. Like Nature, he crowded every corner with life and beauty, nor did he limit his work to any one branch of composition. He wrote in nearly every form and it is probable that each form benefited by his work in the others. All the seeds that he sowed were not of the best quality; some were merely weeds, some withered and died, but the most grew and blossomed into everlasting flowers. He himself must have known that his work was unequal and in fairness to him we must recognise the inequality. One of the greatest mistakes of modern critics is that, having transformed Bach the man into Bach the demi-god, they accept the best and worst without insight or discrimination. Just as Shakespeare was the greatest professional poet, so Bach was the greatest professional composer, and, having much hack-work to do, he was compelled by necessity to draw upon his professional skill to tide himself over those arid places until his inspiration flowed again. How angry, therefore, would he have been to hear those professional passages, which he knew were bad, praised with as much fervour as those other passages which he knew were quite his best.

Another feature of Bach's workmanship is the speed with which he composed and the leisure with which he revised. Anyone who has tried writing, copying and rehearsing cantatas can estimate the speed with which Bach must have written (and legibly, too), but with Bach a first performance of a work did not mean that it had reached its final form. He did not have to contend against that baleful temptation, immediate publication—a temptation which has been the ruin of so many successful composers whose work passes wet from the pen to expose its shame and pretence in unforgiving, inexorable print.

There is another aspect of Bach's attitude to work which, I admit, is pure conjecture and for which I can produce no evidence. This conjecture is that Bach meant his music to sound as intelligible and straightforward as that of his contemporaries. He was amazed, no doubt, when his friends confessed, either by their silence or their words, that they did not comprehend his meaning and certainly he did not console himself with any fictitious comfort that he was born out of time and that he wrote for posterity. The idea that to be misunderstood indicates that a man is in advance of his time, and therefore a genius, is of recent growth and I feel certain that it was a real disappointment to Bach, as it was to Beethoven, that his music was unappreciated. To him his music was perfectly normal and that

anyone should find it strange must have been in his opinion well-nigh incredible.

II.

Bach stands in the world of art with Dante and Milton, men who had a definite philosophy to give to the world and who, never swerving from their main purpose, were able to expound that philosophy in language of great grandeur and adorn it with thoughts of great beauty. No other composer put such deep thinking into music and no other composer was so extravagant with lovely phrases. Frequently these phrases are thrown aside and ignored; where they fell, there they lie, nor are they ever pressed into use again. To Bach, beauty was incidental to a bigger and grander scheme which his mind was fashioning. To follow one of his extended movements is like going for a walk through lovely country in company with a poet who is also a mighty thinker. Never for a moment is the object of our journey forgotten, but as we walk our host draws our attention to some sights we might have missed—some rare and lovely flower which Nature carefully hides, or else to some sudden burst of scenery through the trees, or some strange pattern traced among the clouds. But still we walk, and when we come to our journey's end we know that we have done some healthful task and gathered every beauty by the way.

Other composers when they create a lovely phrase become so deeply in love with it that they are for ever insisting upon its beauty. To follow a composition by one of these composers is like walking round and round a small suburban garden while one's host expatiates upon the poisonous beauty of the belladonna.

To return to Bach. Some of his movements are a succession of lovely phrases so skilfully woven together that it is difficult to say which is the principal motive or which is the most beautiful. Of such formation is the aria on the G string. In some movements these incidental phrases, though seemingly in the composer's eyes of negligible value, frequently overshadow their surroundings. Let us examine one or two arias from the *St. Matthew Passion*. The first shall be the aria for soprano, flute and two oboi da caccia (No. 58, Novello edition, Elgar and Atkins). Though the opening bars are of pathetic beauty, it is not until we reach letter C that the soul is ravished. At the words "So eternal desolation," the melody hovers over a throbbing bass, then sweeps in a lovely double curve on to a new harmony. This is repeated in a new key to the words "and the sinner's righteous doom," but after that it is never heard again. An even shorter-lived phrase occurs in Aria No. 70—"See the Saviour's

outstretched hands." Here the orchestral introduction is eight bars long and of no remarkable beauty except towards the close, but on its repetition and expansion with the voice Bach enriches it with a new melodic line culminating at letter B in a phrase of heart-easing beauty, which was lying unheard in the original dull fourth bar until called by the composer into audible life.

These phrases stand isolated; they have neither development nor antecedent. With what feverish excitement would most other composers have seized upon such darling fancies; how cruelly would they have overworked them; how thickly would they have hedged them round with expression marks—*dolce, con gran espress., douce, avec une extase sublime*. But Bach appears to know not the value of his jewels or else he is too wealthy and too prodigal to ensure their proper treatment, entrusting them for better or worse to the care of future editors and performers.

III.

To the casual listener, the most striking feature about Bach's music is perhaps the activity of his basses. This activity is noticeable in all movements, be they grave or gay, slow or quick. It is through this fundamental activity that Bach gives his music such irresistible momentum, and causes it to sound so much faster than other music which actually travels through more notes per minute than his own. The basses are always driving against the melody so that each seems to be going faster by contrast with the other, just as two trains travelling in opposite directions seemingly double their own velocity. Mere rapidity of notes, so loved by Thalbergian composers, produce no sense of motion because the harmonic centres, chiefly controlled by the bass or the implied bass, are slow-moving and without purpose. Frequently, in these flimsy salon-pieces, one foundation chord is made to bear the weight of two bars' vapidity and the result is that our minds yawn after a very few bars. But when the bass is continually changing, and thereby giving fresh points of view at every moment, we are kept straining to follow the composer's argument, just as a gifted orator, whose mind is very fertile, charges his speech with so many thoughts that the listeners' minds are kept continually straining to keep pace with his reasoning. Mere verbal fluency does not make a man's speech vital, it simply increases his capacity to bore.

Very rarely do Bach's basses fail, and where they do the music invariably becomes cloudy and dull. The final movement of *Phæbus and Pan* does not sound as charming as its appearance promises because its foundations are badly laid. I have tried to coax conviction

from that movement, but in spite of delicate cajolery, in spite of passionate pounding, it remains, as always, awkward and unresponsive. Another momentary failure of the bass occurs in the chorale-prelude "Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland." Here for one bar (15) the bass moves in an irresolute, niggling fashion entirely out of keeping with what goes before. Probably an early editor is responsible for this slight aberration from the true Bach line.

That these failures are difficult to find proves that it was Bach's first care to provide strong basses and that he did not rely upon furious scales and shakes to provide a factitious exhilaration as later composers have done. This contrapuntal method of composition involves great labour and mental fortitude, because when once the hand has been put to the plough there is no looking back. The composition of a fugue is like running a quarter-mile race; when once the pace has been set there can be no rests or easies, though the strain of endurance may be agonising and the temptation to throw up the enterprise well-nigh overwhelming.

IV.

We will now examine the *St. Matthew Passion* and try to discover how Bach faced certain problems of composition. As a work it must be classed as an epic drama, comparable to "The Dynasts" of Thomas Hardy. It does not move continuously, as do the Wagnerian dramas, but it punctuates the story with reflective arias and choruses and is the very type of drama which Wagner sought to destroy. Though there is a great deal to be said for the Wagnerian drama, and certainly Wagner said it, there is also a great deal to be said for the epic drama. Wagner unfolds his story continuously, like a cinema (we must, of course, ignore the pauses when the film stars exhibit their inanimate faces just to show that, though they behave like human beings, they are really quite without intelligence). In this continuous unfolding of the story we see the emotions as they affect the participators in the drama, but we cannot stop to consider their full significance, nor yet the author's personal point of view. With Bach it is different. We follow the story being unfolded in a series of pictures in which we can see the emotions of the moment perpetuated for all time; or we might go further and say that we can see the emotions of the moment fixed in everlasting marble, so that we can examine the effect of the emotion upon a person, or group of persons, from every point of view. Bach does not let St. Peter pass from the stage at the words, "And he went out and wept bitterly"; but he lets us feel the agonising grief and shame of St. Peter, turning to each one of us the while and saying, "Thou art the man." Then the drama continues.

In setting any long poem to music, such as the *St. Matthew Passion* or *The Twilight of the Gods*, only the few great moments of the libretto are clear to the composer when he begins his share of the work. These great moments cause him no difficulty, for the music they demand springs to his mind spontaneously. The real difficulties begin when he tries to set to music the necessary but dull passages which every long work must contain. Many composers use *recitativo secco*. This has several advantages: it makes each sentence or clause clear and sharply defined, it gives the ear temporary relief, it is capable of creating a different mood in a single moment. Bach frequently, and Wagner occasionally, uses this method of narration; but both found that something else was needful, so each invented a system of thought. Wagner called his system "representative themes." Bach used, without naming it, a system of symbolic figures. In both cases the systems were developed to help the composer, not the listener. These systems are but scaffold-poles which the composer puts up to help his building operations. When the building is completed, the scaffold-poles should be removed. And just as it is no concern of the beholder to know where the scaffold-poles of a noble cathedral stood (though it may be useful to the student), so it is no concern of the audience to know what process of composition a composer used in producing his masterpiece. In both cases it is the final result which is important. To insist upon what the composer had in his mind when writing is to misunderstand the workings of the spirit. It may be true, for instance, that Heine, in his poem "Du bist wie eine Blume," was addressing a pig; yet it does not justify a composer setting it to music in a pig-stylish manner. Nor would string-players be justified in baisting their instruments with boiling gravy while playing Beethoven's last quartet, because we happen to know that he was thinking of his cook when composing it. The thoughts which gave a work birth perished in the act, just as the seed that is sown perishes in giving life to the flower.

Wagner's system of identifying themes with definite emotions has one great drawback, which is that if the drama has but little action and but few words the music lacks variety. In this respect *Tristan* suffers badly as a result of its very perfection. Suppose that Bach had used this system in the *Passion* (he did so once or twice), the music would have been drenched with one or two motives which might be labelled "resignation" or "fear of death." But Bach's system is entirely different. He does not write phrases to symbolise particular emotions or things, but he uses characteristic rhythms and outlines. Thus, though joy is always symbolised by a joyful rhythm, the joy of one motive differs from the joy of another motive in all but general

features. This means that unity of style is preserved without monotony of repetition. To Wagner and his disciples some dominating emotion or personality must be like some tiresome, ever-recurring aunt (let Fanny Price be the patient composer, then the dominating personality is Aunt Norris). This tedious, talkative creature is always coming to call, and we would willingly bury her in the back garden but for the honour of our principles. It is amusing to notice how long-suffering composers, goaded to desperation by some ever-recurring theme, bury it in the bass, hoping that in so doing their hospitality will not be impugned and that the other guests will be relieved from its tedious chatter.

Again, Bach accepted certain conventions which Wagner discarded much to his obvious embarrassment. The two conventions generally accepted by composers in the composition of an extended choral work are : (i) Concerted singing; (ii) pieces set in formal structure.

The first convention is the result of the natural craving for the joy of hearing voices sounding together, and it is a joy, born not of any particular time or fashion, but of some deeply-rooted human instinct. To satisfy this craving composers arranged to have duets, trios, etc., and full choruses to round off periods. Bach adopted this convention because the æsthetic pleasure derived therefrom was great and because it provided a variety of delights with a natural feeling for balance. This convention offends the realists on two counts. First, because two or more people do not talk together at the same time in polite society, and, secondly, because people do not let off their emotional crises in rhetorical outbursts. The first offence has a musical justification, the second requires none, for at the hands of a great composer the arias following these crises are the expression of emotions which baffle our powers of speech in our daily lives. What can the average man say at the tragic moments of life but "How terrible! how appalling!" and what else does an ordinary man say at the moments of exaltation but "How splendid!" or, if he is a very clever young man, "How simply topping!" It is given, then, to the composer to make articulate the real emotions which lie behind these trivialities.

The second convention—pieces set in formal structure—is the result of the eternal antagonism between drama and music. Drama demands compression; music thrives in expansion. To provide both the drama and the music with conditions suitable for their success, Bach gives the drama control of the music when speed is required, and music control of the drama when the tension is relaxed, at which point he was able to let the music run its own course at the beck of its own spirit.

My object is not to throw new light upon the *St. Matthew Passion*,

but rather to use the *St. Matthew Passion* for shedding new light upon our own difficult path. Certainly, it contains the gospel of Sebastian Bach, for into it, through its many years of cerebration and revision, he incorporated the fruits of his life—some pet progression, some treasured phrase, some favourite chorus, some complete vindication of a previously doubtful experiment.

Bach in his compositions established for all time a fixed standard of criticism for all who try to compose good music, and in his life he set up an ideal of unselfishness and devotion for all who sincerely love their art. To posterity he left no textbook for writing nor rules for the conduct of life, but there is no composer who cannot take his newly finished work to this unbiased critic and hear from his silent pages a mute condemnation of some accommodating part-writing, some sterile counterpoint, some featureless bass, some squareness of phraseology, and catch in exchange an audible approval of some strange flow of harmony, some delight in a quaint turn of rhythm, some amazement at the originality and variety of the orchestration. There we have him, but Bach wins on points.

ALEXANDER BRENT SMITH.