Reviews:

David Yearsley: *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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Quirkiness is not something one would associate with J. S. Bach or, indeed, with his contrapuntal technique, yet David Yearsley's eloquent book on his counterpoint is like a collection of eighteenth-century curios, a showcase of oddities filled with pictures of skulls, alchemists, and mechanical objects, as well as metaphors associating Bach's canons with manure, autocrats and angels. Why? As Yearsley explains in his preface:

> Strict counterpoint as a whole has been frequently depicted as an enterprise of isolated, unrelenting study divorced from the larger musical culture of the first half of the eighteenth century. In this book I argue that the opposite is true: that in the first half of the eighteenth century no set of musical practices was richer in significance than strict counterpoint. Indeed, the minute, exacting, and seemingly esoteric world of canon could match the hermeneutic resonance of the most opulent of operas. . . . Counterpoint was saturated with meaning—social, theological, and political (xiii).

So in Bach's time, counterpoint bristled with many unusual meanings. Today, however, the unearthing of these meanings is something of a dangerous task. Yearsley is aware that he is treading not only on holy ground but also on the scholarly toes of many who have eternalized Bach in the image of his "esoteric" counterpoint. This is a Bach that we've all known and probably believed in at some point, a Bach of timeless abstraction, not so much a historical figure as a disembodied mind walled within a contrapuntal tower rising high above the fashions of the world. Not surprisingly, this Bach is often located in the autonomy of "the score itself"; his mind is inscribed in its printing, its layout, and—for music theorists—its analysis. But such a focus, as Yearsley warns, may unwittingly rehearse Johann Adolph Scheibe's famous attack on Bach, which ridiculed him as a remote and antiquated composer, "unwilling to confront the aesthetic issues" of his day (111). Yearsley's Bach, on the other hand, is modern and confrontational; thus the quirks in his book are designed to shake the tower and undermine its ahistorical foundations. Indeed, they relativize Bach's counterpoint to such an extent that, by the final chapter, Yearsley feels the need to defend himself as one of the composer's devotees rather than an enemy intent on dispossessing Bach of his throne:

> I recognise that my book is full of relativizing gestures which to a certain degree attempt to bring Bach and his counterpoint down from the lofty summit on which they have been so safely ensconced with the help of generations of Bach admirers. . . . Even while historicizing and relativizing Bach's achievement, I also recognize his unmatched mastery of the intricacies of counterpoint, from the minutiae of dedication canons to the sprawling, virtuosic essays of the *Art of Fugue*. As long as there are those who appreciate counterpoint, Bach's will be the gold standard (237).

Yet despite this rather defensive conclusion, many of Bach's admirers, I am sure, will still find the book offensive and simply brush aside the quirks as postmodern froth. After all, what's the point of tarnishing the "gold standard" with the grime of history? But in a sense that's the wrong question to ask, for the answer has less to do with the music than with ourselves: the peculiarities do not question the quality of Bach's compositions but how we understand them: if we continue to isolate Bach in that tower, then his music is simply a monologue imposed from on high as some kind of canonic law for us to obey and pass on to future generations; if he is released, then the scores become *interactive* and highly malleable—not so much something to be obeyed as to

be continually discussed and reformulated. What Yearsley achieves in the book is the transformation of the monologue into a dialogue—*a due voce*. These are not his terms, but it is clear that the music he engages with converses with history both now and then. In this way, Yearsley not only keeps the conversation open, he keeps it going, for if Bach's canonic practice could engage with the issues of his day, it can also interact with those of ours. Some scholars might want to dismiss this dialogue as merely the disposition of "discourses" around the scores as if they were paratexts that leave the works relatively untouched; but for Yearsley, the scores themselves are discursive, "critical music *par excellence*" (110). Hence he analyzes them in detail, dwelling on musical eccentricities often smoothed over in order to maintain that timeless appearance. After all, this was music written in the age of the "public sphere"—what Jürgen Habermas terms "Öffentlichkeit"—where the circulation of critical journals enabled the public to debate and formulate its own opinion. Yearsley carefully situates Bach in this critical arena; this supposedly provincial and "isolated" composer is in fact an active participant with contemporary commentators such as Johann Mattheson, Lorenz Mizler, and Scheibe, and is not simply a passive victim of their writings. The difference, of course, is that he prefers to respond to his contemporaries in counterpoint, and so requires all of Yearsley's brilliance as a historian and analyst to get the notes to speak—or, more accurately, to dialogue with him in the historical reconstruction of the debate.

The theoretical framework presented here is slightly misleading since, apart from a few sentences, Yearsley does not reflect theoretically on his methods, preferring to wear the credential of a meticulous historian—as a good Bach scholar should—amply footnoting sources, both well-known and obscure. The historical data is impressive and admirably handled, whereas the methodology is more or less assumed in the actual "performance" of the text. And perhaps the method is not too difficult to surmise, since each chapter follows the same procedure. An idea pertinent to the epistemological debates of the eighteenth century is raised, often in the title of a chapter—for example, "Bach the Machine" (173). To legitimize the connection historically, an intricate network is set up to link the composer to personages central to the debate, in this case Julien Offray de la Mettrie, author of the infamous *L'Homme machine* (1748), who not only sought asylum in Frederick the Great's Berlin soon after Bach's appearance there, but also criticized the Pietist doctor Georg Ernst Stahl for believing in the soul as the cause for the body's motions; and it was *his* son, also named Georg Ernst, who provided hospitality to Bach during his trips to Berlin in 1741 and 1747 (173–74). Having made the connection (however tenuous), Yearsley broadens the horizon by exploring the ramifications of machines on eighteenth-century music in general; in this chapter, he focuses on the debate generated by Jacques de Vaucanson's invention of a mechanical flute-playing faun—can such machines explain away the soul in the realization of music? From the vantage of the general Yearsley then homes in on the particular: first, by comparing various self-generating canonic devices with "thinking machines" (183), such as C.P.E. Bach's *Invention by which Six Measures of Double Counterpoint can be Written without a Knowledge of the Rules;* then specifically by analysing the canons in the *Art of Fugue* where, according to Yearsley, Bach "exaggerates the mechanistic, self-generating aspects of canonic writing" (190). And so the general and particular merge as history and analysis legitimize each other; the idea informs the interpretation of a work, and the work's meaning is transformed in its engagement with the idea. In the case of the *Art of Fugue,* the meaning of the work, for Yearsley, is located in a process of mechanical self-reproduction; in an act of ultimate mastery, Bach creates a mechanism that is not so much a counterfeit of music-making, like Vaucanson's faun, as a counterfeit of Bach himself (208). The mechanical is therefore redeemed through the distant lens of irony, and the remote abstraction often associated with the *Art of Fugue* takes on, through this dialogue, a different sense of objectivity. Yearsley handles such

complex chapters with an ease and elegance that belie their intellectual virtuosity; indeed, the quirky connections which he seems to relish as peripheral tidbits for our delectation turn out to be the Freudian slips of history, revealing far more than they appear. The eccentric is central to the argument, and Yearsley's historical reconstruction of such ulterior ideas provides a tool for defamiliarizing well-known pieces.

Yet the lack of an explicit theoretical framework makes it difficult to get a clear perspective on these fascinating insights. How, for example, do we handle the "contradictory impulses" between the chapters (xvi)? Does the mechanistic Bach of the *Art of Fugue* tally with the dying Bach of the first chapter, whose so-called deathbed chorale, "Vor deinen Thron tret ich hiermit," is suppose to confirm his faith in the immortality of the soul and aid its transition to the canonic afterlife of heaven? They are both very late works (and were indeed first published together), yet their meanings, as Yearsley admits, are at odds with each other (33). Is Yearsley simply celebrating a messy history of particulars that cannot be synthesised—a kind of diversity with no integrity? Or are the meanings general and interchangeable? Can the *Art of Fugue* also be an art of dying (*ars morendi*) and the deathbed chorale a mechanized demise? Or are the historical reconstructions a way of selecting the specific meaning of a work from a diversity of possible meanings available to Bach? But then how are we to understand these historical reconstructions? Are they in some way "authentic," as if Yearsley were saying "this is what the *Art of Fugue* meant at the time"? Or are they merely historically informed metaphors that can be freely applied, enabling Yearsley to interpret and analyze the music in a new way? Maybe he's not entirely sure himself: he sometimes describes the book as a "historicist project" aiming merely to set Bach's counterpoint firmly in its "original context," as if Yearsley could fix their historical meanings (210); and yet, he also describes it as "a kind of allegory" in which Bach's counterpoint becomes "meaningful only when stories are told about it," as if the meanings were almost fictional (237).

Where there is a clear alignment of idea and work, an "authentic" reading is quite plausible. In Chapter 3, for example, entitled "Bach's Taste for Pork or Canary," Yearsley situates Bach's F major Duetto from *Clavierübung III* within the debate on taste and the change in the eighteenth century towards a listener-based aesthetic with the burgeoning of the public sphere; this was an aesthetic of immediate delight that focused on what Scheibe calls "*natürlich* melody" as opposed to "*künstlich* harmony (counterpoint)," which he associated with the "turgid" polyphony of Bach (95). Bach inserted the Duettos into the *Clavierübung* relatively late, not long after the Scheibe controversy, so Yearsley tells us. But why compose duets? The critics of strict counterpoint regarded the duet genre as a perfect palate for the balanced flavors of modern taste; it provided "a prime opportunity to mix the natural with the appropriate amount of art," explains Yearsley (100). But Bach's Duetto is not a mix of the two but a grotesque juxtaposition. The opening section exemplifies the "pleasing, *cantabile* style so central to the progressive music criticism of the day" (103); the imitation is intelligible rather than intellectual, based on a simple diatonic subject that generates nothing but the most consonant harmonies. This "is a model of decorum, clarity, and naturalness," writes Yearsley, "so much so that one suspects Bach of a certain disingenuousness in his unhesitating embrace of these Enlightened values" (104). And indeed, the suspicion is confirmed, for in the central section, the cramped and relentless canonic imitation with its cross-relations and chromatic countersubject "verges on the unintelligible," (105) as if the music were questioning "every precept of progressive theory" (107). This section, concludes Yearsley, is "a wilful and tasteless incursion of the turgid into the natural" (108). Thus he reads the schizophrenic bipolar structure of the Duetto as a critique that dialogues with Scheibe in the debate over public taste. The original context specifies the "authentic" meaning of the work; Yearsley wants us to believe that this is what the Duetto meant at the time. And he is persuasive; not only is his interpretation both historically viable and analytically

verified, it also makes sense of this bizarre piece without eradicating the bizarre from its meaning. The quirks actually work.

Yearsley even want to ground some of his more speculative leaps in an "authentic" history. Never one to shy away from the taboos of Bach scholarship, he suggests in Chapter 5 that "Bach's relentless investigation, manipulation, and domination of the royal theme" in *A Musical Offering* is akin to the autocratic regime of Frederick the Great. This is not inconceivable since his reading is delimited by a specific event—Bach's famous visit to Berlin in 1647 (166). Certainly, for Yearsley, it is "more than coincidence that Bach's desire for absolute control of his material is nowhere more palpable than in a work dedicated to a man equally committed to like goals in politics. Both men were intent on dominating their subjects" (170). It may be that this was what *A Musical Offering* meant to Bach at the time. Of course, this autocratic project could also be taken more loosely as an apt metaphor, an "arbitrary" way of constructing meaning that nevertheless ties in with its history; after all, Mattheson compared the rule of the canon with a "violent dictator" (168), and Yearsley is simply exploring this controversial analogy in *A Musical Offering*.

Some of Yearsley's reconstructions, however, are plausible only as metaphors. Chapter 2, on alchemy, for example, is about as speculative as the speculative canons of Bach analyzed within it. The alignment of idea and work is merely one of guilt by association since the source for the connection is Bach's Weimar colleague Johann Gottfried Walther and his friend Heinrich Bokemeyer; there is no evidence that Bach himself was interested in alchemy—in fact, quite the opposite. Yearsley nonetheless takes the analogy between strict counterpoint and alchemy used by the occultists and also their detractors, who condemned such practices as superstitious witchcraft (55), as a means for analyzing Bach's cryptic puzzle canons. These works were not only mysteries to be solved, but, like the alchemical process itself, seem to yield contrapuntal riches from the most basic materials. As Yearsley suggests, "the seemingly simple, but in fact highly skilled act of arranging the building blocks of music in the proper proportion and configuration could result in a kind of magical expansion of the natural material" (89). But the exploration of these alchemical ideas, he admits, is "less to establish [Bach's] hermetic credentials than to examine the way in which his canons, and strict counterpoint more generally, may have been viewed by contemporary musicians receptive to occultist thought" (64). It is merely one way of constructing the meaning of these canons out of many, as if the meaning of the music were a metaphor imposed from without, a meaning that resides in its reception rather than its inception.

It seems that different chapters need to be understood in different ways. However, by the final chapter, Yearsley is drawn inexorably to the conclusion that his entire project has been a metaphorical reading of Bach, one where the "contrapuntal framework is nothing but a set of physical data" at the mercy of discourse and ideology: "musical revolutions," he states, "are as much about words as they are about music" (237). This is because the final chapter, unlike all the others, is a reception history of Bach's counterpoint in Germany since his death, and is therefore bound to the relativism of music's meanings as they mutate through time. But perhaps this is not the only determining factor here, for the history that Yearsley recounts to conclude his book is a sinister and morbid one. Would it not be better to discard these "stories" as "vivid . . . imagery"—particularly if we ourselves are implicated in some way (237)? If meaning is fluid, then this history can slip away as mere metaphor.

But I suspect from the way he argues his case that, deep down, Yearsley wants to stabilize such meanings. The book is really a "historicist project" that somehow got derailed by the diversity it had hoped to track. But the diverse need not be the relative. Indeed, the stability that Yearsley desires may in fact be grounded in the very diversity of meaning he describes. Counterpoint, after all, is supposed to be *poly*phonic; it is a complex, heterogeneous thing, with inherently diverse

intentions. So perhaps counterpoint has different meanings because it has different functions and different characters that open different topics for conversation. It is not the monolithic object that is the bane of this book: neither an abstract truth ensconced in Bach's immortal tower *nor* a post-structural "blank" for the inscription of arbitrary discourses—both strategies, although diametrically opposed, fall prey to abstract universals. Rather this music, in all its physical particularity, is inseparable from the numerous social practices with which it engages. It is precisely this engagement that makes a dialogue with meaning possible; and these conversations, whether it is with Scheibe or Yearsley himself, will bring certain meanings in these works into sharper focus, just as a performer will bring out different aspects of a piece. Hence the reception of Bach's counterpoint is not something "extra-musical." When Yearsley suddenly (and uncomfortably) finds himself echoing Nazi musicology in his totalitarian reading of *A Musical Offering* (233), he is led by the *music* into a line of reasoning that goes back to the eighteenth century; there is a "dictator" in the music, as Mattheson puts it, that allows Friedrich Marpurg, for example, to idolize Bach's counterpoint as a manly, Germanic discipline that strides forth against the effeminate music of France and Italy (228–29). It was this same sense of Bach's eternal virility that inspired the phrenologists and physiognomists of the nineteenth century to calculate from his newly dug-up bones the image of a powerful and "robust" (*kräftig*) figure that must be enshrined as a national relic in a new "sarcophagus of hulking, heroic proportions" (217, 223). Nazi musicologists simply steered the same conversation to meet the deranged political will of the moment, even to the point where soldiers on the front could see their "frictionless cooperation . . . [and] brilliant organization" as a form of contrapuntal discipline (234). As Alfred Burgartz declared: "Bach's fugues and Frederick's battle plans are spiritually united" (232); counterpoint was "selfless obedience" to the collective (235). These meanings are not fictional; they are not outside the music; they are as real as those of us today who wield dictatorial views of strict counterpoint (*strenge Satz*) as the foundational discipline of musical knowledge and practice. Counterpoint can have this effect, even with the best intentions. Of course, it doesn't mean that Bach is a proto-fascist, or that all music theorists are totalitarian, guilty of perpetuating in our pedagogy a German illusion about counterpoint "as the center of the musical universe" (230). But it does raise the question of how we ought to converse with the material. Authoritarianism, by definition, may be a domineering conversation (a monologue), but what Yearsley's book demonstrates is that there have always been many conversations available to those of us who still value counterpoint. Indeed, the only constant in the history of counterpoint is its diversity of meaning, even today—hence the debate continues. I'm sure that we can all think of modern-day Matthesons who, armed with their latest postmodern/poststructural/postcolonial theory, denounce the study of strict counterpoint as a tyrannical practice from which students should be protected; there are still the Marpurgs of today who lament the decline of standards brought on by the fashionable tastes of recent musicology, which knows nothing of music's underlying laws; there are contemporary Bokemeyers bewitched by the numerical abstractions of counterpoint, and geeky machinists designing software that will generate fugues automatically. And, of course, there will be us—everyday, run-of-the-mill music theorists and analysts, who are just like Bach himself (!), persisting doggedly with the practice of good counterpoint. The question that Yearsley asks is which Bach should we model ourselves after? The isolated one ensconced in an ivied tower of contrapuntal truth? Or the one who actively engages with the diverse meanings thrown up by modern society? Yearsley's book might be an inspiration here: perhaps, like him, we ought to try a more playful dialogue with counterpoint, using the quirks to topple that "dictator" from hogging the conversation too much.