Defining Genius: Early Reflections of J. S. Bach’s Self-Image

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Well before the end of the eighteenth century, a conscious and deliberate discussion about self-image, that is, the way an artist sees himself, became a matter of course. Hence Mozart could write in 1778, at age twenty-two, “I am a Composer and was born a Capellmeister. I must not and cannot bury my gift for composing that a benevolent God has bestowed upon me in such a rich measure—I may say so without arrogance because I am aware of it now more than ever before.”

Even when similarly uninhibited in approbation of their own talent, musicians and composers of earlier generations generally did not refer to their metier and vocation in such terms. Critical self-knowledge was an unnecessary notion for those who understood themselves as being in the service of church, court, or town—in other words, serving God’s representatives, whether bishop, prince, or civic authority.

However, when in 1784 the German poet and writer C. F. Daniel Schubart discussed Johann Sebastian Bach’s significance, he showed no interest in whom his “Orpheus of the Germans” had once served or what he had produced in that capacity. Intending to give his idol Bach divine status and immortality, he borrowed the Orpheus analogy from the classicist Johann Matthias Gesner, who, in his Quintilian commentary of 1738, had stated, “Favorer as I am of antiquity, the accomplishments of our Bach . . . appear to me to effect what not many Orpheuses,

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1 Read 26 April 2001.
nor twenty Arions, could achieve.”  

Schubart then pronounced, “Sebastian Bach was a genius of the highest order. His spirit was so original, so vast, that centuries would be needed to measure up to it.”

As is the case with the Orpheus reference, there is a background to the notion of Bach the original genius as well. Although the use of the term “genius” is clearly the choice of Schubart as a later eighteenth-century admirer, its connotations reveal rather close links not just to the inner Bach circle but to the composer himself. This paper intends to demonstrate that Johann Sebastian Bach himself, in a self-aware and self-assured manner, laid the foundation for the image of genius that emerged after his lifetime and reached full bloom by the 1770s and 1780s.

The discussion of genius or, more specifically, original genius (*Originalgenie*) entered the philosophical and aesthetic discourse in Germany only around the middle of the eighteenth century. This is not the place for a review of the French and English use of the term genius that goes back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Suffice it to say that the French *génie*, where (as in the English “genius”) the Latin *genius* and *ingenium* blend, is eventually adopted by philosophers in Germany despite the rejection of the word by Bach’s younger Leipzig contemporary Johann Christoph Gottsched. Although the latter preferred *Geist* to the un-German *Genie*, Gottsched’s discussion of the concept of genius reflects his reception of French and English theories, particularly those of Batteux and Shaftesbury, and helps prepare its use as a fundamental idea of both aesthetic discourse and a genuinely aesthetic art. William Shakespeare was considered—also in Germany—the prototypical genius in literature; Isaac Newton joined him early on as the paradigmatic scientific genius.

Genius connotes not only a characteristic disposition, inclination, bent, turn, or temper of the mind, “a man endowed with superiour faculties,” as Samuel Johnson puts it in his 1755 dictionary. “By the word *Original*, when applied to *Genius,*” William Duff writes in 1767, “we mean that native and radical power which the mind possesses, of discovering something *New* and *Uncommon* in every subject on which it employs its *Faculties.* . . . The word *Original*, considered in connection with *Genius*, indicates the *Degree*, not the *Kind* of this accomplish-

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4 NBR, no. 328.  
5 NBR, no. 366.  
8 Ritter, op. cit., 282.
ment, and . . . it always denotes its highest Degree.”

What is its background? Here the obituary for Johann Sebastian Bach, written in 1750 but published only four years later, provides some crucial information and a number of key points. The piece was co-authored by Bach’s second son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his former student Johann Friedrich Agricola, at the time both members of Frederick the Great’s court capelle in Berlin.

The obituary begins, “Johann Sebastian Bach belongs to a family that seems to have received a love and aptitude for music as a gift of nature to all its members in common.” In the same way that Shakespeare was considered “a poet of nature” and “an illustrious instance of the force of unassisted Genius,” Bach is portrayed as talented by nature. This basic emphasis on the importance of natural gifts and talent corresponds to Bach’s serious interest in, indeed preoccupation with, genealogical matters. In 1735 he put together a family tree, complemented by an archive of musical compositions by his ancestors. Each member of the extended family of musicians receives a brief commentary in the tree, but of particular importance for Bach are the very beginnings of the family talent.

Thus, he describes “No. 1. Veit Bach, a white-bread baker in Hungary, [who] had to flee Hungary in the sixteenth century on account of his Lutheran religion. . . . He found his greatest pleasure in a little cittern, which he took with him even into the mill and played upon while the grinding was going on. (How pretty it must have sounded together! Yet in this way he had a chance to have time drilled into him.) And this was, as it were, the beginning of a musical inclination [der Anfang zur Music] in his descendants.” Then of no. 2, Johannes Bach, great-grandson Johann Sebastian registers a “particular inclination [Zuneigung] for music,” which led to his receiving a formal training as town piper. Talent, however, must be coupled with hard work and study, in the same way as ingenium must be complemented by studium. Hence the obituary presents a report about the orphaned child receiving tutelage from his older brother Johann Christoph: “The love of our little Johann Sebastian for music was uncommonly great even at this tender age,” a statement immediately followed by a very effective story about “the zeal to improve himself.” It is the story about a notebook with a
challenging repertoire that was kept in a locked cabinet, secretly taken out by the boy, and copied by moonlight. “In six months' time he had these musical spoils in his own hands,” the obituary relates, and connects the “very passion to improve himself in music” with “the very industry applied” to the music in the book.14 Nobody except Johann Sebastian himself could have transmitted this story, which was to illustrate, for his own children and students, the necessary combination of talent and industry. The story also presents the basis for the statement formulated by Bach and quoted by Johann Abraham Birnbaum in 1738: “What I have achieved by industry and practice, anyone else with tolerable natural gift and ability can also achieve.”15

The study of *exempla classica*, the reliance on and imitation of good models as the conventional method of learning, must be rounded out and capped by independent intellectual involvement. Hence the obituary authors specifically mention Bach’s “application to the art of organ playing and to composition, which he had learned chiefly by the observation of the works of the most famous and proficient composers and by the fruits of his own reflection upon them.”16 Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, replying in 1775 to a questionnaire submitted to him by Johann Nicolaus Forkel, the first Bach biographer, adds supplementary information by stating that his father became “a pure and strong fugue writer in his youth . . . through his own study and reflection alone.”17 Whether this actually reflects Sebastian Bach’s own view is hard to tell, but it is obvious that in regard to the development of fugal technique there were no viable models Bach could have turned to. More likely the son’s interpretation rather than the father’s account seems to have played a role in answering a specific question put to Emanuel Bach by Forkel about influential masters in Sebastian’s early years. Here he lists “the Lüneburg organist [Georg] Böhm,” but originally he had written “his teacher Böhm.” The words “his teacher” are crossed out,18 apparently for the simple reason that, in line with the new aesthetic concept of genius now in vogue in German philosophy, the Bach son wanted to stress the autodidactic nature of his father’s upbringing. As Carl Philipp Emanuel knew well, a genius is not supposed to have teachers; a genius teaches himself.

English philosophers like Addison, Pope, and Young differentiated between natural and original genius. Edward Young in his 1759 trea-

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14 NBR, p. 299.
15 NBR, p. 344.
16 NBR, p. 300.
tise Conjectures on original composition uses metaphorical language in order to clarify his point. “An Original,” he wrote, “may be said to be of a vegetable nature; it rises spontaneously from the vital root of Genius; it grows, it is not made.” An essential element in the definition of genius, especially as it was adopted by and propagated in eighteenth-century German philosophy, consists of the notion of originality, an identifiable and strong individual creative contribution. The obituary anticipated this aspect and addresses it in the non-biographical section of the text. In the passage that characterizes Bach’s general musical accomplishments and particularly his achievements in composition, we find the following sentence: “His melodies were strange [Ger. sonderbar: apart or away from others], but always varied, rich in invention, and resembling those of no other composer.” This by all accounts most unusual statement is without precedent or parallel. As far as we can tell, no musical oeuvre prior to 1750 had ever been thus described. The obituary authors must have been intensely aware that Bach’s music stood indeed in many ways apart from that of his contemporaries. The specific reference to invention [Erfindung] not only underscores the point, but also connects it to Johann Sebastian Bach’s own view. In the aforementioned 1775 letter to Forkel, C.P.E. Bach mentions the power of invention, “the invention of ideas,” as a decisive criterion by which his father identified a promising composition student: “he required this from the very beginning, and anyone who had none he advised to stay away from composition altogether.”

Sebastian Bach was intensely aware that his music was different from other music. It does not come as a surprise when, in a 1736 dispute with the rector of the St. Thomas School, he describes his church compositions as being “incomparably harder and more intricate.” Moreover, he knew of course that no other composer had written anything like the “Well-tempered Clavier,” the unaccompanied violin and cello solos, the concertos for one to four keyboards, or the Clavier-Übung series, to mention but a few. Even if issues of originality and individuality, in contrast to the more general notions of amenity, beauty, artfulness and the like, played no role in the aesthetics of Bach’s lifetime, he himself apparently paid attention to them in a rather self-aware manner. This is actually reflected in the obituary at another place as well. Within the first summary worklist that can be found there, it becomes evident that the authors wanted to emphasize those

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20 NBR, p. 305.
21 NBR, no. 399.
22 NBR, p. 176.
works that deserve special attention, that are unlike anything to be found elsewhere. Hence they highlight exactly those works or work-groups that are without parallel.\footnote{NBR, p. 303–05.}

Listed are first the published, then the unpublished works. Among the latter we find summary reference such as to “five annual cycles of cantatas” and “a mass of instrumental music of every kind,” but then more specifically for example: “a double-choir passion” [St. Matthew Passion], . . . trio sonatas for the organ with obbligato pedal, . . . two times 24 preludes and fugues through all keys [Well-tempered Clavier], . . . “six solos each for violin and violoncello without accompaniment,” or “concertos for 1, 2, 3 and 4 harpsichords”—that is all works that are without parallel in the musical repertoire.

Originality and incomparability are to be valued and measured not as isolated parameters, but in the context of important traditions in a given field (one need only remember Newton’s view of himself as standing on the shoulder of giants). An illuminating example is presented in 1752 by Johann Joachim Quantz in his discussion of Bach’s eminence in the development of organ playing. He writes,

As early as the last century, in fact from the middle of the same, a few famous men . . . began to strive for an improvement of musical taste [he then gives the names of Buxtehude, Reinken, Froberger, Pachelbel, and others]. But particularly the art of organ playing, which had to a great extent been learned from the Netherlanders, was already at this time in a high state of advancement, thanks to the above mentioned and some other able men. Finally the admirable Johann Sebastian Bach brought it to its greatest perfection in recent times. We can only hope that now, after his death, owing to the small number of those who still devote sufficient industry to it, it will not again fall into decline or even decay.\footnote{NBR, no. 350.}

There is no question that a part of this passage is dependent on a story to be found in Bach’s obituary. It concerns Bach’s visit to Hamburg in 1722, and his playing the organ before a large and distinguished audience, among them the octogenarian organist Jan Adam Reinken, who was brought up in the Netherlands. Reinken is quoted as having made the following compliment to Bach: “I thought that this art was dead, but I see that in you it still lives.”\footnote{NBR, p. 302.} There could have been only one person responsible for the transmission of this dictum, Johann Sebastian Bach himself. He probably also shaped its final formulation,
which eventually, with Quantz’s help, made it into the annals of music history.

Speaking of links with tradition, there is the issue of a well-recognized “benchmark,” a superior paradigm. Shakespeare serves in that capacity in both English and German literature. Forkel, discussing in 1774 Bach’s musical splendors, refers to a remark by Lessing: “Even the most minor of his splendors bear a stamp which calls out to the whole world: I am Shakespeare.” References can also be found to Albrecht Dürer, in the form of Bach as “the Albrecht Dürer of German music.”

The earliest, most widely circulating, and most significant parallel, however, is drawn between Bach and Newton. The first such reference can be found already in the year of Bach’s death. It was made by Johann Friedrich Agricola, a former pupil of Bach’s and around 1740 a student at Leipzig University, then a center of Newtonianism in Germany. By way of analogy, Agricola explains that Bach’s music is best appreciated by real connoisseurs, just as Newton’s writings are best understood by readers with a deep knowledge of science. Three decades later, in his discussion of Bach the genius, Schubart pronounces, “What Newton was as a philosopher, Bach was as a musician.” In other words, just as Newton brought about fundamental changes and established new principles in the world of science, Bach did the same in the world of music, both in composition and in performance. With a work such as the “Well-tempered Clavier,” to mention just one characteristic example, the world of musical composition was no longer the same. Newton the prototype of scientific genius and Bach the musical genius are juxtaposed with respect to the universal and timeless impact of their extraordinary inventions and discoveries.

It seems worth noting at this point that Bach’s most important musical contemporaries, Handel, Telemann, Vivaldi, and Rameau, who all wrote music that had a broader appeal, and was more widely disseminated, than Bach’s, were completely remote from the discussion and the scene in which the eighteenth-century concept of original genius emerged. Two explanations offer themselves. First, their compositional art, whether applied to opera, oratorio, concerto, or any other vocal and instrumental genre, was widely recognized and acknowledged as superior. There is no question about the quality, beauty, appeal, technical

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make-up, or poetic and expressive character of their music. Yet none of their compositional achievements brought about any fundamental and long-lasting changes by way of discovery and new inventions. Second, Bach lived and worked for twenty-seven years in an academically challenging environment, and his main activities consisted of teaching. Hence, scores of students and their pupils’ students helped organize and eventually consolidate Bach’s lasting influence, a phenomenon that none of his musical colleagues sustained. Joseph Haydn put the finishing touches on the fully evolved icon Bach when he hailed him as “the man from whom all musical wisdom proceeded.”

Like his contemporaries and in line with the conventions of his time, Bach left virtually no direct documents transmitting his own view of himself, a kind of self-assessment. At the same time, we observe—beginning with the obituary of 1750—the gradual emergence of a unique image of Bach the original genius, an image shaped by the generation of his sons and students, but continually contributed to by later ones—even beyond Beethoven. Particularly remarkable, however, is the evidence (not merely a suspicion) that the groundwork for the image of Bach the genius was laid by none other than the composer himself. As the obituary and related sources demonstrate, they essentially incorporate reflections of a strong self-image, a desire to accentuate and safeguard the aspects of his art of which he was, justifiably, most proud, and finally to define his place in history, well beyond the narrower confines of the family tree that he had drawn up in 1735.

29 NBR, p. 374.