Annotated Music essay

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What do we learn about J. S. Bach’s musical style and musical thought from texts written by and about the composer? You must include both primary and secondary source material.

A genius by some accounts, a humble servant of God or mere organ teacher by others, Johann Sebastian Bach is undeniably a complex figure. Scholars have variously considered the nature of his musical thought, suggesting that he understood music to have religious, professional, educational and perhaps artistic significance. His musical style – particularly its economy and contrapuntal complexity – has similarly fascinated such historians as Laurence Dreyfus and John Butt. This essay will attempt to consider what exactly primary and secondary texts reveal about aspects of Bach’s musical thought and style.

Perhaps the most popular view of Bach’s musical thought is that it is based on devout religiosity. **Certainly,** Bach was an ardent Lutheran: he not only worshipped in and often worked for the Lutheran Church, but also owned and meticulously annotated multiple volumes of Luther’s writings and translations.¹ Luther saw music as a gift of God and endorsed its role in worship – and Bach’s dedication to Luther suggests he concurred.² Additionally, Bach’s Bible annotations (made after 1733) suggest concern with music’s religious function.³ Beside 2 Chronicles 5:3 he wrote, “where there is devotional music, God with his grace is always present”, suggesting sacred music actually summons God’s spirit.⁴ Furthermore, alongside 1 Chronicles 29:21 he wrote “besides other forms of worship, music especially has...been ordered by God” suggesting he believed God himself ordained music in worship.⁵ John Butt considers these annotations, alongside the fact that Bach wrote plenty of sacred music, indicative that Bach understood music as “a fundamental tool of religion”, proclaiming the Gospel as powerfully as the sermon.⁶

² Ibid., p. 40, p. 45.
⁵Johann Sebastian Bach, ‘Excerpts from Bach’s marginal comments in his copy of Abraham Calov’s edition of the Lutheran Bible (Wittenberg, 1681)’, c. 1733, in David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 161.
⁶Butt, ‘Bach’s metaphysics of music’, p. 55, p. 50.
Additionally, C.P.E. Bach’s 1750 obituary of his father suggests Bach viewed music as a “service” to God – a form of personal worship.⁷ Bach dedicated much of his music to God (with the manuscript inscriptions J.J. (Jesus Juva; Jesus help) and S.D.G. (Soli Deo Gloria; To God alone be the glory)) – including secular works such as his cello suites.⁸ This suggests his personal dedication to God underpinned all his compositional activity: serving and glorifying God was his “ultimate [compositional] purpose”.⁹ Furthermore, evidence suggests Bach understood music to possess inherent divinity. His 1738 foreword to a harmony treatise suggests that music is itself, through its “perfect” thorough bass foundation, divine.¹⁰ Perhaps, as Butt puts it, Bach viewed music as actively “constituting a religious reality”; as itself powerful or holy, quite independent of any divine text¹¹. However Butt also highlights that Bach apparently understood music to have multiple functions. Many of his dedications refer to pedagogical intentions or delighting the heart: only the Orgelbüchlein title page (c. 1717) makes the "Praise of God" specific.¹² This suggests Bach saw music as having functions in pleasing or instructing the human world, in addition to glorifying or embodying God.

Some scholars suggest that Bach understood music as a livelihood. Bach’s own writings suggest he saw himself as a professional agent for organising or bettering music in his community. In 1708, he wrote of a hope of establishing a “well-regulated Church Music” – that is, competently executing music for every church occasion.¹³ Similarly in a 1730 memorandum to the Leipzig Town Council he outlined his concern with creating a “well-appointed church music”, by writing to list the resources he needed (and lacked).¹⁴ Clearly Bach cared about music-making as a profession – about doing his job (variously as music director, composer, cantor and teacher) well. Indeed, in Bach’s era, music was certainly a professional occupation: an appropriate economic option for a man who had to “maintain and educate” many children.¹⁵ In addition, Otto Bettman highlights that Bach grew up

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⁷Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola, ‘The World-Famous Organist, Mr. Johann Sebastian Bach, Royal Polish and Electoral Saxon Court Composer, and Music Director in Leipzig’, 1750, in David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 303.
⁸David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 16.
⁹Butt, ‘Bach’s metaphysics of music’, p. 53.
¹¹Butt, ‘Bach’s metaphysics of music’, p. 46, p. 54.
¹²Ibid., p. 52.
¹³Butt, ‘Bach’s metaphysics of music’, p. 53.
¹⁵¹ Johann Nikolaus Forkel, ‘Johann Sebastian Bach: His Life, Art and Work’, 1802, in David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 461
in a family of professional musicians and, because of his parents’ deaths, had to earn his way with music from adolescence.¹⁶ For Bach, then, music was necessarily a professional service to society as much as a religious tool.

In extension of this, Bach seems to have understood music as an educational tool (which contributed to his livelihood). He became a respected music educator in his lifetime, particularly in Leipzig (1723-50), where he taught hundreds of composition, organ and singing students, often with his own music.¹⁷ C.P.E. Bach in 1775 noted that his father was an instructive, thorough teacher who wrote pedagogical music specifically for his students, although reputable resources were already available.¹⁸ And certainly Bach presented many of his works as didactic. The title page of his Inventions and Sinfonias (c. 1720-3), for instance, promises “upright instruction” for “especially those desirous of learning”, while The Well-Tempered Clavier (1722 and 1742) was described* as being “for the use and profit of the musical youth desirous of learning”.¹⁹ As Hans David and Arthur Mendel suggest, Bach’s dedicated, enthusiastic involvement in writing pedagogical music suggests he thrived on teaching.²⁰ Thus Bach seems to have appreciated music’s educational capacity – both for its contribution to his income and the satisfaction he apparently gained from teaching.

Finally, some argue that Bach understood music as an art form. A decided lack of evidence from Bach himself suggests he did not consider himself an artist. He promoted his musical achievement as the product of sheer industry, reportedly declaring, “I have had to work hard; anyone who works just as hard will get just as far”.²¹ However Bach did attempt to express Baroque Affekt (mood or emotion) in his music.²² One student in 1746 recalled Bach’s concern that his compositions be played “not...merely offhand but according to the Affekt”, which suggests Bach believed in the importance of, and tried to write, music which conveyed emotional expression and sensitivity.²³ Bach’s work is often openly expressive: David and

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¹⁷ Ibid., p. 118.
¹⁸ Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, 'Letter answering questions about Bach', 1775, in David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 399.
¹⁹ Johann Sebastian Bach, 'Title page to Inventions and Sinfonias', c. 1720-3 and 'Title page to The Well-Tempered Clavier', 1722, in David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 22.
²⁰David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 20.
²¹ Johann Sebastian Bach, reported speech, date unknown, in David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 20.
²² David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 17.
Mendel highlight his use of word-painting (e.g. setting the word ‘fall’ to a descending leap) and expressive melody (e.g. John the Evangelist’s “tortured climactic line” (an extended, minor-key recitative line, unmistakably conveying anguish) when he tells of Peter weeping in the *St. John Passion* (BWV 245; movement 12c)).²⁴ That Bach’s music seems to purposefully and intensely convey feeling, mood and meaning suggests Bach understood music as an art form. As Bettman states, Bach seems to have written music to “stir the emotions” and “delight” – to please the ears and affect the hearts of listeners as well as communicate religious messages or educate.²⁵

Writers have also considered Bach’s musical style. Perhaps most universally, Bach is noted for his densely contrapuntal textures. A 1774 letter from C.P.E. Bach to Johann Forkel betrays J.S. Bach’s skill and interest in counterpoint: “when he listened to a…fugue, he could soon say, after the first entries of the subjects, what contrapuntal devices it would be possible to apply, and which of them the composer…ought to apply”. ²⁶ Many others have noted – admiringly and disparagingly – the contrapuntal richness of Bach’s music. Johann Scheibe in 1737 criticised Bach’s music as “overladen”, “turgid” and “confused”, suggesting (albeit negatively) its extended, overlapping lines. ²⁷ Similarly early nineteenth-century Berlin audiences (as described in 1869 by Eduard Devrient, a friend of Felix Mendelssohn’s) considered Bach an “unintelligible…arithmetician” suggesting the intricacy, seriousness and almost mathematical, meticulous quality of his music. ²⁸ By contrast Devrient himself in 1869 admired Bach’s “abundance of melody”, and Johann Birnbaum in 1738 praised Bach’s harmonic skill and smooth integration of contrapuntal voices (“the voices…work wonderfully in and about one another, but without the slightest confusion”).²⁹ This sense of order and refinement is similarly captured in David and Mendel’s suggestion that in Bach’s music parts behave “like persons…convers[ing]”.³⁰ Additionally Wilfrid Mellers notes Bach’s focus on order (as evident in his methodical, exhaustive treatment of keys and adherence to counterpoint rules) with the universe’s divine order.³¹ Despite different readings of its value, Bach’s style is thus widely appreciated as densely contrapuntal, ordered and meticulous.

Evidence from Bach himself additionally suggests his stylistic economy – in both his expansion of short motifs to build a piece and his musical parodying. Laurence Dreyfus notes the concentration of musical ideas in Bach’s work, declaring, “in the case of most Bachian genres, the set of significant ideas will be relatively small”.³² This allows Bach to exhaustively explore all of a motif’s melodic possibilities (to follow the “logic of invention”); to filter it through his “toolbox” of compositional procedures to create something inventive, but controlled and methodical.³³ Likewise David and Mendel recognise that Bach’s music is built of short motifs to illustrate “the technique of elaboration”: the initial two bar motif of Brandenburg Concerto No. 5, I. Allegro, for instance, grows into a whole melodic world.³⁴ In other words, Bach’s economical style is characterised by a thorough exploration of a motif or fragment’s melodic and harmonic possibilities. Additionally Bach’s economy emerges in his recycling of music. He reworked Vivaldi and Corelli works, suggesting both his respect for these composers and his own thriftiness; his sense that music should be worked out to its full potential.³⁵ Bach also parodied his own music. Norman Carrell

⁴³ Ibid., p. 181, p. 173.
⁴⁴ David et al., The New Bach Reader, p. 22.
⁴⁵ Butt, ‘Bach’s metaphysics of music’, p. 58.
identifies hundreds of works where Bach reworked or improved upon his own compositions – for example the melody of Prelude to the 3rd Violin Partita (BWV 1006; 1720) is recycled in Sinfonia in D to Cantata 29 (BWV 29; 1731).³⁶

Similarly he set the Lutheran chorale Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her ten times.³⁷ Clearly Bach was resourceful, and enjoyed revisiting and reconsidering (perhaps further ‘working out’) material.

To summarise, Bach’s musical thought and musical style have been variously appreciated since his lifetime. He is thought to have conceptualised music as a religious reality, a church tool, a livelihood, and an art form. And his style has been viewed as richly contrapuntal, economical and ordered. What emerges from wide reading is a multi-faceted, altogether human picture of Bach as a composer who understood music to have multiple functions and an ultimately expressive, thorough style. In terms of further research, I would suggest a consideration of how Bach’s conception and execution of music compares with that of later composers. I particularly think his meticulous, almost mathematical style would offer a fascinating contrast with 20th century serialism.

Words: 1633

³⁷ Ibid., p. 29.
Bibliography


Essay writing

The above text is an excellent example of an academic essay. This particular essay was written for a Music course assignment and achieved a high grade because careful consideration was given to the following:

Structure and coherence

As this example illustrates, essays must be well-structured and coherent so that each idea clearly links to the one that precedes it and the one that follows. Essays normally have the following sections: introductory paragraph, body paragraphs, and concluding paragraph. The introductory paragraph provides the context, introduces the topic, and defines the thesis (point of view). The body paragraphs give the writer the opportunity to address each subtopic in turn. The concluding paragraph provides the opportunity for the writer to signal that this is the end of the essay, sum up the argument, and restate the thesis.

Within the broad structure of an essay, it is important to develop a coherent argument that clearly links one idea to another. One way that coherence can be achieved is through the use of “transition signals” or “connecting words” that smooth the transition from one idea to another and provide logical links between sentences. Such transitional signals include these adverbs: additionally, furthermore, however, similarly. Another way to develop a coherent argument is through “signposting”, through which the writer signals to the reader what is coming next in the essay or how the essay is being organised as a whole; For example, the writer clearly signals the overall essay organisation in the introductory paragraph:

Scholars have variously considered the nature of his musical thought, suggesting that he understood music to have religious, professional, educational and perhaps artistic significance. His musical style – particularly its economy and contrapuntal complexity – has similarly fascinated such historians as Laurence Dreyfus and John Butt.

Through these sentences, it is possible to see the subtopics that will be addressed in the essay in the order in which they appear (with the exception of the last two – economy and contrapuntal complexity, which are addressed in the reverse order).

Clear expression of the writer’s opinion or “voice”

The writer’s “voice” or opinion is clearly expressed in this essay even though the essay is written almost entirely in the third person. Indeed, as this essay shows, it is not necessary to use “I” to make your opinion clear. Rather it is possible to express your views by using words that express certainty (thus making a strong claim) or uncertainty (thus making a weak or tentative claim).

Strong claims are made by using adverbs that have a strong meaning (e.g., undeniably, certainly, clearly). These adverbs along with their adjective counterparts (i.e., undeniable, certain, clear) are sometimes referred to as “boosters” or “intensifiers”. As the following example shows, when making such a claim in the essay, the writer first provides evidence for the claim she is to make:

Similarly he set the Lutheran chorale *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her* ten times.³⁷ Clearly Bach was resourceful, and enjoyed revisiting and reconsidering (perhaps further ‘working out’) material.

Weak or tentative claims are made by using “hedging” devices such as “perhaps” and “seems”. Hedging is a way that writers can express uncertainty, avoid drawing unjustified conclusions and acknowledge that they are not experts. In this essay, the writer makes tentative claims or “hedges” by using adverbs (e.g., perhaps, apparently), verbs (e.g., suggest, seem, attempt), and modal verbs (e.g., could). The following example illustrates the writer using the adverb “perhaps” to indicate that she is uncertain about the claim she is making about the popularity of Bach’s music:

Similarly he set the Lutheran chorale *Vom Himmel hoch da komm ich her* ten times.³⁷ Clearly Bach was resourceful, and enjoyed revisiting and reconsidering (perhaps further ‘working out’) material.
Perhaps the most popular view of Bach’s musical thought is that it is based on devout religiosity.

The extent to which strong or weak claims are made in essays often depends on the topic and the room for interpretation within this. This particular essay provides considerable scope for interpretation as the writer seeks to interpret the opinions of authors about Bach’s musical style and thought from primary and secondary sources.

**Careful attention to verb forms**

Writing an excellent essay requires the writer to give careful consideration to tense (present, past), aspect (simple, perfect, progressive), voice (active and passive) and use of modals (e.g., might, could). Each of these serve a variety of functions in academic essays. Indeed, the writer can switch between different verb forms even within or between sentences for specific purposes. Verb forms used in the essay include the simple present and simple past, present perfect, modal verbs, and much less frequently, passive voice. A brief overview of the reasons why different verb forms are used is given below.

**Tense**

The most frequently used tense in this essay is the present tense. The present simple is used for:

1. narrating the essay; e.g.,
   Additionally Bach’s economy **emerges** in his recycling of music.
2. referring to generally accepted ideas e.g.,
   Bach is undeniably a complex figure.

The past simple tense is used to refer to events that have been completed in the past; e.g.,

Bach was an ardent Lutheran: he not only **worshipped** in and often **worked** for the Lutheran Church ...

**Aspect**

The present perfect refers to an action which started in the past and is still of current relevance; e.g.,

Scholars have variously **considered** the nature of his musical thought ...

**Modal verbs**

Modal verbs are used for a number of reasons which include:

1. showing the intention of the writer; e.g.,
   This essay will attempt to consider what exactly primary and secondary texts reveal about Bach’s musical thought and style.
2. suggesting possibilities for further research; e.g.,
   In terms of further research, I would suggest a consideration of how Bach’s conception and execution of music compares with that of later composers.

Although not used for this purpose in this essay, modal verbs can also be used making tentative claims or statements; e.g., Bach may have taken this approach because ...

**Voice**

The active voice is primarily used in essay writing because it places the focus of the sentence on the *doer* or *performer* of the action rather than the receiver of the action; e.g.,

Luther *saw* music as a gift of God and *endorsed* its role in worship.
The passive voice is used minimally in essay writing, and in this essay it is either used in quoted material or when the writer does not want to specify the author of the source material; e.g.,

To summarise, Bach’s musical thought and style have been variously appreciated since his lifetime.

**Specialised vocabulary**

As this example shows, an important feature of a well-written essay is that specialised vocabulary is correctly used. Indeed, as a Music essay, this essay includes a number of musical terms; e.g., contrapuntal, melodic, and compositional. Using specialised vocabulary means that the word’s correct form is used in an appropriate collations; that is, with words that frequently combine together; e.g., The adjective “compositional” (from the noun “composition”) is used in the following sentence to modify the nouns “activity” and “purpose”, both of which can combine with this adjective:

This suggests his personal dedication to God underpinned all his compositional activity: serving and glorifying God was his “ultimate [compositional] purpose”.⁹

Given the importance of correctly using specialised vocabulary, you may find it useful to build a glossary with these words and focus on learning their meaning, the words they frequently collocate with, and their various forms.

**Referencing style**

Also of importance is the need to pay special attention to referencing and to ensure that you consistently follow the referencing style of your discipline. In this essay, the Chicago referencing style is used. Numbered superscript figures are used within the text (e.g., ¹) to refer to the full reference, which is given on the same page below the text in the footnotes (e.g., ¹Robin A. Leaver, ‘Music and Lutheranism’, in John Butt (ed.), The Cambridge Companion to Bach (Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 39.)¹