The view of Bach which prevails today in musicological circles corresponds to the role assigned to him by the stagnation and industriousness of a resurrected culture. In him, it is said, there is once again the revelation—in the middle of the Century of Enlightenment—of the time-honoured bounds of tradition, of the spirit of medieval polyphony, of the theologically vaulted cosmos. His music is said to be elevated above the subject and its contingency; in it is expressed not so much the man and his inner life as the order of Being as such, in its most compelling musical form. The structure of this Being, understood to be immutable and inexorable, becomes a surrogate for meaning; that which cannot be other than its appearance is made the justification of itself. This conception of Bach draws all those who, having lost either the ability to believe or the desire for self-determination, go in search of authority, obsessed by the notion of how nice it would be to be secure. The present function of his music resembles the current vogue of ontology, which promises to overcome the individualistic condition through the postulation of an abstract principle which is superior to and independent of human existence and yet which is free of all unequivocally theological content. They enjoy the order of his music because it enables them to subordinate themselves. His work, which originated within the narrow confines of the theological horizon only in order to break through them and to pass into universality, is called back within the boundaries it transcended. Bach is degraded by impotent nostalgia to the very church composer against whose office his music rebelled and which he filled only with great conflict. What sets him apart from the practices of his age, far from being grasped as the contradiction of his substance with them, is made a pretext for glorifying the nimbus of provincial craftsmanship as a classical quality. Reaction, deprived of its political heroes, takes complete possession of the composer whom it long had claimed as one of its own by giving him the ignominious name of the “Thomas Cantor”. Dilettante high schools monopolize him, and his influence, unlike that even of Schumann
and Mendelssohn, no longer results from the musical substance of his music but rather from its style and play, from formula and symmetry, from the mere gesture of recognition. In being placed into the service of proselytizing zeal, the neo-religious Bach is impoverished, reduced and stripped of the specific musical content which was the basis of his prestige. He suffers the very fate which his fervent protectors are least willing to admit: he is changed into a neutralized cultural monument, in which aesthetic success mingles obscurely with a truth that has lost its intrinsic substance. They have made him into a composer for organ festivals in well-preserved Baroque towns, into ideology.

2

The most elementary historical reflection should arouse doubts concerning the historicist image of Bach. A contemporary of the Encyclopaedists, he died six years before Mozart’s birth and only twenty before that of Beethoven. Even the boldest construction of the ‘non-simultaneity’ of music could not sustain the thesis that a single ego can conserve what the spirit of the epoch dissolved, as though the truth of a phenomenon were ever simply attributable to its backwardness. Bad individualism and the irrational belief in timelessness converge: isolating the individual from his relation to the historical stage of consciousness, however poetically that relation may be, can only be arbitrary. To argue that, in his ahistorical workshop—which was nevertheless equipped with all the technical discoveries of the epoch—Bach experienced nothing of its Zeitgeist except for the Pietism of the texts he used for his sacred works—Pietism being anti-Enlightenment—is to overlook the elementary fact that Pietism, like all forms of restoration, absorbed the forces of the very Enlightenment that it opposed. The subject which hopes to attain grace by becoming absorbed in itself through reflected ‘inwardness’, has already escaped dogmatic order and is on its own, autonomous in the choice of heteronomy. Bach’s participation in his time, however, is drastically demonstrated by central aspects of his music. The contrast between Philipp Emanuel’s generation and his father’s often blurs the fact that the latter’s work embraces the entire sphere of the ‘Galant’, not alone in stylistic models like the French Suites—in which at times it seems as if the mighty hand has in advance given definite shape to the genre types of the nineteenth century—but also in the large, completely constructed works like the French Overtures, in which the moments of pleasure and organization are, in Bach’s manner, no less present than in Viennese Classicism. Yet is there any openminded person who has played the ‘Well-Tempered Clavichord’—the very title of which takes the part of the process of rationalization—from beginning to end without being struck again and again by a lyrical element, whose differentiation, individuation, freedom ally it far more closely to Vierzehnhitigen than to an image of the Middle Ages which has in any case become highly questionable? One need only recall the F-sharp Major Prelude and Fugue of the first book, a fugue once compared by a composer to Gottfried Keller’s short dance-legend, and which is not merely the direct representation of subjective grace but moreover mocks all the rules of the very fugue that Bach himself created, through a musical progression in which the motif of the middle part transmits its impulses to the developments as the work unfolds. Or the double-fugue in g-sharp minor from the second book, which the late Beethoven must have known well, and which is astonishing not so much for its chromatics, by no means rare in Bach, but rather for its wavering, deliberately vague harmonization, which, given the 6/8-character of the piece, inevitably evokes Chopin’s most mature work; as a whole it is music broken down into countless coloured facets, modern precisely in the sense of that nervous sensibility which Historicism would like to exorcise. Anyone who thinks this argument invalid as a ‘romantic misunderstanding’ must first, for the sake of the thesis, free himself of that spontaneous relation to the musical idiom and its meaning, a relation which was the prerequisite to understanding music from Monteverdi to Schoenberg. To sacrifice the subject in such works, to hear in them nothing but the Order of Being and not the nostalgic echo that the decline of such an order finds in the mind, is to grasp only the cura mortum. The phantasma of Bach’s ontology arises through an act of force mechanically performed by Philistines, whose sole desire is to neutralize art since they lack the capacity to comprehend it.

3

All this, it is true, stands in sharp contrast to those features of Bach which even in his own lifetime were regarded as anachronistic. This anachronistic aspect is at least partly responsible for the enigmatic amnesia in which his work was shrouded for eighty years, and thus, with incalculable consequences for the history of Western music, prevented from taking its place in the tradition and being absorbed in all its breadth by Viennese Classicism. Indeed, not only
did Bach fulfill the spirit of the *basso continuo*, with its intervallic-harmonic mode of thinking, but within that spirit he was also the polyphonist who created the form of the fugue from its groping beginnings in the seventeenth century; the theory of the fugue stems from Bach no less than that of strict counterpoint from Palestrina, and he remained its sole master. Yet it is this very duality of mind, harmonic and contrapuntal, circumscribing every one of the compositional problems that Bach paradigmmatically resolved, which must exclude the image of him as the consummation of the Middle Ages. Were the image valid, he would neither have had that duality of mind, nor have struggled, especially in the speculative late works, with a paradox which would have been unthinkable for the old polyphonic mind, namely, how, in terms of *basso continuo* harmony, music could justify its progression as meaningful and at the same time organize itself polyphonically, through the simultaneity of independent voices. The expressiveness alone of many of the seemingly archaic pieces should arouse skepticism. The affirmative tone of the E-flat major fugue from the second book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* is not the immediate certainty of a sacral community articulated in music and secure in its revealed truth; rather, such affirmation and emphasis are utterly alien to the Dutch. Rather, in its substance—certainly not in its subjective consciousness—it is the reflection on the happiness of musical security, the like of which is possessed only by the emancipated subject, for only it can conceive music as the emphatic promise of objective salvation. This music is the emphatic promise of objective salvation. Its power to do so presumes the dualism. It says how beautiful it kind of fugue presupposes the dualism. It says how beautiful it would be to bring back its message of happiness from the circumscribed cosmos to mankind. To the irritation of today’s religious neophytes, it is radical, although, of course, its vision is far more comprehensive absolute. But this absolute is evoked, asserted, postulated precisely because and only inasmuch as it is not present in physical experience; Bach’s power is that of such evocation. He was no archaic master craftsman but rather a genius of meditation. It is only rising barbarism that limits works of art to what meets the eye, blind to the difference between essence and appearance in them, such a confusion of the being of Bach’s music with its intention wipes out the very metaphysics which it is supposed to protect. Since such barbarism blurs not merely the essence, but with it the obvious as well, it overlooks the fact that the particular polyphonic techniques used by Bach to construct musical objectivity themselves presupposed subjectivization. The art of fugue composition is one of motivic economy, of exploiting the smallest part of a theme in order to make it into an integral whole. It is an art of dissection; one could almost say, of dissolving Being, posited as the theme, and hence incommensurate with the common belief that this Being maintains itself static and unchanging throughout the fugue. By comparison to this technique Bach employs the genuinely medieval one of polyphonic figuration, of imitation, only secondarily. In the passages and pieces where imitation triumphs—by no means frequent in Bach—in the *stretti* passages and fugues, such as the extremely dense D major fugue from the second book, the venerable technique is placed in the service of a driving, thoroughly dynamic, thoroughly "modern" effect. The fact that the identity of the recurring themes in Bach was able to preserve itself at all, under the attack of the new compositional techniques that had been set free by polyphony, signifies nothing more static than do the dynamic Beethoven sonatas, which faithfully adhere to the tectonic demands of the reprise, yet of course only in order to develop the reprise itself out of the 'process' of the development. In his last book Schoenberg rightly speaks of Bach’s technique of the developing variation, which then became the basic compositional principle in Viennese Classicism. A social deepening of Bach would presumably have to establish the link between the decomposition of the given thematic material through subjective reflection on the motivic work contained therein, and the change in the work-process that took place during the same epoch through the emergence of manufacturing, which consisted essentially in breaking down the old craft operations into its smaller component acts. If this resulted in the rationalization of material production, then Bach was the first to crystallize the idea of the rationally constituted work, of the aesthetic domination of nature; it was no accident that he named his major instrumental work after the most important technical achievement of musical rationalization. Perhaps Bach’s innermost truth is that in him the social trend which has dominated the bourgeois era to this very day is not merely preserved but, by being reflected in images, is reconciled with the voice of humanity which in reality was stifled by that trend at the moment of its inception.

If Bach was indeed modern, then why was he archaic? For there can be no doubt that his form-world, especially in the most powerful
manifestations of his late work, so grotesquely misunderstood by Hindemith in recent years, evokes much that even in his own time sounded like something out of the past, and which seems to have been deliberately aimed at creating pedantic misunderstanding. It is impossible not to hear the eighteenth century tone in precisely such magnificent conceptions as the C-sharp minor triple fugue from the first book of the Well-Tempered Clavier, where, in order to bring out the contrast between the three themes all the more drastically, Bach leaves everything not directly related to this contrast in a 'pre-schematic' state, so that what is to speak, motivically undeveloped like the rudimentary pre-Bach fugues, one of which, the Ricercata, is alluded to by a word-play in the Musical Offering. Like the Ricercata, the Alla breve fugue in E-major in the second book carries the archaic element down to its very score, as though it had been written in the vivacious spirit of a highly stylized past, itself naturally fictitious, the same procedure followed by Bach in writing his famous piano concerto in the Italian style. He frequently indulged an inclination, entirely incompatible with Existentialist dignity, to experiment with strange, arbitrarily chosen idioms and to awake their formative power for music construction. As early as Bach the rationalization of compositional technique, the pre-dominance of subjective reason, so to speak, brings with it the possibility of freely choosing from all the objectively available procedures of the epoch. Bach does not feel himself blindly bound to any of them but instead always chooses that which best suits the compositional intention. Such liberty vis-à-vis the ancient however, can hardly be construed as the culmination of the tradition, which instead must prohibit just that free selection of available possibilities. Even less can the meaning of Bach's recourse to the tradition be described as restorative. For it is precisely the archaic-sounding pieces which are often the most daring, not merely in terms of their contrapuntal combinations, which indeed draw directly on the earlier polyphonic arrangements, but also with regard to the most advanced aspects of the general effect. The C-sharp minor fugue, which begins as though it were a dense network of equally relevant lines, the theme of which seems at first to be nothing more than the unobtrusive glue that holds the voices together, progressively reveals itself, starting with the entrance of the figured second theme, to be an irresistible crescendo, composed from beginning to end and climaxing with the mighty explosion of the main theme entering in the bass, the most extreme concentration of a pseudo-ten-voice stretto and the turning point of a heavily accented dissonance, in order then to vanish as though through a dark portal. No appeal to the acoustically static character of harpsichord and organ can cover over the basic dynamism of the compositional structure itself, regardless of whether or not it could be realized as a crescendo on the instruments of the time, or even, as some idly question, whether Bach could have 'thought' of such a crescendo. Nowhere is it written that the conception that a composer has of his music must coincide with his intrinsic nature, with the objective law peculiar to it. His work is 'baroque' far more in the sense given to that word by the eighteenth century theatre, that of excess, of allegorical expression heightened to the utmost, of reliance on perspective for effect, than in the sense of 'pre-classical', which inevitably fails to explain just that which is specific to Bach, above all, his archaic tendencies. In order to do them justice the question of their function within the fabric of composition must be raised. And here one stumbles upon an ambiguity of progress itself, one which in the meanwhile has taken on a universal aspect.

In Bach's time to be modern was to throw off the burden of the res severa for the sake of gaudium, of the pleasing and playful, in the name of communication, of consideration for the presumptive listener who, with the decline of the old theological order, had also lost the belief that the formal vocabulary associated with that order was binding. It cannot be denied, either that it is historical necessity that art relinquishes techniques once they are no longer validated by the objective spirit of the times, or that the faculties of human eloquence thereby set free in music ultimately produced a higher form of truth. But the price which had to be paid for the freedom of movement thus attained was the imminent coherence of music. Even the earliest products of the 'unskilled' style, most conspicuously, those of Bach's own sons, bore witness to that price. The enigma becomes suddenly visible when one compares the corresponding formal types in Viennese Classicism and in Bach, the rondo of a Mozart piano concerto and the presto of the Italian Concerto. Despite all its newly won compositional flexibility and effervescence, Mozart's proverbial grace is, as pure musical peinture, rather mechanical and crass in comparison with Bach's infinitely involved, unschematic approach. It is a grace of tone rather than of score. The clearer the outlines of the form become, the more their dense and pure logic seems to be replaced by the appeal to a once-established schema. Anyone who has returned to Beethoven after prolonged, intensive study of Bach sometimes feels as though he were confronted by a kind of decorative light music, which only the culture-cliché could consider 'profound'. Such a judgement is distorted and biased, of course, and
invokes external criteria. It is no accident that today’s Bach apologists would endorse it. Yet it still includes elements of the historical constellations that constitutes Bach’s essence. Among his archaic traits is the attempt to carry the impoverishment and petrifaction of musical language, the shadow-side of its decisive progress. Such traits represent Bach’s effort to resist the inexorable growth of the commodity-character of music, a process which was linked to its subjectivization. Yet such features are also identical with Bach’s modernity inasmuch as they always serve to defend the right of inherent musical logic against the demands of taste. Bach as archivist distinguishes himself from all subsequent classicists, up to and including Stravinsky, by his refusal to confront the historical level of the material with an abstract stylistic ideal. Rather what was becomes a means of forcing what is toward a future of its own making. The reconciliation of scholar and gentleman, which, as Alfred Einstein stressed, set the tone and aim of Viennese Classicism since Haydn, is in a certain sense also the dominant idea in Bach. He was not, however, interested in striking a mean between the two elements. His music strove to achieve the indifference of the extremes towards each other more radically than any other until that of the late Beethoven. Bach, as the most advanced master of \textit{basso continuo}, at the same time renounced his obedience, as antiquated polyphonist, to the trend of the times, a trend he himself had shaped, in order to help it reach its innermost truth, the emancipation of the subject to objectivity in a coherent whole of which subjectivity itself was the origin. Down to the sublimest structural details it is always a question of the undiminished coincidence of the harmonic-functional and of the contrapuntal dimension. The distant past is entrusted with the utopia of the musical subject-object; anachronism becomes a harbinger of things to come.

This, if true, does not merely contradict the prevailing conception of Bach’s music but also modifies the immediate relation to it. This relation defines itself essentially through the praxis of performance. Today, however, under the unholy star of Historicism, the performance of Bach has assumed a sectarian aspect. Historicism has incited a fanatical interest that no longer concerns even the work itself. At times one can hardly avoid the suspicion that the sole concern of today’s Bach devotees is to see that no inauthentic dynamics, modifications of tempo, oversize choirs and orchestras creep in; they seem to wait with potential fury lest any more humane impulse become audible in the rendition. The critique directed at the late Romantics’ inflated and sentimentalized Bach image need not be challenged, even though the relation to Bach apparent in Schumann’s work proved to be incomparably more productive than the present punctilious purity. What calls for refutation, however, is that of which the purists are most proud—their ‘objectivity’. The only objective representation of music is one which shows itself to be adequate to the essence of its object. This, however, is not to be identified—as Hindemith, too, took for granted—with the idea of the historically first rendition. The fact that the colouristic dimension of music had hardly been discovered in Bach’s time, and had certainly not yet been liberated as a compositional technique; that composers did not make sharp distinctions between the different types of piano and organ, but rather abandoned the sound in large measure to taste, points in a direction diametrically opposed to the desire to slavishly imitate the customary sounds of the time. Even had Bach been in fact satisfied with the organs and harpsichords of the epochs, with its thin choruses and orchestras, this would in no way prove their adequacy for the intrinsic substance of his music. The artists’ consciousness—the ‘idea’ they had of their work cannot, of course, be reconstructed—may, it is true, contribute to elucidating certain aspects of their work, but it can never supply the canon. Authentic works unfold their truth-content, which transcends the scope of individual consciousness, in a temporal dimension through the law of their form. In addition, that which is known of Bach as interpreter absolutely contradicts the musicological style of presentation and points to a flexibility on the part of the composer which would much prefer to renounce the monumental than give up the chance of adapting the tone to subjective impulse. Of course, Forkel’s famous report appeared too long after Bach’s death to claim full authenticity; but what he writes about Bach the pianist is clearly based on precise statements, and there is no apparent reason why the picture should be falsified at a time when the controversy had not yet arisen and when there was little sympathy for the clavichord—“He loved best to play the clavichord. The so-called pianos (i.e. harpsichords), despite a completely different action”—which can only mean the register—were too soulless for him, and the pianofortes during his lifetime were still too undeveloped and much too primitive to have satisfied him. Hence, he held the clavichord for the best instrument for study as well as for private musical diversion. He found it most suitable for executing his finest ideas and did not believe that either the harpsichord or the piano could
produce as great a variety of tonal nuances as this instrument, which despite its poor tone was extraordinarily pliable in its details. What is true, however, for differentiating within the intimate sphere, is conversely all the more so for the extensive dynamics of the large choral works. No matter how it was done in the Church of St. Thomas, a performance of the St. Matthew Passion, for instance, done with measure means sounds pale and indecisive to the present-day ear, like a rehearsal which a few musicians have by chance decided to attend, while at the same time it assumes a didactic-pedantic character. Yet even more important is that such a performance thereby contradicts the intrinsic essence of Bach's music. The only adequate interpretation of the dynamic objectively embedded in his work is one which realizes it. True interpretation is an x-ray of the work: its task is to illuminate in the sensuous phenomenon the totality of all the characteristics and interrelations which have been recognized through intensive study of the score. The favorite argument of the purists is that all this should be left to the work itself, which need only be performed ascetically in order to speak; interpretation, they contend, serves only to unduly emphasize music which can be expressed simply and which is all the more powerful without such frills. This argument completely misses the point. As long as music requires any kind of interpretation whatsoever, its form defines itself through the tension between the composition's essence and its sensuous appearance. To identify the work with the latter is only justifiable when the appearance is a manifestation of the essence. Yet, precisely this is achieved only through subjective labour and reflection. The attempt to do justice to Bach's objective content by directing this effort towards abolishing the subject is self-defeating. Objectivity is not left over after the subject is abstracted. The musical score is never identical with the work; devotion to the text means the constant effort to grasp that which it hides. Without such a dialectic, devotion becomes betrayal; an interpretation which does not bother about the music's meaning on the assumption that it will reveal itself of its own accord will inevitably be false since it fails to see that the meaning is always constituting itself anew. Meaning can never be grasped by the 'pure' rendition, allegedly purged of all exhibitionism; rather, such a presentation, which is meaningless in itself and not to be distinguished from the 'amusical', becomes not the path to meaning, as which it seems itself, but a wall blocking the way. This does not mean, however, that the monstrously massive performances of Bach which were the order of the day up until the First World War are any better. The dynamics required are not related to the level of volume nor to the breadth of crescendo and decrescendo. The dynamics consist in the quintessence of all the compositional contrasts, subdivisions, transitions and relations which constitute the work, and at the time of Bach's greatest maturity, composition was no less the art of infinitesimal transitions than in any of the later composers. The entire richness of the musical texture, the integration of which was the source of Bach's power, must be placed in prominence by the performance instead of being sacrificed to a rigid, immobile monotony, the spurious semblance of unity that ignores the multiplicity it should embody and surmount. Reflection on style must not be permitted to suppress the concrete musical content and to settle complacently into the pose of transcendental Being. It must follow the structure of the musical composition that is concealed beneath the surface of sound. Mechanically squeaking continuo-instruments and wretched school choirs contribute not to sacred sobriety but to malicious failure; and the thought that the shrill and rasping Baroque organs are capable of capturing the long waves of the lacrimal, large fugues is pure superstition. Bach's music is separated from the general level of his age by an astronomical distance. Its eloquence returns only when it is liberated from the sphere of resentment and obscuration, the triumph of the subjectless over subjectivism. They say Bach, mean Telemann and are secretly in agreement with the regression of musical consciousness which even without them remains a constant threat under the pressures of the culture industry. Of course, there is also the possibility that the contradiction between the substance of Bach's compositions and the means for realizing it in sound, both those available at the time and those accumulated since, can no longer be resolved. In the light of this possibility, the much discussed 'abstraction' of sound in the Musical Offering and the Art of the Fugue, as works in which the choice of instruments is left open, acquires a new dimension. It is conceivable that the contradiction between music and sound-material—especially the inadequacy of the organ tone to the infinitely articulated structure—had already become visible at the time. If this were the case, Bach would have omitted the sound and left his most mature instrumental works waiting for the sound that would suit them. With such pieces it is not even remotely possible for philologists with no affinity for composition to write out the parts and assign them to unchanging instruments or groups. What is demanded is that they be rethought for an orchestra which neither squanders nor scrimp but rather which functions as a moment of the integral composition. In the case of the entire Art of the Fugue, the only such effort has been that of
Fritz Stiedry, whose arrangement did not survive its New York premiere. Justice is done Bach not through musicological usurpation but solely through the most advanced composition which in turn converges with the level of Bach's continually unfolding work. The few instrumentations contributed by Schoenberg and Anton von Webern, especially those of the great triple fugue in E flat major and of the six-part Ricercata, in which every facet of the composition is transposed into a correlative timbre and in which the surface intertwining of lines is dissolved into the most minute motivic interrelations and then reunited through the overall constructive disposition of the orchestra—such instrumentations are models of an attitude to Bach which corresponds to the stage of his truth. Perhaps the traditional Bach can indeed no longer be interpreted. If this is true, his heritage has passed on to composition, which is loyal to him in being disloyal; it calls his music by name in producing it anew.

ARNOLD SCHOENBERG 1874–1951

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensuous ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.

Kears