



BRAD MEHLDAU *After Bach*

1. **Before Bach: Benediction** 5:27

BRAD MEHLDAU

2. **Prelude No. 3 in C# Major from
*The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, BWV 848*** 1:21

J.S. BACH

3. **After Bach: Rondo** 8:21

BRAD MEHLDAU

4. **Prelude No. 1 in C Major from
*The Well-Tempered Clavier Book II, BWV 870*** 2:36

J.S. BACH

5. **After Bach: Pastorale** 3:46

BRAD MEHLDAU

6. **Prelude No. 10 in E Minor from
*The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, BWV 855*** 2:16

J.S. BACH

7. **After Bach: Flux** 5:06

BRAD MEHLDAU

8. **Prelude and Fugue No. 12 in F Minor from
*The Well-Tempered Clavier Book I, BWV 857*** 6:10

J.S. BACH

9. **After Bach: Dream** 7:50

BRAD MEHLDAU

10. **Fugue No. 16 in G Minor from
*The Well-Tempered Clavier Book II, BWV 885*** 3:04

J.S. BACH

11. **After Bach: Ostinato** 12:20

BRAD MEHLDAU

12. **Prayer for Healing** 11:06

BRAD MEHLDAU

MUSIC BY BRAD MEHLDAU PUBLISHED BY WERTHER MUSIC/BMI

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HEN WE THINK OF BACH, we tend to think of him as the scholarly artist, a consummate craftsman turning out work after work of immutable brilliance. But we can't know the half of it; as a professional organist, much of Bach's work took the form of improvisation, and during his lifetime it was the virtuosity and complexity of these improvisations for which he was most admired. As the disciplines of composer and performer became increasingly specialized, they became separate jobs; improvisation left the tradition over time, as written scores became more complex and virtuosic.

Some three centuries after the fact, Brad Mehldau takes up this tradition and applies it to a frustratingly unknowable aspect of Bach's art. In the process, he makes a case for a third stream of Bach interpretation, sitting comfortably alongside the individualist (think Glenn Gould) and the historically-faithful (John Eliot Gardiner's cantata cycle). There have always been elements of Mehldau's style that recall Bach, especially his densely-woven voicing—but he's not striving to imitate or play dress-up. Rather, *After Bach* surveys their shared ground as keyboardists, improvisers, and composers, making implicit parallels explicit.

The album's prologue, *Before Bach: Benediction*, begins indelibly, its falling fifth calling to mind the same interval which opens Bach's *Art of the Fugue*. But right off the bat, Mehldau's subject wanders through brazenly distant harmonies—one quickly realizes that this fugue will not abide by Bach's rules. Development begins immediately, rolling triplets pushing inexorably higher, that falling fifth ringing out from all registers of the piano. Rhythms increase in speed and complexity, the triplets turning into 16th-notes and finally vertiginous 16th-note triplets, ascending the keyboard until they literally run out of space. The piece ends in the pensive mode it began, its harmonies still restless, finally sticking the landing with a last-minute swerve into D major.

The simplicity of the C# major prelude allows us to parse some of what makes Mehldau's Bach playing unique. It's an understated *perpetuum mobile*, tumbling

nonchalantly in mirrored phrases. That phrasing, in fact, is what offers a clue. Pianists are usually taught to follow the contour of a phrase by underscoring it dynamically—increasing or decreasing the volume in imitation of an idealized “vocal” interpretation. This is all the more important with a percussion instrument like the piano, which cannot sustain a note like a string or wind instrument; the player must create the illusion of phrasing by stretching the dynamic fabric across each individual note, connecting them like the frames of a movie. Mehldau's playing of Bach does this in a unique way; he's all relaxed syncopation, even in this adamantly regular prelude. Unexpected notes pop out here and there from the texture, spurring the music on, not quite a swing, but a lilting dance—one wonders if he could possibly be improvising this, too. (Interestingly, Mehldau's frequent partner in improvisation Chris Thile brings a similar easygoingness to his Bach on the mandolin.)

It is just this syncopation that gives rise to *After Bach: Rondo*. Mehldau's fondness for recasting familiar tunes in odd meters is well known. He'll add or subtract beats and fractions of beats from something that had been regular, familiar. It's not so much to make it “his own” as it is to insert a small improvisational hook—a piece of grit around which the piece's development takes form. Here, Bach's regular 3/8 turns into a bouncy 20/16 (though it doesn't stay there for long, either). Which means that it's obvious from the very first bar that, despite the immediate familiarity of the material, we're no longer in Bach's territory. Mehldau also throws in a harmonic twist, taking the sixth scale degree down a half step, throwing a melancholic minor shade over the major proceedings.

The term “rondo,” much like “sonata,” has referred to musical forms of varying complexity over the centuries. All essentially combine a recurring theme or phrase interspersed with varied departures from it. Bach contributed only two short *rondeaux* in the French style—slight, graceful movements in the context of dance suites. Mehldau's “Rondo” is clearly of the bigger-boned Classical-period mold, though he inverts the form's order; the recurring theme is not the one we hear first (the odd-meter Bach) but the original one that follows—a playful act of deference.

One of the difficulties presented by Bach's keyboard music is its blithe disregard for the primacy of either hand. In the vast majority of keyboard writing, the right

hand plays the melody while the left fills out the harmonies with a simple, repetitive accompaniment. Not so in Bach—his counterpoint is equal-opportunity and all-encompassing. Just as his harmonic structures arise from melodic interplay, his keyboard technique evidently evolved to suit his compositional purposes (his obituary made a point to mention that “all his fingers were equally practiced”). Mehldau, similarly, is known for his catholic voicings. If you’ve listened to him improvise on *Smells Like Teen Spirit* or *Blackbird*, you’ll have noticed an effect similar to the treatment of a fugue subject or Lutheran chorale tune in Bach, the melodies emerging from active textures in the tenor or alto voice, plucked out by alternating thumbs. This ability to simultaneously think and play in separate, interlocking layers ties his craft directly back to the Baroque tradition. He approaches the piano not as a monolithic row of similar buttons, but as all the manuals of the organ combined. One has the sense that if the piano had a pedal keyboard, he’d make good use of that, too.

In addition to his work as a composer and performer, Bach was also an educator, and much of his music comes from this didactic (and auto-didactic) impulse. *The Well-Tempered Clavier* is such a work. But the cycle is no dry textbook; its inspiration is proportionate to its comprehensiveness. Composers have often had special associations with musical keys; in his double circumnavigation of them, Bach seems to have attempted something like character studies of each. In choosing the WTC for the basis of his project, Mehldau casts himself in the role of pupil and acolyte. His compositions and improvisations are studies on top of studies, extending that character development, expanding the map in directions Bach could’ve never imagined.

There’s certainly a shared love of complexity, of harmonic spirals leading to whiplash-quick flights of modulation. But there’s an equal, and opposite, attraction to the stability of the pedal tone, a constant underlying note so-called because it was often played on the organ’s foot-pedal keyboard. A pedal tone doesn’t necessarily guarantee harmonic stasis, but it provides an anchor that can both ground a passage and give rise to all sorts of developmental possibilities; it’s an aural point of reference by which the listener can better perceive the changes occurring around it. This technique is taken to an extreme in *After Bach: Ostinato*. The repeated-note motto

which characterizes Bach’s somber G-minor fugue is recast as accompaniment and *idée fixe*; it sounds through the entire piece, with the exception of four heart-stopping bars at the end in which it’s raised to—an anticipatory G sharp!—then back to a reconciliatory G, which now feels old and new at the same time.

Mehldau seems to take the opposite approach as he launches into *After Bach: Flux*. He applies chromatic permutations to the E-minor prelude’s left hand, turning it into something spiky and irrepressible, all restless motion. But the music keeps getting drawn back to the magnetic pole of E major. As the piece progresses, that E takes on an increasingly central role—it’s been another pedal point the whole time, and the music comes to rest on it gently. *Pastorale*, too, is neatly divided between change and stability, its long introductory theme wandering into nearly atonal territory, a lone figure lost in a landscape. But again, it’s a trick; in the second part, Mehldau manages to harmonize a slowed-down version of the tune with a series of repeated seventh chords. It’s not until *After Bach: Dream* that he completely unmoors us, letting the intensely chromatic motion of Bach’s F-minor fugue drift into unknown territory. Arching arpeggios take over the range of the keyboard, churning inexorably through harmonies as Bach’s subject carries them along.

Finally we arrive at *Prayer for Healing*, a well-deserved rest from the contrapuntal activity that animates much of the album. Gently chiming chords trace the outline of a wistful melody, direct and unembellished. It is here that we realize Mehldau’s project has gone far beyond improvising on Bach, or even in the style of Bach; it’s “before” and “after” but it’s also *why* and *because*. To play Bach is necessarily to be able to juggle and reconcile competing thoughts, to hold simultaneous contradictory opinions. In an increasingly polarized, compartmentalized world, to study Bach is an attempt to view something from every angle, from all possible positions. Perhaps the answer to Mehldau’s prayer has been here all along.

—TIMO ANDRES

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