

Bach and the Erotics of Spring

by David Yearsley via shirl - Counterpunch *Monday, Mar 26 2018, 2:08am*
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Johann Sebastian Bach's birthday, March 21st, falls on the first full day of spring, if one calculates that date by mercilessly quartering the calendar. The coincidence is a fitting one: if ever there were a composer who enacted the regeneration of the season, it is Bach.

Few monogamists have been as genetically reproductive as he, and none more musically productive. In addition to fathering twenty children, he brought into the world more than a thousand works (some of them massive things like the Art of Fugue and St. Matthew Passion) with hundreds presumed lost. Many commentators—men all of them—have posited links between Bach's potency with pen and paper and his potency when he laid them down and blew out the candles (or not ...): creativity at the organ bench and the composer's desk is, in these accounts, the bedfellow of procreativity. These writers talk abstractly about artistic will, but say nothing about the urges and activities that the renewal of spring encourages.

Even though fully aware of Bach's human and artistic output, a musician as perceptive as Jeremy Denk can claim, in an article in the New Republic from 2012, that the "two things missing in Bach's music are randomness and sex." Given the just-mentioned Bachian yield, this wrong-headed statement must be chalked up to the dominant image of the composer and his music as unyieldingly serious.

Denk apparently doesn't know Bach's Quodlibet, a piece of musical nonsense concocted by the twenty-two-year old composer and presumably put on at a family wedding (perhaps his own). The piece is full of off-color puns and ill-concealed innuendo—keys going into locks, swords into sheaths (Scheide also being the word for vagina in German) big keys), and big donkeys with big dicks. (The English subtitles of the YouTube performance are too decorous.)

At their reunions the members of the huge Bach clan improvised unbuttoned fun of this sort, though Bach's first biographer assures us that they indulged in such revels only after proving their piety by belting out a couple of Lutheran hymns. The motions of godliness thus gone through, they promptly cracked open the kegs (also referred to the in Quodlibet) and cut loose.

Even the beloved musical Notebook of Anna Magdalena Bach begun in 1725 includes a nuptial poem that, though shorter than the Quodlibet, is equally, and unrepentantly, as off-color. These bawdy verses come directly after a devout chorale about looming eternity.

Anna Magdalena was Johann Sebastian's second wife, a twenty-year-old star singer hired by him at the central German court of Cöthen where he was music director. They married within the year, the groom sixteen years older than the bride, who was closer in age to her new stepdaughter than she was to her new husband.

Short and easy pieces from her Notebook are played by millions of beginning piano students around the world. Since the revival of interest in Anna Magdalena Bach more than a century ago she has been canonized as the perfect musical mother. Little wonder then that many editors of her Notebook

have suppressed the dirty poem in her hand. (All this and much more is investigated in my forthcoming book *Sex, Death, and Minuets: Anna Magdalena Bach and her Musical Notebooks*, due before Bach's next birthday from University of Chicago Press.)

The Bachian fascination with sex cannot be cordoned off in the *Quodlibet*. Many of the composer's works are animated by a kindred—if less ribald—eroticism.

Consider anew Johann Sebastian's most celebrated and oft-performed wedding cantata, *Weichet nur, betrübte Schatten* (Be gone, mournful shadows). The piece appears to stem from the composer's Weimar years, perhaps five years before his marriage to Anna Magdalena. The autograph is lost, but a copy made sometime around 1730 suggests its continued use by the Bachs. Anna Magdalena might well have sung it at weddings in Cöthen or Leipzig—even for her own on December 3rd, 1721, or a week later at the marriage celebration of the pair's mutual employer Prince Leopold. There would have been many further occasions for its performance over the next three decades. Likely written by the Weimar court poet Salomon Franck, the text of *Weichet nur betrübte Schatten* extols the joys of love brought on by spring and its symbol, Flora. Five arias interleaved with recitatives make for a demanding nine movement cantata of some twenty minutes, the radiantly expressive and often flamboyantly virtuosic soprano line accompanied by varied combinations of instruments: strings, continuo, and oboe.

In the opening Adagio, string patterns drift upwards above an ascending bass line interspersed with long rests. The first harmony projects a sense of change already underway: the aria is poised on the cusp of the next season. Above this fragile musical landscape an oboe solo, more hopeful than mournful, entwines around a mostly sinuous, but sometimes jagged, soprano line darkened by minor inflections: "Yield you troubled shadows, / Frost and Wind, go to your rest!" The clouds and cold heed this command as the second section breaks into a brisk Andante that quickly leaves winter behind:

Flora's pleasure
Will grant the breast
Nothing but joyful happiness
Because she brings flowers.

The gloom is gone, an eager bass line encouraging the soprano to come alive with arabesques of desire. Love is in the warming air, and cannot be contained even if hibernal conditions are recalled once more with the return of the opening section.

After a recitative forecasts the arrival of spring, the second aria, in which the soprano is accompanied by the continuo alone, bolts into a galloping bass line—Phoebus' horses racing across the sky, the sun warming the earth. The charioteer is likened to a "courting lover" with the soprano spurred to excited coloratura above the beat of hooves in which can also be heard the breathless eagerness of Phoebus's desire. The third aria beats and flutters as "one heart kisses another" the soprano's amorous games with the violin ascending to the inevitable climax and release. The ebullient fourth aria in lilting triple meter hymns those who "cultivate the art of love" and "playfully indulge in caressing embraces." The final recitative pays lip service to "the bond of chaste love," but ends with hopes that nothing "disturb the amorous urges."

The closing Gavotte hurries gracefully towards the consummation, sealing the union with the traditional nuptial dance, bodies engaged in mutual movements that anticipate their coupling.

Even if there is nothing overtly vulgar here, as there is in the *Quodlibet*, the cantata embraces

spring's renewed fecundity. The pleasures of performance stoke the beckoning physical bliss of marriage. The music and poetry do not bother with matters of sin and propriety. The cantata is not only a prelude to the physical delights of married life but also an embodiment of its sensual joys.

The figure of Flora, who first brightens the muted atmosphere of the cantata's opening when she skips towards spring, is a symbol not just of the season, but of the libidinal desires that make this rebirth possible: procreation does not come from smiles and song alone.

The article on "Flora" from the sixty-four volume *Universal-Lexicon* (the largest encyclopedic project of the eighteenth century published in Leipzig during the Bachs' time there) first describes the festivities held in her honor in ancient Rome where "droves of completely naked whores, playing all kinds of games, fought as gladiators with one another, and perpetrated other debaucheries, which took place particularly at night by torchlight." The author then reminds his readers that the festivities were of two kinds: the orgy just-mentioned for the peasants and another ceremony for upper-class citizens, at which, according to the *Lexicon*, Flora "was presented as a charming lady with a wreath of beautiful flowers on her head, and wearing a dress which is likewise strewn with the most lovely, colorful flowers." In Johann Sebastian Bach's cantata, as in the Zedler article, the picture of vernal purity might chase away wintry clouds, but it cannot fully suppress the image of the naked women in mock gladiatorial combat. If we listen in the shadows and in the sunlight that follows we can hear the joys of the flesh.

It's only right, then, that we mark Johann Sebastian's 333rd birthday not with the usual seriousness and solemnity, but with the exuberance of the season: this composer and his musical wife knew not just how to make babies, but also how to sing about sex.

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