

PATRICK SIMPSON  
#13 SCRIPT

Guess Who's Bach - Melomania #13

What do you think when you hear this?

[Johann Sebastian Bach - Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 in D (Perahia)]

Alright, so it's classical music. It's quite pleasant. This would be good to study to. And uhhhhh... yeah, yeah it's uhhh \*coughing\*, it's nice.

You could easily imagine this as background music to some posh gathering of executives after... I don't know, a gala. But if I'm being perfectly honest, I don't really know what a gala is.

But this is Bach! The greatest composer of all time! Good ol' Johann himself! Surely his genius shouldn't be relegated to the realm of ambient music—although I have nothing against ambient, as you probably know if you've listened to episode five of this podcast. So, let's try something else, maybe a solo piano piece would work better.

[Fugue #16 from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1 (Korevaar)]

Oh okay, so this has a bit more drama, that “do do do do,” it sounds pretty ominous. But what's happening here musically?

Oh okay, the YouTube description has a harmonic analysis here... it says “the countersubject is derived from an inversion of the subject” and “motivic cells are constantly repeated in double counterpoint.” Well, that's a lot of words I don't know combined in a way I don't understand, so... yeah.

This is the dilemma of classical music. We either hear it as an unobtrusive backdrop, or when we attempt to really appreciate it, we're left feeling like uncultured swine, swirling in a sea of jargon. And no composer suffers this fate more than Bach.

We see him as this monument of culture. We listen to him if we want to look sophisticated. But what makes him so great, anyway? And how can we appreciate that quote un-quote “greatness” for ourselves? We’re bringing Bach back to the 21st century.

I’m Patrick Simpson, and this is Melomania.

[Fugue #16]

So, as always, let’s get a bit of context. One of the most important things to remember not just about Bach, but any composer, is that they were a person, just like everyone else. We tend to idealize these great artists of the past, as though they were more than human, transcending us mere mortals to create godlike work. But Bach was just another guy, just doing his job the best he could. The thing with Bach though, is that “doing his job the best he could” is waaay beyond anything imaginable by today’s standards, or really standards of any time. Just to give you a more concrete idea of what exactly I mean by this, let’s get into some more details about what he composed and why.

So, most of Bach’s music was written to be performed only once at a specific event, like church services or holidays. For example, he was the director of music at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany, meaning that among other duties like teaching music and conducting, he had to compose new pieces every week for the services on Sunday. And these weren’t little five-minute hymns or anything like that. For a number of years, Bach wrote what we call cantatas...

[Die elenden sollen essen, BWV 75]

... at a blistering pace of one per week. I can't even make an episode of this podcast once per month, and it's not like this podcast is going to survive for hundreds of years and make my great great great great grandchildren cry or something.

[Dr. Kate Boyd: "He was constant time pressure because he was writing a cantata, like for the next week!"]

This is Dr. Kate Boyd.

["Like a 'hello, my name is?'"

"Yeah, sure"

"Okay. Hello, my name is Kate Boyd."]

She's a professor of piano at Butler University, and she's currently working on Bach's set of keyboard partitas.

["And so he would write it, write it, write it, and then he had all these people help be the copyists, and then he had to get the parts out to the musicians, and then he had to rehearse them, and then perform it, and then do the whole thing the next Sunday."]

Each of these cantatas is at least 15 minutes long, and can last up to 45 minutes. There are multiple movements, and distinct parts for a small choir and instrumental accompaniment. And he wrote an unbelievable amount of these!

["Half of which were lost. But we still have like hundreds, anyway."]

There are at least 209 surviving cantatas, to be exact. If we say each of them is 15 minutes long, that's over 50 hours of original music. And that's an extremely low estimate, given that many, if not most, were longer than that. And then of course, he wrote sooo much else.

["You have the... Brandenburg Concertos."]

[Brandenburg Concerto No. 5 (Perahia)]

Which we heard at the beginning of the episode.

["You have the B Minor Mass."]

[Sanctus from B Minor Mass]

Widely considered to be one of the greatest musical compositions ever, and a pinnacle of human artistry.

[Um, you have all the other instrumental suites: the cello suites, the violin partitas..."]

[Cello Suite No. 1 in G (Yo-Yo Ma)]

And then there's The Well-Tempered Clavier...

[Prelude in D Major from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1 (Gould)]

... which is a set of pieces composed in every major and minor key on the piano, adding up to 24 pairs of preludes and fugues.

["And then he wrote a second volume doing the exact same thing! And so, there are 48 of these preludes and fugues, which really form a cornerstone of the piano literature, of the keyboard literature."]

This is all to say that Bach was extremely prolific.

["It's not like, you have parts of it that are just like 'oh, well that's not so good. This piece is good, but not so much that.' It's all of quality."]

And this of course is amazing, and one of the reasons Bach is so revered, but it's also one of the reasons he's so intimidating to casual consumers. And not only is there just so much music, it's all composed in a specific style that we don't hear often, or at all today. It's incredibly complex and layered, and it would require hours and hours of

analysis to appreciate every element of it, so I'm just going to explain one concept that's key to understanding Bach: counterpoint.

[Toccatina and Fugue in D Minor, BWV 565]

Alright, alright, it's scary, I know.

[Toccatina]

And this Toccatina I'm playing right now doesn't even have counterpoint. So yeah. It gets scarier.

[Toccatina]

But this is a word that everyone who wants to really get to know Bach should know. So yeah... what is counterpoint?

[Toccatina]

[“\*Sighs,\* counterpoint.

\*Long pause\*

Okay.

\*Longer pause\*

You're gonna cut all this space out, I hope, because I'm just, yeah.”

“Sure.”

\*Laughs\*

It is pretty difficult to explain without getting into the weeds of music theory.

[“Counterpoint..... okay, let's put it this way.”]

But I'm gonna let Dr. Boyd take this one.

[“I'm gonna talk about the idea of melody and harmony, which is kind of what we think of, I think, when we think of music. So you hear a Cole Porter tune, and you hear the

melody, and then you hear the chords underneath it. And even in like, the Classical Era, which came after the Baroque Era, which is when Bach was writing, you have the music

of Mozart, and you have, you know, famous songs like...

\*plays Mozart's Piano Sonata No. 16 in C Major\*

Right, so you have a melody in one hand, right?

\*plays melody\*

And then you have the harmony...

\*plays harmony\*

... as broken chords. That's not a melody, that's not very interesting. But if you put them

together...

\*plays again\*

... so you get the combination, right?

But in the Baroque Era, what composers did, was each line in the texture operates independently. So in the example I played from the Mozart, this chord part...

\*plays harmony again\*

... is dependent on the melody to give it any meaning. But in, um, like, music by Bach,

what he does, is will have one voice act independently from another voice. And so maybe the high voice, in the soprano, will be important for a while, but then maybe the low voice, in the bass, will become important for a while. And so that manifests itself in

something like this Prelude in G Major.

\*plays Prelude in G Major\*

Now the left hand, and then, a little conversation...

Right, and so, that's even more noticeable when he starts to write fugues, because a fugue means that you have three independent lines that, on their own, could stand as a complete melodic something of interest, but then you layer them, and so they're all doing their own thing, but then at any given moment, it creates harmonic interest as well. So, to finish...

\*plays a fugue\*

So you get a sense of the whole being compiled, or consisting of three parts that are all substantial, and they contribute to a whole that's kind of greater than, if you just add three things together.”]

So yeah, there you go. To summarize: most music has one melodic line or voice, but to say that something is contrapuntal, or in other words, contains counterpoint, is to say that there are multiple melodic lines. That's what's happening when you listen to Bach.

[“When we take music theory lessons and classes, we have to compose a fugue or something, and oh my goodness is that hard! Bach had some kind of brain, in addition to his training and experience, that allowed him to quickly synthesize his musical ideas and filter them through all of the rules of counterpoint, in order to come up with music that like, goes with all those rules, and yet, is inventive, and not just dry and academic.”]

So, okay, we've covered how Bach is so unbelievably brilliant, but beyond pure technical skill, what makes Bach so compelling after all these years? Well, Dr. Boyd has an answer for us that's surprisingly, pretty simple.

[“It's just so beautiful. You know? I would say that, in a word, I find Bach's music, for me, to be profound. And that is why I, um, love to get up in the morning and play Bach,

with my morning coffee. You know, it's just like there's something about that is very profound, and I feel like it puts me in touch with something I don't otherwise have access to."]

But then, I think it's also important to keep in mind that you don't have to experience this profundity for yourself every time you listen to a Bach piece. That's just going to end in disappointment. Instead, I encourage all of you to simply listen to one Bach piece, really listen, and just see how you feel about it. You can see if you hear the same genius that's inspired generations of listeners and composers alike, or you can decide that it's just not for you and move onto a different piece. All I want you to do, is give Bach a chance, and see him not as some distant god of music, but as The New York Times once called "a living, compelling presence."

We're going to try this right now, with a piece that Dr. Boyd is actually working on, that struck me personally as I was researching this episode. It's the first movement of the fourth keyboard partita, which to me conveys this deep sense of majesty and joy. I'll play a few minutes of it, do the credits, and then play the rest of the piece. Listen for as long as you like. So, without further ado, here is Benjamin Grosvenor performing the Overture from Bach's Keyboard Partita no. 4.

[Keyboard Partita No. 4 in D Major, BWV 828 (Grosvenor)]

Melomania is written and produced by me, Patrick Simpson. The pieces that I used are, in order of appearance, Bach's Brandenburg Concerto no. 5, Fugue no. 16 from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, and forgive my mispronunciation on this next one, but Die elenden sollen essen, the Sanctus from the B Minor Mass, Cello Suite no. 1 in G Major, Prelude in D Major from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book 1, Toccata and

Fugue in D Minor, Contrapunctus 12 from The Art of Fugue, and of course this is the first movement of the fourth Keyboard Partita. Melomania is a production of 91.3 WHJE, broadcasting from beautiful, downtown, Carmel Indiana. Thanks for listening.

[Keyboard Partita No. 4]

Wait, how do you pronounce Bach, again?

[Emma Saying - "How to Pronounce Johann Sebastian Bach"]

\*with new pronunciation\* So it's Bach? Oh, I really messed up this one.