

What Do We Make of Bach?

This piece of music began with its title. It also began with the assumption that along with the music I would write a short book with the same title. I started them both simultaneously, and they remain closely linked in my mind, each half of the project explaining the other. I thought of the piece as freely representing musical types found in Bach, reimagined in our still new century. The score takes note of some of these as they occur: Chorale-Variations, Fantasia on “borrowed subjects” (actually Bach themes in retrograde), a pair of Cadenzas evoking Bach’s improvisational side, Canzone (an instrumental aria), Antiphon, Chorale, and Fugue.

A suggestion early in the process from Ludovic Morlot encouraged me in a direction I had begun to consider, the inclusion of an *obbligato* organ part. Perhaps the organist’s role sometimes represents a dialogue between Bach and the composer of this piece? The timbre and presence of the instrument serve as a constant reminder of the dangerous and often exhilarating suggestiveness of the piece’s title.

In many ways the book, *What Do We Make of Bach?*, is an extended comment on the piece, sharing with it a relationship to Bach’s music both obvious and oblique.

It consists of Portraits—encounters with individuals revolving around Bach’s work; Essays—experiences with institutions in which Bach was at the core, together with some thoughts about where Bach’s music could take us, now; and Program Notes—from many written over the last sixty years, a few chosen to light upon the aesthetic and social issues I feel are most important for us today.

Since few will likely avail themselves of both of these sources, much as this might be encouraged, I have taken some care to make both halves freestanding. Each plays a role in summarizing a lifetime preoccupation. I do not consider either to be in any way a Tribute or Homage. For me Bach has always been too fundamental, too elemental for that—instead it is something to use, to make something of, to add to the stream.

I would like to acknowledge the support of the commissioners of the piece—The Minnesota Orchestra, the Seattle Symphony, and Northrop at The University of Minnesota—and the organists of its first performances, my publisher Associated Music Publishers, and above all my assistant Sarah Schaffer, who achieved publication of the book, and never, in spite of the oddness of the whole venture, expressed anything but hope and curiosity about the outcome. JH