



COMMUNICATION: CONFERENCE REPORT

Late Style and the Idea of the Summative Work in Bach and Beethoven

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In April 2015 the University of Massachusetts Amherst launched its first festival and symposium celebrating the music and legacy of Johann Sebastian Bach. Since that time, the event has become a biennial tradition. However, the 2021 festival and symposium were unlike any of the prior events because of their virtual format. In addition, solo and chamber pieces replaced the large choral works featured in previous festivals. Pre-recorded performances, released each evening in the week prior to the symposium, also included several world premieres of compositions written in homage to Bach.

The day-long symposium featured five paper sessions, each exploring a different aspect of the concept of late style in relation to Bach or Beethoven. The first of these focused on keyboard music in a panel featuring Christine Blanken (Bach-Archiv Leipzig), Reuben Phillips (University of Oxford) and moderator Ellen Exner (New England Conservatory). In her paper, entitled ‘Steps towards New Concepts and against Pragmatism in Organ Music: The Late Organ Music by Johann Sebastian Bach – Models, Pathways, and What Posterity Made of It’, Blanken provided an overview of Bach’s activities as a writer for organ. In the process, she revealed a gradual evolution from church composer to virtuoso to learned composer. She claimed that Bach became more oriented toward summative collections late in life, calling his *Clavierübung III* (1739) a ‘musical catechism’. If Blanken focused on Bach’s organ music, Phillips concentrated on the reception of Bach’s late works by Donald Francis Tovey in his paper ‘Completing Bach: The Mass in B Minor and the Art of Fugue in Tovey’s Hands’. While scholars typically consult Tovey’s published writings and recordings to study his engagement with the composer’s music, Phillips chose instead to look at handwritten annotations in Tovey’s personal copy of the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition; these include his pencilled completion of the *Art of Fugue* and his continuo realization for the Mass in B minor. During his analysis of the annotations, Phillips revealed Tovey’s engagement with the composer to be a very personal one that resists the commonly monumentalized vision of late Bach.

The second session focused on two major sets of variations for keyboard, Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* and Beethoven’s *Diabelli Variations*, with papers by me (Erinn Knyt, University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Michael Spitzer (University of Liverpool). The moderator was Daniel R. Melamed (Indiana University). In my talk, ‘J. S. Bach’s *Goldberg Variations* Reimagined’, I documented seven recent multi-composer works (1997–2020) based on Bach’s piece. Focusing on case studies of two pieces, *The New Goldberg Variations* (1997) and *13 Ways of Looking at Goldberg* (2004), I showed how the plurality of Bach’s late style helped generate new pluralistic postmodern compositions. In doing so, I expanded notions of Bach’s late output as being not just summative, but also generative. There is a tendency to think of Bach and his work as completing an age, as summing it up. However, my talk, along with Robert Marshall’s key-note address (mentioned below), also sought to show ways that Bach helped generate or inspire the creative activities of later generations. If my presentation focused on recent reception history, Spitzer

compared subjective and affective aspects of late style in both sets of variations in his talk, entitled 'Cyclic Thoughts In/Between/About The Goldberg and The Diabelli'. Spitzer made a compelling argument that Bach's set of variations was more subjective, more human and more rooted in the social cultures in which he lived than Beethoven's Diabelli set, which reflected a constructed musical circle ('Kunstvereinigung'). While Bach's music featured his favourite dance, the sarabande, which Spitzer surmises he might have danced with his wife, and folksongs that might have been reminiscent of family singalongs (as in variation 30), Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* brings up memories of a musical circle (Mozart, variation 22, Bach, variation 31, and Handel, variation 32). Spitzer argued that Beethoven's late style as found in the variations is abstract and spiritual, whereas Bach's is physical and related to lived events.

If the first two sessions focused on keyboard literature, the third panel concentrated on the aesthetic concept of late style in music. The moderator was Abigail Fine (University of Oregon) and the presenters were Anthony Barone (University of Nevada Las Vegas) and Keith Chapin (Cardiff University). Barone's talk, "'Old Age's Lambent Peaks": On Organic and Dialectical Paradigms of Lateness', provided an overview of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century ideas about late style and considered how these informed the reception of the music of Beethoven. He documented how nineteenth-century writers sought to separate the aged artist from earlier organicist metaphors of decline and death so as to convey new narratives of transcendence. While François-Joseph Fétis described Beethoven's late works as signalling a period of decline, Wilhelm von Lenz saw them as transcendent. Chapin likewise focused on esoteric aspects of late style in 'The Sublimity of Age: The Reception of Old Things and Old Men in the Age of Sublimity'. Chapin specifically explored the relationship between antiquity, age and notions of the sublime, claiming that time has a way of overwhelming even more than space. If older structures, such as mountains, Egyptian pyramids or the Strasbourg Cathedral, were thought to overwhelm because of their size, age also contributed to this perception of sublimity. Chapin pointed out that similar rhetoric of the sublime has been linked not only to old monuments, but also to old men, such as Bach or Beethoven in their later years. The irregularity, power and complexity of their music was thought to be overwhelming, in part, because of its age.

The keynote event featured Robert Marshall (Brandeis University) and Scott Burnham (Princeton University and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York), with Linda Hutcheon (University of Toronto) as moderator. In 'Spätstil, que me veux-tu?' Marshall's main argument was that Bach's late period was focused on preserving his legacy for future generations. Thus his late style can be viewed as primarily generative. Marshall suggested that as Bach withdrew from his external duties in Leipzig, he focused more fully on this legacy by compiling systematic collections. If Marshall viewed Bach's late period as one of withdrawal, he also claimed that his music was simultaneously becoming decidedly old-fashioned in texture and more abstract, thereby communicating in pieces like the *Art of Fugue* musical essences undiluted by subjectivity. If this provided a broad overview of Bach's late style, Burnham provided a focused case study with his 'Late Style in Exile: Beethoven and the *Missa Solemnis*'. For Burnham, the *Missa* has often been considered a piece 'in exile', yet he was able to position it stylistically within Beethoven's late works by documenting a use of the same family of keys and a similar dramatic treatment of the musical language as found, for example, in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. At the same time, Burnham focused on the liturgical (as opposed to the symphonic) value of the composition. He established the composer's rich cultivation of the tradition of church music as well as his engagement with Catholicism, God and mysteries of devotion.

The final paper session built upon many of the themes addressed in the keynote event, with speakers Ernest May (University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Richard Kramer (Graduate Center of the City University of New York) together with moderator Andrew Talle (Northwestern University). In his paper 'Anything You Can Do, I Can Do Canonically: The Haussmann Portrait, Mizler's Society, and Bach's Late Styles' May described an ambitious Bach interested in adapting to university culture in Leipzig. May's premise is that throughout his life,

Bach sought to excel at whatever he did in reaction to the environment around him. He claims that many of Bach's compositions from the 1740s and beyond were directly stimulated by associations with professors at the Universität Leipzig, including professors of logic and physics. May likens Bach's last works to a portfolio of compositional innovations and notes that this type of compilation is not unlike what other professors did, including those from his Leipzig network. In 'Beethoven and Lateness: A Meditation' Kramer offered a poignant glimpse at Beethoven's late style in the last string quartets, in particular the Lento assai from the String Quartet Op. 135, an alternative ending for the String Quartet Op. 131 and the two finales for the String Quartet Op. 130. Kramer mentioned that there are several ways of looking at lateness, such as thinking of it as drawing upon and preserving one's legacy or as a desire to rewrite the past. Both of these approaches can be seen in Beethoven's late quartets, which include older formal devices and an agonizing over every note during the compositional process.

The 2021 Bach symposium at the University of Massachusetts Amherst was a lively event full of new scholarship and new ideas. Although the conference was held on Zoom, the conversations were energetic and productive, and it is clear that the online format allowed many international scholars to attend. By bringing together Bach and Beethoven, the conference shed new light on the late creative periods and works of these two figures.

Erinn Knyt is Associate Professor of Music History and Graduate Program Director at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Her book *Ferruccio Busoni and His Legacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017) was awarded an AMS 75 PAYS Subvention grant. Knyt also won the 2018 AMS Teaching Award for her article 'Teaching Music History Pedagogy to Graduate Students', *Journal of Music History Pedagogy* 6/1 (2016).