

# Bach and The Tuning of the World

Jens Johler

Novel

Alexander Verlag Berlin

Jens Johler  
*Bach and The Tuning of the World*

## Excerpt

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These extracts contain the prologue as well as thirteen  
of a total of forty-eight chapters in the book.

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Jens Johler

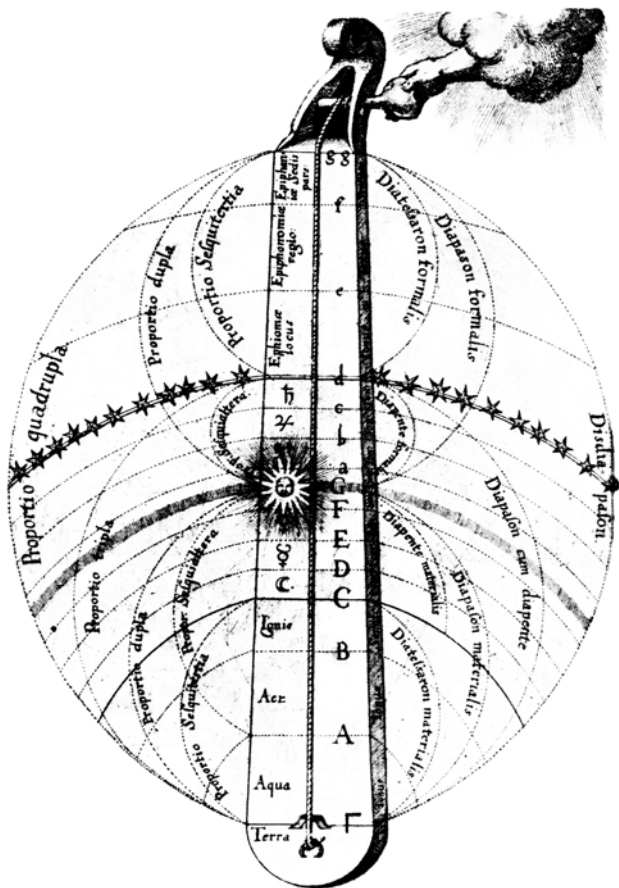
BACH  
and  
THE TUNING  
OF THE WORLD

Novel

Based on an idea by  
Johler & Burow



Alexander Verlag Berlin



*Celestial Monochord,*  
Robert Fludd 1618

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*Fact and Fiction*

*If circumstances had brought him to a major Catholic court or into an independent civic position – and he would surely have welcomed such a development – he would without a doubt have become the greatest opera composer of his time.*

Nikolaus Harnoncourt

*What Newton was to natural philosophy, Sebastian Bach was to music.*

Christian Friedrich Daniel Schubart



## March 1722

HE OPENED HIS EYES and stared at the beams on the ceiling. The moon threw a pale, bluish light through the window.

He wanted to get up, get out of bed, go to his study, make a little music, play something – anything to drive away the ghosts that had haunted him in his dream; but he found he couldn't move. His legs didn't obey him, nor did his arms, not even a single finger.

*What's wrong with me?*

He still felt pressure on his chest. Somebody had set their booted foot on it in his dream and pressed down. It felt like the boot were still pressing down; his chest was constricted; he struggled for breath.

*I can't breathe.*

He listened to her breath. It was calm and even. When she exhaled, she made a soft whistling sound, a high G sharp. He wanted to wake her and ask her to help him get up; he opened his mouth to say, 'Please help me, I can't move, I can't breathe,' but no sound came. He couldn't do a thing; not a thing. All he could do was lie there, staring at the beams on the ceiling.

*Dear God, please don't let me be paralysed.*

He closed his eyes and tried to put himself back into the dream. Who was it who had put his boot on his chest? And how did it come about? He felt that something must have happened in the dream to cause his paralysis. He had a notion that he must get himself back into the dream so it would take a different course, with a different outcome.

*Only to this world.*

Erdmann had not said as much, but he had meant it.

*Your work belongs only to this world.*

He had to go back.

Images from his dream arose in him. The carriage. The street. The canal. Now he remembered the horror that had seized him when the carriage began to go under, further and further, deeper and deeper, until he was submerged in the water. But the water did not penetrate the carriage; it continued on its way, unfettered, under the surface of the water. It was as though he were sitting in the belly of a fish, like Jonah in the belly of the whale.

*I went in the wrong direction*, he thought, and opened his eyes. *No revelation of heaven on Earth. No Jacob's ladder reaching upwards. Only earthly music – that's all it is. No. It's worse than that.*

The pressure on his chest increased. A dark figure suddenly stood at the foot of his bed, ramrod straight, his right hand pointing to the heavens. A prophet. A messiah. A ruler over the tuning of the world. The others surrounding him looked up to him in terror, at his fiery eyes and the arm stretched high into the heavens.

Only she didn't look up.

Bach followed her gaze, his eyes wandering down from the prophet's black coat to his equally black trousers and leather boots. But no . . . only his right foot wore a boot. Bach stared, with incredulous horror, at his left foot.

## I. Departure

ON 15 MARCH 1700, shortly before sunrise, Bach set off. Johann Christoph accompanied him to the town gate and, since the morning light still refused to break, part of the way beyond it. When they stopped on top of the mountain, they saw the sun sending its first rays across the edge of the forest.

‘Will you be all right on your own?’

Bach didn’t answer. Robbers and gypsies made their homes in the woodlands, waiting to grab his knapsack and violin. As soon as Johann Christoph left him, they’d pounce.

‘You’re shivering. Are you cold?’

He wasn’t cold, he was just shivering. He would immediately break into a run after his brother was gone.

‘Well, then, young ’un, God bless you.’

Bach returned his brother’s embrace and set off at a gallop.

‘Wait!’

Johann Christoph pulled a rolled-up bundle of paper from his waistcoat. ‘I almost forgot,’ he said. ‘Here, it’s yours now. Take it.’

Bach took a step back, staring at the bundle.

‘You want me to put it in your knapsack?’

While Johann Christoph untied his brother’s knapsack and stowed away the roll of paper, Bach furtively wiped a tear from the corner of his eye.

‘And work hard, always work hard, you hear?’

He nodded.

‘Why don’t you say something?’ And then, before finally setting off on his way back to Ohrdruf, Johann Christoph said in passing, more in a murmur than out loud: ‘Beware of pride, young ’un. There will come a time when you’ll surpass us all.’

Astonished, Bach watched his brother walk away. For five long years Johann Christoph had been his teacher, a strict teacher who uttered nary a word of praise for him. And now this? And what was it his brother had said? Was it a prophecy, a wish, a mission, or an order?

Just as Johann Christoph disappeared between the trees, the incandescent ball of fire rose on the horizon. Inwardly, a radiantly pure C-major chord resounded, soon dissolving into individual notes as if played on a harp. As he started on his way again, Bach whistled the arpeggio softly to himself. All of a sudden, his fear was gone. He thought of Lüneburg, of the Latin School, and of the famous Georg Böhm who played the organ there; he thought about the musical manuscript in his knapsack, and about his brother's words. And while tears sprang once again to his eyes, he increased his pace, hurrying along so as to arrive in Gotha on time, where Georg Erdmann, his fellow pupil, was eagerly awaiting him.

ERDMANN WAS SITTING ON A ROCK in front of the town hall and jumped up when he saw Bach. He was two years older than Bach, thinner and taller by a head. He, too, carried a knapsack on his back and instead of a violin, he had a lute slung over his shoulder.

He had been reading a lot in the last few weeks, said Erdmann as they left the city walls behind them, and had found his calling. He would become a philosopher, the greatest who ever lived. He would acquire all the knowledge of his time. Natural philosophy, moral philosophy, philosophy of law, everything! He had just read about an Englishman by the name of New-Tone.

Bach pricked up his ears. He liked the name.

'This New-Tone, or Newton,' Erdmann went on to explain, 'is quite an eminent philosopher – some say, even more emi-

nent than Leibniz, but that was for posterity to decide. Anyway, one day this Englishman was lying under an apple tree and fell asleep. And while he was peacefully dreaming away, he was rudely and suddenly awakened – by an apple, which fell bang on his head. He was angry and annoyed, and, naturally, he wanted to vent his anger at someone. But at whom? There wasn't a soul in sight. After reflecting upon this for some time, the Englishman had a sudden inspiration on how all this was connected: the falling of the apple to the ground, the movement of the Earth around the sun, the movement of the moon around the Earth – and indeed all other movements that are not the direct result of an external impact. So there is a force inherent to all physical bodies, or at work in mysterious ways between them, without the bodies directly touching. And Newton called this magical force “gravity”.’

Bach was fascinated. Softly he said the word to himself: *gravity*; *gra-vi-ty*. The word fascinated him. The thought fascinated him that everything – the near and the far, the heavens and the Earth, the moon and the apple – was connected by a mysterious force. *Gra-vi-ty*: he tested various intonations of the word to get nearer to its meaning; he elongated the syllables, stretching them; he varied melody and rhythm; and the more lavishly he did so, the more he got caught up into the word; he stamped his feet, clapped his hands, snapped his fingers . . . until he noticed that Erdmann was looking at him with irritation.

‘Gravity,’ he said one final time, in an austere voice, with a gesture of apology.

Erdmann interpreted this as an encouragement, and began talking about Johannes Kepler, an astronomer who had postulated certain laws about the movement of the planets.

While listening to his friend with one ear, Bach heard the distant call of a cuckoo, and asked himself what it meant

that it first sang a minor, then a major third. It sounded like  
farewell and loss.

[. . .]

## 4. Latin School

THEY WERE already expected. Barely had they entered the cobbled yard of St Michael's Monastery than a student took them under his wing – another scholarship student, as they correctly assumed. [. . .] Before showing them the dormitories, he warned them in a hushed voice about the young gentlemen from the Collegium Illustre, who also had their dormitories in the inner courtyard. A *bagarre* with them would occur every once in a while.

'What's that?' asked Bach.

'A brawl.'

'No, I mean the Collegium Illustre.'

'Oh that,' said Waldemar with a dismissive gesture.

'Well?'

'The Knights' School. Some also call it the Knights' Academy, but it's a Latin school just like ours, only for the nobility, so the great lords can mingle among themselves.

[. . .]

The curriculum consisted of Latin and Greek, Religion and Logic, History and Geography, Mathematics, Physics and German Literature.

Bach had already found a special knack for mathematics when he went to school in Eisenach and Ohrdruf and so in this subject he could shine. During the first week, he had the chance to prove the theorem of Pythagoras and, when the teacher asked him what else he knew about Pythagoras, he answered that Pythagoras was one of the great sages of antiquity. Not least, he explained, Pythagoras was famous for finding the mathematical proportions of the harmony.

[. . .]

‘**E**XCELLENT,’ said the teacher. ‘Then you also probably know what the Pythagorean Comma is?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Bach said eagerly, without noticing how the others’ eyes by now were turned on him with envy.

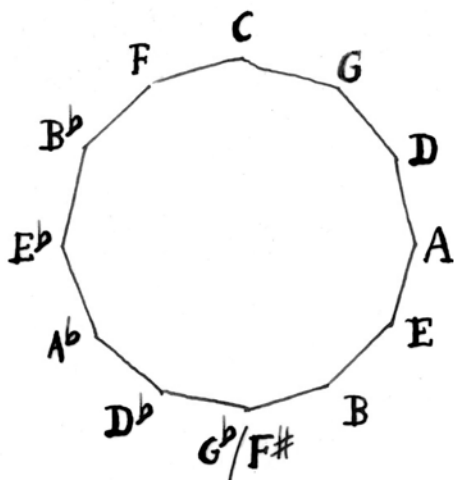
‘Well?’ asked the teacher.

‘A comma,’ said Bach, ‘if you translate it literally from Greek, is nothing but a *section*, and in this case – well, it’s not so easy to explain. Do I have permission to go to the blackboard and draw a sketch?’

‘Please do so,’ said the teacher.

Bach got up from his desk and walked to the blackboard. ‘Here is how it is,’ he said, turning to the class. ‘If you tune perfect fifths on an instrument and go up higher from fifth to fifth, from C to G, from G to D, from D to A and so forth, you’ll return to the C after exactly twelve steps, only seven octaves higher. It’s called the circle of fifths.’

He turned his back to the class and drew the circle of fifths on the blackboard:





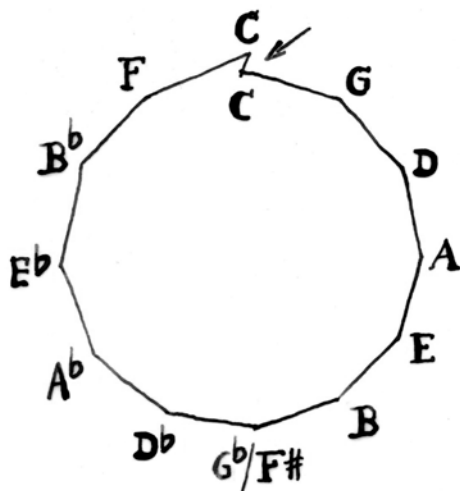
There you could see it. It began with C and ended with C, only seven octaves higher. It was simple.

‘And where is the Pythagorean Comma?’ enquired the teacher.

‘Yes,’ Bach said, ‘that’s the real problem. If you tune perfect octaves, namely from C to C’ and so forth, you’ll have a different note than by tuning to perfect fifths.’

‘Why?’ the teacher asked. ‘Why is that?’

‘Well,’ said Bach. ‘It’s a problem that hitherto no science has been able to resolve. The fact is, twelve perfect fifths result in a different note than seven perfectly tuned octaves.’ Bach turned to the blackboard again, wiping away a section of the chalk circle at the upper C and added a small spike. Then he drew an arrow pointing straight to the spike and said: ‘There. Here you can see it. The circle of fifths doesn’t close. The beginning and the end do not match. God has presented us with a riddle here.’



‘Thank you, Bach,’ said the teacher, ‘that was an excellent lecture.’

Bach put down the piece of chalk and strode back to his place.

‘But,’ queried an apothecary’s son after the teacher had allowed him to speak, ‘what does all this actually mean?’

‘What it *means*,’ said Bach, ‘is that you cannot play in all keys on the organ or the clavichord. If the instrument has been tuned in C, you can get barely to E major, and after that the wolf howls.

*The howling of the wolf* was an expression musicians used to describe a fifth that was so far out of tune that it only sounded miserable. It was called the *wolf fifth*.

‘All right,’ said the apothecary’s son, ‘but what does it all signify?’

‘It primarily signifies,’ Erdmann interjected, in the arrogant tone he had learned from listening to the aristocratic students, ‘that the order of the world is highly imperfect.’

‘Imperfect?’ asked the teacher, crossing his arms.

‘Well,’ said Erdmann, rising from his seat, ‘after all, the world is indeed anything but perfect! At least it’s in dire need of improvement – all progressive scholars are agreed on that.’

‘So God has created the world in an imperfect manner?’ enquired the teacher. ‘That’s how His Lordship meant it – right, Erdmann? So God created the world – well, what now, Erdmann? Give me a hand here. Did He do so sloppily? In a slipshod manner?’

‘Well . . .’

Bach saw beads of perspiration on Erdmann’s upper lip.

‘But we just heard it from Bach,’ Erdmann said hesitantly. ‘Everything doesn’t fit together quite right here. It’s not as it ought to be. If you tune to perfect octaves, you get to a different note than you do when with tuning to perfect fifths. Such

a difference would not exist in a perfect world. In a perfect world, the circle of fifths would be closed.'

He folded his arms across his chest now, so they stood facing each other, the teacher and the student, both with crossed arms.

'So Your Highness intends to improve upon God's creation?' the teacher said ironically, unfolding his arms. 'It's not good enough for His Lordship: His Lordship knows better, and His Lordship will show us. His Lordship will show GOD, am I right? Answer me!'

Bach would have liked to help Erdmann, but how? Erdmann was his friend. He admired his courage. He admired his brilliance. But was it permitted to set oneself up as a judge of Creation?

All the colour had drained from Erdmann's face. Beads of cold sweat covered his forehead.

'Just at the moment, I can't answer that,' said Erdmann evasively. 'I have to think it over first.'

'Well,' the teacher said, smiling, 'get on with it, Erdmann. So now His Lordship has three days to think over how he wants to improve God's work. Three days in detention – get out!'

Upright, with hunched shoulders, striding stiffly, his eyes fixed in front of him, Erdmann stalked to the door and set out for the detention room.

## 5. The Lion of Eisenach

THE THING BACH MISSED most of all was playing the organ. [. . .] If the classroom and choir practice left him enough time for it, he made a pilgrimage to the other end of the town, where, at St John's Church on Market Square, the great Georg Böhm played the organ. He had never heard a master like him. In terms of virtuosity and expressiveness, Böhm outmatched even Uncle Christoph in Eisenach.

For days and weeks, Bach had only dreamed of being a pupil of this master organist but, since he adored him so much, he could not bring himself to ask. Once, after Böhm had played his last chord, Bach walked up to him, his heart pounding in his throat, determined to speak to him; but when the pastor came and spoke a few words with the organist, his courage abandoned him once more. [. . .]

*During a walk Erdmann eventually succeeds in luring his friend into St John's Church as if by chance, where he has an appointment with Georg Böhm. Now there is no going back for Bach: he has to play for his venerated master.*

KNEES TREMBLING, Bach climbed up the stairs to the gallery and sat down on the seat. He pulled the necessary stops, took a deep breath and began with a capriccio by Pachelbel. He added a few harmonious variations, had the organ swell up and then become soft again, very soft, before he filled it with life once more.

'Hmm,' said Böhm, as the last note was fading away.

*I knew it, thought Bach. I'm not good enough for him.*

'Do you also have a composition of your own?' Böhm asked.

'Maybe a chorale or a sonata?'

‘I composed a toccata some time ago,’ suggested Bach. ‘I could play that.’

He began with three ringing notes, an octave apart, followed by a diminished seventh chord, playing after that fast, virtuoso musical figures across the manuals with both hands. He was still not satisfied with the toccata, not by a long shot; he would play it again and again, and continue perfecting it, but what he was playing now was what he *was able* to play now – more was simply not possible at the moment. [. . .]

Suddenly he sensed that Böhm was standing behind him. A little later, Böhm pushed in some stops, which changed the sound, so that everything Bach played now sounded more delicate, more tender, almost a whisper. After a while, Böhm pulled the stops out again, and the sound of the organ became fuller again. Bach’s fingers remembered the quick runs they had played with the toccata, and transferred them to the fugue.

‘Just go on,’ he heard Böhm’s deep voice behind him say. ‘Everything will be fine.’

Bach’s heart was beating so violently that his hands and feet almost refused to obey him. As uncertain as he had felt just a moment ago, there was no longer any doubt that the great Georg Böhm would accept him as his pupil.

*Georg Böhm introduces Bach to Pythagoras’s harmony of the spheres and to Johannes Kepler’s theory of world harmony. From now on Bach has only one goal: to play music that connects Heaven and Earth – harmony up there in the cosmos, harmony down here on Earth: in our instruments and in our hearts.*

*Bach’s teacher Böhm is friends with Adam Reincken, the celebrated organist of St Catherine’s Church in Hamburg. Eventually Böhm takes his pupil along to the big and wealthy Hanseatic City, where Bach makes the acquaintance of the famous northern German organist, who also sits on the Board of Directors of*

*the Hamburg Opera. The next day Reincken invites them both to accompany him to his box.*

## 8. 'That False Serpent, Opera'

WHAT AN enormous theatre! Two thousand people could fit into the auditorium, and what seemed the population of a small town had crammed themselves in there this afternoon. Bach was mightily glad that he had a seat in Reincken's box, and didn't have to sit in the stalls among all the pushing and jostling, the laughter and chattering. The ladies and gentlemen in the boxes were festively attired in precious linen and silk, and lavish wigs. They drank wine and liqueur, and the ladies fanned themselves with well-practised movements. It was hot and stuffy in the auditorium, which was lit by a thousand candles and oil lamps. It smelled of a mixture of perfume, powder, burning wax and body odour. [. . .] Bach was glad when the lights in the hall finally went down, the noise subsided to a tolerable level, and someone backstage knocked on the floor three times with a staff or hammer. [. . .]

It was the tragedy of Orpheus, the singer who stirred the emotions of people, animals, plants, even the very stones and rocks, with his singing. It was the story of Orpheus and Eurydice.

The music and dramatic action cast an immediate spell on Bach. He shared Orpheus's happiness over his forthcoming wedding with Eurydice; he was painfully torn when he learned Eurydice had been bitten by a snake and died; his own hopes and fears went out to the singer, who descended and entered Hades to fetch Eurydice back; and he yielded to despair when Eurydice had to return to the Underworld because Orpheus had turned around to catch a glimpse of her.

Again and again, he shook his head in awe and amazement at how the audience's imagination had been captured here with all the means of the many arts. The painted scenes, the

stage machinery – Orpheus and Eurydice seemed to float up from the deceptively realistic cave and only used their feet when they had left the cave – the poetry, the music, and the acting all worked together here in harmony, in a perfect imitation of nature. The cornets, trombones, and the reed-organ represented the Underworld, and could always be heard when Evil and Death were dramatized on stage; the strings, flutes, and, above all, the harp represented the Upper World, and when Orpheus commanded the stage, the sound of the violins tugged at one's very heart.

But most of all, Bach was moved by Eurydice. She sparked such a fierce longing in him that his chest tightened. *Why do I feel this way?* he thought. *What's happening to me? Is it Eurydice for whom I yearn? Is it the fact that I can't accept her death that makes me burn for her? Do I feel with Orpheus because he, like me, is a musician? Or is it not Eurydice at all who's creating such a painful desire in me, but rather the singer?*

[. . .]



## 9. The Muse

THE FOLLOWING afternoon, after he had played on the grand organ with the four keyboards, Bach walked over to the Zippelhaus, and the living quarters that Adam Reincken had procured for them. Exhausted but happy, he climbed up the stairs and rapped on the door with the knocker – a cast-iron snake's head.

After a little while, the door was opened, and Bach froze.

He saw grey-blue eyes and a slightly opened mouth. He saw her blonde, curly hair, and the strands that fell over her temples. He saw her lean figure in a tight linen dress, over which she wore a turquoise shawl. He saw the expectant expression on her face. He wanted to say something – but what? If he could only just manage to be gallant for a moment . . . for one single moment!

'Oh –yes?' a gentle, exceedingly enchanting voice asked.

'B-beg your pardon,' he finally stammered.

'What for, my dear?'

He had no idea for what. Or, in fact, he had too many ideas. He sensed the harp, the strings, and flutes of the Upper World, yet also the cornets, trombones, and the reed-organ of the Underworld. He sensed an entire universe full of music; and if he had had the courage at this very moment, he would at the very least gallantly . . . sing. And yet he remained silent.

'Y-yes?' she asked again.

How was it possible that a human being was able to put so much expression, so much melody, in two small syllables? He would have to remember. He would try to dissolve the words into music, too. He would work on it, all the days of his life.

'Why are you so silent?'

'I'm with Böhm,' he finally stammered out. 'Reincken . . . the small room . . . the dormitory over there.'

'And your name?'

He told her. She told him hers. But for him, she already had quite another.

As he stepped over the threshold, his paralysis eased a little. He even managed to answer her questions. Yes, he was from Lüneburg. Yes, he was a student of Böhm. Yes, he was at the opera yesterday. Oh, yes, he had seen and heard her . . .

'I beg your pardon? On the clavichord? Yes, of course, should you so wish it . . . Right now?'

She led him into a large, sparsely furnished room: a four-poster bed surrounded by red patterned drapery, a painted chest, an oriental rug, an oval table, two chairs, a music stand; leaning against the wall was a lute, a framed silhouette hanging above it, and – over there, the clavichord!

He only needed to sit down on the stool and bring his hands close to the keys to be transformed.

She gave him the music. He sight-read, which wasn't hard, and she sang to it. And how she sang! Who knows what life is like in Paradise, but it couldn't be so different to this. He saw this ethereal creature – he heard her gentle soprano voice, the same voice that had filled him with such longing the day before – and now he could have sung his heart out with happiness that he was allowed to sit here and accompany this voice.

'Enough,' she suddenly said.

*No*, he thought, *never enough*.

'You're a valiant fellow,' she said.

*And me? What should I say now?*

'My dress is too tight,' she said. 'Would you mind helping me unbutton it?'

She turned her back to him, casting him a glance from her blue-grey eyes over her left shoulder.

He rose from the stool, and his knees began to shake. He walked up to her, smelled the scent – what was it? Violets? Lilac? Roses? Forget-me-nots? – and fumbled with her buttons. He had never done anything like that before. He wondered if it was a sin. But what if the dress *was* too tight for her?

‘Oh yes,’ she said, after he at last managed to free the first button. ‘Now I can breathe more easily.’

‘Is that enough?’ he asked, and took a step back.

‘No . . . no,’ she said quickly. ‘Please go on.’

He went on. And while her dress fell to the ground, he felt that his own clothes were growing too tight for him. Autumn was drawing in, the summer was over, but here, in this apartment, the heat was intense.

‘How do you like my perfume?’ she asked.

‘Very much indeed,’ he replied, plucking up courage. ‘The scent of roses?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘You have a sensitive nose. But there’s something else here, too –’ she indicated her slender white neck – ‘which you’ll have to come very close to recognize. And if you guess what it is . . .’

She pulled his head towards hers. His nose and – he couldn’t avoid it – his mouth touched her blonde hair, then her neck. He felt like fainting, but that was out of the question. It would certainly not be gallant of him.

‘Y-yes?’ Again this melody. One of these days, he would compose a series of variations on it. An aria, thirty variations, then the aria again.

‘What do you smell?’ she asked softly.

*Nothing*, he wanted to say, but checked himself.

Once again, he put his mouth and nose against her neck. And then, all of a sudden, it came to him. ‘Skin,’ he whispered.

Was that gallant? No, maybe not. Probably it was far too

blunt. But if he'd varied the theme, or found a sweet and catchy new melody for it – now *that* would have been gallant.

But, gallant or not, it was definitely the right answer. [. . .]

*Back in Lüneburg Bach composes an opera, but he must also pay the bills . . .*

## 15. Going South!

*Bach's first professional engagement as organist is in Arnstadt, in Thuringia, where he plays the organ at the New Church, teaches the students of the Latin School, and befriends the niece of the burgomaster, Maria Barbara, whom he will later marry.*

*In Arnstadt, a letter from Georg Erdmann arrives one day from Venice.*

*Venice, Bach! You need to come here, immediately, before the town sinks into the sea! It's all built on pilings, criss-crossed by canals, and punctuated by thousands of bridges. When we crossed over by boat from Chioggia, it was as if we were seeing a mirage rising from the fog. And the music, dear friend – next to painting, music is the art of arts in Venice. Just now, we attended a concert at the Ottoboni Palazzo by a young musician whom they call the prete rosso, or 'red priest', because he actually is a priest and has flaming red hair. His name is Antonio Vivaldi, and the music of this young master – we heard a violin concerto – is so sublime as to take your breath away. . . .*

Page after page, Erdmann went on raving about Venice, Vivaldi and Venetian virtuosity, for whom any art form, whether painting, music, even church music, was primarily devoted to pleasure and entertainment. The letter ended as it had begun, with the urgent appeal to take to the road: *Go south, Bach, go south!*

But what Bach heard from this appeal was the exact opposite: Go north!

[. . .]

Bach requested formal leave of absence from the Consistory and asked his cousin Johann Ernst to substitute for him. Then he bade farewell to Maria Barbara, and embarked on the journey to Lübeck.

*Bach's aspiration is to study under the legendary organist Dieterich Buxtehude. What he learns there in particular (during an encounter with the organist Andreas Werckmeister from Halberstadt) is the 'well tempered' tuning of the clavier, by which – and this is new! – you can play everything, all keys, even F sharp major.*

*Three months later, Bach is back in Arnstadt.*

## 21. Strange Tones

ON SUNDAY, he sat in the organ loft again, trembling with the desire to show the burghers of Arnstadt all he had learned during his stay with Buxtehude. How witless and unimaginative it was, always merely to play the melody as a prelude to the chorale, which was in any case then sung by everybody anyway! Why not stir the blood with an improvisation in the North German style, so that the singing would stand in jubilant contrast to the prelude, and then, as it were, grow out of it! He pulled the registers, signalled to the bellows treader and hit the keys. He loved this organ. It had a purer sound than the one at St Mary's Church in Lübeck and was tempered differently, allowing you to play more keys; and so he dared now to play a couple of unusual modulations, and felt uplifted and inspired. How they would marvel, down there on the plain wooden benches – and in a moment, cued by the cadence he would give, the chorale would break forth like a tremendous hallelujah to the glory of God! Now the time had come. Now came the cadence. Now open your mouths and sing!

They didn't.

Had they missed the cue?

No, they obviously wanted to hear more.

*All right, then.*

He improvised another verse, and yet another, before once again giving the signal with the cadence. Now let loose! Sing!

They didn't.

He looked around stealthily. It was no use. He couldn't see them down there. The parapet blocked his view. He rose from his stool, still playing, and looked down over the parapet: all of them were sitting in the pews, but they weren't looking

towards the front, towards the cross or the pastor in front of the simple altar – they were all staring up at him. With open mouths. In amazement? Outrage?

He finished the prelude with a final chord, as if he had not expected them to sing at all, and began with the usual organ prelude, obediently playing the melody, the way they were used to, and now, if you don't mind, sing!

Now they sang.

[. . .]

ON THE 21 FEBRUARY, Bach had to justify himself before the Consistory. [. . .]

He was reproached for having lately made such *curious variationes* in the chorale and having mixed in so many *strange tones* that the congregation was quite dumbfounded by it.

*Bach leaves Arnstadt at the earliest opportunity to be organist in Mühlhausen. A year later he takes up a position as court organist in Weimar, where he composes cantatas, teaches the Duke's nephew, and soon also his own son, Wilhelm Friedemann. After seven years in the service of Weimar he receives a tempting offer from Prince Leopold of Köthen and accepts it – unfortunately without first seeking the Duke's permission to resign. So offended is Duke Wilhelm Ernst that he now sends Bach to prison.*



## 35. Landrichterstube

THERE WERE THREE different prisons in Weimar: the Town Prison for convicted criminals; the Penitentiary and Orphanage, to which the gypsies grabbed off the street were also brought; and the Landrichterstube, where beggars, hoboes and other riff-raff were indefinitely detained.

Bach counted as 'other riff-raff'.

When the warder asked him for his name, he fell into a brown study. He could scarcely reconcile his name with this new environment. The man who was here had to be somebody else.

'Don't you have a name?' the jailer asked.

'Bach,' he said at last.

'Well, in you go.' The warder pushed him into the cell and locked the bolt.

It was a small cell, eight feet long, five feet wide, with a narrow window opening high up on the thick wall, through which the November wind whistled. There was a straw mattress on the ground, and a wooden bucket in which to relieve himself. It stank of mould, faeces and urine. [. . .]

That night, he lay rigid upon the cold straw, now almost accepting of his fate. When he heard rustling in one corner of the cell, fear returned. He sat up in the darkness and stared into the black air. What if he stayed locked up here forever? If the Duke simply forgot about him?

Why was he not so famous that even the idea of sending him to prison was unthinkable? Marchand 'Le Grand' was not in prison. The Sun King had dismissed his court organist, but he hadn't locked him up! *But me*, Bach thought, *me they are allowed to imprison!* Then again, he reflected, why should he be any better than the prisoners in the other cells? Why

should he be any better than Our Lord Jesus Christ? Jesus hadn't thought, *You don't nail a Jesus of Nazareth to the cross!*

*Have mercy*, he thought. And a melody resounded within him. *Have mercy, my God, for the sake of my tears.*

*After six weeks in prison, Bach is released, and takes up his position in Anhalt- Köthen. Prince Leopold is a Calvinist, and as Calvinists only allow the simplest church music, for the next five years Bach will compose only secular music here – such as the Brandenburg Concertos. Bach is now thirty-five years old, and has been married for thirteen years to Maria Barbara, with whom he has seven children, though three of them have died.*

*In 1720 Bach travels with the Prince to Karlsbad for a spa treatment, stopping off on the return trip at Saxe-Weissenfels.*

## 40. The Arrow

[. . .]

ONE OF THE STOPS, the last one, was at Saxe-Weissenfels. Bach knew the court from his time at Weimar; he had performed the Hunting Cantata there, and looked forward to renewing his acquaintance with the art-loving Duke.

On the day of their arrival, Duke Christian gave a musical soirée, and of course they were invited to attend. When Bach ascended the wide staircase by the side of his Prince, the music had already begun. Halfway up the stairs, the high double door at the top opened to admit someone or allow them out, and through the open door could be heard a soprano voice that was just then commencing an aria.

Bach's hand felt for the marble railing, his other hand clasping his chest; he stood still, closed his eyes. His legs threatened to buckle.

It wasn't possible. It couldn't be. The Devil was playing a cruel game with him. The Devil was playing a trick on his hearing – his hearing, of all things, which counted among his most precious and most incorruptible possessions. His *eyes* had deceived him often, but never his *ears*.

And yet . . . what he was hearing, what came from the hall and reached his ear was *his* voice, the voice of *his* singer, the voice of Eurydice, of Circe. He knew he must be mistaken, that it was a dream, a delusion. He wanted to wake up from the dream; and yet at the same time, he wanted to hear this voice forever, for ever and ever. He opened his eyes and looked up to the hall door, now closing again so that the voice was muffled and all but silenced; he glanced up to the ceiling above the door – and that is where he saw him: the little, naked,

golden-haired winged boy who held bow and arrow in his fat little child's hands, an innocent smile on his face.

'Aren't you feeling well?'

'I'm fine, I'm fine.'

'Hold on firmly to the rail so you don't fall down the stairs.'

'I'm all right. It's only . . .'

'Of course, the air is stuffy. The weather is oppressive. By God, I'll be glad to get back to Köthen. Maybe we should set off again first thing tomorrow morning, what do you think?'

'No, no,' Bach stammered, and pulled himself together. 'Not tomorrow, not tomorrow. I'm fine, please don't worry . . . I'm fine,' he repeated, and climbed up the stairs, with unsteady knees.

As they entered the hall, the short introduction of the flutes sounded again, and then the lovely soprano voice: *Sheep can safely graze and pasture in a watchful shepherd's sight.*

He heard the music, his music – the aria of Pales from the Hunting Cantata – and when he saw the singer, he felt the blow of a second arrow.

No, it was not Sophie Agneta Petersen who was singing, though their voices sounded confusingly similar. She was dark-haired rather than blonde; her eyes were brown rather than greyish blue; and her thin, delicate face was framed by a sweep of natural curls that fell to her shoulders in all their full glory.

'Nobody has ever sung the aria of my Pales so enchantingly,' said Bach when he was introduced to the singer during the break.

'Your Pales?' she asked, frowning.

'I composed it.'

'You are *the* Bach?'

'One of many,' he said modestly.

'The Bach whose Hunting Cantata was performed here?'

Bach made a little bow.

‘My teacher told me about it – Pauline Kellner. She sang Pales in that performance.’

‘Yes,’ Bach said, ‘I remember. She wanted me to compose an opera for her.’

‘So? Did you?’

‘No.’

‘Maybe you’ll compose an opera for me,’ she said jokingly.

‘It’s not really my *métier*,’ Bach said, ‘but for you I would.’

*I would do anything for you.*

She blushed a little, but didn’t behave any differently than if he had made an entirely normal compliment. ‘How long will you be staying in Weissenfels?’ she asked.

‘That depends on my Prince,’ he replied. ‘But I’ll certainly still be here tomorrow. May I see you again?’

*Bach spends another day with his Prince in Weissenfels, a day on which he and Anna Magdalena Wilcke are almost inseparable. But then it is time to return to Köthen. During the whole journey Bach battles with his longing for Anna Magdalena and his guilty conscience about Maria Barbara. When he arrives home, it is strangely quiet.*

## 41. 'Why Did You Leave Me?'

IT WAS WILHELM FRIEDEMANN who opened the door. He looked pale, agitated; his shirt hung halfway out of his breeches; his hair was spiky and unkempt; he had red-rimmed eyes.

'What's going on?' Bach asked. 'What happened?'

'M-Mother,' Friedemann stammered. 'She's – up there . . .'

Bach raced up the steep stairs; saw Friedalena Margaretha, who gestured him to be quiet; saw Philipp Emanuel holding little Gottfried's hand; and heard Friedalena Margaretha whispering to him: 'She waited for you, dear brother-in-law.'

He pushed open the barely open door, and saw Maria Barbara lying in bed, her face pale and severe, her mouth slightly open, her eyes closed, her cheeks sunken, her forehead beaded with sweat.

Catharina Dorothea silently rose from her bed-side chair. 'She's asleep,' she whispered.

Bach sat down and took Maria Barbara's hand.

'Oh,' she said, and opened her eyes, which seemed to cost her a tremendous effort.

'I'm here,' he whispered, 'I'm here. You'll live, Maria, you mustn't die, you'll live, my beloved.'

When he heard himself speak the words 'my beloved', he flinched as if a snake had bitten him.

'Oh,' said Maria Barbara once again, in a sepulchral voice, 'why did you leave me?'

*But I'm with you now*, he wanted to say, *I'm here – see? – and now everything will be fine*. He opened his mouth, and took a breath to speak the words; but when the time came, the words didn't cross his lips. *I'm with you now, I'm here*. Yes, he

was there, but his heart was with the other woman. Only a few hours ago he'd wanted to be free. And now?

Suddenly Maria Barbara opened her eyes wide, and moved – where did she find the strength? – towards him with her upper body, her mouth open as though she wanted to kiss him or curse him. She remained in this position for what seemed an eternity, half erect, a stricken look on her face, then fell back into the pillows, exhausted; her eyes became vacant; she took one last deep breath, and died.

Bach rose, went to the window, and opened it to let out her soul.

THE BURIAL TOOK PLACE on 7 July. The funeral was, if anything, more than fitting. Bach enlisted the services of the entire school, rather than half their number, which would have been normal and appropriate, which of course added to the expense; everyone was to sing hymns and chorales in Maria Barbara's honour – everyone, without exception, even if it did cost twice as much.

But it didn't help at all. He couldn't stop blaming himself; couldn't forget that he had wished her gone as he had sat in the carriage with the Prince, the distance from Weissenfels growing ever further, and Köthen ever more oppressively near. He questioned the reliability of his memory – whether what he remembered now as a wish was not merely the retrospective interpretation of an indeterminate sensation. But the truth was that he had wished he could be free. He had desired it, and it had now transpired. God had taken him at his word. It was as if God were saying, *You see? That's how it goes. You wanted it – now deal with it.*

He couldn't get her last words out of his mind: *Bach, why did you leave me?* Had she really said that? Or had he misheard? Perhaps she'd said: *But why must I leave you?* Or even: *But why*

*must I leave you all?* Or she had said nothing at all except *But*, or *Bach*. He was sometimes unable to distinguish between external noises and those that resounded only in his head. Were they real, those sounds he heard, as he scribbled down the notes on paper with quill and ink? He heard them, but he was the only one who did; nobody else, even if a hundred people were sitting in the same room as him. So what about Maria Barbara's last words? Had Friedalena and the children heard them? He thought to ask, but didn't, for fear of the truth.

*In the spring of 1722, Bach finishes The Well Tempered Clavier, a series of preludes and fugues in every key, even down to F sharp major. It is the first complete Work of this sort – and it can only be played if the clavier is arranged into the well tempered tuning, which Bach has learned from Andreas Werckmeister in Lübeck.*

*Just as Bach has completed his work for the clavier, his old school friend Georg Erdmann arrives on a visit.*



## 44. Channelled Notes

ERDMANN HAD COME in his own carriage from Danzig. He was the Tsar's Resident in Danzig and was on his way to Dresden, where he had been granted an audience with Augustus the Strong, who owed his Polish crown to the Tsar. [ . . . ]

After the meal, the two friends withdrew to the music room to smoke, drink a glass of red wine and chat for a little while.

Bach told him he had just finished a piece that meant a lot to him. [ . . . ] Some years ago, he had learned of a new tuning by which the circle of fifths could be closed and thus perfect order established. In theory, anyway. The practical proof had yet to come, he said. Now he himself had provided it. With his new opus.

'Good gracious,' Erdmann said. 'My congratulations.' But at the risk of being deemed either obtuse or an *imbécile*, it had always been his belief that the Pythagorean Comma was a physical, nay, mathematical fact of nature. A quandary of nature, as it were. Was it possible to change the laws of nature, just like that?

'No,' Bach said, 'that rests in God's hand alone.'

'And perhaps not even there,' commented Erdmann. 'But how has it become possible to close the circle of fifths now?'

Bach explained.

'Interesting,' said Erdmann, nodding thoughtfully several times. 'Very interesting. If I understand you correctly, my friend, all fifths are tempered, all in equal measure?'

Bach nodded.

'And all thirds, too?'

'Those even more so,' Bach said.

‘In other words: all notes are tempered?’

‘Through all octaves.’

‘There’s no other way to do it.’

‘In other words, they become imperfect, distorted? Because *tempering* is nothing but a euphemism for distortion. Is that not so?’

‘Well,’ Bach said hesitantly. He hadn’t regarded the matter from such a strict point of view until now, at least not with such an undertone of forensic judgement. Perfect, imperfect; distorted, undistorted – well, yes. It was indeed a quandary of nature. If you wanted to play everything, you had to make compromises.

‘So, with this, the world has now become perfect?’ Erdmann asked.

‘With this, the clavier is well-tempered,’ Bach retorted. ‘Because one can go through all the tones and semitones without once having to retune the instrument.’ [. . .]

He would love to present a sample of his work to his friend, but . . .

‘Go ahead,’ Erdmann said.

Bach sat down at the clavichord, played the prelude in F sharp major, began with the fugue and stopped in the middle of it.

Erdmann sat opposite him in an armchair, darkly brooding.

‘What’s the matter?’ Bach queried.

‘We’re on our way to an artificial world,’ Erdmann said.

A frown creased Bach’s forehead. He had no idea what Erdmann was talking about.

‘We are building a city from scratch right in the middle of nowhere, on the marshes of the Neva River, practically overnight – it’s called St Petersburg.’

*Oh, the Russians again.*

‘We’re building factories, shipyards, cloth mills, with thou-

sands of workers, who all work according to one single scheme like cogs in a clock. We're straightening rivers, and digging canals across the country, so there's no longer any difference between river and canal. We're lighting up cities with torches and lanterns, and turning night into day. With our new watches, we can carry time from place to place, and soon nobody will look at the sun and the stars anymore – everybody will be looking at the hands on their watches. Don't you recognize the signs, Bach? We are in the process of creating an artificial world, a soulless, mechanical world. A world in which there's nothing left but cause and effect, cause and effect. On my travels I've met the natural philosophers of the Académie Française and the natural philosophers from the Royal Society; I've met Halley, Newton, Flamsteed, and all the rest of them. They take everything apart – everything that's alive and everything that's dead – and put it back together again. They dissect living animals, cut open corpses and look for the matter of life – the selfsame matter with which they could create new living beings. It's their goal to create a completely controllable world made by human hands. In order to accomplish this goal, they experiment with everything, Bach, anything that's possible. And if something does not fit into their order, they negate it, discard it or destroy it. Ultimately, they will destroy men, as well, and create a new human being, one without free will, one who functions only according to cause and effect – a human being as a machine. And nobody will be able to do anything about it, Bach – not me, not you, not the princes, not even the priests. I'm not a dreamer, Bach, I'm not rebelling against it – I can just see what is coming. But I had always hoped that art, poetry, music would remain our refuge, a Garden of Eden in which men, even in a faraway future, will remember their origins, a sanctuary that allows them to stay in tune with the harmony of the world, at least

once a day, at least once a year, at Christmas, at Easter, or whenever they are given the privilege of listening to truthful music. But now . . .'

He didn't finish his sentence, but fell silent.

Bach stared at him. What did his art and his knowledge have to do with this horrific vision of a mechanical mankind?

'You don't understand,' Erdmann said.

'No,' said Bach. 'I don't understand.'

'How can I explain?' Erdmann said, more to himself than to Bach. And then, after a pause: 'Do you remember the despair you were in, in Lüneburg, when your teacher Georg Böhm was dissatisfied with your playing of the organ, because it was so perfect, so perfect, so masterful virtuoso – but there was something missing. You remember?'

Bach remembered.

'And then came the day when Böhm told you about Boethius, about the three levels of music, which themselves in turn constitute something like a mystical triad. Music – that was the realization that shook you so deeply that you told me about it with tears in your eyes: music has the mission of bringing harmony to men's souls, harmony with himself, harmony with his fellow man, harmony with the universe. *I will write heavenly music, Erdmann*, that's what you said. *In my music, I will reveal heaven on Earth, because music is Jacob's ladder to heaven.*'

Bach cast Erdmann an inquisitive glance. Nothing had changed, had it? That *was* the goal of music, it was his goal. What could anyone have against it? [. . .]

'Music,' Erdmann continued, 'controls the soul of a human being; it forms it, guides it, leads it to truth or ruin. A musician is a magician, and his magic can be healing or destructive, white or black magic. [. . .] So now, if the chords on the clavier no longer correspond to their perfect ratio, if

the notes are tempered – all of them! – the connection to the harmonies of heaven will be wrenched apart forever.’

‘But . . .’ began Bach...

‘No – no buts!’ Erdmann interrupted. ‘You have a perfect system, Bach, but what kind of perfection is it? You call it temperament, I call it the rape of nature. You call it temperament, I call it distortion. You call it temperament, I call it a lie. And the lie doesn’t only affect the instrument, but the souls of men. Because, if there’s no longer any purity in music, how can the purity of man’s soul survive? When you temper the clavier, you will temper men, Bach.’

It was exactly what Werckmeister had said, though from a different perspective. Harmonic progression through the circle of fifths could be a model, in Werckmeister’s words, for ‘all pious and well-tempered people living and rejoicing in eternal harmony with God’.

‘Shouldn’t we be happy when men become less brutish and warlike,’ said Bach, ‘when they become more considerate, less irascible, less violent?’

‘Perhaps,’ Erdmann said, reflecting for a moment. ‘Only I fear,’ he added quietly, ‘their brutishness and violence will break out even worse somewhere else. The well-tempered soldier is merely a more efficient killing machine. But this is not only a matter of the brutishness of emotions and their moderation. It’s about truth. How will men be able to differentiate between pure and impure, right and wrong, truth and lie, when purity and truth no longer exist?’ [. . .]

Bach suddenly recalled a moment with Anna Magdalena. She had come to him in his study in order to rehearse for one final time an aria she wanted to sing at a soirée in the castle that night. He was accompanying her, and suddenly she interrupted her singing, and said: ‘The clavier is out of tune.’ – ‘It’s not out of tune,’ he had said, ‘it’s well tempered.’ ‘I know, I

know, dear,' she had said, 'and you can play everything with it, all keys, and that's wonderful. But it's impossible to sing to it.'

'You say your system is round,' Erdmann continued, 'because you close the circle of fifths. You say your system is perfect, because you can play everything with it. But your system allows for all that only because it denies facts – the fact, for example, that the triad above the keynote is comprised of the overtones. The first overtones of C – why am I telling you this? – are E and G, namely a perfect E and a perfect G. But if you temper the E and the G on the clavier, you have separated the third and the fifth from the natural overtones, you have ruptured the combination. In a word: you may compose as beautifully and artfully as you like, but it will always result in a merely artificial beauty, as artificial as the garden at Versailles or the Great Garden in Dresden, with its formal paths and pollarded trees. You may compose as beautifully as you like, but all it will be, and all it will remain, is a constructed artifice and an affront to nature.'

'That's not true,' Bach said in a whisper.

'Oh, yes, it is,' said Erdmann, 'and I think you know it.'

'But you once said it to me yourself,' Bach cried out in despair. 'That a world in which the circle of fifths is not closed is an imperfect world. *God has created an imperfect world.* Those were your very words. And that's why we have been given the task of perfecting it.'

Erdmann stood up. He took off his wig as if it were a hat and scratched his bald head. Then he put it back on. 'It's getting late,' he said, with a glance at his silver pocket watch. 'I must be on my way. I have to set off tomorrow at dawn.'

'Does that mean you're leaving in anger?'

'In anger?' Erdmann asked. 'Why?'

'Because of the well-tempered clavier.'

'Why, no,' said Erdmann. 'No, no, of course not. Why

should I be angry with you? You do it, I do it, we all do it. Perhaps it's all to do with the times we live in. Perhaps the truth is, nobody can act differently any longer. Perhaps the entire world will be retuned. I had hoped art would remain the exception. But who am I to be angry with you? I'm in the service of the Tsar, I'm no different, I'm helping to build the same world as you are. We channel the rivers, you channel the notes. What's the difference?'

*After Erdmann has left, Bach is stricken with terrible doubt. For three days he lies in bed as if paralysed, and is on the verge of throwing the work of the Devil – The Well Tempered Clavier – into the fire. In his distress he resorts to the church. But God, whom he beseeches to talk to him, remains silent.*

## 46. H-C-A-B

[. . .]

HE LOOKED UP, saw the cross above the altar, saw the tormented Son of God whom they elevated and humiliated at the same time; and heard Him say to his accusers: 'Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world.'

The Gospel from which these words came had always been his favourite, perhaps because he himself was called Johannes, like so many in his family – Johann Christoph, Johann Jakob, Johann Lorenz, Johann Ambrosius – but perhaps also because it proclaimed: 'In the beginning was the Word.' Because the Word – so he knew from his father – was sound and echo. 'And therefore, my son, you might say with equal truth: In the beginning was the Sound.'

And while he was still pondering all this, he knew that God had spoken to him after all.

[. . .]

AND SO HE began work on his St John Passion. [. . .] He wrote the Passion in feverish haste, the ideas brimming out of him faster than his quill could follow; he kept the range of keys small, beginning with G minor, which remained the main key; for the death of Our Lord, he chose B minor, the key that signified lamentation and grief; in the final dirge he darkened towards C minor; and only with the closing chorale did he bring the redemptive brightening towards E flat major. In the last two lines of the closing chorale –



*Lord Jesus Christ, O hear me,  
I shall praise you endlessly!*

– in these lines he accommodated his avowal, the humble and at the same time joyful confession of his return and his reversal, the signature of the transformed Bach. To the words ‘Hear me’ in the fourth- and fifth-to-last bar, he wrote, in the bass voice, the notes

H-C-A-B.\*

*Bach cannot present his Passion in Calvinist Köthen, where cantatas and passions are frowned upon. Not until 1724 is it finally performed in Leipzig, where Bach has been Cantor at St Thomas’s since 1723.*

*Three years later the St Matthew Passion is also performed.*

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\* Translator’s Note. Unlike the letters of English musical notation, which go from ‘A’ to ‘G’, the German system also uses the letter ‘H’. ‘B major’ and ‘B minor’ translate as ‘H-Dur’ and ‘h-Moll’; the German ‘B’ is used only for ‘B flat’.

## 48. The St Matthew Passion

GOOD FRIDAY, 11 April 1727. St Thomas's Church was packed with the faithful of all social classes. The notables of the city were sitting in their ancestral pews; the common people had to stand, stepping from one foot to the other because it was still so cold in the church, cold as only spring can be. It was in the afternoon's service of vespers. [. . .]

This time – though they didn't know it yet, these people who blew their misty breath into the cold air of the church and pulled their coats tighter to them – this time, it would touch their hearts far more than two years before. In the St John Passion, Jesus was the lord and ruler, who, right from the beginning, endures the Passion as a luminous hero, as if immune to any earthly harm – no accusation, mockery, humiliation, or pain. This time, Christ was the Mystic Lamb that was sacrificed for us, for our sins, and they would all weep for him; for him, and for their own poor souls.

[. . .]

THERE WAS NO APPLAUSE at the end; that was not the custom in a church service. Some walked up to Bach with tears in their eyes and silently pressed his hand. The parents and friends of those who had taken part waited for them to pack up their music sheets and instruments and got ready to leave; they, too, had red-rimmed eyes; but now they were laughing – relieved, delivered. There were of course critical voices as well, especially among the notables. 'Too operatic,' said some; 'Too long,' said others, 'too dissonant.' The phrase 'Strange tones', familiar to him from Arnstadt, hit his ears again. He paid them no mind. He wandered around, congratulated the students, praised the soloists and instrumentalists;

embraced Friedemann and Philipp Emanuel, who had done a good job; distributed a good deal of praise, which had not always been his way. When he finally turned around to look for Anna Magdalena, he was greatly astonished to recognize somebody he had absolutely not expected to see.

‘You? Here?’

‘Couldn’t miss out on the grand opera, could I?’

‘I hope it didn’t bore the unbeliever,’ said Bach.

‘Not at all,’ replied Erdmann. ‘To be honest, it touched my heart. A man could almost be converted by hearing something like that. But converted to what? To the word of God? Or to the music of Bach? Anyway, I’ve never heard anything quite as moving as this. Not even in London, at the opera.’

‘I wonder if that’s much of a compliment,’ said Bach.

‘The greatest there is,’ said Erdmann. ‘And, incidentally, I seem to recognize one particular aria. The one about love, farewell and rowing away?’

‘*I will give my heart to thee*,’ Bach said with a smile. ‘Henrici rewrote it a little for me. But it’s the same melody.’

‘And I noticed something else,’ said Erdmann. ‘There were a few unusual keys, if I did not mishear. Maybe even an F sharp major?’

‘*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani*,’ said Bach. ‘That’s where it went down to B flat minor. And with the words *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me*? even down to E flat minor. You can’t get any lower in the circle of fifths.’

‘I admire your daring.’

‘I wouldn’t have got this far without *The Well-Tempered Clavier*,’ said Bach. ‘Or, as you called it, the work of the Devil.’

‘Those weren’t my words,’ said Erdmann. ‘You know I don’t believe in the fellow. But . . . if he had made a contribution to create such a divine work as your St Matthew Passion, I might be persuaded to give the subject some further thought.’

Anna Magdalena joined them, greeted Erdmann, and announced that she was going home with the children. 'You will probably go to the Boses? I heard you can get something to eat there.'

'I'm expected there,' Bach said. Then, turning to Erdmann, 'Will you come?'

'Gladly,' said Erdmann. 'I'm starving. Right now, I could eat a whole lamb.'

Bach raised his eyebrows and shot him a look from under them.

'Repeat, "Could",' said Erdmann with an apologetic gesture. 'I know, today is the day on which the lambs are spared.'

'Except the Lamb of God,' said Bach.

'Yes, except that one.'

They walked outside, then crossed the road to the house of the Bose family. The well-paved street was brightly lit. There were advantages to this, of course, even if the artificial light of the lanterns did make the stars in the night sky seem to fade.