

Johann Sebastian Bach, *Magnificat in D*, BWV 243, 1733. Autograph score, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.



FROM THE ARCHIVES

## Cantor Maximus

Olivier Clément

Translated by Michael Berrigan Clark

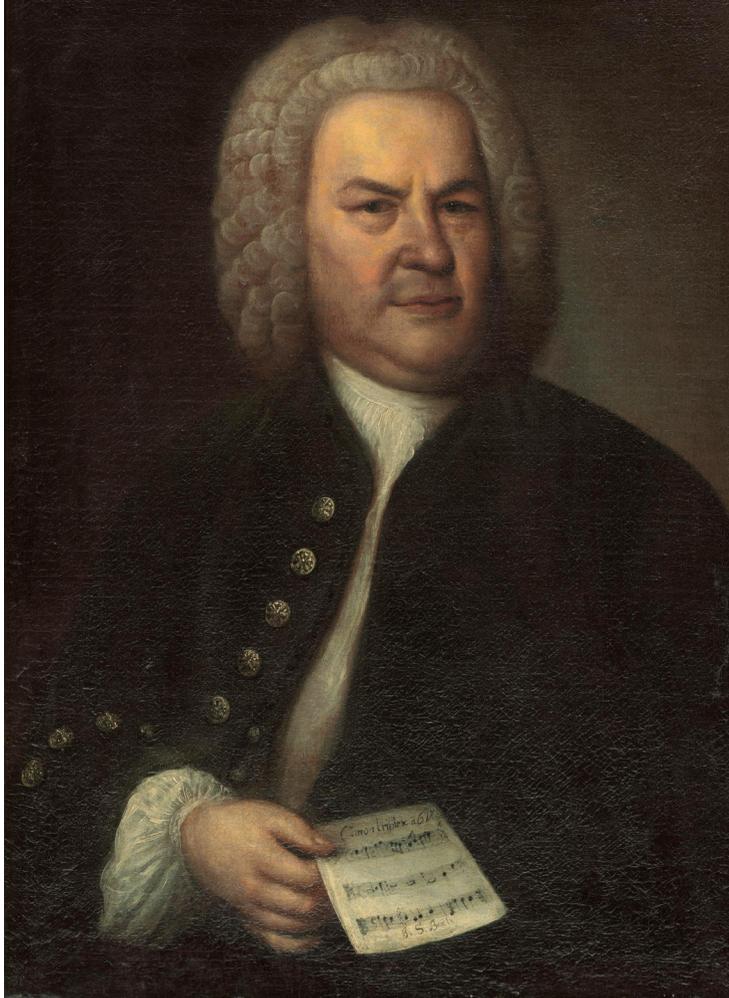
*This reflection was published in French in Olivier Clément, Anachroniques (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990).*

One does not listen to Bach. One participates in the music, one sings it (if only silently), one lets it sing within oneself. Because his music is inseparable from prayer, it is a music that prays and causes one to pray. Bach composes faith. He composes to transmit not only the exterior resonance of faith, but also its content (which is why he opposed Pietism as too subjective and too lacking in an ecclesial dimension). At Leipzig in particular, from 1723 to his death in 1750, the rhythm of his principal creations is the rhythm of liturgy: he composes organ preludes, writes introductions and accompaniment for canticles and chorales, meditates on the Eucharistic mystery during Communion, and concludes the whole progression with a fugue. The chorales he prepares always relate to the Sunday Bible readings. His cantatas are made not for the concert hall but for church, so their individual parts may be interspersed between the various liturgical moments.

Bach cannot be divided. He was a musician of genius, of course, but also a believer with a passion for theology (it is characteristic of the “fragmented” state of our culture that historians present the latter quality as a mania or a peculiar quirk). Beginning in his school days at St. Michael’s in Lüneburg, the adolescent Bach certainly learned music, but also had long conversations with the rector, a prominent Lutheran theologian. Later, Bach’s library would be overflowing with theological works. He read and reread the Bible, annotated it, and immersed himself in the Psalms to such a degree that the French musicologist Pierre Vidal could detect the correspondence between specific verses of the Psalter and the musical phrases in Bach’s organ works. “I always had as my unique goal the creation of a music well ordered to the greater glory of God.” And the majority of his scores carry as their closing inscription: *Soli Deo gloria*.

Boris de Schlözer noted in reference to purely aesthetic commentary on Bach's music: "We are well aware that there is something else in Bach, that Bach is a poet, a Christian, a mystic. . . ." Yes, a mystic who has no need to deny the world and life, who blesses them inexhaustibly, a singularly incarnate mystic with his two wives and twenty children, a creative mystic who does not prophesy in some delirious state, but who sees himself in the role of the servant, because he stands in a place where heaven and earth are united: the Church, the victorious Cross. Therefore it is enough for him that he be able to *serve*, in the higher sense of *diakonia*.

Bach is clearly part of the Lutheran tradition that insisted on returning the people to their place as full participants in liturgy. Hence the importance that Luther himself placed on the chorale, sung by the entire assembly (he composed forty of them himself). Considered more broadly, music itself became for Luther "a magnificent gift of God, very close to theology." And he was certainly right; it is the essence of good theology that it be doxological, that it be sung! There is a gentle and serious Teutonic spirit here, still described in tender and nostalgic terms in the novels of Ernst Wiechert (especially *The Jeromin Children*), a spirit that has perhaps survived, here and there, the follies and outrages of our century. Like Luther and his followers, Bach composed chorales in "four-square" form. Like Luther, whose works he read, Bach insists on the depravity of human nature and on salvation through grace.



However, as Bach's genius unfurls, it takes on a "catholic" scope, in the deep sense of this word that conveys the meaning "according to the fullness." Within the Lutheran heritage, he stresses Christus Victor, Christ the vanquisher of death and hell, an emphasis received in a direct line from the Fathers. At Leipzig he found a liturgy that made generous use of Latin and was still close to the Roman rite. The lapidary beauty of the Latin versicles seems to have inspired him, filled him with fervor (more than the mediocre German poems of Picander that he was obliged to use for several cantatas). The result was the splendid *Magnificat* (created for Christmas 1723 in

Elias Gottlob Haussmann, Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach, 1746. Altes Rathaus, Leipzig, Germany.

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the Church of Saint Thomas), whose prodigious élan makes the unique “hymn to joy” truly Christian. How can one fail to notice the dancing motif heard in the cellos in the *Exultavit*, followed by the extreme asceticism of the *Sicut Locutus est*, which in turn allows the final *Gloria* to explode into sound?

One of Bach’s most beautiful works, composed near the end of his life in a truly ecumenical spirit, is the *Mass in B Minor*. He himself gave it the title of “Catholic Mass” and dedicated it to a Catholic sovereign, the king of Poland.

If I had to name my favorite “piece” by Bach (as if his work could be split into pieces!), I would have to say the *Saint Matthew Passion*, that long poem of the Church at the foot of the Cross with Mary. A poem, because Bach is what the Germans call a *Tondichter*, a poet of sound. But it is not simply a “piece”; it is an entire world.

So instead, I choose the organ chorale *Vor deinen Thron tret’ ich hiermit*—“Lord, I come before your throne”—which the blind Bach dictated from his bed a few days before his death. It is a work of firm confidence, raised up to a state of fire and crystal. And thus I should like to die. I write that as a prayer. And since it is still necessary to live: any one of the toccatas for organ, an “irrational missile” that I could easily imagine played by a cruel young girl who, on the inside, soars upward with the music, as a tall thin bird flies away (above

the ponds, near my home), beating its wings in the hard joy of being.

The music of Bach teaches us much on a burning issue of the day: the relationship between music and liturgy. I believe it teaches us two fundamental things. The first is that music must be in service to the Word, with a capital letter. Music must be the capital letter of the Word. It is music that must uproot the Word from the realm of merely human parlance in order to reveal its axis of silence, that silence that is “the mystery of the world to come” and that rests in the Word as the Spirit rests in Christ. The Spirit, the Breath: such is perhaps the sense of the *basso continuo* so dear to Bach, and concerning which he said, “Its end and its final cause can be none other than the glorification of God and the fate of the soul. Where this end is not taken into consideration, there is only bellowing and barbarous organ ditties.”

Bach assigned an extreme importance to language, to the title and the text of a chorale or cantata. The adagios of his concertos are constructed like speeches; the least inflexion in a cantata is ordered toward liturgical expression. The *Saint Matthew Passion* follows the gospel text as tightly as possible; its entire structure serves to describe, to express, to contemplate the tragic and life-giving Cross.

The other lesson is that music in itself, in perfect accord with the text, must include an inner symbolism, a sacramentality. Certainly in the case of

Bach's music, symbols seem to lurk in the polyphony: they are creative, they give rise to its branching structure and ensure that it has meaning. The repetition of a single note tolls the bell for the start of day, or for death. The chromatic patterns suggest anguish, suffering, the Passion. The union of two natures in Christ (Bach is very "Chalcedonian"! ) is expressed through the interweaving of a masculine rhythm and a feminine triple rhythm. Bach, moreover, feminizes his rhythms and contours every time he wants to lead us to the gates of the Kingdom.

All is not equal, of course, in this music. There is also, in the expression of a German musicologist, "Bach at his sewing machine." Or even, according to the sensibilities of a Chinese aesthete, an eternal marching music! The Italianisms are not always felicitous; on occasion Bach loses the sense of the text. An austere, ascetic, paschal cantata, like the one entitled *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, can make us nostalgic for the old liturgical music, purely monodic like Gregorian or Byzantine chant. Or that of Monteverdi and Schütz. There is occasionally with Bach's music, as in a baroque church, a space of exaltation rather than incarnation. All is saved, nevertheless, by the sense of the crucified God, and, I might add, of the divinized human being, of man in the full stature of his humanity. It has been said that Western Christianity had some difficulty, after Saint Augustine, in expressing the idea of mediation in all its fullness. Which is probably why, in our era, so

many Jesuits have become Hegelians! But Bach tears apart the limitations of the Augustinian tradition as accentuated by Luther: beyond the sin washed away by the blood, there is the human being restored to creative power, the poet of a life that is stronger than death.

Today it is a popular habit to say that Bach is "baroque." The concept of "baroque" has supplanted that of "classical" to an absurd extent (I remember a series of television broadcasts that referred to the facade of Versailles as "baroque"). The only advantage to the term is to liberate the history of European sensibility from a certain "Gallocentrism," so evident, however, in the little German courts where Bach worked for so long.

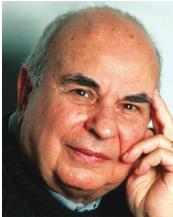
The music of Bach is an "impure" music, in the sense that it is often tied to a text, and those who listen to it without understanding any German—or Latin—or without following along boldly in a translation will suffer from a certain aesthetic cretinism. They will turn the music into a spectacle or entertainment, whereas it must be heard as preaching and contemplation. They reduce the music, in fact, to the baroque, which is, at least in part, much like our own, a culture of the spectacle, of live entertainment.

But the baroque is so much more, and surpasses itself by uniting shadows and light. On the one hand, there is in Bach's music an apparently abstract perfection (which performance

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practices accentuated—until quite recently) and an extreme sensitivity, sometimes vehement. Here and there, even in the light, the night shows through the surface and romanticism is heralded by what Luc-André Marcel calls “the very excess of arabesques, the proliferation of *possibilities*.” There is a nearly constant tension between moderation and balance, on the one hand, and vivacious imagery and intense expression on the other. Between an imperturbable rhythm and a heartbreaking pathos: between Transcendence and the Passion that anticipates human romantic passion, or rather encompasses and transfigures it. Bach is ascetic, rigorous, and “fleshy, colorful, emotive, animated by an acrobatic frenzy” (Philippe Beaussant). A synthesis of the “horizontal” and the “vertical,” of counterpoint and harmony. . . . Bach gives us an example of what I would call a “free theophany” (theophany meaning manifestation of God). There was once a medieval culture, of high Christianity, a unified culture, organic, but a highly

restrictive theocracy that limited the possibilities of human expression and exploration. There once was, and still is, an explosion of modernity, a culture torn apart that allowed a prodigious exploration of the confines of the human and the cosmic. But the center, when ignored or denied, begins to disappear, and a gap opens up where nihilism takes hold. In this situation, Christians must not dream of rebuilding a Christianity, nor must they allow themselves to dissolve into modernity or reject it entirely according to some clenched-fist paranoia. Let them follow the example of Bach under the conditions that prevail today. At the heart of a modernity already on its way to triumph and negation, Bach was content to affirm a free theophany, a powerful and creative theophany. Faithful and resurrectional. Let us try to do likewise, to the best of our abilities. Then, if God is willing, the fragments of exploded modernity, instead of dispersing in the night, will begin to gravitate around that Sun that has no need to curse nor to explain itself, but only to shed light. ✱



**Olivier Clément** (1921–2009) was a French lay Orthodox theologian, who devoted his life to the study of Christian spirituality and ecumenical rapprochement. Raised in an agnostic household, he was baptized into the Orthodox Church in 1951. For many years, he was Professor of Moral Theology at the Institut de Théologie Orthodoxe Saint-Serge in Paris. He wrote more than thirty books, many of which have been translated.