

THE VOCAL MUSIC OF J.S. BACH¹

While not as familiar to most concert-goers as his instrumental compositions, Bach's vocal works contain some of his greatest music, displaying the widest range of emotional and spiritual expression, in addition to extraordinary musical architecture and compositional technique. This is all the more astonishing considering that he wrote most of this music while also holding down several other demanding jobs, and raising a large family. This class will focus on Bach's cantatas and passions, and will include selections from his instrumental music.

Reading: I will email class notes every week. Please read before class.

Three tracks: Students may choose different levels of engagement with the material:

- Level 1. Just read the notes and attend the classes. The lectures are self-contained; you should be able to follow the lectures without referring to other material.
- Level 2. In addition to 1, read the relevant sections of any of the recommended books, listed below, and read the extra material in the appendices to the handouts. If you have access to a music streaming service, you may want to listen to some of the music mentioned in class.
- Level 3. In addition to 2, watch the linked videos, read other linked articles.

Recommended book to accompany the course:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, Faber & Faber, 2011, \$16 paperback. Compact and easy to follow. Politics and Prose should have some copies in the OLLI section. Amazon also carries it.

For the purposes of this course, the best single volume for understanding Bach's life and work is:

Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, Oxford Composer Companions, Oxford University Press, 1999. Nine hundred entries, dictionary-style, by 40 professional scholars and musicologists, on all aspects of Bach's life, family, musical environment, musical contemporaries, individual works, instruments written for, musical styles, and performing practice. If you love Bach, order this book. (Costs \$66 new, but only \$10 to \$15 used from Amazon).

CLASS 1 Sept 21 BACH's LIFE AND PLACE IN MUSIC HISTORY

Summary

Bach led a busy and productive life. To support his large family, he took demanding jobs whose heavy responsibilities would have crushed someone less energetic and organized. And in between he somehow found time to compose an astounding volume of music—his collected work fill 70 volumes—including much of the greatest music of his or any age.

Outline

1. Bach's life—circumstances, major events; his character and personality
2. Bach's inheritance
 - Lutheranism. The Reformation; growing cultural division between the North and South of Europe. Example of chorale as basis for music in the Lutheran church.
 - The Baroque. Major shift from Renaissance to Baroque, in melody, rhythm, harmony, and structure.
 - Italian, French, and German Baroque styles contrasted
3. The cantata—purpose, structure

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musical selections from

- Lutheran chorales
- Cantata 140, “Wachet auf,” movements 1 and 4

Questions to consider

- Bach keyboard and instrumental works appear far more often on concert programs than his vocal works. Why might that be?
- Many concertgoers find it more difficult to listen to the vocal cantatas, passions, and oratorios of Bach than the oratorios of his contemporary George Frederick Handel. Why might this be? Do you find this to be true?
- Some music lovers wish that Bach had spent less time writing cantatas and more time writing instrumental works—say, trading some cantatas for more Brandenburg Concertos. Do you agree?

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 57-63 (vita) 71-109 (A Chronology)
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 40-48

CLASS 2 Sept 28 CANTATA 140, “Wachet auf” by the Washington Bach Consort

Summary

Since its founding in 1979, the Washington Bach Consort has been one of the nation’s premier performing groups specializing in the music of Bach. This class will feature a special performance by the consort of one of Bach’s best known cantatas, including a live Q&A with members of the Consort.

Outline

1. video performance Cantata 140, “Wachet Auf,” Washington Bach Consort
2. discussion of the music by Michael Marissen
3. Q&A with members of the Washington Bach Consort

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, p. 279
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 501

CLASS 3 Oct 5 FUGUE; PERFORMING STYLES

Outline

1. Fugue, polyphony, counterpoint. The fugue is the most controlled of musical styles, yet can also be one of the most expressive. Central paradox of Bach’s music: structured and controlled (shown most clearly in his mastery of the fugue), yet also intensely emotional.
2. Importance of dance in the Baroque. The vigor of dance rhythms is one reason for J.S. Bach’s wide appeal.
3. Modern performing styles vary greatly from those practiced in Bach’s time. To fill the large concert halls common since the 19th century, modern ensembles are generally larger, modern instruments louder and brighter sounding, and modern voices fuller and more dramatic than in Bach’s time. In the last 60 years, many performers have shifted back toward historically-informed performance practices to present the music of Bach and other Baroque composers.

Musical selections from

- The Well-tempered Clavier
- The Art of Fugue
- Choral fugues from cantatas

- Dance movements from instrumental works and cantatas
- Brandenburg Concerto No. 3

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 118-127 (Performing Bach Today)
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 24-26, 68-73, 130-131, 515-518

CLASS 4 Oct 12: EARLY CANTATAS I

Outline

1. Keyboard prodigy: by age 13, he could already play the most difficult organ compositions in existence. Left school at age 18 in 1703. First job as church organist at Arnstadt 1703-07. Then church organist at Mülhausen 1707-08. Growing reputation as keyboard player.
2. Several outstanding cantatas written in this early period, showing dramatic movement, emotional complexity, and mastery of all aspects of north German musical style.

Musical selections from

- Organ pieces
- Cantata 4
- Cantata 106
- Cantata 21

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 203-210
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 68-73, cantatas entries appear under the German title of the work

CLASS 5 Oct 19 EARLY CANTATAS II; INSTRUMENTAL COMPOSITIONS AT CÖTHEN

Outline

1. Court musician and composer at Weimar 1708-17. Exposed to Vivaldi's concertos, which he transcribed and adapted in order to learn the Italian concerto style. Wrote cantatas for the court, including several of his best.
2. Favorable circumstances at Cöthen 1717-23: no onerous non-musical duties. With no elaborate church music required, a flood of instrumental compositions now poured from Bach's pen, including Book I of *The Well-tempered Clavier*, the solo sonatas and partitas for violin, the solo suites for cello, suites for orchestra, and the Brandenburg Concertos.
3. Bach's wife Maria Barbara died suddenly in 1720, leaving him with 4 children to raise. Eighteen months later he married Anna Magdalena Wilcke, a fine soprano who was to bear him 13 more children.

Musical selections from

- *The Well-tempered Clavier*
- Brandenburg Concerto No. 5
- Cantatas 12, 21, 39, 70

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 211-217, 342-348, 407-416
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 68-73, 515-518; cantatas entries appear under the German title of the work

CLASS 6 Oct 26 LEIPZIG CANTATAS I

Outline

1. In early 1723 Bach was offered and accepted the post of cantor (director of church music) at the main churches in Leipzig. Bach's duties included teaching singing, violin, and other instruments at the church school, and providing all the music for Sunday services at the 4 major churches in the city.
2. In his first 6 years in Leipzig, Bach composed over 200 cantatas for performance at Sunday services; for long stretches during this time he was composing one cantata per week. This is perhaps the most astonishing feat of sustained musical creativity in history.
3. Bach's vocal style combines German-style chorales (hymn tunes) and large complex choruses, with Italian-style arias and solo pieces.
4. This class will focus on Bach's first cycle of weekly cantatas, performed from Easter 1723 to Easter 1724, including an introduction to his St. John Passion.

Musical selections from

- Cantatas 65, 109, 105
- St. John Passion

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 218-239

Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, cantatas entries appear under the German title of the work

CLASS 7 Nov 2 LEIPZIG CANTATAS II

Outline

1. Bach launched into his second cantata cycle at Easter 1724. Over the next year he composed a remarkable group of cantatas each based on a particular chorale, finding a new range of expression, adapting operatic techniques to the cantata form.
2. He completed three more weekly cantata cycles by 1729, also finding time to write the St. Matthew Passion.

Musical selections from

- Cantatas 1, 19, 20, 29, 34, 82, 146, 191

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 240-288

Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, cantatas entries appear under the German title of the work

CLASS 8 Nov 9 LEIPZIG—ST. JOHN PASSION, ST. MATTHEW PASSION

Summary

1. Background: history of the passion story set to music; Bach's 2 surviving passion settings; performance history of St. Matthew Passion.
2. The work itself: story, text, dramatic nature, performance forces, dramatic elements, integration of music with story.

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 160-180,
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 425-434

CLASS 9 Nov 16 LEIPZIG—MIDDLE AND LATER YEARS, B-MINOR MASS

Summary

In 1729, age 44, Bach took over the Collegium Musicum, an amalgam of professional and high-level amateur singers and instrumentalists. At the same time, he throttled back on church compositions, giving him time to turn back to instrumental works, including the English Suites, Keyboard Partitas, Well-tempered Clavier Book II, as well as more orchestral suites. In the last decade of his life, Bach turned his attention to his great encyclopedic works: the Goldberg Variations, The B-minor Mass, and the Art of Fugue.

Musical selections from

- B-minor Mass.

Resources:

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, 137-151
Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, 284-289

Further reading and listening

All books on this list are available from www.Amazon.com. Most can be purchased used as well as new, at very reasonable prices.

Specifically about Bach

✓ Boyd, Malcolm, ed. *J.S. Bach*, Oxford Composer Companions, Oxford University Press, 1999. Nine hundred entries, dictionary-style, by 40 professional scholars and musicologists, on all aspects of Bach's life, family, musical environment, musical contemporaries, individual works, instruments written for, musical styles, and performing practice. If you love Bach, order this book.

David, Hans T., and Arthur Mendel, *The New Bach Reader: A life of Johann Sebastian Bach in letters and documents*, (revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff, W.W. Norton & Co., 1998. Illuminating compilation of all the letters and other documents by Bach that have survived, together with an assortment of court records, Town Council minutes, and other contemporary documents that pertain to him.

Gardiner, John Eliot, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, Knopf, 2013. Superb study of Bach's major works, integrated with notes about his life and character; from one of the leading conductors of early music, including the Baroque.

Nicholas Kenyon, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Bach*, Faber & Faber, 2011, \$16 paperback. Compact and accessible.

Wolff, Christoph. *Johann Sebastian Bach: the learned musician*. W.W. Norton, 2000. The definitive biography of Bach for our time, by the leading Bach scholar of our time. To understand the extensive musical examples, some musical training is helpful.

About Western music generally, including Bach and the Baroque era

Burkholder, J. Peter, Donald Grout, and Claude V. Palisca, *History of Western Music*, 7th ed. W.W. Norton & Co., 2006. One-volume text designed for use in a college survey course. Comprehensive yet concise. Well written with attractive page layout and hundreds of illustrations. Keyed to Norton Recorded Anthology of Western Music listed below.

Burkholder, J. Peter, and Claude V. Palisca, *Norton Anthology of Western Music (NAWM)*, Volume 1: Ancient to Baroque, 6th ed. W.W. Norton & Co., 2010. Pages of music with brief written descriptions illustrating many key developments in western music, designed for use in a college survey course. Keyed to Norton Recorded Anthology of Western Music listed below.

Kerman, Joseph, and Gary Tomlinson. *Listen*. One-volume textbook for a college-level music appreciation course. Remarkable for placing in historical context the long development of western music. Also gives space to music outside the Western canon. Excellent illustrations and layout. Published with a set of CDs and a web site containing musical examples.

Listening

Greenberg, Robert, *Bach and the High Baroque*, audio and video course, The Teaching Company, 1997, www.teach12.com. Thorough and entertaining introduction to all aspects of Bach's life and music, by a composer and star music lecturer. Prof. Greenberg is funny, down to earth, opinionated, and never pompous. One gripe: he is equally at home in mispronouncing Italian, French, and German.

Among the contemporary ensembles to have recorded most or all of the cantatas, favorites include

John Eliot Gardiner with the English Baroque Soloists, Monteverdi Choir and soloists
Masaaki Suzuki with the Bach Collegium Japan
Philippe Herreweghe with La Chapelle Royale Orchestra and Collegium Vocale Gent

These groups all follow historically-informed performing practices, which include small ensembles, relatively fast tempos, a light vocal style with little vibrato, and reconstructions of Baroque-period instruments.

Before about 1960, most Bach recordings used large choruses—think of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir—and large orchestras playing modern instruments. Tempos could be painfully slow by today's standards. No one plays Bach like this anymore, but some of these recordings are still worth hearing for the high quality of the playing, and because they often featured the great voices of the era

The tide began to turn away from this romantic style around 1960 with the recordings of Karl Richter and the Munich Bach Orchestra and Chorus. These recordings still sound old-fashioned to modern ears, but they offer excellent interpretations and superior soloists.

Helmut Rilling with the Bach Collegium Stuttgart recorded many of the cantatas in the 1970s, employing a performance style somewhere between the older romantic style and the light dry style favored today. Rilling assembled a first-rate orchestra and chorus, and excellent soloists, so his recordings are always worth listening to.

Rilling, like Richter, hired female altos as his soloists, rather than countertenors, as is the fashion today. I personally don't like the hollow hooty sound of the countertenor voice, and would go out of my way to hear female altos singing the Bach solos. But but on this point, I seem to be on the wrong side of history.

Many Bach aficionados swear by the recordings of Nicholas Harnoncourt and the Concentus Musicus Wien, pioneers of the historically-informed school of playing. I find his recordings to be dry and fussy—using boy sopranos as soloists, for example, on the argument that these were the soloists Bach had available. Some conductors push the historically-informed style to what seems to me an extreme, with

overly fast tempos, an absolute minimum of singers, a staccato singing style, or all three. I think of Joshua Rifkin, or Reinhardt Goebel and Musica Antiqua Köln in this category. Maybe this is the direction that Baroque performance is moving, but for now I prefer more moderate approach of conductors like Gardiner, Suzuki, and Herreweghe.

Viewing

Gardiner, John Eliot, "Bach—a Passionate Life," BBC Films, 2013, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5o1DZPqgx-M>

Wonderful, deeply felt outline of Bach's life and music, with excerpts from some of his great works, written and narrated by a great Bach conductor and scholar.

Bachstiftung (Bach Foundation) is putting out excellent videos of their small-ensemble performances of cantatas, from beautiful churches in several small towns in Switzerland. Their conductor, Rudolf Lutz, has also done lecture-demonstrations to introduce several cantatas. Highly recommended.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/Bachstiftung>

Video: "From the Clavichord to the Modern Piano," part 1

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uCCw_hmlLA

Texts, discussions, etc.

Bach Cantatas Website has been contains most of what Bach fans want to know. Assembled over many years, with contributions by hundreds of specialists and laymen, it includes discussions of the cantatas, oratorios, and masses; the works for keyboard and other instruments; discussions of hundreds of performers. It also has texts and translations, and even a calendar of the Lutheran Church year

<http://www.bach-cantatas.com/index.htm>

Emmanuel Church in Boston has done the clearest translations of Bach's texts, as well as thoughtful notes on each work.

http://www.emmanuelmusic.org/notes_translations/nt_notes_transl_cantatas.htm#pab1_7

Performance dates of all of Bach's vocal works can be found at

<https://www.bach-cantatas.com/Date.htm>

Lots of material about Bach and the entire Baroque period can be found at The Baroque Music Site

<http://www.barquemusic.org>

Glossary

Baroque	In music, the period from 1600 to 1750. In both music and art, baroque style indicates a mixture of drama and emotional expression within a well-defined structure.
BWV	<i>Bach Werk Verzeichnis</i> (Bach Work Catalogue), modern list of Bach's complete works. His works are known by their titles and BWV numbers.
cantata	An unstaged work for chorus and solo voices. Can be sacred or secular; sacred cantatas are written for church service.
chorale	Hymn tune in the Lutheran church, with roots in Gregorian chant, and adding elements from folk and popular melodies of the day. Bach church cantatas nearly always end with a chorale, intended to be sung by the entire congregation.

counterpoint	The combination of two or more independent vocal lines according to a set of rules.
fugue	Musical form for three, four, or occasionally more voices (musical lines) in which each voice states the theme in turn, followed by elaboration in which the theme returns, often in several voices at the same time.
passion	Cantata on the suffering and death of Jesus, generally written for Holy Week; generally longer and more complex than ordinary cantatas.
polyphony	Musical texture consisting of 2 or more independent melodies moving in different rhythms.

TIMELINE OF BACH'S LIFE

1685	Born 21 March in Eisenach, Thuringia	
1695	After death of mother and father, Bach leaves Eisenach to live with brother in Ordruf, where he enters the lyceum.	
1700	Lives and studies in Lüneburg on a scholarship. He is an excellent student, particularly in theology and music; his reputation grows as a singer, violinist, and keyboard player.	First organ works
1703	First professional job, as organist in Arnstadt.	
1707	Second professional job, as organist at Mühlhausen. Marries Maria Barbara Bach.	Organ works, first church cantatas, motets
1708	Appointed organist at Weimar. First child born.	Keyboard and instrumental works; Well-tempered clavier
1717	Appointed Kapellmeister to Prince Leopold at Cöthen. The Bachs now have 6 children.	Brandenburg concerti
1721	Maria Barbara dies. Bach marries Anna Magdalena Wilcke the next year.	Magnificat
1723	Appointed Thomaskantor in Leipzig, where he will remain for the rest of his life. Duties include teaching singing, keyboard, violin, harmony, theology, and Latin; rehearsing and directing choirs and ensembles for Sunday services at both principal churches, as well as composing. Eighth child born.	200+ church cantatas
1723-28	Writes one cantata every week for 3 of his first 6 years in Leipzig.	St. John Passion 2 other passions, now lost
1729	Assumes direction of collegium musicum	St. Matthew Passion
1730s	Composes more instrumental music, fewer cantatas	keyboard partitas Christmas Oratorio
1742	20th child born	Goldberg Variations
1747	Visits court of Frederick the Great at Potsdam	Musical Offering
1750	Dies, 28 July	Art of the Fugue B-minor Mass