

# A Journey on the Way of Bach

Nathan Jones

Dan Moller, *The Way of Bach: Three Years with the Man, the Music, and the Piano*. Pegasus Books, 224pp., \$28 cloth.

“ I THINK THAT IF I WERE REQUIRED TO SPEND THE REST OF my life on a desert island,” the legendary pianist Glenn Gould once said, “and to listen to or play the music of any one composer during all that time, that composer would almost certainly be Bach.” More than any other composer, Bach provokes these sorts of dramatically intimate gestures from other celebrated musicians. Chopin would sometimes lock himself in a room and play Bach to calm his pre-performance nerves; Robert and Clara Schumann shared a “Bach diary” during their honeymoon; Pablo Casals played Bach every single morning, as a “blessing on the house.” The list could go on, seemingly ad infinitum.

Even amateur musicians, though, often feel compelled to make such gestures. I told my doctoral advisor, very early on, that I would write a dissertation on Bach or none at all. Steve Jobs held a lifelong romance with Bach, from his early LSD-fueled visions of Bach dancing in nature, to his friendship with Yo-Yo Ma (culminating in the iPod’s launch advertisements), to his later claim that Bach’s music offers something like a proof of God’s existence. And in his recent book, *The Way of Bach*, Dan Moller, professor of philosophy at the University of Maryland, takes his reader through his three-year-journey of trying to play Bach on the piano, read Bach scholarship, and develop a book about everything he learned and felt along the way.

Moller states up front that he will not be offering pedagogical advice, or even anything approaching a true biography. What he *will* do, he says, is “convey the felt experience of an adult learning Bach, from the point of view of someone who *loves* Bach with a completely unprofessional, undetached abandon.” Yet he also wants to “explain that feeling in terms of his life and work.” For such a personal, devotional type of book, this ambitious aim is laudable. Moller is a tenured philosophy professor with serious academic credentials: he could write a book solely about his “Bach piano hobby” and find a readership for it.

However, since Moller wants to use Bach's keyboard music as a bridge between his own subjective experiences and the objective facts of Bach's life, his aim is dangerous as well. Bach did not leave us with a slew of his own personal writings, à la Wagner or Beethoven. In order to describe "The Way of Bach," Moller needs to be able to integrate his own experiences into our scanty extant documentation of Bach's life, work, and thought.

In this task, Moller succeeds early and often. His early discussion of Bachian counterpoint, for example, begins as a description of his own difficulty in playing contrapuntally, shifts to a historical account of Bach's version of counterpoint, and culminates in an unabashed *normative* claim that Bach clearly agreed with: counterpoint is the essence of music, the "musical approach to music," as Moller puts it. In the broadest of terms, Moller situates Bachian counterpoint between the Renaissance, with its emphasis on harmony (who listens to Palestrina for the tunes?), and the modern popular musical era, with its apotheosis of melody (who listens to Elvis for the harmony?). Such a historical bifurcation obviously requires far more specification, but his overarching point is a provocative and compelling one: the integration of melody into harmony, the "point" of music, peaked with Bach in the early-to-mid eighteenth-century. Accordingly, Moller has no qualms calling Bach "the greatest composer of all time," and even "the greatest musician in history." Such music, Moller claims, is well worth the suffering it requires to understand and perform.

And suffer Moller does. From physical ailments (his fingers, hands, and arms are almost always hurting) to social ostracization (his grandiose claims about Bach are rarely welcome at dinner parties) to professional distraction (the only thing that gets him through delivering his philosophy lectures is hearing Bach in his mind's ear), the reader begins to see Moller as a kind of musical monk who expresses his devotion through painful but intimate isolation. He increasingly seems to identify with Bach himself, and you can feel him becoming genuinely upset as he learns of the suffering Bach himself underwent (the death of loved ones and professional rejection being constants throughout Bach's life).

This monkish identification with his spiritual hero, however, yields some truly great writing. In his second chapter, Moller tries to explain what he admires so much about Bach. What separates Bach from others? Why be so fanatical about *this one guy* when there are dozens of other amazing composers out there? The answer, for Moller at least, is that Bach combined confident ability with humble service. "Here was the greatest composer of all time," Moller writes, "and he was spending hours, countless hours, in creating fancy editions of his teaching manuals there was no reason to suspect anyone else would ever see." Bach was a musical mad scientist, but he invited all comers into his laboratory, and the willing learners would receive his patient

instruction. In Moller's wonderfully pithy words, "the music of Bach dares things unattempted yet, but never feels the need to tell us so."

Later, Moller recounts the story of Bach applying to replace Johann Adam Reincken, one of the great church organists of the time, at St. Katherine's in Hamburg, then one of the great operatic cities in Europe. Despite an audacious and wildly impressive audition, in which he improvised for hours on Reincken's own "*An Wasserflüssen Babylon*" ("By the Rivers of Babylon"), Bach was not offered the position. Back-room financial dealings led to the appointment of the mediocre son of a wealthy Hamburger, and Moller is clearly crestfallen by the development. "By the rivers of Hamburg," he concludes the section, "we knelt down and wept." Here is Moller the allegorical exegete, who flattens time and space in order to interpret the suffering of another as his own.

By this late point in the book, Moller might also strike his reader as an old Augustine of Hippo, confessing divine seduction as he looks back on his own spiritual life. The last chapter is simply entitled "God," and Moller seems to understand that any account of "the way of Bach" must eventually involve "the way of the cross," the single most important theme in all of Bach's work. He quickly and rightly rejects the condescending attitude of many Bach scholars whose books "inevitably contained a brief, reluctant, treatment of his religion, which the author secretly thought was stupid." Moller even tries going back to church, but neither Protestant nor Catholic churches can help him understand God like Bach can. One could justly charge him with idolizing Bach, and he might even declare himself guilty.

Whether one can declare his ambitious final chapter a success, however, is a tougher question. Moller has not tried to write scholarship here, but he has waded into the deepest Bach-waters one can wade into: Bachian theology. Bach's theological credentials do impress him (Bach passed rigorous theological examinations with flying colors and "many a pastor in Bach's day would have been proud to have owned" his personal theological library, according to Bach scholar Robin Leaver), but strangely, Moller chooses not to attempt even a cursory explanation of Bachian theology in light of these books of (almost exclusively) Lutheran theology. What results is an unfortunately ham-fisted interpretation of a complicated scholarly subject.

Earlier on in the book, Moller casually referred to Bach's cantatas as "faceless," and that was a forewarning of the mistakes that were eventually to come. After all, the two most important "faces" in Bach's cantatas are those of Jesus Christ and Martin Luther. That much is obvious and inarguable. Had Moller researched Luther's musical theology, the books sitting on Bach's shelves at home, he would have spared himself from a blunder such as this: "Later, the Pythagorean ideas were revived by Galileo and Kepler, like a conversation briefly interrupted by 2000 years of mediocrity." No, well before Galileo and Kepler (who was a *Lutheran*), Martin Luther explicitly praised Pythagoras

for his “ingenious understanding of the mathematical order of things” (in his *Heidelberg Disputation*), for describing that “wonderful and most lovely music coming from the harmony of the motions that are in the celestial spheres” (in his *Lectures on Genesis*), and nods to Pythagoras in describing music as “sounding number” (in his *Encomium Musices*). Moller includes Luther in these “2000 years of mediocrity,” when in reality, his writings were the fertile soil out of which Bach’s music grew.

Moreover, Moller seems bewildered by Bachian tonality, again ignoring the Lutheran theological roots of Bach’s work. He wonders why major music sounds generally happy and minor music sounds generally sad, which is a classic issue in musicology. He is aware of “two wrong theories” among the “philosophers and musicologists”: tonality as a mere allusion (which he discards), and tonality as a function of the harmonic series (which he considers profound but flawed). His proposed third alternative, “tonality as a function of the human mind,” is only partially correct. The truth, supported by studies in both modern musicology and modern neuroscience (laid out nicely in Iain McGilchrist’s *The Master and His Emissary*), is something Luther had already suggested five hundred years ago: both the non-human natural world and the human world have fallen away from divine perfection, and the perfect correspondences that once obtained between “the music of the spheres out there” and “the human body in here” have been damaged. Nevertheless, a correspondence between the harmonic series and the human mind still obtains, and the tonal differences we experience subjectively in a piece of music remain linked to what Luther objectively calls “musical nature.” We *think* and *feel* dissonance, for example, because certain frequencies battle each other *in nature*. This is what God intended providentially, and Luther repeats this claim many times. Strong echoes of this old Lutheran theory can even be found in Bach, especially when his rhetorical mouthpiece Johann Abraham Birnbaum defended his artistic and aesthetic theory from a scathing attack by Johann Adolph Scheibe (one of Bach’s former students). Rather than smothering Bach in a morass of Romantic speculation, he should have ended this book with some musico-theological insight from the sources that obviously nourished Bach throughout his life: Martin Luther’s musical theology.

Despite these shortcomings, *The Way of Bach* is still a bracing read for anyone interested in Bach. Bach lovers will delight in Moller’s vivid descriptions, trenchant rhetoric, and naked admiration. The “Bach curious” will likely enjoy Moller’s sprawling literary and philosophical references, which one would expect from a philosophy professor writing about music. The “Bach dispassionate,” however, may want to look elsewhere, because this book drips with the sort of Passion that animated Bach’s music in the first place. ♪