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Can Bach Give Voice to the Silent Faith of Japan's Hidden Christians?

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I remember my own awakening to Bach's music somewhere around 1999, while a student at Luther Seminary. I was studying Luther, so, I figured, why not listen to Lutheran music? My collection began with Karl Richter's weighty 1961 Deutsche Grammophon recording of "Wachet auf" (BWV 140) and the "Magnificat" (BWV 243), which I played constantly. Soon eager for more, on a friend's recommendation I found the more vulnerable, historically informed Bach *Passions* recorded by John Eliot Gardiner; then came the *Christmas Oratorio* (BWV 248) by Harnoncourt and Leonhardt (with the airy voices of a boys' choir), followed by ever more from Helmut Rilling, Tom Koopman, and still others. The sonic variety of these recordings is astounding, powerfully showing that we can only know "Bach" as interpreted by living musicians.[1]

While in the midst of this nascent collecting, I attended a lecture by renowned Bach scholar Robin Leaver, sponsored by *Lutheran Quarterly* and held at the University of Minnesota. I cannot recall which cantatas Leaver exposited, but I do remember distinctly that he used and highly recommended the recent

[1] This article would not have been possible without the tremendous assistance of my colleague in the Japan Lutheran Bach Research Society, Takumi Kato, whose conversation and recommendations gave rise to the basic structure of this paper and much of its content.

For centuries, the liturgical music of J. S. Bach has inspired the faith of millions of Western Christians. The music of Bach has taken hold among many Japanese as well, but it is yet to be seen whether this fascination can be translated into an entry for some into the Christian faith.

interpretations of Masaaki Suzuki. For five years already, Suzuki had been working through Bach's cantata repertoire, producing with his Bach Collegium Japan recordings and performances notable not only for their authenticity, but for the richness with which they inhabited Bach's pious texts.[2] The venerable *Penguin Guide to Recorded Classical Music* now has this to say: "Although the excellence of rival surveys is not in doubt, this Japanese survey is the strongest and most consistent . . . an obvious first choice."[3] Leaver's recommendation went even further: Suzuki had captured the theological essence of the music.

That Suzuki had managed such a feat no longer surprises me at all. But at the time it was a shock to hear Leaver, a veteran musicologist well versed in Luther's theology, declare that the mantle of the Lutheran church's most famous artist and musical theologian now fell upon a Japanese director and his (mostly) non-Christian choir. I was not alone in my orientalist surprise. Soon afterward, perhaps inspired by Suzuki's fame, Lutheran theologian-journalist Uwe Siemon-Netto wrote a series of articles pointing to Bach's role as the (Lutheran) evangelist of Japan.[4]

There may be something subterranean about Japan's affinity for Bach. Along with their highly successful sixteenth-century mission, the Jesuits brought with them Gregorian chant, along with a few pipe organs, to a surprisingly large swath of the Japanese public.[5] Local craftsmen were intrigued enough—and sufficiently skilled—to make their own fair copies of the European instruments out of bamboo, a feat re-created in 2010 by ancient-music craftsman Taruki Hirayama at the old Jesuit college museum on Amakusa Island.[6] Christianity and its accoutrements were brutally suppressed throughout the subsequent Edo era, but church music, like Christians themselves, lived a "hidden" life, leaving a sonic signature upon the most traditional of repertoires, the koto music called "rokudan." Rikkyo (Anglican) University professor of medieval and Renaissance musicology Tatsuo Minagawa first noticed the uncanny resemblance while studying monastic prayer tones. He then launched a close collaboration with professor and director of Kyoto's Japanese Traditional Music Research Center, Satoko Kubota. They presented and recorded their historical findings at a series of lecture/concerts in 2010, producing a CD from the project and going on to perform in several venues in Rome in 2012 as participants in the International Musicological Society Congress.[7]

[2] Barney Sherman, "How Japan Became a World Capital of Bach: Some Musings on Masaaki [Suzuki]," Iowa Public Radio, October 3, 2016, accessed February 4, 2022, https://www.iowapublicradio.org/show/sunday-baroque/2016-10-03/how-japan-became-a-world-capital-of-bach-some-musings-on-masaaki.

[3] Ivan March, Edward Greenfield, and Robert Layton, *Penguin Guide to Recorded Classical Music*, rev. (New York: Penguin, 2009), 1602.

[4] Uwe Siemon-Netto, "J. S. Bach in Japan," *First Things*, June 2000, among others.

[5] Nami Takei, *Nanban ongaku sono hikari to kage, Zabieru ga tsutaeta inorinouta* [Nanban Music Its Light and Shadow: Xavier's Song of Prayer] [in Japanese] (Tokyo: Ongaku no tomo sha, 1995), 54–57.

[6] Teruaki Hirayama, "Tengusa koreshiyo kanzo take paipuorugan 16 seikimatsu Amakusa Shikite tsukura reta orukan no fukugen [Amakusa college museum reconstruction bamboo organ made at the end of the 16th century]," Amakusa College Hall, March 2010.

[7] Tatsuo Minagawa, *Rokudan and Gregorian chant: "Credo,"* ed. Tatsuo Minagawa (Japan Traditional Cultures Foundation, 2011); "Rokudan and Gregorian Chant Credo," *International Choral Bulletin*, no. 2 (April 15, 2013).

Though these resonances may exist, there is no absolute need of this prehistory in order for Bach to be loved. Bach's music was already being performed in Japan by expatriate circles in the 1860s, and Japanese surely were in attendance.[8] The Meiji government was first interested in military music, but an agenda of public education soon followed, part of a broad, top-down program of the Ministry of Education to bring Japan up to international speed.[9] Shuji Izawa was sent abroad in the 1870s to study how American schools used music in their curricula and afterward helped lead the pedagogical movement as head of the newly established Tokyo Music School (later Tokyo School of Fine Arts, or "Gedai" for short), which was the center of Western music activities. The rapid push to implement Western musical education included lots of Bach, who from the very first Japanese scholarly publications—perhaps in imitation of European sources—was recognized as the founder of the modern German musical school, whose profoundly "structured" compositions inspired Handel, Haydn, and the entire classical tradition.[10]

Ever eager to adopt the best, the Meiji government soon imported teachers and scores, particularly from Austria and Germany, to instruct Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart. Among these were August Junker and Raphael von Koebel, who must have had something to do with sending their brilliant female graduate Noboru Koda on a six-year apprenticeship in Boston, then to Vienna. Upon return in 1896, Koda, together with her sister Sachi and pianist Tachibana Itoshige, performed one of the first known all-Japanese performances of Bach, wowing elite crowds gathered to celebrate the empress's patronage of the Tokyo School of Music with a virtuoso performance of "Ciaccone" (from BWV 1004), among other dramatic pieces.[11] Recent scholarship highlights the musical leadership of Rudolf Dittrich, who directed the first choral performances of Bach's sacred music.[12] By 1890, Dittrich's choirs had already performed the "Crucifixus" from the *B minor Mass* (BWV 232)—an ambitious attempt for the still inexperienced musicians.[13]

Despite these early efforts, Bach's instrumental keyboard and violin music remained paramount. The lack of a suitable pipe organ did not stop Akataro Shimazaki (1874–1933) from becoming Japan's first doyen of organ, playing on imported and locally manufactured harmonia, or "reed-organs," unworthy of his prowess. A proper instrument was finally inaugurated with a gala concert featuring Bach's "Prelude in D minor" (BWV 539) in 1920, but it was quickly rendered unusable

[8] Thomas A. Cressy, "The Case of Bach and Japan: Some Concepts and Their Possible Significance," *Understanding Bach*, no. 11 (2016): 143.

[9] Margaret Dorothea Mehl, "Introduction: Western Music in Japan: a Success Story?" [in English], *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 10, no. 2 (December 2013): 217; Ryuichi Higuchi, "Nihon no Bach juyo," [Bach-Rezeption in Japan] [= Meijigakuinronso, no.562], *Geijutsugaku kenkyu, Tokyo*, no. 5 (1995): 40.

[10] Nobuko Goto, "Nippon ni okeru Bach no ongaku" [Bach Reception in Japan], *Baha no subete*, 1985, 165.

[11] Goto, 160.

[12] Dittrich went on to succeed Anton Bruckner as Habsburg court organist; Dittrich's musical reminiscences of Japan heavily influenced Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Irene Suchy, "Verrsunken-und-vergessen: zwei oesterreichische Musiker in Japan vor 1945," in *Mehr als Maschinen für Musik* (Vienna: Literas Universitätsverlag, 1990), 89–121.

[13] Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi*.

by the 1923 Great Kanto Earthquake.[14] Mitsukoshi department store picked up the pipe organ baton in the 1930s, installing one in its swanky new Ginza store.[15] There, Eizaburo Kioka, Japan's first bona-fide organ virtuoso (and later Christian music pioneer), wowed noontime and radio crowds by playing through Bach's entire organ repertoire.[16]

All in all, Bach's instrumental music found a welcome home in Japan. Composer Yamada Kousaku (1886–1965) went as far as urging in a 1922 article that Bach's counterpoint be the starting point from which Japan should adopt Western music. Bach's style married the linear Japanese tradition with Western harmony not through overwhelming chords, but with subtle, interweaving polyphony, highlighting the beauty of "the line."[17]

Choral Music

In this early stage of appreciation and adoption there was little comprehension of Bach as anything but a great composer of the Western mode. That he was a church musician was known and acknowledged, but the theological content of his music remained opaque. The musical and linguistic difficulty of his choral pieces, moreover, made it difficult to gather enough sufficiently skilled and intrepid musicians and choristers together to perform them.[18] This changed in the 1930s with the arrival of the very first Victor recording of the *Saint Matthew Passion* (BWV 244). Even much abridged, the twenty-four twelve-inch 78rpm discs weighed a ton and cost a fortune, but finally, Japanese enthusiasts could hear what they had been missing.[19] Japan soon saw the first full productions of Bach's major choral works.

Naotada Yamamoto (later a convert to Catholicism) directed the *B minor Mass* in 1931,[20] and Shuichi Tsugawa (a theologically trained Christian pastor, translator of Schweitzer's Bach biography, and leading church musician) produced the *Christmas Oratorio* (BWV 248) in 1935.[21] In 1937 the *Saint Matthew Passion* was directed by Klaus Pringsheim,[22] a German Jew of an accomplished intellectual family (his twin sister married Thomas Mann) who had studied with Gustav Mahler in Vienna. Pringsheim had been appointed in 1931 "professor of composition and counterpoint,"[23] and when his planned return to Germany was

[14] Goto, "Nippon ni okeru Bach no ongaku," 161–62.

[15] Junko Uchida, "Introduction of a Pipe Organ into Nihonbashi Mitsukoshi Department Store" [in Japanese], *Bulletin of the National Museum of Japanese History* 197 (February 2016): 166.

[16] Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi*.

[17] Goto, "Nippon ni okeru Bach no ongaku," 167.

[18] Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi*.

[19] Takumi Kato, "Nihon ni okeru Bach Matai junankyoku no shoen. The first documented performance of J. S. Bachs Matthäuspassion in Japan (1937)," *Ongaku Kenkyu* 16 (2004): 1–30.

[20] Goto, "Nippon ni okeru Bach no ongaku," 164.

[21] Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi*.

[22] Kato, "Nihon ni okeru Bach Matai junankyoku no shoen. The first documented performance of J. S. Bachs Matthäuspassion in Japan (1937)."

[23] "Klaus Pringsheim Senior," Wikipedia, accessed February 4, 2022, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Klaus Pringsheim senior.

interrupted by the Nazi takeover, he remained in Tokyo. After a period in Thailand, where he went to escape pressure from the German embassy, he returned to Japan in 1942. There, in the middle of the war, in what must be one of the most remarkable and dramatic acts of courage and pluck in musical history, Pringsheim gathered up his disciples for an entire concert season, which included the first Japanese audition of the *Saint John Passion* (BWV 245).[24] In the same year, fellow German Jew Joseph Rosenstock directed a Japanese translation of the *Saint Matthew Passion*.[25] Both ended the war in forced exile and house arrest in the Japanese countryside.

These were extremely ambitious performances for the musicians of the era, not to mention the challenging conditions of wartime Tokyo. We have no record of their quality or impact, but they left behind a strong, indigenous legacy of sacred music performance. In the wake of these first recordings and performances, organist Eizaburo Kioka (mentioned above) launched his own all-Japanese Bach choir, and even attempted mid-war to found a conservatory for church music. When in 1950 the NHK (Japan National Radio) Orchestra set out to celebrate the two hundredth commemoration of Bach's death, they chose what were known as the great composer's most respected works: the Saint Matthew and Saint John passions.[41] The era of Bach's choral music in Japan had begun.

Perhaps the most remarkable early promoter of Bach's choral music was Pastor Fumio Fukatsu, a disciple of Eizaburo Kioka, for his personal use. Fukatsu had already translated the first half of Schweitzer's Bach biography when, after the war, he was offered a weekly spot on the radio. Personal ties to the newly minted Deutsche Ostasienmission had landed him with a unique collection of long-play records of Bach's church music. For several years running, Fukatsu played and commented on Bach's cantatas according to the church year.[26]

Fukatsu's engagement with Bach continued even after he moved into social work; he helped establish a home for ex-prostitutes (many of them military "comfort women"), who were made illegal overnight in 1958 and shunned by wider society. Living among this community of outcasts with a handful of deaconesses, Fukatsu continued his active campaign to translate Bach's church cantatas for communal devotion. Professor Tomoo Ishida recalls his visit to the home when he was an impressionable twenty-year-old seminarian: "It was just after Easter, so we sang *Christ lag in Todesbanden* (BWV 4) in Fukatsu's translation: 'Christ lay in Death's dark prison / It was our sin that bound Him; This day hath He arisen / And sheds new life around Him.' As we sang, one resident began to cry and eventually

[24] Takumi Kato, "Printed Booklets of Klaus Pringsheim's Bach Cycle in Tokyo, 1942– 43" [in Japanese], *Journal of Liturgical Musicology (Japan)* 10 (2010): 9–33.

[25] Kato, "Nihon ni okeru Bach Matai junankyoku no shoen. The first documented performance of J. S. Bach's Matthew's Passion in Japan (1937)," 41. Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi*.

[26] The last two years were with a different broadcaster. Deutsche Ostasienmission, "Fukatsu Fumio, ein interview," December 1999, accessed January 6, 2022, https://www.doam.org/ueber-uns/aepm/aepm-missionare-u-a/fukatsu-fumio-lebenwerk/5167-fukatsu-fumio-ein-interview.

broke down in tears. On the way home, Fukatsu explained, 'She must have felt that she had once died, and had been resurrected to gain new life.'"[27]

But this theological use and interpretation of Bach was far from universal. After Leipzig fell to communist East Germany, Japan followed the trend of empirical Bach research. Apprenticing in Germany, Ichiro Sumikura and Seiichi Tokawa contributed to the painstaking work of establishing original, authoritative manuscripts and chronologies, and in general developing a much more robust comprehension of Bach's musical setting, form, and influences. This school often preferred, however, scientific analysis of pen-ink and musical theory to theological significance. Especially on account of his later works, Bach was increasingly cast as a reluctant church musician, more of the Enlightenment than of the church.[28]

Despite these trends, Bach continued to be played and performed with great enthusiasm, to the delight and solace of the Japanese soul. Through the 1960s and 1970s there are records of amateur choral groups beginning to perform Bach. Members of the Lutheran church were not absent from what soon became a Baroque music boom. From his post as professor at the influential Tokyo Women's Christian University, Eisai (Hidetoshi) Ikemiya oversaw a veritable explosion in choral societies all over Japan, many of which were established specifically to sing Bach's passions in Japanese translation. Tokyo Lutheran member Minoru Yamada did the same from his post at Musashino Academy of Music, directing choirs to sing Bach in Japanese so that the people could understand the words.[29]

As the Japanese economy started to soar through the 1970s, the pieces were now in place for a real Bach boom. Proficient musicians and choristers were no longer hard to find; Japanese classical musicians were wowing crowds in the United States and Europe. And importantly, the public was willing to shell out real money for an authentic Western musical experience. Construction of concert halls exploded, too, each one grander than the last, many of them furnished with rafter-shaking pipe organs ready to belt out Bach.[30] Going to hear Bach performed by pipe, orchestra, and choir became a popular pastime of Japan's musically cultured elite.

Though Bach's church choral music was more popular than ever, comprehension of the theological counterpoint between text and music still remained almost entirely absent. The watershed event came in 1983, when Helmut Rilling's entire *International Bachakademie* was imported from Stuttgart to Tokyo for two weeks of masterclasses and performances. The son of a Lutheran pastor, Rilling had grown up with Luther's gospel message. His own vocation remained at his retirement in 2013 what it had been thirty years earlier in Japan: "[Bach's] cantatas

[27] Tomo Ishida, "Atarashi inochi ni kandoshita keiken: Bahha no mori no moohitotsuno rutsu: A moving experience of new life: Further roots of the Bach Grove" [in Japanese], *Baha no mori tsushin*, no. 108 (July 2010), accessed January 6, 2022, http://www.bach.or.jp/doc/backnumber/No108.html.

[28] For an introduction to this tendency, see Michael Marissen, "Bach Against Modernity," in *Rethinking Bach*, ed. Bettina Varwig (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 315–35,

[29] Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi.*

[30] For more on this, see my own forthcoming article, "Japan's Organ Boom."

and oratorios are clearly towering monuments of human intellect, but above all of divine understanding, . . . it is important to try and comprehend Bach, take up his message . . . and make it one's own. Clarifying the meaning is the most important thing for me as an interpreter of Bach."[31] Rilling's characteristic charisma and clarity about the meaning of the texts won over the Japanese crowd. A new generation of spiritual Bach enthusiasts was born.

Flush budgets of the bubble years allowed the *International Bachakademie* event to continue for three years running, gathering an entire who's who of Japan's music scene, including translator and promoter of the event Keisuke Maruyama. Of particular importance was the celebratory closing concert of the final (1985) *Bachakademie*, dedicated to the three hundredth anniversary of Bach's birth. This performance was held for the first time not in a concert hall but in the chapel of Meiji Gakuin University, a Christian institution. There, Rilling led what amounted to a chorale worship service, highlighted by Reformation cantata *Ein Feste Burg* (BWV 80), complete with liturgy and sermon.[32]

It was a revelation. Dedicated Japanese enthusiasts already knew from books and travel that Bach was a church composer, but few had fully comprehended just how embedded Bach's music was in Lutheran liturgy and theology. A number of publications about Bach's cantatas and passion music came in the aftermath. Penned by Christian and non-Christian alike, they testify to Bach's movement from the Japanese intellect into the Japanese heart.

Fortunate for posterity, also in attendance at this last *Bachakademie* was young Masaaki Suzuki, recently returned from Sweelinck in the Netherlands and a musical apprenticeship with harpsichordist and early music giant Tim Koopman. Son of a Reformed Christian and musical family, Suzuki was baptized while in kindergarten.[33] As a promising keyboardist, after graduating from Gedai he worked on his historical harpsichord and organ performance in Holland, winning several competitions. He returned to Japan in 1983 and began teaching at Shoin Women's University, an Anglican school in his hometown of Kobe. Shoin's recently completed chapel offered an ideal sonic venue for historically inspired rehearsals and performances.[34] Starting in 1990 for a festival in Osaka, Suzuki gathered his choristers together and called them the Bach Collegium Japan, with the intent of performing with fashionable period instruments and style.[35]

Suzuki's interpretations were profoundly pious, much to the surprise of Robert von Bahr, director of the Swedish BIS label, who responded at first with "uncontrollable laughter" when he received the proposal to record Suzuki's cantata

[31] "Helmuth Rilling über den Glauben bei Bach," *Christliches Medienmagazin PRO*, April 18, 2013, accessed December 14, 2021, https://youtu.be/fZ25AlrrmfE. My own translation.

[32] Kato, *Nihon-jin to Baha ongaku no deai - Nihon no baha juyoushi*.

[33] Chiho Iuchi, "Bach to Basics with Father and Son Maestros," *Japan Times*, December 4, 2019, accessed February 4, 2022, https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2019/12/04/music/bach-basics-father-son-maestros/.

[34] Masaaki Suzuki, "Aanvaardingsrede" [in English], Kampen Theological University,January 28, 2015, accessed December 4, 2021, https://vimeo.com/144893132.

[35] Iuchi, "Bach to Basics."

series.[36] "I'd always held the same stereotypes: Japanese can copy, but they can't [create] anything themselves."[37] But the letter also contained a plane ticket, and when Bahr finally heard them in Tokyo, "the sun came up."[38]

Suzuki's practices (and performances) were notably devotional. As he recounted during the acceptance of an honorary doctorate from Kampen Theological University, "A recording session with a Bach cantata is the best way to experience the words of God."[39] According to personal conversations with friends well connected in the Japanese music community, many choristers and musicians are or have become Christians. The flowering ancient-music movement had already produced accurate and superbly artistic productions from Gardiner, Herwege, Harnoncourt, Leonhardt, and others, which had replaced Rilling's "outdated" modern orchestras with smaller ensembles and period instruments, and sometimes even boy choirs. But something was missing in all this sophisticated authenticity that von Bahr found in Suzuki: a deep religiosity made all the more powerful coming from Japan. "This isn't merely music-making; what Masaaki does is [truly] worship."[40]

Among the sundry complete recordings of Bach's cantatas, Suzuki's cycle alone begins with Luther's programmatic atonement hymn, "*Christus lag in Todes Banden*." This is not only Bach's earliest vocal work; it is entirely composed from Luther's hymn of the same name. Suzuki says why very clearly: "BWV 4 indicates better than almost any other Cantata how music addresses itself not only to the senses but also to the intellect. One might describe this as the most theological of the Cantatas . . . not just the individual words, but the whole of the musical structure itself is presenting the cross."[41] Such a presentation depended, yes, on musical skill, but "what is most important in infusing a Bach cantata score with real life in performance is a deep insight into the fundamental religious message each work carries."[42]

While Western aesthetes struggle to inhabit words they can't fully believe in,[43] Suzuki seems to have taken up Rilling's exegetical mantle and "updated" it

[36] John Ibbitson, "A Bach CantataTwo Decades in the Making," *Globe and Mail*, November 8, 2013, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/a-bach-cantata-two-decades-in-the-making/article15346443/.

[37] Michael Arntz, "Der Gründer des Bach Collegiums Japan Ein bisschen 'crazy'": Die Mission des Herrn Suzuki," *Bayern Radio Klassik*, September 29, 2015, accessed January 6, 2022, https://www.br-klassik.de/aktuell/bachcollegium-japan-masaaki-suzuki-104.html. My translation.

[38] Ibbitson, "A Bach Cantata."

[39] Suzuki, "Aanvaardingsrede." For a recent treatment, see, Robin A. Leaver, "Bach's *Christ Lag in Todesbanden* (BWV 4)," in *Bach Studies: Liturgy, Hymnology, and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

[40] "Das ist eigentlich nicht Musikmachen. Für Masaaki ist das, was er macht, ein Gottesdienst." From the first CD jacket, quoted in Arntz, "Der Gründer des Bach Collegiums Japan Ein bisschen 'crazy.'"

[41] Suzuki, "Aanvaardingsrede."

[42] J. S. Bach, Masaaki Suzuki, and Bach Collegium Japan, *J. S. Bach – Cantatas, Vol. 1: BWV 4, 150, 196* [in German], 55 vols., Bach Cantatas 1 (Djursholm, Sweden: BIS, 1995), 4; cited in Kees de Ruijter, "Laudatio bij erepromotie Masaaki Suzuki: Liturgie als crossculturele kracht," Kampen Theological University, January 28, 2015, accessed December 4, 2021, https://en.tukampen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Laudatio-bijerepromotie-Masaaki-Suzuki.pdf.

[43] See Philippe Herreweghe, "Voorwoord," to Barend Schuurman, *Bach's cantates toen en nu. Toelichtingen en overwegingen bij tekst en muziek van het centrale werk van Johann Sebastian Bach* (Budel: Damon 2014),

in the ancient-music style carried out with a particular Japanese "monozukuri," or craftsmanship. The fact that the Bach Collegium Japan and its Japanese auditors must rely upon a translation actually deepens their understanding, according to Suzuki. "Indirect" is a positive trait in Japanese culture, and Bach's mysterious music combined with an "indirect" translation works its roundabout way into the Japanese heart.[44]

And so in the wake of Rilling's influence, Lutheran theology embedded in Bach's message had a brief flowering in Japan. Uwe Siemon-Netto's various articles seem to have captured this wave at its peak. But it is an emphasis that has yet to take more complete root in Japanese soil; Bach speaks aesthetically, but the message is still only faintly heard. Despite Suzuki's explicit aim, and Yoshikazu Tokuzen's assertion that "Bach is a vehicle of the Holy Spirit,"[45] most enthusiasts, even choral members who've sung through the passions and cantatas, still have but the vaguest sense of the theological and personal drama embodied in Bach's interpretations of the gospel.

That's the case in the West as well, of course. Conductor John Eliot Gardiner in his recent "portrait" has no illusions about Bach's profound religiosity, but time and again goes out of his way to distance himself from Bach's pious and conservative Lutheran orthodoxy.[46] In doing this, Gardiner repeats a seemingly endless train of researchers who have attempted to mold Bach into an enlightened proponent of "musical science" and liberal values. Such interpreters, according to Michael Marissen, end up much like the protagonists in Schweitzer's *Quest for the Historical Jesus*: "miscasting Bach in [their] own ideological image . . . in support of [their] own agendas."[47] Bach simply did not hold "enlightened" views on progress, democracy, art, reason, human achievement, tolerance, or cosmopolitanism. Marissen concludes that "there is no hint that Bach thought of himself as a secular, 'modern' artist."[48]

Listening to the Silence

It's hard to say what the legacy of that still ongoing ministry of Bach's music will be. The Bach Collegium Japan recently gave its three hundredth concert, and though Masaaki remains artistic director, his son Masato was named as chief conductor in 2019.[49] The crowds still gather, though not as densely as before. The prices for the Lenten performances of the passions, too, have dropped, apparently from $600

12. Cited in Ruijter.

[44] See Suzanne Bona and Masaaki Suzuki, "Interview with Masaaki Suzuki," April 16, 2016, accessed January 15, 2022, https://sundaybaroque.org/podcasts/msinterview.mp3, at 10:40.

[45] Uwe Siemon-Netto, "Bach's Missionary Mystery," *The Cresset* 68, Michelmas (2004): 42–43.

[46] John Eliot Gardiner, *Music in the Castle of Heaven: A Portrait of Johann Sebastian Bach* (London: Penguin, 2013).

[47] Marissen, "Bach Against Modernity," 330.

[48] Marissen, 319.

[49] Iuchi, "Bach to Basics."

in the year 2000 to more like $100 currently, and not only because of the ongoing economic stagnation. And it's no longer all Bach all the time. Recent programs have included Beethoven, Mozart, and Mendelssohn, favoring the sacred music, yes, but drifting gradually from the ensemble's original vision.

That is why I have worked with the Japan Luther Research Society, in conjunction with Japan Lutheran College and Seminary, in the past year to form a Lutheran Bach Research Society. Through publications and events, we hope to continue planting the seeds of Christ's gospel among Japan's Bach enthusiasts.

Much mission talk revolves around the charged word *indigenization* or its update, *inculturation*. Trapped in nineteenth-century nationalist frames of reference, this often means finding some authentic, foundational (and often disappearing) cultural base upon which to preach and build the gospel edifice. This ship crashes quickly on the shoals of Japan, which for 150 years has pursued a breakneck marriage of East and West. To speak the Good News to Japan, one may need not even have to learn a single kanji. It might be enough to share some Bach—by now all but indigenous—and make sure the latent message is understood.

Masaaki Suzuki certainly sees it this way. "Our cantata project has been nothing less than a divine miracle. Who would ever have imagined the works of Bach being performed and listened to so enthusiastically in Japan, a secular, non-Christian nation far removed from Bach's own nation of Germany, and a nation where no religion has ever set down firm roots. The Christian population of Japan still amounts to little more than a few percent of the total, but although there is little evidence of [mass] conversion or the construction of churches in Japan I feel sure that the message of the Bible is slowly but surely finding its way into the spirits of the Japanese people."[50]

In a 1999 interview, Bach pioneer Fumio Fukatsu reflected upon his extraordinary 1940s and 1950s "preaching" assignment of playing Bach on Japanese radio: "People don't come to church, don't hear a sermon, but they listen when this music is playing and explained. So Japan became a Bach country. It is almost a religion: Bach religion."[51]

After seventy years the question remains whether this Bach-religion will lead the way to Christ-religion.

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[50] Suzuki, "Aanvaardingsrede."

[51] "Die Leute kommen nicht in die Kirche, ho¨ren keine Predigt, aber sie ho¨ren zu wenn diese Musik la¨uft und erkl¨art wird. So wurde Japan ein Bach-Land. Es ist fast ein Aberglaube: Bach-Aberglaube." Deutsche Ostasienmission, *FUKATSU Fumio - ein interview.*