



Review of David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

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[1] About thirty years ago I attended a lecture in which Bach's experience as a Latin teacher was adduced to show that he would have been aware of rhetorical strategies and used them in his music. I wondered if it might not be equally legitimate, given his probable exposure to fencing in Lüneburg, to look for thrusts and parries in Bach's music. David Yearsley doesn't quite get to fencing, but his *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* invokes a wide range of other cultural manifestations drawn from three centuries.

[2] The book is an entertaining series of historical-cultural vignettes starring the technique of counterpoint in general and Bach's in particular. "Reflexively described as abstract and therefore often marginalized, strict counterpoint has inspired some of the most socially resonant language in the history of Western European music criticism, a discourse which speaks, in fact, for its centrality and relevance. In all its contexts—alchemical, Enlightened, gustatory, avant-garde, reactionary—and whether it captivates or angers, it is a rich resource for metaphor." (235)

[3] Each of Yearsley's six chapters explores a different setting from which the metaphors are drawn. "Vor deinen Thron tret ich and the art of dying" shows how Bach's last chorale setting can be understood, in the tradition of Lutheran deathbed rituals, as his last words. "The alchemy of Bach's canons" likens the transformations of learned counterpoint to those undertaken by alchemists. "Bach's taste for pork or canary" explores the eighteenth-century debate pitting contrapuntal artifice against natural *galant* cantabile. "The autocratic regimes of *A Musical Offering*" finds "the hermeneutic nexus between musical absolutism and political autocracy," and makes Bach an active supporter of Frederick the Great. (166) "Bach the machine" sets counterpoint alongside eighteenth-century automata, including a defecating duck. Finally, "Physiognomies of Bach's counterpoint" carries us into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the fascination surrounding Bach's mortal remains.

[4] Such an original assembly of resources exemplifies what the historiographer Paul Veyne advocated when he likened the writing of history to an art form.⁽¹⁾ His reasons for this characterization include the subjectivity of the choice of subject matter, the lack of method, the originality of the "plot," and the arrangement of the documentary evidence.⁽²⁾ The choice of what to present and how is central: "The scholar does not tell stories or comment on the past, he shows it; in fact, chooses and organizes it, and his work has the false impersonality of a documentary photomontage. Erudition is a variety of historiography to which we give too little thought; two centuries of historicist speculation have excessively associated 'history' with 'science' or 'philosophy,' whereas the natural place of history, the documentary knowledge of the concrete, is

situated at the opposite pole, that of erudition . . . history or poetry . . . is perceived through documents or texts that have density and the handling of which is, besides, a source of pleasure or of interest; it may even be considered that it is the taste for handling this dense matter that is the surest sign of an authentic sense of what history or poetry really is.”⁽³⁾

[5] Yearsley’s erudition is impressive, and he takes obvious pleasure in handling the “dense matter” that forms the basis of each of his excursions into the “zone of shadow” that surrounds Bach’s counterpoint. He is at his best when laying out the material, placing things side by side, presenting long quotations, musical examples, and pictures. However, he sometimes overreaches in his desire to draw conclusions, and his search for “meanings” leads him far from Veyne’s ideal. Veyne says that a “document has a double nature. On the one hand, it belongs by its form to a series: a legal document, to the series of legal documents; a building, to that of buildings [etc.] . . . on the other hand, like every event, it is at the crossroads of an indefinite number of events and is capable of answering an indefinite number of questions. Erudition is only concerned with the first aspect: it establishes the meaning of a document in its series according to the rest of the series; it leaves to the user the task of asking all the questions he wants. Its task consists in showing him only what questions he must *not* ask; one does not question a false act like an authentic one, nor a proverb like a truth established after inquiry; thus erudition is content to adjust the optics of the documents. After that, each person can look in the document and there perceive the past with all the richness of vision of which he is personally capable.”⁽⁴⁾

[6] Yearsley does a lot more than present the documents. The most striking instance of overinterpretation comes as a consequence of equating the discipline of contrapuntal technique with concentrated political power (Chapter 4). In a clever zeugma, Yearsley says of Frederick the Great and Bach that “Both men were intent on dominating their subjects.” (170) Speaking of the *Canon a 4* from *A Musical Offering*, he says: “A majority of the contrapuntally additive voices announce the entry of the theme as well as their own submission to it” (162), and “Here was a thoroughly ‘well-regulated’ music akin to absolutist ruthlessness.” (170) This metaphor sounds a little shrill, but that’s nothing compared to the trouble it gets the author into later, when he is discussing Frederick the Great as the “proto-Führer” (note 43, page 231) in German musicology of the thirties.

[7] Noticing a passage from Alfred Burgartz (1931) that likens the voices in a fugue to submissive soldiers marching (page 232), Yearsley is caught up short by the possibility that he may be seen as sympathetic to a fascist reading of Bach: “I am . . . aware that my interpretation of *A Musical Offering*—that Bach and Frederick the Great shared a sometimes ruthless approach to their respective arts—comes to conclusions that are not as dissimilar to those of Burgartz as I would like them to be; I am equally aware that to think along lines that converge on fascist and proto-fascist hermeneutics threatens to poison any hearing of Bach’s counterpoint.” (233)

[8] Why the hasty backpedaling? Anybody can appropriate anything. We have an example ready at hand from the recent memoir *Jarhead*, in which Anthony Swofford recounts how soldiers in the First Gulf War were psyched to go into battle by watching scenes from *Apocalypse Now*, a film about the Vietnam War with an originally anti-war agenda.⁽⁵⁾ Now that the military has co-opted the famous helicopter attack scene (accompanied by the “Ride of the Valkyries”), should pacifists not watch it? The Nazis wanted to take Bach on board because he was already a giant figure, not just because it is possible, by an imaginative use of metaphor, to find some reflection of military discipline in it. Yearsley must either actually believe there is fascism in the music or that his having written about it makes him complicit, neither of which is true. He has succeeded in making an imaginative juxtaposition of historical documents, and has convincingly shown how people in the past might have come to the conclusions they did. But he is not responsible for those conclusions, and he should leave us to “perceive the past with all the richness of vision” we are capable of. If we want to, then, I suppose we can let the association with evil from hundreds of years later poison our hearing of Bach, but that decision should be left up to us.

[9] Equating ruthlessness and Bach’s counterpoint because they share rigorous discipline is reminiscent of Panofsky’s isomorphism between the Medieval *summa* and Gothic cathedrals, both of which are organized according to well-ordered subdivisions. Veyne has little patience with such historical “explanation:” “It is known what a stir was made by Panofsky’s book in which he sets forth the discovery he thinks he has made of a formal homology between the great theological *summas* of the thirteenth century and the structure of Gothic cathedrals. I do not know if that homology exists, and is not one of the many phantoms raised by the combinative. But let us suppose it does exist; the real, the only question will then be to explain concretely how that homology between the book of a theologian and the work of an architect could have been produced. Panofsky certainly does not fail to try to explain it—could it be that architects and theologians associated with each other, and that a foreman wanted to transpose into his own art the subdivision procedures of the Scholastics, as Seurat and Signac wanted to apply to painting the physical theory of primary colors (which they had misunderstood, so much so

that in their pictures those colors do not recombine and produce a grisaille)? Many other explanations are imaginable, but, as long as we do not have the right one, Panofsky's thesis will be an unfinished page, and not at all an example to be followed by the human sciences."⁽⁶⁾

[10] An alternative to the view that counterpoint is a model of military-style regimentation can be found in Marpurg (often cited by Yearsley in other contexts). Marpurg's reading of the meaning of counterpoint is more democratic, even free-market, than fascist. He says that "in a fugue all voices compete with each other and none has preference over another as is the case with other genres."⁽⁷⁾ These "other genres" (ones characterized by melody and accompaniment texture, like aria or sonata) might provide more persuasive metaphors for authoritarian behavior.

[11] It's at times like these that a retreat to the notion of "the work itself" seems attractive, and Yearsley is often sensitive and insightful when writing on the music itself. Discussing the canon at the twelfth from *Art of Fugue*, he shows convincingly how "The churning out of contrapuntal operations creates not the rhetorical force of, say, a stretto, but the confusion that comes with an excess of signs . . ." making " . . . a dizzying array of canonic relationships in rapid succession." (201) Similarly, regarding the canon at the tenth, he points out some thematic double meanings—the *dux* and *comes* seem to have been reversed but aren't—that make an "uncanny retrogression." (203–204) I disagree, however, with the conclusion that Bach "gives the counterpoint the appearance of controlling musical events" (201), or that "Bach had in a way removed himself from his music." (206) These remarks go overboard to serve the metaphor that is the plot of the chapter: "Bach the Machine."

[12] Yearsley makes an effort in several chapters to narrow the gulf that separates learned, technically complex counterpoint from "real" (207) music. The latter is exemplified by *galant* style, by Mattheson's ideal of "free-flowing, natural melody" (54), and the former by various kinds of learned canon, "obscure mysticism and secret practices." (91) Yearsley finds both juxtaposed in the duetto in F from *Clavierübung III*: "As against the loose and engaging style of the opening, we have less dialogue than clinical examination of contrapuntal material: erudite recitation supplants the logical succession of rhetorically persuasive ideas." (108) I agree that there's a sharp contrast between the A section and the B section, but not that one is more contrapuntal than the other.

[13] Yearsley finds many quotes to support this opposition, but we might want to consider the possibility that it was hyped up to support a quarrel of ideas, that it results from a publicity stunt that doesn't stand up under scrutiny. After all, it is the same Mattheson who says that the reason we use invertible counterpoint is that "[A]n assiduous organist no less than an ingenious composer or Capellmeister can draw materials and inventions from these artifices for the rest of his life."⁽⁸⁾ For him, the purpose of strict learned techniques is to aid in the making of inventions. Counterpoint, then, is a technique, and flowing melody is a style. The gulf between "real" music and counterpoint would not be half so wide if we were all better trained in counterpoint, and could use it freely.

[14] In an era when courses in this subject seem to be on the wane in university curricula, Yearsley is to be commended for practicing contrapuntal technique in public. He wants to bring counterpoint down to earth: "The great mystery turns out to be nothing more than a gimmick." (44). He demonstrates often how counterpoint is a locus of fun and even humor: the crab canon on the Royal Theme is "an invitation to recreation and amusement." (155). To show us that "such pieces . . . are not as difficult as they appear," he composes his own crab canon on the same theme, allowing as how Bach's is "not only a better piece than mine, it's funnier too" because "it goes nowhere faster." (153–155) It is reassuring to see a musicologist playing in the sandbox with the great composers of the past, closing up the gulf between style and technique. Yearsley's only reference to present-day counterpoint pedagogy is a reference to Kent Kennan's counterpoint text, in which Kennan takes a trial-and-error approach to crab canon.⁽⁹⁾ Yearsley disapproves, finding Marpurg's method, which he used to compose his own, clearer and easier. And that is not his only complaint with present-day attitudes: "Current engraving software is unable to produce reversed clefs and key signatures, a fact that nicely demonstrates the current obscurity of the genre of the crab canon and its semiotics." (note to Example 4.9, page 151)

[15] Yearsley's book is a pleasure to read. It holds an abundance of arcane and interesting documentation, and is written in a vivid style that approaches "narrative non-fiction" with lots of past conditional tense (for instance, "It seems completely plausible that this is how Bach would have understood the title if he studied the book in Weimar . . ." 84). One might quibble with some of his analytical observations, but his familiarity with the music produces many valuable insights. His search for meaning might make him the victim of Veyne's "phantoms raised by the combinative," but it's a good bet that without such zeal he wouldn't have come up with such a rich "documentary photomontage" of the 18th century.

Footnotes

1. Paul Veyne, *Writing History*, translated by Mina Moore-Rivoluceri (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984; originally published as *Comment on écrit l'histoire: essai d'épistémologie*, Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1971). I have found Veyne's writing helpful in sorting out issues in music history. For more on Veyne, see my "Authentic Analysis," *Journal of Musicology* XII/1(1994): 3–18.

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2. "Yes, history is subjective, for it is undeniable that the subject of a history book is chosen freely." Veyne, page 30. "History is a work of art because, while being objective, it has no method and is not scientific. Similarly, if one tries to specify where the value of a history book lies, one will find oneself using words that would be applied to a work of art. Since history does not exist, there are only 'histories of . . . ?' and histories of which the eventlike atom is the plot. The value of a history book will depend first of all on the cutting out of that plot, the unity of action it requires, the boldness with which this unity has been extricated from more traditional cutouts—in short, on its originality . . .

" . . . Since the field of the eventworthy is surrounded by a zone of shadow of which we cannot yet conceive, much subtlety will be needed to explain this non-eventworthy area and to see what is taken for granted. Finally, history, like the theater and the novel, shows men in action and requires some psychological sense to make them alive; for mysterious reasons there is a connection between the knowledge of the human heart and literary beauty. Originality, cohesion, flexibility, richness, subtlety, and psychology are the qualities necessary to say with objectivity 'what really happened,' to use Ranke's words." Veyne, page 230.

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3. Veyne, pages 231–32.

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4. Veyne, pages 231–32.

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5. See Lawrence Wechsler, "Valkyries over Iraq: The trouble with war movies," *Harper's Magazine* (November 2005) pages 65–77.

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6. Veyne, page 109.

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7. *Abhandlung von der Fuge* v. 1 (Berlin, 1753, repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1970) 4, page 129.

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8. *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister* (Berlin, 1739, repr. Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1987) III, 22, 47.

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9. *Counterpoint Based on Eighteenth-Century Practice*, 4th ed., Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1999.

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