328. On Bach's playing and conducting, by Johann Matthias Gesner (1738) (*BD* II, no. 432)

To Marcus Fabius Quintilianus

You would think but slightly, my dear Fabius, of all these [the accomplishments of the citharists], if, returning from the underworld, you could see Bach (to mention him particularly, since he was not long ago my colleague at the Leipzig St. Thomas School), either playing our clavier [*polychordum*], which is many citharas in one, with all the fingers of both hands, or running over the keys of the instrument of instruments [*organon organorum*], whose innumerable pipes are brought to life by bellows, with both hands and, at the utmost speed, with his feet, producing by himself the most various and at the same time mutually agreeable combinations of sounds in orderly procession. If you could see him, I say, doing what many of your citharists and six hundred of your tibia players together could not do, not only, like a citharist, sing-

ing with one voice and playing his own parts, but watching over every-
thing and bringing back to the rhythm and the beat, out of thirty or
even forty musicians [*symphoniaci*], the one with a nod, another by tap-
ping with his foot, the third with a warning finger, giving the right
note to one from the top of his voice, to another from the bottom, and
to a third from the middle of it—all alone, in the midst of the greatest
din made by all the participants, and, although he is executing the
most difficult parts himself, noticing at once whenever and wherever a
mistake occurs, holding everyone together, taking precautions every-
where, and repairing any unsteadiness, full of rhythm in every part of
his body—this one man taking in all these harmonies with his keen
ear and emitting with his voice alone the tone of all the voices. Favorer
as I am of antiquity, the accomplishments of our Bach, and of any
others who may be like him, appear to me to effect what not many
Orpheuses, nor twenty Arions, could achieve.

*The original is in Latin; Charles Burney made an incomplete translation, some
details of which are used here.*