

Bach's Well Tempered Psalter
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Bach's Secret

Bach had a secret way of writing music, and shortly after surviving the attacks of September 11, 2001, I discovered what it was. He frequently used liturgical texts, and sometimes their associated Gregorian melodies, as frameworks for his instrumental pieces, the way a builder uses blueprints and scaffolding when putting up a cathedral. Today, we can work backwards, and by trial and error find the words Bach used. Once we've found the words, we can test a candidate Gregorian melody to see how things go together.

For more on Bach's relationship to 9 - 11 - 2001, see www.jsbachfoa.org for my articles on the Goldberg Variations and on the World Trade Center attack.

Latin and Music

Latin is the natural language of music for three reasons: First, it is rich in pleasant sounding syllables; Second, its accents lend themselves to settings with and without regular meter; and Third, it comes with a huge library of music and words which make excellent templates for new compositions. In simple terms, Latin sounds good when it's sung and there's lots of it out there just waiting to be used. (I originally said "just begging", which is a good expression until I realized that Latin should never beg - never. Shame on me.)

We take for granted the Latin settings of the B Minor Mass and the Magnificat, but Bach also relied heavily, although not exclusively, on Latin texts as inspiration for his instrumental music. Many of his best known keyboard works, both for Harpsichord and Organ, are based on prayers from the old Mass, passages from the Bible (especially the Psalms), and the great chants and hymns of the medieval Church.

In fact, these are some of the most beautiful and durable works known to man, and it shouldn't surprise us that Bach's music absorbed both their beauty and their endurance. Composers were always on the lookout for a good librettist, and Bach found the best of them all.

Program Music

His keyboard works, especially the Inventions and the Well Tempered Clavier, are often thought to be "pure" music, without special effects like gunfire or the sound of swarming fleas. This view is wrong, if you know where to look. Here are a few of examples.

Joy - 2 Part Invention Number 5, E Flat. See how joyful it when two brothers get along.

Tolling of a Funeral Bell - Prelude 2 in C Minor from Book 1. I played a lot of funerals, and I've Heard the Bell Toll. For a while the bell button was on the organ console and the sexton would come up to the choir loft, reach over me, and push it. Bach used the same effect in the G Minor Prelude from the Eight Little Preludes and Fugues. The clue is in the accompanying (WTC)

fugue, which fits the words of "Laudate Pueri Dominum". This Psalm used to be sung during the funeral procession, while bringing the body to the church.

Flowing Water - 3 Part Invention Number 2, C Minor, "The Lord is My Shepherd". The Latin says aquam refectionis, or refreshing water (in the sense of water which restores or repairs). The strings of sixteenth notes and trills (beginning in measure 5) sound watery to me, maybe because I've heard so many others use the same idea (with flutes) to depict streams.

Bad Things are Coming - Prelude 20 in A Minor from Book 1. The Prelude is exactly that. The Fugue is "In Exitu Israel" which describes the Israelites' flight out of Egypt, including the parting of the Red Sea. If you don't want to read the psalm, you can watch the movie.

There are more examples, and I've pointed them out in my comments on specific pieces.

The Psalms

Bach changed my attitude about the Psalms. I had listened to snippets of them in Church, but they didn't capture my interest until I had to read them in Latin. Then I found out how much I had missed.

I learned Latin in a Jesuit high school, and the Jesuits taught me well. Even so, I never guessed how much pleasure Latin would give me later in life. Looking back, I've wondered why they didn't teach us from the Vulgate, with the classics as supplements. Now I think I know. The Psalms are earthy. For example, Psalm 126 speaks to the ages and might explain why Bach had so many children. "Beatus vir qui implevit etc." I'll leave this one to you. It's time to get your feet wet, anyway.

When my grandfather was a boy, the mills would hang out a sign "Help Wanted - No Irish Need Apply". Unfortunately for the mill owners, who had outgrown their need for divine guidance, the Irish applied themselves very well indeed, and that was the end of the sign, the town hall, and eventually the White House.

It took me a couple of years to realize that I liked Latin. It took me a little longer to find out that I liked math, too. Mr. (later, Father) Woods S.J. gave me a 4 (out of a possible 100) on a freshman algebra test and then followed with some very good advice. The test had 25 problems, and the answers were multiple choice. A monkey could have guessed six of the answers correctly, but I only got one. "What happened?" Mr. Woods asked. I ran out of time, I said. "Oh no you didn't, you had plenty of time. I watched you. You spent the entire period staring out the window, daydreaming. You need to be careful of that. Learn to concentrate on what you're doing". And I've tried to do just that.

Which Version did Bach Use?

There are actually several versions of the Psalms and of the Vulgate. I found an excellent web article by Michael Tweedale, in which he discusses the merits and drawbacks of various editions of the Vulgate, along with his own research for his digital edition of the Clementine Vulgate

("The" Vulgate, for centuries the official Catholic Bible), which he has made available to the public. I've included the address of his site in the references.

Incidentally, different versions of the Bible number the Psalms differently. The low-numbered and the high-numbered Psalms generally are the same in the Vulgate and in the King James family, but the ones in between differ by one.

I suppose Bach relied on Luther's Hebrew based German Bible for theology, but for a lot of his music, he used Latin.

I'm reasonably sure Bach used both Latin services (the equivalent of the Liber Usualis in whatever form he had available) and the Vulgate itself. The Vulgate was authorized by Pope Clement VIII and dates back to the Council of Trent in the late Fifteen Hundreds. This was more or less the official Latin Bible of the Catholic Church until the Twentieth Century. The more or less part applies especially to the Psalms. At least two official versions of the Psalms, both edited by Jerome, were used in Bach's time, and Bach used both. The older of the two is known as the Roman Psalter. The somewhat newer is called the Gallican Psalter. Many of the Psalms are the same, except for a few words here and there.

My own copy of the Vulgate contains two versions of the Psalms, the original Gallican, and a revised set introduced by the Vatican in the early 1900's. This urge to tamper with perfection led to one more instance of art imitating life, as it seems to have given Hollywood the idea of recycling classic films. I received this insight while watching a remake of *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Some of the religious orders had their own preference for which Psalm texts they used, mixing and matching. Bach learned his Latin and his Psalms as a boy, singing at services. My *Liber Usualis*, published in 1953, refers to Benedictine traditions which I suspect go back at least a few hundred years, which would put us in Bach's time. I'd seek out a helpful Benedictine for guidance, but I don't want to take out my reference to the Jesuits. Oy vay.

The *Liber* has most of the Psalms (including accent marks), and while many of them agree word for word with the Psalms of the Vulgate, there are some significant differences.

For example, Psalm 94 (*Venite Exultemus Domino*) caused me all sorts of trouble. I recognized very early that this magnificent Psalm is the foundation of the great organ fugue in G Major (BWV 541) but I couldn't keep the notes and text together - at an early point, the music simply rejected the words. I finally stumbled on the solution. First, the version Bach used is not from the Vulgate, it's from the Roman Psalter, and the words are slightly different. Second, and more importantly, he took the Psalm from the Matins service on Pentecost (Whit Sunday) where the choir several times intersperses an Invitatory (*Alleluia Spiritus Domini replevit orbem terrarum: venite adoremus alleluia*) and then the opening lines of the Psalm. All of a sudden, the words fit the music perfectly.

Most of Bach's fugues end with a *Gloria Patri*, implying that he did not always take words directly from the Bible, but instead duplicated the way the Psalms were traditionally sung in service. The *Gloria Patri* is the most common add on, sometimes yielding that honor to the

Requiem Aeternam. It's no surprise that most of Bach's fugues end with what sounds like an Amen. So does the Gloria Patri.

Warning

Be careful if you decide to read the Psalms in Latin - their words and imagery are addictive, and you could find yourself quoting them inadvertently. No one will understand you, and you might be thought a little odd. This is an occupational risk for any reader, but Latin makes it worse.

Medieval scholars incorporated so much scripture into their own writings that "their work dripped with references from the Psalms", according to someone whose name I don't remember. Even I, who am only half medieval (on my mother's side), can't look up at the night sky without thinking *Quoniam videbo caelos tuos ... For I will look up at your heavens, from Psalm 8.*

English Translation

The Douay Rheims Bible, edited by Bishop Challoner in the mid 1700's, is as accurate a translation as any. I've used Challoner extensively in this work, but in a few places the translations are my own, and should be taken with a grain of salt, as they say in English.

One interesting result of doing my own translations is that I re-discovered a few characteristics of the Psalms that were lost during my own lifetime. Modern translations de-emphasize the God of the Old Testament, the God of Power and Might, in favor of a more New Testament Savior preaching mercy and kindness. Some passages have even been re-worded to remove their sharp edges, so to understand what Bach had in mind when he wrote his music, we should go directly to the source.

Here are a couple of examples of the softening that has gone on. I once heard a choir sing an arrangement of Psalm 8, in English. It happens to be one of my favorites, because of its word pictures (eg, of fish "walking" along the pathways of the sea). In the English rendition, the fish were swimming, but what really struck me was that a line was missing.

The psalm describes the cries of young infants, and calls them sounds of praise, but the missing line explains why a howling baby is such a good thing. The reason, which the Latin version makes perfectly clear, is that eventually the baby will stop crying and will grow up. Then, as a man, he will have the strength to destroy the enemy and the evil doer.

In today's liturgy, "sons" are out and "children" are in. Not so in the Latin, not so. The Psalms are bubbling over with sons, while daughters are hardly mentioned - I once did a word count and found that there are about ten sons to every daughter. The old stress was on how useful it is to have big, strapping sons who can stand with you when trouble knocks on your door.

Still, there are times when Latin needs a little help. When Rosemary and I were married, the Wedding Mass was standardized. One of the readings was a passage from Psalm 127, which in English used to go "Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine in the recesses of your home, and your

children like olive plants around your table." In Latin, it's sons, but children really is a better choice.

How to Read Latin

Writing Latin is hard, but hardly anyone wants to write it. Reading Latin can also be hard, but depending on what you want to read, it can also be very easy. Classical Latin is hard and Biblical Latin is easy.

St. Jerome wrote or edited much of The Vulgate, and he was a genius. He was fluent in Classical Latin, although in all fairness, in his day, around the late 300's, Latin wasn't nearly as Classical as it is today. Jerome deliberately wrote in a simple, direct style, and he used a relatively small, simple vocabulary. Because he was so gifted, he could share his ideas in vivid and memorable phrases. When Jerome spoke, people listened.

See my article "How to Read Biblical Latin" on the Latin Section of JSBachfoa.org website for more information and for examples.

Bach, Beethoven, and Who?

The Great Composers lived in an age when Latin was still sung, taught, and spoken. Here's an example from Paul's Second Epistle to Timothy.

I've fought the good fight, I've finished the race, I've kept the faith.

This is such a good phrase, that it has become part of our language. But this is better:

Bonum certamen certavi, cursum consummavi, fidem servavi.

The "c" of certamen and certavi sound like "ch" in church, and the "c" of cur and con like "k".

Accents: BOnum cerTAMen cerTAVi CURsum consumMAvi fiDEM (the accent normally goes on the fi, but not today) serVAVi

Repeat it out loud a few times, but stretch the cursum out a little, like "c uuuuuu rrr sum". Make each of the three phrases fill two measures each, in 4/4, for a total of six measures. Add a little "ba boom ba boom ba" after certavi to fill up the second measure.

Bonum certamen certavi
cursum consummavi
fidem servavi

Starting to sound familiar? I'd bet the farm that it meant something special to Tchaikovsky, which would be good example of robbing Paul to pay Peter.

Paul had such a way with words that people all around the world still know him, even if not professionally. I worked for a few years with a Jewish emigree from Russia, who had some fascinating stories to tell. One day, when we had a minute to talk, he was struggling to find just the right way to phrase his point. He put his head in his hand and said "Oh, what was his name? You know, the man who invented Christianity." The answer seemed so obvious, that I was struck dumb. Then he remembered "Oh yes, Pavel."

The Perils of On Line Research

One problem I've run into, is that I do most of my research while sitting at my kitchen table. This sometimes leads to information which you won't find in a good library.

Now the buck we pick was in her mouth
the tear was in her eyes
I said that I come from Dixieland
Susanah... don't break down and cry.

I downloaded that from <http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/Delta/3005/Mus155.htm> on 11/24/02, but now in 2011 the link is gone. The part about coming from Dixieland seems to have established itself, though. I just Googled the line and found several references which seem to have taken it in good faith. It's worth a few clicks just to watch knowledge wash out to sea.

For the benefit of anyone not brought up in America, the lines are from Stephen Foster's classic, Oh! Susanna. The real words are "The buckwheat cake was in her mouth, the tear was in her eye; Says I, I'm coming from the South, Susanna, don't you cry". Even now, I wonder if Foster's song didn't start out with "a" cake and "a" tear. I'd like to know and maybe some day I will, but *ars longa, vita brevis*. On that note, I've actually seen a few books with untranslated quotes, but that was years ago when giants walked the earth.

Odds and Ends

Here are a few items which I think are interesting, even if they don't really belong here.

1. Euge - Another little gem from the Psalms. This sounds like, and actually means, "well done", or, as we say today, "A okay" (the earliest known form of "OK"), and you read it here first. It's from Psalms 34, 39 and 69. I'm guessing, but it probably got introduced into our language by a teacher with a sense of humor ("Euge, Mr. Jones, Euge"), at a time when Latin was still pronounced correctly.

2. By coincidence - World Trade Center and Well Tempered Clavier share the same initials. So do Bach and Job.

Bach must have thought long and hard about Job. Archibald MacLeish named his twentieth century Job "JB", and the irony is in Bach's initials, JB, or as he might have written it, JoB. Bach and Job each lost ten children, although Bach lost his wife while Mrs. Job apparently survived.

Along with her fishwife's tongue, Mrs. J might have been sent as one of her husband's minor trials, to toughen him up for the big ones.

3. Another Coincidence - Thinking about how close I had come to being killed in the 9 - 11 attack, a phrase from Ecclesiastes popped into my mind. "I returned and saw under the sun that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all." I had originally learned this years ago, not from the Bible, but from Strunk and White's Elements of Style parody by Orwell. When I looked it up, it turned out to be Ecc. 9-11.

4. And Finally - This article has somehow changed right under my nose from an article about Bach into an article about Latin with musical examples by Bach. I've seen this phenomenon before. I was surprised to watch Bach work his way, nose first, into Schweitzer's autobiography until half of Schweitzer's book was about Bach and only half was about the author. If you believe in revenge from beyond the grave, this might be payback time.

Notes and References (including New Material)

I read a very interesting book which offers excellent insights into the problems which musically inclined Catholics encounter as the Church struggles, although that might be too strong a word, with the musical aspects of its liturgy. It's called Why Catholics Can't Sing, and it has a subtitle which is certainly accurate, but which I won't repeat here. It's by Thomas Day, and is published by Crossroad.

I've added new material to what follows, supplementing the notes in my Goldberg and Requiem prefaces.

I'm putting the following on line:

Bach's Mass in Goldberg, by Ed Kotski

Beethoven's Hidden Mass, by Ed Kotski

Bach's Requiem Mass, by Ed Kotski

Bach's Well Tempered Psalter, by Ed Kotski (You're reading the Preface to the Psalter now)

Each contains a bibliography which tends to share entries. Starting below, I'm eliminating duplicate entries unless I've made changes.

The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1914 Edition (also available on the Web). This is a superb reference. We had a full set when I was a kid, but I never thought of reading it. Rosemary bought me the CD version for my birthday a couple of years ago, and I was surprised to see how well the articles were written. It doesn't say much about Bach, presumably because of his ill-advised fling with the Lutherans, but it treats Him, however briefly, with great respect, which, I noticed, is

more than it did for Luther, whom the editors clearly disliked. Surprisingly, they portray Henry VIII almost wistfully, like a son who died too soon - before he had time to come to his senses.

Germany in Bach's day was a mish mosh of Catholic and Protestant states who were learning to live with each other. Bach was not anti-Catholic, and actually applied, and was rejected, for a Catholic position. One of his sons converted, but I don't know whether he was inspired by conviction or circumstance.

I ran across a couple of unexpected gems while reading about Germany, and I'll pass them along. First, if you're looking for a job with cachet, the position of Holy Roman Emperor is still vacant. You're not eligible unless you're already a full time King, but how much would it cost to send a resume? Second, until the end of the nineteenth century the French were official diplomatic representatives for the Vatican, and by extension, for Catholics who were traveling abroad. It's probably too late to take advantage of this, but if you get yourself into a jam and your own Embassy won't help, it might be worth giving someone a call and see what happens.

Johann Sebastian Bach - Life and Work by Martin Geck, Harcourt, 2006. A very informative book. I'm only a third of the way through it, and would like to have finished it before including it as a source, but my own work calls. A writer as good as Mr. Geck understands these things.

Johann Sebastian Bach by Philipp Spitta, English Translation by Bell and Fuller-Maitland, Dover's re-publication of the original 1889 edition. Almost the first, and still the finest. If the Good Lord's willin' and the creek don't rise, I'm going to write a little article about some of the goodies I found in Spitta.

Landowska on Music Collected, Edited, and Translated by Denise Restott, Assisted by Robert Hawkins, published by Stein and Day, New York, 1964. Contains Wanda Landowska's essays, insights, and speculations. She was right - don't double dot the subject of Fugue 1. She said so, but nobody listened.

The Liber Usualis, With Introduction and Rubrics in English, and with accent marks! Edited by the Benedictines of Solesmes, published by St. Bonaventure Publications, Great Falls, Montana, 1997. Originally published by Desclée and Co., Tournai, Belgium, 1953.

Biblia Sacra, Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam, Colunga et Turrado, Don Ramon de la Cruz, Madrid, 2002.

Michael Tweedale's Electronic Edition of the Vulgate is available on the Web (Google "biblia vulgata) or try <http://vulsearch.sourceforge.net/html/> . When I first ran into him, Michael was a young scholar in England who had already accomplished great things.

Harvard Dictionary of Music, Second Edition, Willi Apel, published by the Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. in 1972. O Lord, but Apel did good work, and I try to look something up every day, just to stay healthy. When I wanted to check the spelling of Tchaikovsky, I had to look under Nutcracker because Apel doesn't list composers by name. With

Mozart it's pronunciation. With Beethoven it's van or von. With Bach, well he's hard to play, but at least he's easy to spell.

Johann Sebastian Bach - Complete Preludes and Fugues for Organ, Dover's 1985 reproduction of the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition.

Johann Sebastian Bach - Toccatas, Fantasias, Passacaglia and Other Works for Organ, Dover's 1987 reproduction from the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition.

Oeuvres Completes pour Orgue de J. S. Bach annotees et doigtees par Marcel Dupre, published by S. Bronemann, Paris, in 1941.

Dictionary of Ecclesiastical Latin, Leo F. Stelten, published by Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., Peabody, Mass., in 1995. An excellent dictionary.

Reading Medieval Latin, Keith Sidwell, Cambridge University Press, 1956. When you get to the point where you can translate a Psalm, and you start to feel the thrill of accomplishment, take a quick look at Sidwell's book and see how the pros do it.

Latin Resources on the Web - The University of Notre Dame has a very helpful site, named "Latin Dictionary and Grammar Aid". It contains several good links, one of which, "William Whitaker's Words", I found particularly useful. To find them, use Google.

My sister Kathleen Canning taught Latin for many years, and now shares some of her methods on the Latin page of jsbachfoa.org including her system for color coding.

I had, until she died in 2009, an additional reference in my wife Rosemary, who had a keener eye for a misspelled word than anyone I've ever known. She pointed out that I had gotten JS Bach's name wrong (Johann has two, not one, n's) on the cover of my "Bach's Mass in Goldberg", but not, unfortunately, before it ended up in the Library of Congress. Not learning from my mistake, I've again made a few changes after she looked this manuscript over, and any strange looking words which remain are my doing, not hers.

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2. The relationship between Bach's Music and the attacks
3. Examples of Bach's keyboard music, as he heard it
4. Sheet Music

Beethoven, too (What's he doing here?)

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