An Indigenous American Perspective on Bach Culture

Invited essay by Dr. Tara Browner



As a longtime admirer of the music of Johann Sebastian Bach, I have for some time been searching for a research niche in the arena of Bach studies. I use the term “arena” purposefully, because in the realms of Bach performance, scholarship, and organized fandom (known as “Bachfreunde” in Germany), the interpretation of every detail is highly contested. Bach is more than his music: he is an ideology (see Theodor Adorno’s 1951 essay, “Bach Defended Against His Devotees”), and for many of his followers his compositions present a complete philosophic system of balance, mysticism, and a kind of spiritual harmony.

During the course of my studies of the literature and recordings, I have found the interactions between exponents of historically informed performance, scholars, and amateur Bach “experts,” to be fascinating in and of themselves. And in the last decade, the emergence of first the World Wide Web and then YouTube has created platforms where aficionados of all types can globally present their theories and opinions to the public without any filtering process. Indeed, some of the YouTube videos are visual wonders, and reveal Bach’s secret numerologies in their graphic complexity under scrolling scores, while others are of the Gnostic variety, where the performer unveils some type of

mystical knowledge, often gained in a singular moment upon waking in the middle of the night.

After realizing that I wanted to work on the culture that surrounds Bach rather than the music itself, I had to consider what I brought to the scholarly table in terms of an intellectual toolkit, which in the case of Bach Studies are two disparate forms of innate knowledge. First, I am a Lutheran and daughter of a church musician, so Bach was the soundtrack of my childhood (insider); and second, I am a person with deep roots in Native American culture (outsider), and my experience of Bach's compositions, including the texts, emerges from a completely different sensibility than most Bach enthusiasts.

In the end, I decided to focus my study using four organizing concepts, all of which emerge from an Indigenous perspective. They are the sacred landscape of pilgrimage; places and objects of power and spiritual communion; forging a transcendent connection through claiming of Bach's name in conjunction with one's own; and seeking direction on performance questions through visions. The first two concepts are somewhat interconnected, as those who engage in the Bach pilgrimage ("Stations of Bach") generally come in contact with both sacred places and objects, including the Thomaskirche, Bach statue, Bach's grave in Leipzig, and also the 1735 crystal "Vivat J S B" goblet in Eisenach (see the photo above, courtesy of the Bach Haus, Eisenach), which is the only surviving everyday item from the Bach household. Given that the Bach Haus museum (Eisenach) is *not* the house where Bach was born, its status as a place of pilgrimage rests upon its possession of the goblet.

Native American peoples understand the power inherent in names, and claiming a personal relationship with Bach through taking his name is a strategy employed by a number of performer/scholars (for example, Cory Hall as Bach Scholar ^{tm}) and Bradley Lehman's "Bach/Lehman 1722 Temperament"). Finally, a number of performers, from Rosalyn Tureck through Cory Hall, have had performance questions answered through the means of waking up in the middle of the night with some kind of key information suddenly in their grasp, in a way analogous to a revelation during a Vision Quest.

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