

Beyond Bach: Aspects of Beethoven's Studies in Bach

by Ortrun Cramer

All great Classical composers after Bach studied his works and learned from them, but no one succeeded, as Mozart and Beethoven did, in grasping and further developing Bach's science of composition in such a way, that something entirely new emerged, again pointing into the future.

Ludwig van Beethoven had been familiar with Bach's art of composition since his early youth. In 1783, an article appeared in *Cramers Magazin der Musik*, which stated that young Beethoven "could become a second Mozart." The proof of his extraordinary talent was: "He plays most of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* by Sebastian Bach, which Mr. Neefe has placed in his hands. Anyone who knows this collection of preludes and fugues (which one could almost call the *non plus ultra*) will know what that means. . . ."

In 1783, *The Well-Tempered Clavier* existed only in private or commercial manuscripts; the first printed editions were published, first in 1799 in England, and in 1800-01 in Leipzig-Vienna, Bonn and Zürich. Beethoven's teacher Christian Gottlob Neefe, who was in contact with Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel, served as a proofreader of the edition of the Simrock publishing house in Bonn. From the essay in *Cramers Magazin der Musik*, one can conclude that the copies must have been circulated rather widely among music lovers.

When Beethoven started his studies with Haydn in Vienna—the hoped-for studies with Mozart had been rendered impossible by the latter's early death—he was welcomed and received by the admirers of Johann Sebastian Bach's music in Vienna. There was the well-

known Baron Gottfried van Swieten, in whose house the musical elite of Vienna would gather every Sunday, and where, according to Mozart, "nothing was played but Händel and Bach," and whose library Mozart described as "although in quality a very large store of good music, yet in quantity a very small one." And there were more admirers of Bach among the musicians, poets, publishers, personalities from the nobility and from economic life.

In an essay recently published in our *Ibykus* and *Fidelio* magazines on "Moses Mendelssohn and the Bach Tradition," Steven Meyer pointed to the special role of the family of the Jewish banker Daniel Itzig from Berlin.¹ Frequent cultural gatherings at his house were attended by (among others) Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, by Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Itzig's daughter, Sara Levy, had studied piano with Wilhelm Friedemann Bach; she became a key figure in the networks defending Bach's music. Her sister, Babette Salomon, was Felix Mendelssohn's grandmother; she gave him a copy of the full score of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. Two other daughters of Itzig, Fanny von Arnstein and Cäcilie Eskeles, were married in Vienna. Fanny von Arnstein was a co-founder of the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde (Musical Friends Society) in Vienna; Beethoven wrote a small composition into Cäcilie's album: "*Edel sei der Mensch, hilfreich und gut*" ("Let man be noble, helpful and good").

1. *Fidelio*, Summer 1999.

Of special value for Beethoven was the library of his student, friend, sponsor, and protector, the Archduke Rudolph, son of Emperor Leopold II, half-brother of Franz I. Archduke Rudolph, who later became Cardinal and Archbishop of Olmuez, was a highly talented musician. He played the piano part in the first performance of Beethoven's Violin Sonata Op. 96, and composed 40 variations on a theme by Beethoven, which he dedicated to his teacher. He had an impressive library, which Beethoven could use, which contained a large number of works by Johann Sebastian Bach in print, hand-written copies or manuscripts, as well as many theoretical works on music with further Bach pieces. In Rudolph's library were: *The Art of the Fugue*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, all four parts of the *Clavierübung*, the *Two- and Three-Part Inventions*, the *French and English Suites*, *Motets*, *Masses*, the *Four-Part Choral Songs*, and many more.

For Beethoven, this library was of great value; it enabled him to pick out what was "most appropriate" for his studies, as he declared in a letter to the Archduke. It is remarkable, that Beethoven dedicated to the Archduke a whole series of his greatest compositions, which are most clearly influenced by his Bach studies, among them the Piano Sonatas Op. 106 and 111, and the *Great Fugue* Op. 133. What Beethoven considered his greatest work, the *Missa Solennis*, was originally intended to be performed on the occasion of Rudolph's enthronement as Archbishop of Olmuez.

In his correspondence with his publishers, too, Beethoven showed his constant concern with the work of Johann

FIGURE 1



Bach's manuscript of "Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden," from the St. Matthew Passion.

Sebastian Bach: On the one hand, he constantly requested copies of newly published editions, for example, a copy of the *B-Minor Mass*, from the publishers Breitkopf and Härtel in Leipzig, and

Nägeli in Zürich. He thanked Breitkopf and Härtel for sending him Bach compositions, writing, "For the beautiful things of Sebastian Bach, I thank you very much indeed, I shall preserve them and

study them." Beethoven welcomed the planned project for a complete edition of Bach's works, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as "what does my heart good, my heart which beats fully for the elevated, great art of this original father of harmony."

In Beethoven's sketchbooks, interspersed among work on his own compositions, there are numerous entries of short or long passages out of Bach's works, among them, the *Chromatic Fantasy*, fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* and *The Art of the Fugue*.

The method of noting down association of ideas right away, Beethoven explained in 1823 in a letter to Archbishop Rudolph, whom he advised the following: "Right at the piano, quickly, fleetingly write down your ideas. . . . Through this, not only will your imagination be strengthened, but one also learns how to fix the remotest ideas in an instant. . . . Gradually, the ability emerges to present precisely and only what we wish/feel, which is such an essential need of noble men."

If Beethoven copied out long passages or special transitions from Bach's compositions, for study and for later use, he was following a method which Johann Sebastian Bach had already applied, who only achieved his science of composition through the study of good fugue writers, and "only through my own reflections," as Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach reported. Only through the conscious replication of the creative discoveries of great predecessors, does the student reach true knowledge—as opposed to obtuse, rote learning. (It would be useless, to condemn composition students to copy *The Well-Tempered Clavier* ten times over!)

The Art of the Four-Voice Song

In Beethoven, this enduring dialogue with Johann Sebastian Bach—and with the works of Mozart which Bach's discoveries take up and develop further—leads to a fundamental further development in the late compositions.

In an interview with *Ibykus* maga-

zine, Norbert Brainin, the primarius of the unforgettable Amadeus Quartet (whom we will see shortly in a film clip), explained where the decisive progress of Beethoven over Johann Sebastian Bach's composition method, lies: "Beethoven writes in his late quartets, a kind of four-voice setting, in which the four voices are played, that is, sung, together. All the voices sing something which is *important*—and, that is, all *equally important*. The balance is perfect; the voices need not be concerned with how loudly or how softly they sing, because everything is so *perfectly* composed. The most important element here, is the *Motivführung* [the thorough-composition], because the motifs that Beethoven uses, all originate from the piece and are related to one another." However, Brainin added, "It must be sung correctly, with the right voice . . . I assume, that a *bel canto*-trained singer, would recognize this immediately."

In order to investigate this idea further, we will use the following musical examples.

The four-voice choral phrases by Johann Sebastian Bach, appeared in print in 1784. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach became accustomed, by his father, he said, "not to see anything as a master work," the works were to serve connoisseurs and those eager to learn the art of composition, to study the "very special arrangement of the harmony and the *natural flowing of the middle voices and the bass*." Johann Sebastian Bach did not treat his own students with "dry counterpoint," but rather—after having initially worked through the pure four-voice general bass—led them into the chorales, such that he "first set the bass to it," and then his students "had to discover the alto and tenor voices themselves." Later, "he taught them to write the bass voice themselves."

Let us listen to an example of a four-voice chorale, perhaps the best known four-voice Bach chorale composition: "*Wenn ich einmal soll scheiden*" ("Should I at some time depart"), from the *St. Matthew Passion* [Figure 1]. We will hear a performance by the Wiener

FIGURE 2
Passage from Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 127

The figure shows a musical score for a passage from Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 127. It consists of three systems of staves. The first system shows the Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello parts. Violin I and Viola are marked *sotto voce*, while Violin II and Violoncello are marked *pizz.* The second system shows the Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello parts with *arco* markings and dynamic markings of *cresc.* and *p*. The third system shows the Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello parts with dynamic markings of *p* and *cresc.*

Singverein (Vienna Singing Group), conducted by Wilhelm Furtwängler, from 1954. After the "rediscovery" and performance of the *Passion* under the direction of the young Felix Mendelssohn in 1829 in Berlin, it has become traditional among conductors to perform this chorale a capella, that is, without instrumental accompaniment, and this is how it is performed in this example.

The chorale comes immediately after the presentation of Christ's death, in the *Passion*, and signifies a point of self-reflection for the listener, on one's

FIGURE 3

Opening of 'Heiliger Dankgesang' of Beethoven's Quartet Op. 132

Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart.
Molto adagio

own death and on eternal life. That this moves one's feelings most deeply, is obvious.

Let us now investigate, how Beethoven decisively further developed the art of the four-voice song—which also, as we heard in the earlier contribution, is shaped by Bach also in a very polyphonic manner.

For Beethoven, the sense and aim of the study of his predecessors, was indeed his own further development, towards new idea-manifolds. Beethoven described this very clearly in a letter to the Archbishop Rudolph, in which he explicitly names Bach and Händel as the only true geniuses, among his predeces-

sors: "The aim of the world of art, as indeed in the whole creation, is freedom, progress; if we moderns have not the same firmness as our ancestors, yet the refinement of our manners has in many ways enlarged our sphere of action."

What this expansion involved, can be heard in two examples, taken from Beethoven's late string quartets.

In autumn 1995, Norbert Brainin demonstrated the thorough-composition method in Beethoven's late string quartets, during a master-class of the Schiller Institute in Dolna Krupa, Slovakia.² I would like to show a film clip from this master class. Let us first listen to a short passage from the slow movement of the quartet Op. 127; the piece should be performed *Adagio molto espressivo* [Figure 2]. We will hear it performed by the Auer Quartet from Budapest. [She shows video excerpt of master class. During the demonstration, Brainin remarks: "This is perfect counterpoint. If you were told that it was by Bach, you would believe it."]

Now, to the third movement of the string quartet in A-minor, Op. 132, which was composed in 1825, and, like the quartets Op. 127, 130, and 131, was written for Russian Count Nikolai Galitzin. The movement of the quartet is entitled, "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenden an die Gottheit" ("Holy Song of Thanks, from a Convalescent, to the Godhead"). We have already heard about the importance of the "Lydian interval" for the decisive condensation of the well-tempered system, of the 24 major and minor keys. Quartet Op. 132 begins in the first movement (which we are not considering here) with a dense series of Lydian and double Lydian chords, as preparation for the development of the later composition, and especially this third movement. (On the significance of Op. 132, a number of articles have been published in our *Ibykus* over the past years, for example,

2. A report on the master class appears in "The Principle of Motivführung: Reviving the Classical Ideal in Slovakia," *Fidelio*, Winter 1995.

by Bruce Director and Anno Hellenbroich.)³

The “Heilige Dankgesang” is to be counted among the high points of Beethoven’s compositional art. The listener cannot escape the overwhelming effect of the self-fulfilling development process. The composition bears autobiographical traits: In 1825, Beethoven was seriously ill, and was forced to interrupt work on the quartets, for some time. The composition did not leave him alone, as one can see in his conversation notebooks, how involved with it he was. This reaches from short sketches for the quartet and sketches on the title “Dank-Hymne eines Kranken an Gott bey seiner Genesung” (“Hymns of Thanks to God, from an Invalid in his Convalescence”); “Gefühl neuer Kraft und wiedererwachtem Gefühl” (“The Feeling of New Strength and Reawakened Feeling”); up to ironic jokes, such as the sketched canon for Danish composer Kuhlau during an excursion: “Kuehl, nicht lau,” (“Cool, not Lukewarm”), which is a pun on the name, composed on the B-A-C-H (B^b A C B^b) motif. Beethoven often uses this form of irony, when he is dealing with the most serious, even fundamental problems.

Noteworthy is also the emphasis that Beethoven lays on the correct reproduction of the dynamic signs in the proof copy of the voices. In the first performance of Op. 132, he reportedly played a phrase of the second violin himself, in order to demonstrate the correct expression. After the performance, the violinist Holz wrote, in Beethoven’s conversation notebook, “I am happy now to be able to say, that I have received a violin lesson from Beethoven.” Keep in mind, that Beethoven was entirely deaf at this time!

The “Heiliger Dankgesang” begins as a simple, four-voice, Lydian chorale

3. In English, see Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “The Substance of Morality,” *EIR*, June 26, 1998, and an appendix, by many of LaRouche’s collaborators, “The Case of Classical Motivic Thorough-Composition,” *EIR*, Sept. 4, 1998. Both of these were also published in *Fidelio*, Winter 1998.

FIGURE 4

‘Neue Kraft fühlend’ Section of the ‘Heiliger Dankgesang’

FIGURE 5

Cantabile espressivo in the ‘Heiliger Dankgesang’

(from F), with a short introduction and short contrapuntal interludes, which are redefined in the further development. Let us first hear the beginning of the “Heilige Dankgesang,” in a performance by the Amadeus Quartet [Figure 3]. After the first strophe of the chorale, a new element, a second subject, is intro-

FIGURE 6

Second Entry of 'Heiliger Dankgesang' Chorale

Molto Adagio

pp $\langle \rangle$

cresc. p

cresc. p

cresc. p

cresc. p

FIGURE 7

Final Entry of the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' Chorale

Molto adagio

168 Mit innigster Empfindung

Mit innigster Empfindung

Mit innigster Empfindung

Mit innigster Empfindung

Mit innigster Empfindung

p

duced into the composition, an part in D-major: “Neue Kraft fühlend” (“Feeling New Strength”), which initially appears to be in the most marked contrast to the chorale. Then, the chorale returns, in an altered form, with accompanying voices after the *Andante*, thence followed by the *Andante* part in altered form. Finally, the chorale appears a third time, but this time

in a completely different form, in an incredible intensification with altered, accompanying motifs which have become fully independent voices, and a tightly led, repeated presentation of the chorale through all voices.

Let us consider a short film clip from Norbert Brainin’s presentation of the principle of composition. In this part of the master class in Dolna Krupa, he demonstrated the works alone, without other players, and marked the voices of all the instruments involved [Figures 4, 5, and 6].

[In the video, Brainin makes the following comments:

“Now we are in the dominant of D-major.

“Now comes ‘Neue Kraft fühlend.’

“Then there are trills again, the first violin trills so beautifully there.

“Now comes a real — such a fervent song (measures 67-70). Here is written: *Cantabile espressivo*, but only in the first violin!

“Now the others begin to play along.

“And so forth, it is all thematic.

“Now, again the same, but in a completely different form. The contrapuntal moment here is found in the second violin, viola, and ’cello. I can not play it for you as beautifully as it actually should sound. I can only play one voice at a time. But they are all very independent, and nonetheless together.”]

And, in conclusion, the last part of the “Heilige Dankgesang,” where Beethoven has characterized four voices with the additional remark: “*Mit innigster Empfindung*” (“with deepest, innermost feeling”) [Figure 7].

This conclusion suggests that we think back once again, to Johann Sebastian Bach. In 1738, Bach composed a short study on the thorough-bass, which only exists in a copy by one of his students. In this, is written: “The original cause of finish and end of all music, also of the thorough-bass, should be nothing other than to be for the worship of God and recreation of the spirit. Where this is not taken into consideration, is not music, but rather a diabolical bawling and mindless singsong.”

Bad Schwalbach 2000
Participants



Participants in the conference include J.S. Bach (upper left), speakers Anno Hellenbroich (above), Dino de Paoli (left), and Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr. (below, left). Pianist Prof. Günter Ludwig (below, right), in concert on May 27, performed Bach's Partita in B_b-major, Haydn's Two Themes with Variations in F, and Schubert's Sonata in B_b-major.

