

Review: Patently Obvious

Reviewed Work(s): Bach and the Patterns of Invention by Laurence Dreyfus

Review by: Ivan Hewett

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whose open vowels and pure tone did full justice to its rarefied qualities. In a fine piece, 'Debussy and Satie', Robert Orledge shows human insight in his depiction of these two characters, their individual chemistries fruitfully sparking each other off in very different directions. Mutually supportive through difficult times as they found their own specifically French musical solutions to Austro-German domination, yet sadly the friendship broke in 1917 with the success of Satie's *Parade*. There is a good deal of vivid detail, not least the appetising digression about Debussy's prowess in the kitchen.

Patently obvious

IVAN HEWETT

Bach and the patterns of invention

Laurence Dreyfus

Harvard UP (Cambridge, Mass. & London, 1997); xii, 270pp; £29.95. ISBN 0 674 06005 9.

This brilliant book sets out to answer one of the enduring mysteries of music – namely, what was the compositional method that allowed Bach to write such a vast quantity of music of such surpassing quality? Bach himself suggested that method lay behind his achievement – 'anybody could do as much if they worked as hard' he is said to have remarked. But how could something as mundane as method lead, time and time again, to music of such wonderful unpredictability, which engages with the conventions and forms of the era only to subvert and surpass them?

The 19th century's answer to that question was to say simply that Bach was 'beyond history'. But as the patient labours of 20th-century musicology have shown, Bach's music is determined in a myriad ways by its creator's position as a courtly *Kapellmeister* and expositor of the Lutheran faith. Since then, the rise of 'new historicism' and deconstruction have dissolved any remnants of Bach as a god-like creator. It takes a brave man to go against both new and old musicology, and assert that Spitta may have had a point; but that is the message of Dreyfus's provocative book. He takes his cue from Adorno's essay 'Bach defended from his devotees'. This portrays Bach as an archaic figure, who set his face against the modern idea of music as *gaudium*, i.e. something aimed at a specific consumer, and therefore pleasurable, agreeable, communicative. The lofty masterworks of Bach's final years cleaved more than ever to a notion of music as a *res severa*, pursuing its own logic in sublime



JSB: master of invention

ignorance of notions of taste or decorum. As Dreyfus admits, 'Adorno's view, which understands Bach simultaneously as both modern and archaic, results in a compelling image, and one that has silently been pulling more than a few strings throughout much of the present book'.

Compelling it may be, but it's hardly connected in any convincing way with the fine detail of Bach's music. What Dreyfus has done is turn that ideal image into a convincing 'warts-and-all' portrait, so as to restore Adorno's view as a living force in our thinking about Bach. The problem, as he himself declares at the outset, is that he shares some of Adorno's impatience with musicology, which is embarrassed by notions of the transcendent, and which wants to turn Bach into a safe composer, 'fit for Baroque organ festivals'. As Dreyfus says

music history and analysis... are well equipped to provide a kind of refuge

from the problem of aesthetic understanding... The challenge lies therefore in developing a critical language in which [Bach's] greatness can be transmitted while at the same time trying to say something other than what is already intuited when performing and listening to this music.

That 'something' can't be entirely 'other', – otherwise we would end up with another ingeniously elaborated 'refuge from the problem of aesthetic understanding'. What's needed is a concept that fills the gap between hazy intuition on one side, and dry historical and analytical fact on the other. Dreyfus's idea of 'invention' fills that gap brilliantly, partly by remaining deliberately ambiguous. In the first chapter the author says that an invention 'must be more than a static, well-crafted object, but instead like a mechanism [*sic*], that triggers further elaborative thought'. Already we have an image of something both

concrete – a static well-crafted object – and something pregnant with possibilities. Take, for instance, the C major two-part invention, which Dreyfus takes as his *locus classicus*. Our first instinct might be to identify the ‘invention’ of this piece with ex.1, the little seven-note theme that launches the piece – but one of the striking things about inventions is that they are never reducible to themes; they are always segments of a complete vertical texture. For a segment to qualify as an invention it must recur several times unchanged; unchanged, that is in its ‘essence’. We hear it as ‘the same thing’. What does change is the invention’s ‘accidents’, in other words, the function (usually harmonic) it’s called on the fulfil at that particular moment in the piece. This absolute cleavage between material, on the one hand, and its placing on the other, Bach took from rhetoric, where *inventio* – the subject matter – and *dispositio* – its arrangement in an argument – were regarded as completely separate operations. For Bach, therefore, composition consisted of three stages. First conceive of an invention that would retain its identity under the maximum number of functional changes; secondly, work out all those changes; thirdly, lay out those changes ‘in a reasonable order, taking into account both their function and more general harmonic guidelines.’

So far, the hypothesis – astonishing though it is – is unimpeachably historical. Rhetoric was after all part of the education of every composer (although, as Dreyfus candidly admits, Bach probably had no more than a smattering of it). What lifts Bach above his own time is that he noticed a hidden potential in the commonplaces of rhetoric that they had missed. Bach alone realised that, translated into the musical sphere, the divorce between *inventio* and *dispositio* would create a veritable logic of discovery, a means both of creating and arranging musical material, and of testing its properties.

The first part of this process Dreyfus has already given us. What follows is a searching enquiry, conducted with impressive rigour and historical tact, of the way Bach’s inventive procedures combine with, enrich, and sometimes contradict the conventional forms, genres and harmonic possibilities of his time. In the second chapter Dreyfus shows how Bach’s French dance forms went far beyond their models in terms of inventive rigour, but at the cost of distorting the genre. Loading a genre with too much invention was one way of giving it an unusual expressive depth; another method was to mix traits from different genres in single piece, an aspect of Bach’s

Ex.1: Bach: Two-part invention no.1, RH bar 1



music that often drew disapproving comments. This ambiguity at the semantic level might be reflected by an ambiguity at the syntactic level, whereby patterns of *dispositio* common to a certain genre might be confirmed in one parameter of the music and denied in another. In one of many fascinating analyses, Dreyfus shows how in the Sinfonia from Cantata BWV 35, Bach endows each section of the ritornello with a certain harmonic function. Having done this, ‘he need no longer observe the convention that the orchestra must play them... the tutti-soli contrast... no longer determines the shape of the movement but becomes part of the decoration’.

It’s not just the expectations of a genre that Bach’s patterns of inventions could collide with. They might also produce results that are dissonant with harmonic practice. Dreyfus devotes several fascinating pages to showing how the first movement of Brandenburg Concerto no.2 is based on an ideal ritornello which never actually appears in the piece. Dreyfus retraces a compositional process in which Bach, in trying to work out all the harmonic transformations of this ideal ritornello, discovers that the central *Fortspinnung* section is defective in the major mode (in the sense of producing wrong syntax), and the opening *Vordersatz* section defective in the minor mode (because it fails to do the job of establishing a tonic). To avoid these defects, Bach is forced to present versions of the ritornello which are defective in a different sense: they are missing part of their normal anatomy (e.g. they lack part of the *Fortspinnung* section). (The sense that a piece may be answerable to two incommensurable sets of rules, one to do with harmonic grammar, another to do with the ‘logic of inventions’, introduces the notion of a tragic flaw in Bach’s view of music which Dreyfus will return to.) In the chapter ‘The status of a genre’ Dreyfus shows how the notion of an unheard ideal model can extend to an entire work. He shows how the G minor gamba sonata exceeds its modest genre by incorporating signs of concerto form. It does this by pointing ‘sometimes to the presence of two fictive soloists, sometimes to the presence of an orchestral tutti’.

The notion of Bach’s works gesturing towards an ideal unheard work is seduc-

tive. What makes it so compelling is the way Dreyfus inverts the normal conception of how that image relates to the finished piece. Instead of being the *Einfall* that precedes hard work, the ideal work becomes the residue of that process; the sum-total of all the transformations that for some practical reason were rejected, together with those that actually made it into the music.

What Dreyfus is combating with his notion of invention is the idea that because Bach’s music is ‘out of time’ – both in the sense of the compositional method that led to it, and its dissonance with the norms of his era – there must therefore be an ‘essence’ of Bach. It is of the essence of essences that they are unfettered by time and circumstance – but the whole thrust of Dreyfus’s argument is that the ideal nature of Bach’s music is grounded in its historical circumstance. Riding on the back of ‘essence’ are other romantic ideas of artistic creation, and Dreyfus knows that he must unseat them as well. Among these is ‘thematicism’ – for what is an *Einfall* if not the ‘seed’ that leads to a work? In his opening chapter, Dreyfus was at pains to point out that an invention is not a theme. (He might, to amplify that point, have spelt out something that only becomes clear when you peer at his analysis of the C major invention. This is that there may be no thematic connection whatever between the handful of inventions that make up a given piece. What links them is their common membership of a scheme of *dispositio* – what we would call arrangement. So there is no ‘essential’ link between inventions – only the ‘accidents’ of their placing.) But in the fifth chapter this aside is elevated to a polemical broadside against the entire organicist view of music, as embodied in the ideas of Schenker. Dreyfus’s tartly sums up the organicist view as that of ‘music as a vegetable’ – something which grows miraculously from an *Urlinie* or a motif. Against this he sets the ‘sublime mechanism’ of Bach’s method. The two are totally incompatible, as he convincingly shows.

Another rider on the back of ‘essence’ is ‘style’. But for Dreyfus there is no single Bach style: ‘Style presupposes a genre – or rather, to put it another way, the choice of genre leads to a certain style. Bach is the same, except that his ‘patterns of invention’



were conceived 'against the grain' of typical expectations for that genre.' But over and above that, isn't there a Bach fingerprint that we can discern across genres? Dreyfus concedes the point, but feels it's a trivial one:

... we persist in speaking of Bach's style as if it were something tangible, a composite of features that can decide questions of authenticity or determine a chronology. ... this problem... originates in the metaphor of style itself, that someone's style is akin to her *stylus* or signature.

According to the philosopher Richard Wollheim, this metaphorical blending of style and signature hides a deep conceptual difference. Referring specifically to the visual arts he says:

Signature is that collection of characteristics of an artist's work that we use to assign his works, and the concepts are not only different, they are not extensionally equivalent. There will be stylistic features in an artist's work that are not signature, and, more importantly, there will be signature features that are not stylistic.¹

As an example of signature Wollheim gives the owl that appears constantly in the paintings of Met de Blaes, whatever the subject matter, and goes on: 'Briefly I would say that what makes such features non-stylistic is that they are context-free; that they inadequately interrelate with the structural or integrative principles of the artist's work.' Bearing this definition in mind, how would we distinguish 'signature' and 'style' in Bach? I imagine Dreyfus would say that a feature is stylistic if it

illuminates Bach's relationship with a given style, form, or genre. But what about this harmonic turn, which occurs everywhere in Bach (ex.2)? It seems hard to relegate this deep and pregnant gesture to the level of the Met de Blaes owl, which seems like the painterly equivalent of a nervous tic. And yet its appearance in every imaginable context in Bach's music would make it 'non-stylistic' in Dreyfus's view.

I mention this not to indicate a flaw in Dreyfus's argument, but only to show that his view of Bach's inventions leads to some puzzles. But this is as it should be. Only small ideas are watertight – and Dreyfus's new vision of Bach has led him to a concept of the creative process which is far from small. On the contrary, it is vastly suggestive, in ways which illumine many things beyond Bach. (For example, it points to a connection between the constructivist ideals of the modernists and the smallness of their output. Shackled to essentialist notions of art, they're debarred from the enabling division of creation into *inventio* and *dispositio*.) As for Bach himself, he emerges as simultaneously more colossal than ever, and more human. For written in to the fabric of his supposedly 'sublime' works is the notion of human failure and insufficiency. The inventive work runs up, time and again, against the limits of what the musical *lingua franca* of his time could deliver. It's a moving and convincing picture of Bach, and a thoroughly original one, delivered in lucid prose in which close argumentation is often capped by an illuminating metaphor. Like Bach's music, it is rhetorical in the best sense.

1. Richard Wollheim, 'Pictorial style: two views', in *The mind and its depths* (Harvard UP, 1993), p.183.

BOOKS RECEIVED

- Juliane Brand & Christopher Hailey, ed.:** *Constructive dissonance: Arnold Schoenberg and the transformations of 20th-century culture*. University of California Press, £35.
- Alan Chedzoy:** *Sheridan's nightingale: the story of Elizabeth Linley*. Allison & Busby, £15.99.
- David Fanning:** *Nielsen: Symphony no.5*. Cambridge UP, £25, £8.95 pbk.
- Patricia Hall:** *A view of Berg's Lulu through the autograph sources*. University of California Press, £32.
- Bernard Harrison:** *Haydn's keyboard music: studies in performance practice*. Clarendon Press, £48.
- George R. Hill & Norris L. Stephens:** *Collected editions, historical series & sets, & monuments of music: a bibliography*. Fallen Leaf Press, \$250.
- Paul Hillier:** *Arvo Pärt*. Clarendon Press, £30, £12.99 pbk.
- John Irving:** *Mozart's piano sonatas: contexts, sources, style*. Cambridge UP, £35.
- Jack Lawson:** *Carl Nielsen*. Phaidon Press, £14.99 pbk.
- Franz Liszt: Sämtliche Schriften 3: Die Goethe-Stiftung.** Breitkopf & Härtel, DM136.
- Robin Maconie:** *The science of music*. Clarendon Press, £19.99.
- Antony Pople, ed.:** *The Berg companion*. Cambridge UP, £40, £14.95 pbk.
- Christian Martin Schmidt, ed.:** *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy: Kongress-Bericht Berlin 1994*. Breitkopf & Härtel, DM93.
- Rainer Sievers:** *Igor Strawinsky: Trois pièces pour quatuor accordes: – Analyse und Deutung*. Breitkopf & Härtel, DM44 pbk.
- Adrian Thomas:** *Górecki*. Clarendon Press, £30, £12.99 pbk.
- Conrad Wilson:** *Giacomo Puccini*. Phaidon Press, £14.99 pbk.

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