



## ACT 3: BACH'S MUSIC SETS THE TONE

Few composers post-Bach could elude his profound influence. Bach's body of work became formative for artists ranging from Beethoven and Schönberg to the Beatles and Lady Gaga. Yet how did Bach's music come to set the tone?

Bach's contemporaries were utterly taken by his compositional prowess, particularly the remarkable polyphony in his music, its emotive harmonies, and his unique melodies. Drawing from these characteristics, this exhibition delves into the immense legacy of Bach's music – from Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue* to Mendelssohn's choral cantatas, the organ pieces on the theme BACH by Max Reger and Franz Liszt, from Gustav Mahler's *Bach Suite* to Alban Berg's *Violin Concerto*, and the adaptations by Ferruccio Busoni and Jacques Loussier.

The exhibition highlights how Bach's compositions gained global acclaim and were woven into some of the most iconic pop anthems. It examines how Bach's music transcended genres, sparking inspiration in all forms of art, as demonstrated by the silkscreen prints by the Spanish artist Eduardo Chillida.

# POWERFUL POLYPHONY

**If there was ever a composer who displayed full mastery of polyphony, it was undoubtedly our blessed Bach.**

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Friedrich Agricola:

Johann Sebastian Bach's obituary, 1754

A hallmark of Bach's music is its intricate polyphony. From concise musical motifs, he developed complex arrangements with several independent voices engaging in a spirited exchange. His masterful handling of various vocal and instrumental melodies (counterpoint) paved the way for future composers, guiding them towards innovative composing methods.

Ludwig van Beethoven discovered in Bach's compositions inspiration for the arrangement of musical themes and diverse harmonic experimentation. Bach's cycle *The Art of the Fugue*, BWV 1080, served as a catalyst for Beethoven's *Grosse Fugue*, Op. 133, in 1825. In this unconventional piece for string quartet, Beethoven amplified the emotional intensity, oscillating between raw expressions of pain, anger, and defiance, punctuated by intervals of gentle melancholy.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy's study of *St Matthew Passion* spurred him to write cantatas modelled on Bach's choral cantatas. Bach's influence can be seen in many of Mendelssohn's compositions; his oratorios, choral works, and organ compositions revitalized 19th-century ecclesiastical music.

## **Johann Sebastian Bach's obituary**

Facsimile edition of the first printing from 1754 | Leipzig, Hanover, 1965 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

In their obituary, Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel and his pupil Johann Friedrich Agricola paid tribute to Bach's life and work. They wrote this tribute shortly after Bach's death in 1750. It was subsequently printed in 1754 in the series *Musikalische Bibliothek*, the official publication of the Corresponding Society of Musical Sciences, of which J.S. Bach was a member from 1747 to 1750.

## **Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)**

### **Sketches for the Grosse Fugue, Op. 133**

For string quartet

1825 | Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Musikabteilung mit Mendelssohn-Archiv |  
Reproduction

For his String Quartet, Op. 130, Beethoven envisaged the final movement as a long fugue. The publisher Maurice Schlesinger wrote in Beethoven's conversation booklet: "Such a work was destined to be written by Beethoven, for now he alone truly comprehends the art of the fugue." (Almost deaf, Beethoven used notebooks for communication.) But the radical final movement was met with bafflement at its Vienna debut on 21 March 1826. Beethoven composed a new finale for the string quartet, publishing the Grosse Fugue separately as Opus 133.

## **Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847)**

### **Chorale cantata: Ach Gott vom Himmel sieh darein ('Oh God, look down from heaven')**

For baritone solo, choir and orchestra

Autograph score, 1832 | Universitätsbibliothek Johann Christian Senckenberg Frankfurt am Main

With clear echoes of Bach, Mendelssohn Bartholdy transformed the Lutheran chorale into evocative, Romantic-style imagery. He dedicated the ornately orchestrated cantata to his friend Johann Nepomuk Schelble (1789–1837), the conductor of the Choir of Saint Cecilia in Frankfurt — one of Germany's oldest oratorio choirs, which remains active to this day.

## APPROPRIATION THROUGH ADAPTATION

Around the mid-19th century, Bach's works were rarely performed in public. To champion them to a wider audience, Franz Liszt adapted Bach's cantatas for the organ and his organ works for the piano. His meticulous piano transcriptions set a benchmark for ensuing generations of musicians and composers (such as Johannes Brahms, Camille Saint-Saëns, Eugen d'Albert, Ferruccio Busoni, Max Reger, Percy Grainger, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Bela Bartók and Myra Hess), who expressed their admiration for Bach through their unique arrangements.

The Second Viennese School's luminaries, Arnold Schönberg and his protégé Anton Webern, created analytical reinterpretations of Bach's works. In them, they revealed the underlying musical structures. Schönberg adapted organ chorales for orchestra and discovered in Bach's counterpoint foundations for his twelve-tone technique. In contrast, Webern arranged the Ricercar a 6 from Bach's The Musical Offering, BWV 1079, for a vibrant chamber orchestra, endeavouring to "illuminate the motivic intricacies of this composition".

### **Johann Sebastian Bach**

#### **Prelude in E minor, BWV 548**

#### **Arranged for piano by Franz Liszt (1811-1886)**

Leipzig, no date | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

This volume contains piano transcriptions of the Preludes and Fugues for Organ, BWV 543-548. Liszt shifted the bass segment played by the organ pedal to the piano's left hand, doubling it with octaves when feasible. He used the piano's sostenuto pedal to sustain certain notes and add colour. Crucially, he refrained from modifying Bach's original notation or introducing tempo, dynamics or phrasing annotations.

### **Johann Sebastian Bach**

#### **Ricercar a 6 from The Musical Offering, BWV 1079**

#### **Arranged for chamber orchestra by Anton Webern (1883-1945)**

Vienna, c. 1935 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Webern deconstructed the theme of the Ricercar into succinct motifs, dispersing them amongst instruments with varying timbres to "expose their context". He was eager to "awaken what, in Bach's abstract portrayal, remains dormant to most, either being non-existent or wholly elusive."

**Johann Sebastian Bach**

**Chorale prelude ‘Komm, Gott, Schöpfer, Heiliger Geist’  
 (‘Come, God, The Creator, Holy Ghost’), BWV 667**

**Arranged for orchestra by Arnold Schönberg (1874–1951)**

Vienna, c. 1925 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Schönberg arranged the organ piece from Bach’s Great Eighteen Chorale Preludes for a vibrant orchestra, noting: “The essence of these colours is to accentuate individual lines, and that is pivotal amidst the contrapuntal maze! ... We need transparency that we may see.” The piece was first performed on 7 December 1922 by the New York Philharmonic conducted by Josef Stránský at Carnegie Hall.

# B-A-C-H

## The sequence BACH in Bach's The Art of the Fugue

First printing, second edition, 1752 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken, Musikbibliothek Peters | Reproduction

**Franz Liszt (1811-1886)**

### Prelude and fugue on the theme BACH

For organ | Edition revised by Liszt | Leipzig, 1872 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

In a tribute to Bach, Liszt used the striking sequence BACH (German notation for B flat, A, C and B natural). He transposed the prelude-fugue duo into the orchestral sound of the 19th century. Although composed for the consecration of the new organ in Merseburg Cathedral in 1856, this virtuoso piece wasn't completed in time and only performed half a year later.

**Max Reger (1873-1916)**

### Fantasy and fugue on BACH, Op. 46

For organ | Leipzig and Vienna, c. 1900 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Reger expressed his deep admiration for Bach in this work. He melded extremely dense counterpoint with late-Romantic symphonic sounds and harmony reminiscent of Richard Wagner. His work faced criticism from both staunch traditionalists and proponents of the New German School, the two competing musical aesthetic factions of Reger's era.

**Eduardo Chillida (1924-2002)**

### Hommage à Johann Sebastian Bach

Silkscreen and embossed prints, 1997 | Handmade Eskulan paper | Copy number: 34/120 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

For over four decades, renowned Spanish sculptor and artist Eduardo Chillida delved deeply into the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. Entranced by the meticulous patterns and limitless variations within Bach's compositions, Chillida responded with abstract works crafted in mediums ranging from iron and steel to granite, terracotta and paper. For the series of graphics on display, Chillida employed a minimalist aesthetic to echo Bach's musical genius. He captured his perception of Bach as the architect of time and sound in the interplay of moving

black lines and embossings, drawing inspiration from Bach's seminal works and their transcriptions. In addition to silkscreen and embossed prints, this collection contains reproduced score pages interspersed with reflective insights from Chillida and select poignant quotations. A copy of the entire book can be seen by the listening bench.



# SECRETS OF HARMONY

**If ever a composer employed the most hidden secrets of harmony with the most skilled artistry, it was certainly our Bach.**

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Friedrich Agricola:  
Johann Sebastian Bach's obituary, 1754

In his quest for exquisite musical settings, Bach ceaselessly explored novel tonal combinations and emotive harmonies. His use of harmony was characterized by dramatic chords, bold semitone shifts (chromaticism) and startling key changes (modulations). Yet, it all feels seamlessly integrated, because in Bach's artistic vision, music was meant to reflect the divine cosmos.

In the 24 preludes and fugues of his Well-Tempered Clavier, Bach showcased the art of composing and performing in all major and minor keys. This magnum opus informed generations of musicians and spurred luminaries like Frédéric Chopin, Paul Hindemith and Dmitri Shostakovich to write their own cycles of works.

Bach's vividly harmonized chorales and his knack for enhancing chords and melodies with notes from other keys were groundbreaking. An outstanding example is the chorale 'It is enough' from Cantata BWV 60, which Alban Berg ingeniously incorporated into his Violin Concerto (1936). Eschewing tonality based on a tonic, Berg masterfully entwined the chorale's melody and structure with the twelve-tone technique.

## **Paul Hindemith (1895-1963)**

### **Ludus tonalis**

Mainz, 1943 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Hindemith's piano cycle builds on Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier. It comprises a prelude, twelve three-part fugues, eleven interludes and a postlude. In it, Hindemith demonstrated his new harmonic theory and his system of free tonality. From the chromatic scale's twelve tones, he devised his Series I: C, G, F, A, E, E flat, A flat, D, B flat, D flat, B natural, F sharp, reflecting each pitch's decreasing tonal relationship with the tonic (C). As explained in the accompanying index, each fugue is linked to a distinct pitch in the series.



## **Max Reger (1873–1916)**

### **Letter to Fritz Stein**

Meiningen, 26 April 1913 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig, on permanent loan from Christian Haslinger

Composer Max Reger held Bach in the highest esteem. He concluded a letter to his friend Professor Fritz Stein, a conductor and music scholar, with the words: “And once your assembly concludes, play the first prelude from the Well-Tempered Clavier to cleanse the mind!”

Fritz Stein was the conductor at the 48th Musicians’ Assembly held by the ADMV General German Music Association in Jena (3–7 June 1913). Although Max Reger was sceptical of the ADMV for championing the New German School, his Roman Song of Triumph was premiered there on 6 June.

## **Alban Berg (1885–1935)**

### **Violin concerto (‘To the memory of an angel’)**

Vienna, 1936 | pocket score | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Berg dedicated this poignant work to the daughter of architect Walter Gropius and composer Alma Mahler-Werfel, Manon Gropius, who died at the age of 18.

The second movement features variations of the chorale ‘It is enough’ from Bach’s cantata ‘O eternity, you word of thunder’, BWV 60. The distinctive chorale melody begins with three whole-tone steps. Berg’s twelve-tone series concludes with the same intervals, and he also wove in the BACH motif.

# RHYTHMIC VARIETY

**Bach's melody and harmony are made even more distinctive by their inexhaustible rhythmic variety.**

Johann Nikolaus Forkel: Johann Sebastian Bach: His Life, Art and Work, 1802

Rhythm and metre play an important role in Bach's compositions. Bach employed rhythmic motifs to pictorially express words such as 'tremble', 'chastise', 'knock' and 'smash'. He used dance rhythms not only in the dance movements of his suites, but also in preludes, fugues and cantata settings. In the Sinfonia of the Christmas Oratorio, rhythms from the dance known as the siciliano evoke a festive, intimate mood. And chorale cantatas and orchestral suites begin majestically with French overtures featuring dotted rhythms.

Some of Bach's dance movements have gained immense popularity, both in the original and through countless arrangements. Gustav Mahler arranged such movements from two orchestral suites for symphony orchestra and compiled them into a new 'Bach Suite'.

Bach's knack for combining regular metres with contrasting accents and rhythms is reminiscent of jazz. It's no surprise that many renowned jazz musicians, including Jacques Loussier, Bobby Mc Ferrin and Till Brönner, have embraced Bach's music.

**Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749–1818)**

**Johann Sebastian Bach: His Life, Art and Work**

Leipzig, 1802 | Forkel's personal copy | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

For this first biography of Johann Sebastian Bach, Forkel received firsthand insights from Bach's sons Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann. As well as a description of Bach's life, it contains an extensive appreciation of his oeuvre coupled with detailed observations of his compositional style.

This copy bears annotations from both Forkel and its later owner, the musicologist and conductor Friedrich Konrad Griepenkerl (1782–1849). On the title page, Griepenkerl noted: "This copy was owned by Forkel, and then by Dr Riedel [Gabriel Riedel, lecturer at the University of Göttingen], from whom I received it as a gift."

**Gustav Mahler (1860–1911)**

**Arrangement of the Gavotte (I and II) from the Orchestral Suite  
in D major, BWV 1068, by Johann Sebastian Bach**

Autograph piano part from his Bach Suite | 1909 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

This piano part was found in the complete edition of Bach's works owned by Mahler, which the Bach Archive acquired in 2021. Mahler arranged three movements each from Orchestral Suites No. 2 in B minor, BWV 1067, and No. 3 in D major, BWV 1068, as a symphonic work. He debuted his Bach Suite in New York on 10 November 1909, and it subsequently became one of his favourite concert pieces.

# IN A SINGLE VOICE

**Using special melodic turns, he combined the notes required for completeness of the modulation in a single voice, rendering a second part unnecessary and even impossible.**

Johann Nikolaus Forkel: Johann Sebastian Bach: His Life, Art and Work, 1802

Can a four-part fugue really be played on a solo violin? Johann Sebastian Bach was determined to make anything possible in his music. Even in his works for solo instruments, he masterfully encapsulated the breadth of his artistry on a single melody instrument.

To do so, he used the ability of string instruments to play on multiple strings at once. Despite the constraints of double stops and bowing techniques, Bach skilfully hinted at the most intricate voicings and harmonies, weaving a vivid tapestry of sound in the minds of listeners.

Bach's masterpieces initially seemed unorthodox to 19th-century concertgoers. Robert Schumann therefore wrote piano accompaniments for the Six Sonatas and Partitas for Solo Violin. Ferruccio Busoni reimagined the famous Chaconne from the Partita in D minor as a lavish piano rendition. And Camille Saint-Saëns reworked the Gavotte from the Partita in E minor for the piano. Then again, no arrangement can compete with the original.

## **Johann Sebastian Bach**

### **Sonata No. 2 in A minor for solo violin, BWV 1003**

**with piano accompaniment added by Robert Schumann (1810–1856)**

Leipzig, 1854 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Robert Schumann was an authority on Bach's works. In 1840, at the Leipzig Gewandhaus, he heard Bach's Chaconne for solo violin with a piano accompaniment by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Twelve years later, during his tenure as city music director in Düsseldorf, he wrote his own piano accompaniments for the three sonatas and three partitas. They were widely performed in concert halls and schools.

**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
**Chaconne from Partita in D minor for solo violin, BWV 1004**  
**Arranged for piano by Ferruccio Busoni (1866–1924)**

Leipzig, 1902 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Busoni's grand rendition of the Chaconne remains both a staple and a bravura showstopper on the world's concert stages. Through his piano interpretations of Bach's works, Busoni sought to "captivate a broader audience with these compositions by the master, so steeped in artistry, sentiment and imagination."

**Johann Sebastian Bach**  
**Gavotte from Partita No. 3 in E major for solo violin, BWV 1006**  
**Arranged for piano by Camille Saint-Saëns (1835–1921)**

Leipzig, 1915 | Bach-Archiv Leipzig

Referring to the Bach Complete Edition volumes published in Leipzig between 1851 and 1899, Saint-Saëns transformed Bach's cantata arrangements and instrumental pieces into mellifluous, sensitive piano versions. He played a key role in popularizing Bach's legacy across France.

# UNPARALLELED INVENTIVENESS

**No one has applied as much inventiveness and originality to seemingly austere compositions as Bach.**

Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Friedrich Agricola:  
Johann Sebastian Bach's obituary, 1754

Bach's ingenuity was outstanding. He wrote the most exquisite fugues and canons, presenting them in collections that showcased profound expressive depth. His use of chorales was exceptionally inventive, resulting in unique cantatas and chorale preludes. The wealth of divergent forms in his preludes and fugues, variations, suites, concertos, arias and choruses is seemingly limitless. He ingeniously melded traditional compositional methods with new styles. The way Bach explored the arrangement of musical material using all sorts of approaches had an incomparably inspiring effect on subsequent generations of composers.

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy studied Bach's oeuvre throughout his lifetime. As an accomplished organist, he delighted in performing Bach's organ music. He amassed copies of Bach's compositions and edited selected chorale preludes. These works greatly influenced Mendelssohn's own compositions for the organ. With his Six Sonatas, Op. 65, "in which I have tried to record my way of approaching and regarding the organ," Mendelssohn founded a new era in organ music. In it, he advanced the techniques of arranging fugues and chorales, and established the genre of the Romantic organ sonata.

## **Johann Sebastian Bach Little Organ Book Edited by Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy**

In: John Sebastian Bach's Organ Compositions on Chorales | Leipzig, London, c. 1845

Composer Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy was a prominent collector and editor of Bach's works. He began this four-volume edition with the Little Organ Book, in which Bach gave aspiring organists "instructions ... on how to arrange a chorale in a multitude of ways". In 45 concise chorale preludes he masterfully blended intricate polyphony and the art of the fugue with supreme expressiveness.

# Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy (1809–1847)

## 6 Organ Sonatas, Op. 65

First edition, c. 1845 | Leipziger Städtische Bibliotheken – Musikbibliothek Peters

Mendelssohn Bartholdy composed fugues and arranged quotations from chorales in the manner of Bach. He combined them with symphonic elements and Romantically heightened expression. His cycle of sonatas inspired composers like Josef Rheinberger, Max Reger and Paul Hindemith to write their own organ works. Sonata No. 6 begins with a series of variations on Luther's chorale 'Our Father in Heaven'.

The Peters Music Library was acquired by the City of Leipzig with the help of funding from the Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media (following a resolution of the German Bundestag) as well as support from the Cultural Foundation of the Sparkasse Banks in Eastern Germany and local bank Sparkasse Leipzig, the Saxon State Ministry of Science and Art, the Cultural Foundation of the Federal States, and the Packard Humanities Institute, Los Altos, California.

### Music to the exhibition on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72BluaFOLKLpMGHLFherMF?si=93396020dc4943aa>

The exhibition is kindly co-funded by



Ostdeutsche Sparkassenstiftung  
gemeinsam mit der  
Sparkasse Leipzig

mit Hilfe des PS-Lotterie-Sparens



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