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# Discussing BACH

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Bach and Emotion:  
*'Zur Recreation des Gemüths'*

## Authorised Transcript

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# Bach and Emotion: *'Zur Recreation des Gemüths'*

Authorised transcript\* of a live video discussion with  
Ruth Tatlow (RT), Bettina Varwig (BV), and John Butt (JB)

Recorded on Tuesday 9 June 2020

The logo for BachNetwork, featuring the word 'Bach' in a black serif font and 'Network' in a red script font.

JOHN BUTT | RUTH TATLOW | BETTINA VARWIG

discuss Bach and Emotion

*'Zur Recreation des Gemüths'*

\* The following transcript has been edited and expanded for clarity and will at times differ slightly from what was spoken in the live discussion.

RT Greetings from Bach Network to the June 2020 Bach Marathon organised by our friends at the Bachfest Leipzig. The theme of the Bach Marathon, *'Zur Recreation des Gemüths'*, is at the heart of some research that Bettina, John, and I are currently engaged with. Over the next twenty-five minutes or so we will be discussing this theme in much the way that we do on our Bach Network Dialogue Meetings. So let's begin by introducing ourselves.

BV Hello, I'm Bettina Varwig. I'm a Lecturer at the University of Cambridge working mainly on music of the early modern period, and including a strong interest in Bach.

JB Hello, I'm John Butt, Professor of Music at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, working on Bach and other fields and also active as a performer, as director, particularly of the Dunedin Consort, a group that is likewise Scottish based.

RT And I'm Ruth Tatlow. I'm currently Fellow at the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study and a Visiting Researcher at Uppsala University based in Sweden.

JB We are all working on a number of new historically grounded approaches to the question of emotion in Bach's music, each in a slightly different area and each building on frameworks developed in recent scholarship. Let's start with Bettina.

BV Yes, I think we all agree that Bach's music has something to do with emotion – it makes us feel something. In the time of Bach, this effect was usually discussed under the heading of 'moving the affections', and I've been interested in finding out about what was actually being moved here and how. Traditionally, in musicology, this is understood as a process of representation: the idea that Bach used particular melodic motives or harmonic progressions to depict a particular textual or affective content. So when you hear the final aria in Cantata [BWV] 199 with its text 'how joyful is my heart', you hear the triple metre, you hear the major key diatonic figuration, and so on, and you understand that this music means joy. Or you hear the opening motives of that aria in the John Passion [BWV 245], 'Eilt, ihr angefochtenen Seelen' ('Hurry, you besieged souls') and you hear the running semiquavers in the violins and you understand that this depicts the faithful running to Golgotha to witness the crucifixion. Now that's all well and good, but I have always found this mode of analysis somewhat limited, in the sense that it understands the process of hearing this music as a process of decoding. So once you've understood what this music means, its job is sort of done. And to me this never fully explained what is so powerful and so moving about much of Bach's music.

And so I started looking into how writers at Bach's time discussed this process of moving the affections and it emerged that it was very much not just a cognitive process of decoding for them; it was a process grounded in what music did to their bodies. Because emotions were understood as phenomena that affected body and soul in tandem, and they were caused by the movements of what they called the vital spirits, which flowed around the body. Those spirits were a subtle, volatile and undetectable substance that was responsible for most of the body's life functions, and their flows fundamentally governed a person's emotional state. So, in an experience of joy, the spirits flowed freely; they rushed to the body's organs and extremities; they caused a pleasant feeling of warmth and that sense of delight flooding body and soul. Or in negative feelings like fear or disgust those

spirits stagnated, they collected around the inner organs and the heart, leading to coldness and trembling, a pale face and feelings of trepidation.

So, those opening words of Cantata 199, 'My heart is swimming in blood' ['Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut'], actually makes reference to that state of a heart inundated with stagnating liquids. This was called *plethora* in the medical terminology of the time. So when Bach writes a string of dissonances in that opening movement of that Cantata 199, those dissonances didn't just represent a feeling of fear or remorse; they actually potentially instilled that feeling viscerally in the bodily fibres of Bach's congregants. And so then that final movement of that cantata comes round, that moment of joy, and again this did not simply represent the idea of joyfulness but it allowed a listener's spirits to flow freely again after the contractions of the previous movements. So flooding them with that sense of relief and delight and generating a bodily-spiritual state in which they could then receive grace.

So, what my research has tried to show is the fact that Bach's music was not simply thought to go in the ear to the brain to be cognitively processed and understood in terms of its message, but it actually tangibly affected the flows of spirits around the body and so enveloped listeners in every fibre of their being. So that's where I'm at with emotions in Bach's music. I wonder if you have any questions that you want to ask to take this further?

RT I think it's wonderful – I think it's so exciting! It makes a huge amount of sense in the way that we experience Bach's music: that it's not just intellectual but it's the whole physicality.

JB And I particularly appreciate the move against exclusively thinking of music as representation because then music is always after the event; it's always a 'Johnny-come-lately' to the world. But in fact what you're showing is that it's at the front of experience, the front of the period that we're talking about, and indeed, it's very interesting that the points you're mentioning still have validity for today's audiences, which I think is an important issue in what links us to the music of Bach so well.

The other thing that really strikes me about what you're pointing to here is that this is a rich period in modern history when theology, science and art were mostly sort of aligned – you know, the notion of the sort of empirical, or semi-empirical nature of flows of what we might now call hormones within the body – as related to what was considered already created within the godly panoply of the world, and that that relates directly to the experiences of the individual.

And the other thing that really interested me about what you say is how it plays out in time, because we so often when we're thinking about Bach, who is such a wonderful abstract composer in many respects, we tend to forget that his music actually has an effect over time: it's not all there in one flash, although sometimes

in terms of contrapuntal combinations one could say it's all there, but it's the fact that it plays out. So, I think it's a great advance for us to think of Bach, and music in general of course, in the way you're pointing to.

BV Thank you, John. As a brief response: I think that coming together of theology, philosophy and science and so on in that moment is really crucial in the sense that once you get to the later eighteenth century, these things very much start breaking apart. And once Kant comes along, and music becomes an object of mental contemplation, you can no longer link it in with those other kinds of processes that went on. So when we sit in the concert hall now and music is supposedly this transmission from mind to mind, we cut out that whole bodily dimension in a way that limits our experience.

JB Yes, it's true that classical music has gained a huge lot in what you might call *Geist* [spirit], or the notion of the human soul; but it's lost a huge amount of body along the way. And in fact, it's perhaps the popular field or various forms of the popular fields that actually teach us how important that is.

RT Shall I say where I come in?

JB Yes, that would be great to hear!

RT Mine overlaps a little bit with what Bettina is saying – we've been in discussion about it – but my starting point was this particular statement by Andreas Werckmeister [in *Musicalische Paradoxal-Discourse*, 1707]. He wrote: 'All consonances as well as the motions of metre and beat are purely those proportional numerals closest to the unison or equality ... a human being', he writes, is 'naturally moved to joy when such *Numeri sonori* – or resounding numerals – are instilled into his ears and then into his heart and emotions'.<sup>1</sup> And as we are all asking, the big question is 'how this works': how can the *Numeri sonori*, the sounding numbers of music, move a human being to joy? And how did composers exploit this natural quality of music?

So the bit I'm looking at is the answers that lie in the physical resonances and proportions of sound and in the way that composers exploited this natural power of music, which is written about quite a lot. Theorists of Bach's time explain that the way to create emotional effect is by cleverly constructing a composition with every section ordered proportionally, with the understanding that the proportions of consonances closest to the unison, or the 1 : 1, have the most joyful and pleasing effects; they expand the life spirits.

Until recently musicologists thought that these sources were speaking about musical intervals in a melody, and actually, Bettina, you've described it much better than I would have done, and they [musicologists] talked about the locational intervals that caused the specific emotions of joy sadness and anger. And of course, although this is part of the process, these small-scale effects last a split second, and I wasn't really satisfied with it [as an explanation] either! So what I've

noticed is that the theorists are also writing about the larger scale effect of proportioned sound with the consonances 1 : 1 [the unison] and 1 : 2 [the octave] sounding across the duration of a complete section, complete movement, or even a complete composition.

An example is one sonata by J. S. Bach [from the Musical Offering BWV 1079] which has a consecutive 1 : 1 proportion with 220 bars in two movements and a da capo, followed by 220 bars in the remaining two movements – so you get a consecutive 1 : 1. Now earlier I understood this to be because the 1 : 1 was thought to be the epitome of beauty and of deliberate choice to imitate God's perfect Creation, which of course is part of the philosophy of it. But now what I'm exploring is if Bach might also have created this large scale 1 : 1 to heighten the emotional impact of this sonata.

Now obviously, the listener is not going to count these bars. But the resounding numerals, the impulse of each bar will be felt today as it was in Bach's time. And I have another little citation here: in 1717, Christoph Raupach explained [in *Beweis-Gründe*] that a person is moved by a well-proportioned composition, even if the person is not expecting to react emotionally and even if the person doesn't know how or why.

Interestingly this goes right into the nineteenth century. Eighty years later, the very famous physicist Ernst Chladni wrote [in *Die Akustik*] something similar: 'The effect of music on us is because of the proportions. We feel the temporal proportions of successive movements ... we don't calculate them ourselves, as if we were concerned about the numbers through which time and space were expressed, but rather nature counts for us, and the results of the harmonious proportions give us pleasure', and importantly, are 'purposefully reworked by artists'.<sup>2</sup>

And he cites Leibniz, 'music is the exercise of the mind calculating unknowingly'. [*Musica est exercitium Arithmeticae occultum, nescientis se numerare animi*]

So I'm currently working on how composers have reworked these proportions to harness the power and emotional potential of music, and specifically what I'm looking for is the recurrence of consecutive 1 : 1 proportions in different means within a work, but specifically the bars, as well as in the use of mirror image symmetry that I and others have discovered in the structure of Bach's works and in works by other composers – because it's not just J. S.; it's many others, and it goes on for quite a long time. So that's what I am up to. How do you react to that? Any ideas? Any thoughts? Any questions?

BV If I may bring things back to the body – sorry about that! – there is a sense of course in which ideas of proportionality were at the foundation of how people thought about bodily health and well-being, in the sense that if you look at Athanasius Kircher's writing in the mid-seventeenth century, he talks a lot about

the way in which a healthy body is one where its parts are in consonance with each other and sinfulness and ill-health upset those proportions. And you get seventeenth-century writers like [Johannes] Nucius even saying that musical dissonance is also a result of original sin and the Fall – that's when humanity went out of tune with the cosmos and so on; so this resonates really nicely with things I've been thinking about in terms of bodies and how they operated.

JB Obviously the Pythagorean tradition stretches all the way through the Medieval period and the Classical period, and we often tend to think that it sorts of starts to disappear in the eighteenth century, and indeed it does in many respects, but it's still very much there as Ruth's work in general has shown – and indeed well into the nineteenth century too. You could say that neo-Classicism itself is also based on the concept of classical proportions and things.

When we're talking about the way that Bach's music has an effect on us, what I think you might be helping us with is the notion that there's a supreme confidence about Bach's music that gives us a sense that, somehow, everything is all right in the end. Whether we think about that in the religious sense or in a secular sense in terms of our civilisation – what's left of it... So I think that what you might be pointing to is that Bach's control of large blocks of sound, and their balancing one with another, is one of the things that actually makes us feel sort of confident, it harmonises our experience in a way. We sense that there's an underlying order even though we hear many, many surface ripples and dissonances along the way.

You might be putting your finger, in other words, on one of the things that people find so nurturing about Bach's music – not everybody does, but some people, I think, really do – they find that it gives them a confidence, or a sense of overall confidence, that is not unlike a religious confidence but it's parallel to a religious confidence; it can be tied to religious faith or separate from it.

RT Thank you for that feedback; that's really wonderful. I have many questions myself: can rubbish music that is ordered like this [i.e. 1 : 1] sound good? Lots and lots of questions. And is it one of the reasons why Bach's music has lasted so long? I mean, of course, there are so many different factors involved there, but I like the idea that it gives us this feeling of security and safety, a little bit like a Classical building.

JB What would really interest me is actually how these things play out in non-Western cultures which have some sort of appreciation or interaction with Bach; Japan is the obvious place to start, but there are plenty of other places as well. How do these play out in slightly different traditions, indeed in some that may be quite different? In other words, it's very easy to think of Bach as being a Universal, and when you talk about proportions you are talking about universality, but I'm always sceptical of making that claim. We need to see how Bach relates to both the human condition in general, but also different historical and cultural manifestations of the human condition.

RT Thank you. Well, John, [what about] your research?

JB Mine ties in with an aspect that Bettina talking about earlier, and to a certain extent with what Ruth has been talking about in terms of balance, and this was occasioned by my reading of a passage in Forkel's biography of 1802, when he says that Bach's music is suffused with dance on a level that no other composer of his time achieved.<sup>3</sup> In one sense, this is obviously not true: all composers of Bach's time used dance incredibly deeply. But I think he was on to something when he suggests that even in fugues, even in church music, even in the most serious of music, you find allusions to dance. It's not so much the question that Bach uses dance – they all did – indeed, write dances, but the fact that so much of his music seems to be about dance: it refers back to dance, it takes us away from dance, it makes us think of dance, and then reminds us again of dance, as if it is digesting and re-experiencing dance.

So, this led me to thinking, how did dance play out in Bach's environment, because we know from many Puritan examples that dance is often seen as the pathway to the devil? Starting with Luther, as we surely must, it's quite interesting to see that his comments on dance are very similar to his comments on music: they are sporadic, they are unsystematic. But where you find them – and the 1538 Preface is an obvious place to start – for Georg Rhau's publication of *Symphoniae iucundae*, Luther talks about dance as a sort of foretaste. In other words, we will experience dance as we will experience music in heaven. So dance seems to be connected with polyphony, connected with both individuals and people, and it's also in Luther's case particularly connected with joy. And in various sermons and commentaries, one finds references to dance as an expression of joy and as a gift of God in exactly the same way as music was.

And if one looks at favourable writings on dance from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – France is the obvious place to start – one finds references back to the Classical period, to Plato and so on, where dance is seen as a regulator of the body, a regulator of the external projection of our virtues, which mirrors our internal; so it's a way of using what we've got, honing it, and using it to the best possible purposes, in exactly the same way one might use music towards the best possible purposes. And indeed, there's a very important Lutheran treatise on dance by Johann Pasch from 1707 [in *Beschreibung wahrer Tanz-Kunst*] which very much talks about how dance refined the natural spirit in exactly the same way as musicians say music refined the natural spirit. And one finds in Mattheson's writings a great number of references to dance as something, again, which unites the spirit, a mood.

Each dance, in other words, is connected to a particular mood. So dances are a way of us exercising our moods and controlling them, but also using them, as Mattheson says, to the glory of God, to a deeper form of worship. So tying dance with the spirit, with the individual and with the honing of the individual, but also with the community and, of course, in French culture, dance is seen very much as



representing the order of the court, of the society coming out of that, and of refining the natural spirit.

So it's very interesting then that there is a strong theoretical background that would suggest that Bach took dance very seriously, and as is absolutely typical of Bach, he uses it contrapuntally. He uses it in a way where we're sometimes distanced from it. I'm thinking in particular of the sarabande from Cantata [BWV] 57, 'Selig ist der Mann', where the words of the aria, 'I would wish for my death were Jesus not to love me' ['Ich wünschte mir den Tod, den Tod, wenn du, mein Jesu, mich nicht liebtest'] – so it's a subjunctive aria. And we hear a sarabande at the beginning which shows us what it would be like, and then the singer comments on that, then joins the sarabande, then separates from the sarabande. So we can almost feel how the physicality of the emotion that a sarabande represents is played out in the music and used as a subjunctive view of what it would be like if Jesus didn't love us, and so on.

In other words, then, it seems to me that the crucial aspect of Bach's music is this digestion of dance: not just writing dance – there are plenty of them – the last movement of the Matthew Passion [BWV 244] is a straight forward sarabande, you almost don't even have to discuss it. But the fact that dance is used, quoted, and played out in the thoughts and psyche of the listener and the singer strikes me as a very important way of bringing back the physical aspects of emotion and human discipline within Bach thought. So those are more or less the lines on which I've been working.

BV I have two thoughts in response. This is very rich, and I think there are also very many interesting convergences here. I really appreciate the way in which you rehabilitate dance from its negative associations with the body in the sense that the body is not necessarily just a problematic and negative aspect of human existence in Christianity, right? I mean, the flesh is; that's where sin is, as opposed to the spirit. But you could lead a bodily existence in the world in a spiritual way and dancing could be part of that leading of a morally upright Christian way of life on earth with your body, in a way that exactly disciplines and helps you express and contain your inner life, and so on. I think that's a really important point.

Then the other thing your little exposition got me thinking about is the way which dance can have those effects of cleansing the spirits, raising the spirits – without you having to actually do the movements. In a way, I guess, current neuroscience gives us answers to this in the sense that we know that listeners have motor neurons firing when they hear music being performed even though they don't execute those movements that the performers make themselves; it is part of what is happening in there in their bodies and minds. And so it's an important aspect to remember that you don't have to be dancing to experience the physical and spiritual positive effects of what dance might do for you.

- JB What that points to is the fact that memory is not just a mental thing, but something we actually feel as well, and that would tie into Ruth's view of proportions of time in the playing out of a piece; that it is a memory that is distributed throughout the body in a certain sense. I think the point about intuiting dance without actually doing it is a very interesting factor that we often forget. Baroque players have always said that 'You must learn to dance or you won't understand it!', but actually by seeing people do it, you actually mirror what they're doing, even though you might be hopeless – like me – at dancing. In exactly the same way that I can appreciate a great violinist and hear them stretching up on the high [E] string and know I could not possibly play as well as that, but I can intuit what they are doing and feel it as part of expression, and think that's a very important aspect of mirror neurons.
- RT It is very exciting this whole business about dance! Mattheson uses dance as one of the examples to show how regular proportions must be put into music.<sup>4</sup> It's obviously a very simplistic example, but as you say, having absorbed that pulse, having absorbed the nature of the pulsing, one feels the sarabande in terms of the regularity. I mean, the dancer has to count because the dancer needs to know how many times the opening is repeated. There is this subconscious counting in dance as well. It is the physical mirroring, but I also think this is almost an illustration of Leibniz's subconscious calculating. The rippling effect of these pulses going through your body as well, and especially if it's dance music. As you say, you get to something like the final chorus of the Matthew Passion and you know where you are.
- JB It is literally a binary dance: the A section [of the overall ABA da capo] is a binary sarabande with repeats, and the repeat is of course where the text is added. So you might think of when you're playing a cello suite or a keyboard suite that when you're doing the repeat, it's as if you are adding the text or you're adding an extra layer of possible meaning that you already intuiting through the mood at the start.
- BV Although I don't know if we have got closer to actually working out how Bach's music might have moved his listeners or moves us, one of the nice things that for me has emerged from this discussion is that there are these multiple routes into the question, and that it is not a monolithic singular answer to 'How does Bach's music move us?' or 'How do emotions work in Bach's music?'. There is a way in which the answer is necessarily multifarious and incomplete and continuously evolving in the way that we can just never quite encapsulate how this music has these effects.
- JB I think it's also a very interesting reflection on how history works. Some of the things we're talking about seem very real to us today; other things seem very archaic and almost need to be abolished in a certain sense. Getting that balance between what's continuous and isn't continuous is one of the huge historical issues of course what we're facing right now – in terms of slavery debates and all

the various things that went on in the eighteenth century that we would hate today.

So it's very interesting to see how certain aspects of the trajectory towards the present are very much alive and it makes us question, I think, what we need to work on in the future in terms of preserving our heritage but also acknowledging those elements which are falling away or need to fall away.

RT Well, that's a wonderful natural ending to our very lovely discussion and I think we should just end by wishing the Bach Marathon [2020] all the very best from Bach Network. So I think we should say bye-bye.

JB Bye.

BV Bye-bye.

RT Bye.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andreas Werckmeister, *Musicalische Paradoxal-Discourse* (Quedlinburg: Thedor. Phil. Calvisius, 1707), Chapter 4, 'Why human find such pleasure in music'. English translation adapted from *Andreas Werckmeister's Musicalische Paradoxal-Discourse*, translated and with commentary by Dietrich Bartel (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018), 70.

<sup>2</sup> Ernst Chladni, *Die Akustik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1802), 292, §244. It is interesting that Chladni knew-Leibniz's definition, even though it appeared first in a private letter, written to Christian Goldbach, and dated 17 April 1712.

<sup>3</sup> Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Ueber Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke* (Leipzig: Hoffmeister und Kühnel, 1802), 52.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Mattheson, *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister* (Hamburg: Christian Herold, 1739), Part 2, Chapter 13, 'Von den Gattungen und Abzeichen der Melodien', particularly §§82–85.

