

"Johann Sebastian Superstar"

How Media
Create and Consolidate
the Image of the Musical Genius



Supervisors:
Darryl Cressman
Peter Peters

Helen Piel
ID 6042160
RCA 5960
08 June 2015
6986 words

Contents

Johann Sebastian Superstar.....	2
Genius, Music and Technology.....	3
Bach on the Rise.....	5
Bach on Record.....	7
Transition to New Media.....	10
Bach Online.....	10
Bach on Trial.....	13
Conclusion.....	14
References	16

“There is one God - Bach - and Mendelssohn is his prophet.” (composer Hector Berlioz)¹

Johann Sebastian Superstar²

The Baroque composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) has had a lasting impact on Western musical culture, continuously being raised to a level transcending that of his contemporaries as well as that of his predecessors and successors. The “godfather of all music” (Garrett 2012) has written music inspired by the divine, music that is timeless, music that is metaphysical. Indeed, particularly in the public eye Bach has emerged as a musical genius *par excellence*:

although still considered human, the genius artist was not thought [...] to be confined to social, political or historical circumstances. The genius artist was judged to be so to the degree that she or he realized *universal* values or truths. [She or he] was thought to be a spontaneous creator, in a nearly divine sense (Holliday 2005, p.907, emphasis in original).

This notion of genius fully materialised during the Enlightenment and was reinforced during the Romantic period, extended to scientists like Isaac Newton and has ever since permeated the (public) understanding of exceptional artists and scientists alike.

Not that this has not been criticised. In the 1950s, Theodor W. Adorno called for a re-contextualisation of Bach and his music instead of focusing on them as timeless unchanging universals. Similarly, Susan McClary (1989) has stated that there is no “music itself” that exists independently of the composer’s circumstances; again only a contextualisation of Bach can imbue him and his opus with meaning again. But in order to understand how the attribution of genius to the Baroque composer occurred in the first place, it is necessary to understand how the music – *after* its composition – was mediated. As Nicholas Cook has pointed out, musical meaning emerges from music’s relationship to other media (Sexton 2007, p.2), which in itself questions the idea of “music itself.” These media are of different type, ranging from texts (scores, biographies, newspaper articles, critiques) since the eighteenth century to records and the radio in the twentieth century and finally the internet in the twenty-first century. Among these, the notion of Bach the musical genius is seemingly most directly perpetuated by textual media: from the first biography by Johann Nikolaus Forkel proclaiming Bach to be “the greatest orator-poet that ever addressed the world in the language of music” (1920/1802, p.152) to newspaper articles titled “Johann Sebastian Superstar” (Eckhardt 2006). Less obvious might be the perpetuation by the other, more “technological” media. However, while their mediation appears to be more indirect, this does in no way mean that it is any less powerful. It also does not mean that human mediators are

¹ BBC Radio 3, A Bach Christmas (2005). ‘A Bach from A to Z: Q is for Quotations.’

² Many thanks go to Bettina Zacher, head of music at Klassik Radio, for taking the time to answer my questions on their web channel *Pure Bach*.

any less relevant; the self-understanding of the people involved in the worlds of records and the internet plays an additional and interlinked role. Setting aside any judgment of man or work, we therefore need to ask how the construction and consolidation of Bach the musical genius has developed and is still being performed by records and online projects.

In order to find out more about the perception of Bach and the media’s construction of him as isolated musical genius, this paper will apply a combination of literature research with internet research. Both will account for presentations of Bach (and classical music more general) to an audience. Regarding the internet, particular focus lies on websites that different recording labels dedicated to the composer as well as on two specific online Bach projects. These are, first, the stream *Pure Bach* by the German radio station Klassik Radio, and second the *All of Bach* project of the Netherlands Bach Society (NBS). In addition, a semi-structured qualitative interview with Bettina Zacher, head of music at Klassik Radio, has been conducted to learn more about their web programme. Thus this paper will create a story of Bach the musical genius: following a brief overview over the concept of genius and the role of technology, Bach and early perceptions of his work will be introduced in order to see the dynamic of the application of the term “genius” to the composer. The cases of Bach on record and online make up the next part, followed by a discussion of two critical responses to the development.

Genius, Music and Technology

The notion of genius, as noted above, takes the person it is applied to out of their social, political, cultural contexts and attaches universal and timeless value to their work. The Bach interpreter Glenn Gould (1962) reflects exactly this position when he says, “Bach, you see, was music’s great non-conformist, and one of the supreme examples of that independence of artistic conscience that stands outside the collective historical process” (cited in Springer 2012). While generally still popular with the public, scholarly circles have mostly come to see the concept as a relic of Romanticism – an object of study but not useful as an explanatory tool; with social constructivism the focus has shifted to an insistence on the importance of context. One thing is very clear: “genius” is not an unproblematic concept. With so many involved and interwoven questions of what it takes to be a genius, what the difference between genius, talent and creativity is, or whether or not it can be applied only retrospectively, once a work has stood the test of time, the concept resists rigorous definition (Murray 1989, p.6).

There is an additional problem when applying the concept of genius to the arts rather than science. In the arts, the connection between the work and its originator is much stronger: “Whereas it is possible to imagine that if Einstein had not formulated the general theory of rela-

tivity someone else would have done, it is inconceivable that Beethoven’s music or Shakespeare’s poetry would have been composed if those particular individuals had not existed” (Murray 1989, p.7). What is more, as Hennion and Fauquet say,

The case of ‘great names’, such as Bach’s in music [...], is complex. They are already what they are. We cannot rewrite history in hindsight, forgetting their double nature, as though they were not both the subjects of history and the objects of our celebration (2001, p.77).

Consequently, this paper will not look at whether or not Bach *was* a musical genius or whether or not the concept of genius is of value in the analysis of Bach and his music. Instead, it will look at the question of how this image of the genius, the godfather of all music, has been created and consolidated over time in the context of the media in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In that context this paper also presupposes such a strong connection between Bach and his music that it will treat them as one unit of analysis.³ Media-wise the focus will be on records and the internet. Of course, these are not the only media dealing with Bach. Print media might be the first that come to mind: biographies, newspaper articles, critiques etc. often very directly declare their enthusiasm for Bach and his music, directly applying the term “genius” to the composer.⁴

In light of these materials, the mediation of the “Bach the genius” image via technology therefore easily slips the mind. However, it is no less powerful and possibly even more powerful because of its subtlety. Records and the internet are not neutral conduits; they frame it (Hennion 2003; Sexton 2007). It must be noted that the distinction between the technologies is at least partially artificial, and that in fact the radio is closely linked to them: records are broadcast by the radio, and the internet can combine both in the form of web radio, streaming digitised records while also offering new types of presentation of Bach and his music, like video.

During the course of this paper, it will also become clear that the different media have been and still are following similar trends in their mediation: both records and the internet have a democratising as well as a specialising effect on Bach as well as on classical music in general. On the one hand, the rise of recording technologies started the breakdown of a number of barriers between the audience and the music. As recording developed, and later the internet, earlier constraints of musical performances – such as dependence on actual physical performers in a specific place at a specific time – were removed. At the same time, the constantly growing repertoire often resulted in specialisation of presentation and taste. Providers and audiences alike began to

³ As Hennion has pointed out, “The hand is not dealt to two partners (Bach and us) but to three (Bach, us and ‘the music’), none of which can be separated from the others: Bach’s music continually changes” (Hennion 2003, p.4). This change is implicit in the creation of the image “*Bach the musical genius*” as that is also developing over time, which is why in the context of this paper it is possible to merge Bach and his music conceptually.

⁴ Interestingly, it has been argued that the prevalence of “Bach the genius” in print is at least partly a result of the *lack* of materials from Bach’s own times: “Absent greater insight into Bach’s life, scholars have tended toward romantic guesswork” (Woolfe 2013).

focus on specifics within the world of classical music: one visible trend lies in the emphasis on certain performance styles like historically informed performance practice, another can be found in the association of high quality and musical standards with specific composers.

Both of these developments contributed to the creation of Bach the musical genius. First, democratisation ensured that Bach was introduced to a wider audience, while specialisation allowed for the attention to focus on Bach and consequently enforced his special status in the world of (classical) music. While specialisation generally entered the stage after democratisation, the two then have often run parallel, in particular, as we shall see, with the move towards new media like the internet. It is necessary, however, to first turn to the early Bach reception to understand that this elevation of the composer onto the musical Olympus was by no means predictable or instantaneous.

Bach on the Rise

Johann Sebastian Bach was born in Eisenach⁵ on 21 March 1685 to Elisabeth (née Lämmerhirt) and Johann Ambrosius Bach, a town musician. As youngest of four sons in a family committed to music, music-making and instruments, he grew up being surrounded by music in his everyday life and any musical talent he showed was supported and stimulated (Bach & Agricola 1754; Siegmund-Schultze 1985, p.13ff). Biographies usually divide his life into different phases and creative periods – sometimes merging one or two, or creating more subdivisions – according to Bach’s place of living and working: his early years and travels (until 1703), the time in Arnstadt and Mühlhausen (1703-1708), followed by Weimar (1708-1717), Köthen (1717-1723) and finally Leipzig (until his death) (e.g. Siegmund-Schultze 1985, Rueger 1989, Dowley 1990). In Leipzig, he took up the post as cantor of St Thomas’s school which he occupied until his death on 28 July 1750.

In terms of musical output, Bach wrote over 1000 pieces – 1128, to be exact: cantatas, chorales, preludes, masses in addition to fragments and lost works – belonging to the Baroque period. His music has long been considered as “overwhelmingly pietistic and spiritual” and “quintessentially German”⁶ while recent scholarship has come to recognise Bach as “first and foremost a professional musician” who met deadlines and wrote and changed his works according to the wishes of “church, city council or court” (Dowley 1990, p.81f). Thus much has happened in the

⁵ Eisenach, situated in the west of modern-day Thuringia in Germany, is known for being overlooked by Wartburg Castle, where Martin Luther had lived in the 1520s and translated the New Testament into German.

⁶ Bach’s first biographer exclaimed: “This man, the greatest orator-poet that ever addressed the world in the language of music, was a German! Let Germany be proud of him! Yes, proud of him, but worthy of him too!” (Forkel & Sanford Terry 1920/1802, p.152) and in his essay “What is German?” Richard Wagner interpreted Bach as portraying the “wonderful peculiarity, strength and significance of the German spirit” (cited in Rueger 1989, p.164). NB: This and all following translations of text originally in German are my own.

scholarly perception of Bach and the notion of the musical genius has given way to that of a gifted professional. These two interpretations are visible already in the first extended biography written about Bach fifty years after his death by Johann Nikolaus Forkel:

If [Bach] was asked the secret of his mastership he would answer, ‘I was made to work; if you are equally industrious you will be equally successful,’ a remark which made no allowance for his own exceptional genius. (Forkel & Sanford Terry 1920/1802, p.106f)

It is also noteworthy, however, that Forkel at the same time clearly prefers the notion of the musical genius. He steps away from the interpretation of Bach the naturally gifted son of a musical family – which resonates with recent views, – and he does so in spite of what Bach himself and his family said of him.⁷

On a different level, the biography is both a general sign of Bach’s growing popularity with the public – moving from the more limited Bach reception as “composer for experts” (Haselböck in Ender 2006) – and a means to promote Bach and his music. After his death he had been quickly superseded by other composers in the public attention and his final move out of the shadows of history is usually said to have come with Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s 1829 performance of Bach’s *St Matthew Passion* (Siegmund-Schultze 1985, p.128; Rueger 1989, p.160f; Dowley 1990, p.81). Thus it was only over time that early obscurity and unpopularity gave way to the general elevation of Bach into the musical Olympus; after Forkel’s enthusiastic 1802 biography, the idea of the incomparable musical genius seems to have been attached quite firmly to Bach in the second half of the nineteenth century.⁸ Not so without criticism, however. In 1879, a commentator in *The Orchestra* clearly distinguished between appreciating Bach or his music and uncritically revering him as an idol of fashion:

To musicians who can understand and appreciate Bach, he is indeed a King of Men: his works speak in language little short of inspiration: they are revered because they are known, and the acquisition of such knowledge has probably been the labour and the solace of a life. How different this reverence from the adulation of the devotees of Fashion, or the worshippers of Mammon, or—worse than either—of those who sacrifice the Good and True in Art at the shrine of their own Self-importance. (‘Bach Worshippers’ 1879, p.84)

Also remarkable is the clarification that Bach’s music was a child of labour, not divine inspiration, and that indeed not all of his work is equally valuable or equally good – parts of it are “uninteresting” or show a composer “ill at ease” (p.83).

⁷ Bach’s son, Carl Philipp Emmanuel, and Johann Friedrich Agricola, a student of Bach’s, wrote a necrology about the composer stating that “[Bach] belonged to a family which was given love and skilfulness for music as a gift from nature to all its members” (Bach & Agricola 1754, p.158).

⁸ At least in Europe. The Unitarian minister and writer Henry Giles, living in America, devoted a complete chapter to music in his *Illustrations of Genius in some of its Relations to Culture and Society* (1859) – and never mentioned Bach once.

Thus Bach’s perception before the twentieth century has not been unanimously that of the musical genius. It is therefore time to turn to the record and the internet to see the increasingly uncritical understanding of Bach due to these two media.

Bach on Record

The first records of classical music were already made in the late nineteenth century, although only few survive. In the 1870s, Thomas Alva Edison was the first to “[succeed] in recording and reproducing sound” and in 1887, the possibly first classical records were made (Day 2000, p.1). In 1890, the first larger numbers of commercially issued recordings on cylinder went on sale in the United States, and in London the Gramophone Company produced classical recordings, including Bach’s “Air” (p.2f). However, as Timothy Day points out in his study *A Century of Recorded Music*, classical music recordings were generally less prominent than those of popular songs in the beginning of the twentieth century: not only was there a general lack of interest in classical music, the works were usually too long to fit the capacity of the early cylinders and discs – a capacity that was, on average, two minutes in 1900 and four and a half in the late 1920s (p.6).

Still, despite early difficulties the history of recording was infused with the sense that the technology was able to “democratise” classical music. This notion of democratisation essentially involved freeing up classical music from any previous constraints thanks to the new medium. First, the necessity of embodied performances vanished – you could simply play the record of a performance but did not need to have the actual performers and instruments while listening to the performance. Consequently, the record also freed the music from spatial and temporal limitations; if you had a record and a phonograph, you could listen anyplace and anytime. Classical music was increasingly brought into people’s homes, and over time it became increasingly cheaper too. The latter in particular allowed for an expansion of target audiences with different social and cultural backgrounds. Thus, in 1928, the *BBC Handbook* proclaimed that the BBC was “the great Democratiser of Music” and that the possibility of broadcasting recorded music was “the greatest ally that the divine Muse has ever had on earth,” bringing “good music” to “the shepherd on the downs or the lonely crofter in the farthest Hebrides... the labourer in his squalid tenement... or the lonely invalid on her monotonous couch” (cited in Day 2000, p.73).

The link between record and radio goes beyond similar aspirations to democratise classical music and beyond the latter playing the former. Essentially, research in radio technology during World War I allowed the change from acoustic to electrical recording techniques and thus the overcoming of the early technological limitations of the medium. The running time of records increased considerably and the available repertoire of classical music was not reliant on abbreviat-

ed recordings anymore (Day 2000, p.16f). Thus, by 1936, audiences could buy several complete recordings of Bach’s works. However, while these developments include the German Baroque composer in the earliest stages of recording, they cannot account for a promotion of his as a musical genius. At least in the United States, while there were indeed complete recordings of his Brandenburg Concertos and an abridged version of the *St Matthew Passion*, next to a few other works, the focus was by no means on Bach alone. Of Mozart, for instance, seven symphonies and ten piano concertos were recorded in full; so were nine of Haydn’s symphonies and all of Beethoven’s (p.63f). It was in Germany that the situation was about to change with the founding of the label Archiv Produktion in 1947.

The Archiv label initially set out to preserve the sound of early instruments and German Baroque music. It is remarkable how central the role of Bach’s music in particular was for its development, not only being the first success securing the label’s future but also later on having many recordings closely identified with it. As David Butchart summarises in his history of Archiv Produktion, Bach’s organ works – combining both the old instrument and Baroque aspect of the original programme – were the first to be recorded in the summer of 1947:

The first recordings, released on 78rpm shellac discs, were so successful with both press and public that it was decided to record the complete organ works of Bach [...]. The project, announced in the Bach anniversary year of 1950, was completed in September 1952. The recordings are still available today. (Butchart n.d., ‘Archiv Produktion – History’)

Several large-scale projects on Bach should follow (the cycle of cantatas, the first Bach Edition) and several “masterpieces,” the Passions and B minor Mass, “have been recorded by successive generations of Archiv artists” (*ibid.*) as they had become so closely connected to the label. As such, Archiv’s Bach recordings can be seen as democratising his work by preserving it and thus making it available – the recordings by different artists also allow experimentation on the listener’s side – but they also show aspects of specialisation – specialisation in music, but thus also in taste and target group. The focus on early music and highlighting of Bach takes a clear step into one direction, leaving other possibilities behind. This specialisation is foreshadowing later developments caused by the growing mass of available repertoire. As Day puts it, the budding repertoire specialised the taste of music lovers since “there is simply too much music available for anyone to develop a knowledge, let alone a love, for all” (2000, p.140). In the case of Archiv, the label was part of what led to that specialisation in taste due to its programme. Later, other labels felt the need to react to that development.

Thus the specialisation of taste, with an eye on the status of Bach, fostered EMI Classics’ (now Warner Classics) reorganisation of their labels in 1995: the company decided to classify their offer of classical music hierarchically. In consequence, they channelled people’s perception

of classical music and cemented Bach’s position on its Olympus. The new system combined full, mid- and bargain price CDs reflecting an understanding of value and quality apparently inherent in the different musical styles and projecting it onto the buying public. Most noteworthy in context of the above is that one of their four “full price” categories – the *Baroque Special* – is defined thusly: “Music from the time of J.S. Bach, his forerunners, contemporaries, and successors” (cited in Day 2000, p.135). It is hardly possible to make the description more Bach-centred and to suggest – next to his assumed marketability – his importance for not only his own epoch but also those that followed. In the sleeve to his record *Music*, violinist David Garrett has summed up this very same notion: “[Bach’s] harmonic progressions, melodies, and rhythms and orchestrations have paved the way for every other classical composer until today” (2012).⁹

In the case of both Archiv Produktion and EMI Classics we encounter the importance of the market and, indirectly, of gatekeepers to the development of the label and their respective ways of keeping Bach central to their programme. The concept of the “gatekeeper” developed in media studies with David Manning White’s study of editors and their practices in American mid-west newspapers: “Media gatekeepers, in White’s analysis, determine not only what is mediated by technological means but the *manner*, the nuances of its communication” (Barnard 1997, p.272, emphasis in original).¹⁰ For the purposes of this paper, it is possible to apply the concept more generically to the record industry (and, as we shall see, later on in relation to music on the internet) without trying to identify single gatekeepers. Thinking of the industry as a whole as the gatekeeper to Bach, their actions in and reactions to the market make clear in how far they mediate the idea of Bach’s speciality in music – next to the technological mediators of the record (and later the internet), gatekeepers are human mediators. Their choice to, again and again, centre on the Baroque composer reveres him not so much in words but in attention. Of course the addition of textual media to records – titles and descriptions, as well as reviews – often emphasise the admiration. A case in point is Deutsche Grammophon’s series website: Bach not only gets his own special treatment by being the only composer series titled “Masterworks” (the others are invariably called “editions” or “collections”, see Deutsche Grammophon – Composer Series n.d.), he also is linked to a special “About this Collection”-website that none of the other series have (Deutsche Grammophon – Bach Masterworks n.d.).

⁹ These two examples also point to the fact that a record is more than the physical disc, as it is placed in an environment of marketing and often sold together with an informative sleeve – thus textual media frequently accompany records, in their descriptions, promotion and, of course, also in published reviews and critiques.

¹⁰ A curious case in point, combining a hierarchical understanding of taste with Bach on top of the ladder and a strong sense of “gatekeeping,” is the Golden Record. Launched into space in 1977, it was “intended to communicate a story of our world to extraterrestrials” (‘What is the Golden Record?’ n.d.). One could read its message as Bach being Earth’s best musician: the record’s playlist, composed by a small committee, contains three pieces by Bach, adding up to the longest playing time while also making him the only musician represented by more than one piece (except for Beethoven, who contributed two).

Transition to New Media

It is partly as a result to market changes that in recent years record companies have occasionally seen the need of transiting to new media. Often, their choice of entry into these new media – such as digitisation, later the internet – has been Bach. This suggests that Bach is a safe bestseller instead of a shelf warmer on the one hand; on the other, his music is worth being carried over into a new world of classical records. Hänssler CLASSIC has digitised the *Hänssler Edition Bach-akademie* and put them onto Apple’s iPod Classic – creating BachPod, which won the 2008 ECHO Klassik.¹¹ The result of twenty-five years of work, the project unites 175 hours of music on one portable device which truly allows for universal access, anytime, anywhere. At €499 however, the project much more specialises than democratises Bach’s work. The target audience will almost exclusively consist of those already familiar with Bach – and possibly those particular recordings. In a similar vein, for half the price, the Teldec label (now part of Warner Classics) released their *Complete Bach Edition* on a 32GB USB flash drive in 2013, next to the complete works containing the video of a BBC video documentary, articles on Bach’s major works and background information on the edition itself: according to *Gramophone*, “A set which, like the Bible and Shakespeare, ought rightly to accompany any thinking person to a desert island” (The Complete Bach Edition 2013).

Both of these examples show a new approach to recording, eliminating the physical disc and embracing the new media. These projects are unique in the world of classical music, allowing for an even stronger specialisation of Bach. They also are a first step on the way into the world of new media that continued with the transition to the internet.

Bach Online

When the transition of classical music to the online world took place, the often curious combination of democratisation and specialisation has become even more evident, while the new technological possibilities also added new aspects to the representation of Bach (such as video). Democratisation is achieved by the constant availability of music online, often for free – Bach is universal by being even more ubiquitous, and theoretically anyone can access his music without any cultural or financial barriers (Boone 2008). More generally speaking, the decline in sales of physical music recordings has been mostly in favour of digital music and the new media (Guarini 2013). As a result, the British music commentator Norman Lebrecht has proclaimed classical music recording dead (e.g. 2007). The internet, it seems, is the new place to go for classical music, and several projects have taken this up.

¹¹ The ECHO Klassik is Germany’s major award for classical music.

That classical music on the internet is a sign for it being neither dead nor dying has been shown by Will Boone in his thesis *Composing Playlists, Conducting Streams: The Life of Classical Music in the Internet Age* (2008). Analysing two case studies – Pandora.com and eClassical.com, - Boone traces “the interweaving of the forces of technology, taste, and eBusiness” (p.71) in light of a “new class of listeners [that] is more willing to experiment, less interested in a sense of tradition and more interested in ‘music as music’ than in music as something that confers cultural status” (p.2). Some of the conclusions he draws are mirrored by two online Bach projects: *Pure Bach*, an online stream hosted by the German Klassik Radio, and *All of Bach*, initiated by the Netherlands Bach Society (NBS), take the Baroque composer and place him and his music into their own special space. They are prime examples of both democratisation and specialisation at the same time, democratisation being one of the main concepts employed by Boone (p.53f).

The private German radio station Klassik Radio is currently running nine web channels with different topics; *Pure Bach* is the fifth-most popular (Zacher 2015, personal communication).¹² As the name suggests, this online stream only plays music by Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach – alongside Tchaikovsky – is the most popular composer with the radio’s audience¹³ and according to Bettina Zacher, head of music, he is the “king” who set the pattern musically and compositionally for future generations and thus deserves being highlighted in such a way (*ibid.*). The music is on rotation so that, without any direct repetitions, as much as possible can be played – and with an emphasis on equal quality.

The democratising aspects are clear in the channels’ world-wide availability for free and around the clock. Klassik Radio’s target group is everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, and the station attempts to create a forum for music without pigeon-holing it. Zacher stated clearly that she avoids the term “classical music” because of its elitist connotations. She understands her role as that of someone who opens doors into the world of music by offering a large, high-quality repertoire – in the case of Bach that means that different recordings of the same pieces are played, in order that the audience can form their own opinion (Zacher 2015, personal communication). It is possible to term that attitude “gate-opener” in contrast to the analytical concept of the gatekeeper.¹⁴ The gate-opener reflects the understanding of the “Democratiser” and is thus closely linked to the ideas of the democratisation of classical music. Especially, the wish of reach-

¹² The other channels are: live radio, movie, opera, lounge, Brazil, smooth, nature, new classics and kids. The programme is set to be expanded in the future (Zacher 2015, personal communication).

¹³ Klassik Radio almost daily gets feedback from its users, either via email, weekly online questionnaires or – more indirectly – via the feedback feature accompanying the online programme. That feature takes the form of a happy smiley and a sad one. In general, the feedback given thusly is positive and matches the more direct research (Zacher 2015, personal communication).

¹⁴ Zacher used the German word “Türöffner,” which literally translates to door-opener.

ing more – and younger – people, and to introduce them to classical music is prevalent. Currently, the average age of Klassik Radio’s regular audience is 55+ (*ibid.*); the assumption that the internet can be a means to reach a different demographic is supported by studies showing that 14-29 year-old people on average make up half of the online radio audience in Germany, and 30-49 provide approximately another third (ag.ma & RMS 2013).

On the other hand, the notion of specialisation is also very obvious in playing “only Bach” music. However, the stream is not completely isolated; the web channels are all grouped on the same website, thus allowing easy switches from one to another.¹⁵ One of the big challenges is to achieve the balancing act of catering both to those who have previous knowledge of Bach and classical music and those who do not without alienating the one or the other. The challenge relates to the question of a focus on specialisation (possible for those with pre-existing knowledge) or democratisation (the wish to open up classical music and to include a wider audience). In effect the gatekeeper behind the ideal of the gate-opener is revealed: the presentation of Bach depends on editorial decisions, actions within and reactions to the market. Thus, the assumption that “the audience wants to be taken by the hand” (Zacher 2015, personal communication) is evident in considerations by the radio station to eventually have their channels presented rather than them just streaming music.

In the Netherlands, a similar Bach-focused project went online in May 2014: *All of Bach* is run by the Netherlands Bach Society (NBS). Its explicit goal is to embrace the new media and its possibilities for its democratising characteristics as a “future-proof” way of bringing Bach to the world:

In order to reach as many people as possible, we turned our eyes to the new media. ‘In this way we can involve people in the way we work and let them discover how you can make Bach sound. It’s a gift to the world. [...]’ says our artistic director Jos van Veldhoven. (Netherlands Bach Society n.d.)

In particular the option of video has been taken up; the performances are not just recorded but filmed and then uploaded onto the project’s website – a new one every Friday, in addition to background information and interviews with artists. “We try to make it as accessible as possible by avoiding specialist terms and musicological discussions [...]. We try to explain and talk about the music on a level that everyone can understand. It is all online, all for free” (NBS director Jan van den Bossche cited in Anderson 2015). Thus very similar to Klassik Radio, NBS also has a self-understanding of being gate-openers, performing Bach’s music and then sharing it with as many as possible without any impositions on the audience in the sense of paywalls or necessary previous knowledge on Bach or Baroque music.

¹⁵ The story is a different one, of course, if you use the app instead of the website.

At the same time specialisation also plays a role. As much as the target audience is the world, the focus on Bach only, with no links to other composers or contexts, makes it more likely that the website is accessed by people already familiar with Bach and actively seeking out resources that match *All of Bach*'s profile. This specialisation of classical music resources on Bach as exemplified by *All of Bach* (as well as *Pure Bach*) suggests not only that he is worth more than other composers – being worthy of such singular projects,¹⁶ – it also caters the music more exclusively to those who already know about Bach and look specifically for his opus only, in seclusion from any other music, classical or not. However, it remains to be seen in how far the internet will affect the perception of Bach and his music in the long term. As Boone points out, online companies such as the ones he studied have not “eradicated all obstacles and completely democratized classical music” (2008, p.53) but they do show that classical music is still strong. The two described projects furthermore imply that Bach is one, if not the leading figure, of classical music – they are both born from that conviction and simultaneously manifest and enforce the idea.

Bach on Trial

The interplay between democratisation and specialisation – in loose links to the gatekeepers and gate-openers of classical music – has curious effects on Bach and his image. First, the specialisation, the emphasis on his works that so often manifests itself in an isolation of Bach from other music, results in a disengagement from context. There is a sense that the world of classical music revolves around Bach, so Bach does not need any firm links to it. This idealisation echoes the “virulent attack of Bach fever” from which a “large part of the musical world [was] suffering” in the late nineteenth century (‘Bach Worshipers 1879, p.83) and has been criticised now as then. For Peter Phillips, for instance, it is “as unhealthy as it is ridiculous” to “mindlessly [idolise]” Bach as has been done with Shakespeare (2014). But criticism emerged already in the 1950s with Theodor W. Adorno: he felt the need to “defend” Bach against his “devotees” and place him back into context (Adorno 1995).

Part of what Adorno describes in his essay also clearly relates to the second identified trend in the mediation of Bach and classical music more in general: democratisation. The focus in particular is on the universal availability which, according to Adorno, deprives Bach of meaning: “his influence [...] no longer results from the musical substance of his music but rather from its style and play, from formula and symmetry, from *the mere gesture of recognition*” (p.136, emphasis added).¹⁷

¹⁶ As NBS's director van Bossche says, “There is a power in Bach that is only comparable to artists like Shakespeare and Van Gogh. People who have no knowledge of Christianity, Martin Luther or theology in the 17th and 18th centuries are still immensely attracted by it – *so it must have some universal power*” (cited in Anderson 2015, emphasis added).

¹⁷ Quite remarkably, the commentator in *The Orchestra* characterised the status of Bach's works similarly: “they are revered because they are known” (1879, p.84).

In sad consequence, Adorno feels that Bach has become “a neutralized cultural monument” (*ibid.*). Similarly, Susan McClary has written in 1989 that much contemporary musical practice and understanding of Bach have “flattened him out into pure order” (p.56), “stifling” the music (p.57); her focus strongly lies on the call for contextualising Bach and his music to counteract the romantic notion of the “music itself” that exists independently of the composer’s circumstances. Indeed, only re-contextualisation can imbue Bach and his opus with meaning again, by returning some texture to the flat and neutral image that much of the musical genius-discourse in musicology – which took place in print media – but also performance practices¹⁸ have created.

Remarkably, many of the instances discussed in the previous two sections have increasingly included contextualising materials that accompanied the records or the internet presentation of Bach and his music – both in print and as videos (for instance the BBC documentary on the flash drive storing the Teldec edition). Nonetheless, the two technologies still have the power to construct, mediate and consolidate the image of the musical genius.

Conclusion

Johann Sebastian Superstar, godfather of all music – the image of Bach the musical genius has seeped into our modern culture. It is the result of a continuous construction and consolidation that started years after the composer’s life and death, slowly emerging from a more ambiguous relationship that people had to him in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This situation strongly highlights the power technological mediation can have in the shaping of ideas, since it apparently did not follow naturally from Bach’s status during and immediately after his lifetime. Only with the development of the record and the internet, Bach – as both part of and separate to the general world of classical music – has emerged as the genius we see today. Simultaneously, Bach is carried into the world and given his very special spot on the musical Olympus.

Indeed, the democratisation and specialisation of Bach have often gone hand in hand, reflecting actions in and reactions to the market of classical music by the gatekeepers in the record industry and online world. Since the trend to specialisation has emerged, such as with Archiv Produktion in the late 1940s, it has often been running parallel to the democratising efforts. The situation is particularly noticeable with Bach on the internet: as a medium, the internet can combine almost universal availability with highly specialised projects. It has been this specific and almost paradoxical combination of democratisation and specialisation that is continually consoli-

¹⁸ A point also made by Peter Phillips (2014): “Bach is seen as superman, an *Übermensch*, whose impeccable technique delivered every time. [...] Bach is the antithesis of boom and bust. We can feel safe with him. How has this move back in time been possible? Part of it can be explained by the triumph of the early-music revolution.”

dating the image of Bach the musical genius: it has made Bach omnipresent and distanced him from other composers.

Reflective of democratisation efforts is the desire by producers and providers to be a gate-opener rather than – or at least in addition to – being a gatekeeper and to introduce as many people as possible to Bach and his music. However, this desire is often connected to specialisation questions in the difficulty of needing to achieve a balance act between people with and without any previous Bach encounters. Nonetheless, Bach has emerged as someone – or maybe the one – with musical powers worthy of special attention. It is almost a self-perpetuating image in strong connection to the market of the record and the internet: more Bach projects are viable and justifiable because of this image, but all these projects then again enforce and project the image outwards that made them possible in the first place.

Considering the developments of Bach’s music on records and online, there is also a sense that the composer’s universality and power have been achieved by his ubiquity, a situation that for critics hollowed out the idea of Bach. It might be said that this ubiquity and universality, while they did and do effect the understanding of the Baroque composer as the musical god and genius, they simultaneously deprive the concept “musical genius” of any particular meaning. At least a partial remedy to that is the increasing contextualisation of Bach or single pieces as part of some of the new projects, simplified by the possibilities of the internet and other new media. Paradoxically, the attribution of social and cultural context to Bach’s creativity should then essentially negate the original definition of genius as not to be confined to any social, political or historical circumstances.

References

- Adorno, Th. W. (1995). ‘Bach Defended Against His Devotees.’ In *Prisms* (translated by S. Weber & S. Weber) (pp.135-146). Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Anderson, A. (2015, 08 May). Netherlands Bach Society Take on All of Bach. *International Arts Manager* (online version, retrieved 14/05/2015 from <http://www.internationalartsmanager.com/2015/05/netherlands-bach-society-take-on-all-of-bach/>)
- ‘Bach: the Invention of a Musical God.’ (2000, 27 July). *The Independent* (online version, retrieved 28/04/2015 from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/bach-the-invention-of-a-musical-god-710110.html#>)
- Bach, C.P.E. & Agricola, J.F. (1754). ‘VI. Denkmal dreyer verst. Mitglieder der Societ. der mus. Wissenschaften: C. Der dritte und letzte ist der im Orgel-spielen Weltberühmte HochEdle Herr Johann Sebastian Bach.’ In Lorenz Christoph Mizler de Kolof (ed.). *Musikalische Bibliothek, oder Gründliche Nachricht nebst unpartheyischem Urtheil von alten und neuen musikalischen Schriften und Büchern. Des Vierten Bandes Erster Theil* (pp.158-176). Leipzig: Im Mizlerschen Bücher-Verlag.
- ‘Bach Worshippers’ (n.d., October 1879). *The Orchestra* 6(63), 83-84.
- Barnard, S. (1997). ‘Keepers of the Castle: Producers, Programmers and Music Selection.’ In T. O’Sullivan & Y. Jewkes (eds.). *The Media Studies Reader*. London [etc.]: Arnold.
- BBC Radio 3, A Bach Christmas (2005). ‘A Bach from A to Z: Q is for Quotations’. Retrieved 01/05/2015 from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/bach/bachatozq.shtml>
- Boone, W. (2008). *Composing Playlists, Conducting Streams: The Life of Classical Music in the Internet Age* (Master’s Thesis). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations and Theses. (UMI 1454455)
- Butchart, D. (n.d.). Archiv Produktion – History. Retrieved 14/05/2015 from <http://www.deutschegrammophon.com/de/album/archiv-produktion/history.html>
- Day, T. (2000). *A Century of Recorded Music. Listening to Musical History*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Dowley, T. (1990). *Great Composers: Bach*. London: Hamlyn.
- Eckhardt, E. (2006, 22 June). Barock: Johann Sebastian Superstar. *Die ZEIT* 26 (online version, retrieved 01/05/2015 from <http://www.zeit.de/2006/26/Bach/komplettansicht>)
- Ender, D. (2006). “Die Krönung des barocken Denkens.” Martin Haselböck interpretiert Bachs h-Moll-Messe. *Magazin der Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Wien*. (online version retrieved 07/06/2015 from https://www.musikverein.at/monatszeitung/artikel_im_pdf.php?artikel_id=708)
- Forkel, J.N. & Sanford Terry, Ch. (transl.) (1920/1802). *Johann Sebastian Bach. His Life, Art and Work. Translated from the German of Johann Nikolaus Forkel. With notes and appendices by Charles Sanford Terry, Litt.D. Cantab.* New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe.
- Garrett, D. (2012). Bach – Double Harpsichord Concerto in C Major. CD Sleeve to *Music*. Decca Records.
- Giles, H. (1859). *Illustrations of Genius in some of its Relations to Culture and Society*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields.
- Guarini, D. (2013, 09 January). Music Sales in 2012 Prove Digital is Rising, CDs are Dead and... Vinyl is Alive Once Again? *Huffington Post* (online version, retrieved 15/05/2015 from

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/09/music-sales-2012-digital-physical_n_2440380.html)

- Hennion, A. & Fauquet, J.M. (2001). Authority as Performance. The Love of Bach in Nineteenth-Century France. *Poetics* 29, 75-88.
- Hennion, A. (2003). Music and Mediation: Towards a New Sociology of Music. In M. Clayton, T. Herbert & R. Middleton (eds.). *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (pp.80-91). London: Routledge.
- Holliday, V. (2005). ‘Genius’. In M. Horowitz (ed.) *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (pp.907-909). New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons.
- Lebrecht, N. (2007). *The Life and Death of Classical Music. Featuring the 100 Best and 20 Worst Recordings Ever Made*. New York: Anchor Books.
- McClary, S. (1989). ‘The Blasphemy of Talking Politics During Bach Year.’ In R. Leppert & S. McClary (eds.). *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception* (pp.13-62). Cambridge [etc.]: Cambridge University Press.
- Murray, P. (ed.) (1989). *Genius. The History of an Idea*. Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell.
- Phillips, P. (2014, 07 June). Why It’s Good to Remember that Bach Could be a Tedious Old Windbag. *The Spectator*. (online version retrieved 07/06/2015 from <http://www.spectator.co.uk/arts/music/9224851/bach-could-be-a-tedious-old-windbag-so-dont-lets-deify-him/>)
- Rueger, Ch. (1989). *Johann Sebastian Bach*. Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer Verlag.
- Sexton, J. (ed.) (2007). *Music, Sound and Multimedia. From the Live to the Virtual*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Siegmund-Schultze, W. (1985). *Johann Sebastian Bach. Genie über den Zeiten*. München: Wilhelm Heyne Verlag.
- Springer, M. (2012, 16 October). Glenn Gould Explains the Genius of Johann Sebastian Bach (1962). *Open Culture*, retrieved 01/05/2015 from http://www.openculture.com/2012/10/glenn_gould_explains_the_genius_of_johann_sebastian_bach_1962.html
- Woolfe, Z. (2013, 06 December). Composers ‘Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven’ and ‘Richard Wagner: A Life in Music’. *The New York Times* (online version, retrieved 14/05/2015 from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/08/books/review/bach-music-in-the-castle-of-heaven-and-richard-wagner-a-life-in-music.html?_r=0)

Internet Sources

- ag.ma & RMS (2013). Altersstruktur der Nutzer von verschiedenen Formen des Webradios in Deutschland im Jahr 2013 (statistic). Retrieved 12/05/2015 from <http://de.statista.com/statistik/daten/studie/271076/umfrage/altersstruktur-der-nutzer-von-webradio-in-deutschland/>
- BachPod (n.d.). ‘About the Project.’ Retrieved 12/05/2015 from <http://www.bachpod.de/index.php?id=2815&L=2>
- Deutsche Grammophon – Composer Series (n.d.). Retrieved 07/05/2015 from http://www.deutschegrammophon.com/en/series/comp_series

Deutsche Grammophon – Bach Masterworks (n.d.). About this Collection. Retrieved 07/05/2015 from <http://www.deutschegrammophon.com/en/album/bach-masterworks/home.html>

Netherlands Bach Society, *All of Bach* – www.allofbach.com

Netherlands Bach Society (n.d.). ‘About all of Bach.’ Retrieved 15/05/2015 from <http://allofbach.com/en/about-all-of-bach/>

Klassik Radio, *Pure Bach* – <http://www.klassikradio.de/liveplayer.php?channel=purebach>

‘The Complete Bach Edition’ (2013). Retrieved 14/05/2015 from <http://www.warnerclassics.com/release/552294,0825646611270/bach-johann-sebastian-the-complete-bach-edition>

Voyager, the Interstellar Mission (n.d.). ‘What is the Golden Record?’ Retrieved 06/05/2015 from <http://voyager.jpl.nasa.gov/spacecraft/goldenrec.html>

Personal Communication

Zacher, B. (2015, 07 May). Interview with Author.

Image on Title Page

Johann Sebastian Bach [edited image]. Retrieved 16/04/2015 from <http://www.organpromotion.org/images/content/Bach/Bach-Portrt.jpg>