

3. J. Passio secunda Joannē. à 2 Viol. 2 Oboe. 2 Violini Viola e Cont.
J. S. Bach.

Handwritten musical score for the first system, including staves for Flauto, Flauto II, Violino I, Violino II, Viola, Corno, Alto, and Basso.

Handwritten musical score for the second system, including staves for Continuo, Violoncelli e Bassoni, and other instruments.



Reflecting Heaven: Interview with Hegumen Peter Mescherinov

Translated by Sergei Brun

Father Peter, when a person becomes a believer, when he acquires certain spiritual experience, does he begin to perceive music in a new way, in a way he hadn't previously?

Yes, the perception definitely changes. Music itself (I mean real music—classical music, not pop or anything like that) as an art form has a very powerful impact on a person, a direct impact. It is the most subtle, harmonious art, the least verbal—an art that is not related to something specific (like architecture or painting, for example). Music is more “abstract,” and perhaps that is why it has a deeper effect on the soul. But all classical music is historically based on ecclesiastical content.

From an aesthetic point of view, if we take the definition of Saint Theophan that art is a reflection of heaven, music reflects the deepest foundation of the harmony placed by God in all creation. Music can thus become a reflection of the divine order. Of course, this can also be said in relation to the other arts, especially architecture, and medieval architecture in particular. Architecture was consciously engaged in reflecting the heavenly order on Earth.

But to the greatest extent, this characteristic pertains to music. When a person knows his faith, he discovers just that. And of course, it is one thing to

perceive harmony unconsciously; it's another thing to understand where it comes from, the basis of its order. Perception changes in this way.

How long have you been studying [Johann Sebastian] Bach? What have you managed to achieve during this time?

I've been interested in Bach for about thirty years. Well, at least I started listening to him a long time ago, because when they teach classical music, everyone plays Bach from a very early age. And this is a very proper and right approach, because it naturally educates taste. The “peculiarity” of Bach's music, its depth, has always attracted me. Actually, it was through him that I came to Christ, because, perceiving the depth and singularity of his music, I wanted to understand its origins. Moreover, it is directly related to the divine services. Much of it consists of Lutheran liturgical chants. The first lines of the Gospel that I read were in German—the words to Bach's *Saint John Passion* and *Saint Matthew Passion*. Then, when I was baptized and came to the monastery, I had a period of more concentrated immersion in church tradition, a process that is natural for all Christians, when music faded into the background. But I did not do it on purpose; it is not that I ascetically cut myself off from art. . . . And then my interest in Bach re-

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Opposite Page:
Johann Sebastian Bach, *Saint John Passion*, c. 1738.
Autograph of the first page. Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

turned on a completely different level, because his spiritual component is the brightest among all composers, all musicians. And even from the point of view of pastime—in the good sense of the word—nothing is better than listening to Bach, with an understanding of what this music is about, of course. I am now translating his sacred cantatas. . . . I hope, perhaps, to translate every one of them somehow.¹

Does Bach have a great artistic heritage?

About 200 sacred cantatas have survived, though he wrote more. There are also the *Saint Matthew Passion*, the *Saint John Passion* (composed as divine services for Good Friday), the *Easter Oratorio*, the *Christmas Oratorio*, many short chorales, and organ compositions, which are also associated with divine services. All of them also require translation and understanding, because Bach was very skillful when it came to meaning. He did things deliberately. He said that even when you play a chorale on the organ, you need to have a thorough understanding of what the text is about.

And the fact that Bach belonged to a spiritual and cultural tradition that differs from ours, the fact that he belonged to Lutheranism—is this reflected in his work? How should an Orthodox audience relate to this? Could it prove spiritually harmful in any way?

Of course Lutheranism, with its dogma and mysticism, are reflected in Bach's work. Can this harm an Orthodox person? Of course not. Many Orthodox Christians love and know Bach's work, but none of them has converted to Lutheranism. Studying a different Christian culture is very useful.



Johann Sebastian Bach. Carl Seffner, statue of in front of St. Thomas Church, Leipzig, 1908.

What are the criteria for good and bad music?

There is an internal standard for the very construction of a piece of music—form, mastery of the material. There are also external criteria for music as regards its application, its purpose. Basically, of course, I follow internal criteria. After all, music is the art of combining seven notes in such a way that they captivate and elevate the human soul. Bach himself said that music should serve for the glorification of the Almighty and for the edification of one's neighbor. How to achieve that? This is what great composers are for. There are not many of them. . . . By the way, I recently listened to Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev's *Saint Matthew Passion*, and I understood very well that any piece of music is very strongly determined by the environment in which the composer lives. Vladyka Hilarion's *Saint Matthew Passion* has absorbed the musical culture of our time, not only art music but popular music as well. I am not saying this as a reproach—I liked this

¹ This translation was subsequently published as Johann Sebastian Bach, *Тексты духовных произведений*, trans. Peter Mescherinov (2012), <https://igpetr.org/book/iogann-sebastyan-bah-teksty-duhovnyh-proizvedenij/>.

piece—but in it, you can hear echoes of both the soundtrack to a good film and some elements of a musical. The sonic atmosphere in which a person exists affects him in one way or another. Either the composer rejects the avant-garde, that is, he consciously opposes all these influences, or the influences are somehow absorbed, and cannot but be found in the music. The same is true in the work of Bach. He absorbed exactly what his era gave him. This is a particularly Lutheran spirituality, “individualistic” in the best sense of the word, which is quite clearly reflected in Bach, in all his musical techniques and formal devices. The era was absorbed into Bach’s music. And—of course, this is my subjective opinion—that era was “better” than ours: it was higher and purer, and certainly more spiritual, it was more Christian, and from the point of view of aesthetics, it was more developed and richer.

There is another interesting problem: when people have just come to the faith, they often worry about what kind of music to listen to, and if it is possible to listen to non-spiritual music, to musicians who are quite far from faith?

Let’s take the striking example of [Richard] Wagner. It is known that he was by no means a model of decency and had very peculiar views that were, at best, questionable from a Christian point of view. The man was proud to the point of insanity, and so on. But his work expresses a certain artistic truth that appears as parallel to and distinct from the author’s life: that is, Wagner as a person is one thing, and Wagner as a creative entity is another. In his creative work, he was given the ability to achieve just that “reflection of heaven” of which Theophan the Recluse spoke.

So a genius, even if he is a sinner and an unbeliever, can still reflect this harmony?

Yes, there is such a phenomenon. But this is not a necessary relationship; it may happen, or it may be the other way around. For example, the composer [Alfred] Schnittke was a believer and undoubtedly moral. But—and this, of course, is also my personal opinion—I cannot listen to his music, because it seems to me that demons have gotten into it and are operating there. He himself, though, was a true Christian and an impeccable person. There are some paradoxes of artistic creativity. But of course it is especially pleasant when the personality of the creator and his music coincide. And you can see it right away. Again, take Bach and [Franz Joseph] Haydn: these are two of the most striking such examples in the history of music, when personality, faith, kindness, high morality, and magnificent artistic creativity coincide harmoniously. This gives an extraordinary, “heavenly” effect.

Is there contemporary ecclesiastical creativity? Has everything already been written, all the services already recorded, so nothing new can be created? Or is something new being created now in the Church?

I think it all depends, again, on talent. If a new John of Damascus appears, then . . .

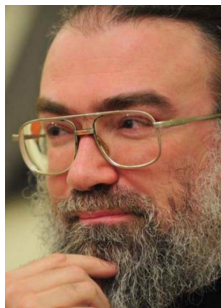
Bach appeared at a certain moment in time. But before him there was something, and this “something” enjoyed its authority. Then Bach appeared, he created new works . . .

The remarkable phenomenon of Bach is precisely that he did not invent new forms. Bach is an illustration of the typical ecclesiastical approach. He did

not create new forms, but filled the old forms with inner content. For example, the modern Lutheran service is very different from the service of the eighteenth century. During the nineteenth century, the transformation of Lutheranism from a real religion into something rationalistic took place; it “abolished” Bach’s culture, the living culture of his time. And so today, no one would know what a cantata is—they would only study it at the conservatory as an archaic musical form—if Bach had not filled the cantata with an inner content, enabling this musical form to endure. In contrast to Bach, Haydn laid the foundation for new European music by creating new forms, the symphony and the sonata, which have not yet exhausted themselves. These two composers can be compared in terms of their inner mood, deep faith, and talent. But one of them ended the era without creating new forms. The other, on the contrary, began a new era. There is also this parallel: Haydn wrote his

first Mass when Bach was finishing his famous *Mass in B Minor*. So, both are possible. Everything depends on genius and talent—and on one’s environment, because genius and talent do not exist somewhere so elevated it is airless.

In our current mood, I believe the Church should be conservative, traditional. It should preserve the existing forms: literary and liturgical, iconographic, musical, and the liturgical space itself. Within the framework of these forms, you can still create wonderful things. Maybe new forms are possible, but there is a great danger that they will become imbued with the postmodern spirit of our time, which blurs everything. An Orthodox musical is hardly appropriate in the Church. On the other hand, holding onto tradition should not turn into a rigid end in itself. Otherwise, new Haydns and new Johns of Damascus will not be given a chance to appear. ✱



Hegumen **Peter (Mescherinov)** is the rector of the Church of the Icon of the Theotokos “of the Sign” on the estate of the Danilov Monastery near Moscow. He was educated as a classical musician. Prior to joining the monastic community, he was a member of the Moscow Conservatory Symphony Orchestra. He is the author of the book *Церковь и общество* (Church and Society) and multiple articles on classical music, and has translated many German Protestant liturgical texts from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.