

## J.S. Bach's Innovation in Comparison to Other Composers of the Era

Yuqiao Zou

### Abstract

Johann Sebastian Bach is a name we will never feel unfamiliar with; he was a great musician and composer. He is known as the father of Western music, and his works are still widely performed, sung, and loved by music lovers worldwide. But what about Bach has made him known as the father of music? What makes him different from other composers of his time, or what makes Bach and Bach's music unique?

**Keywords:** Johann Sebastian Bach, Western music, Music, Classic music

Johann Sebastian Bach is a name we will never feel unfamiliar with; he was a great musician and composer. He is known as the father of Western music, and his works are still widely performed, sung, and loved by music lovers worldwide. But what about Bach has made him known as the father of music? What makes him different from other composers of his time, or what makes Bach and Bach's music unique?

J.S. Bach stands out so much against other baroque composers

The music of the Baroque period is doomed to be inseparable from the influence of religion, while Bach's music is deeply influenced by Martin Luther's Protestantism, so to talk about Bach's music is not only to talk about music; religion is essential. When we try to listen to Bach's music, we must experience every note with religious understanding and emotion. Bach's music is the religion of music, establishing faith in the seriousness of this art. Bach's meaning differs from his name: Bach's music is not just a "stream" but a continuous flow like the sea, bottomless.

Bach's musical works showed the sublime, solemn, pure, and simple extreme that Baroque art could express. This part of the credit is also due to Martin Luther's missionary work in Germany, and the "Lutheranism" he created has always influenced the streets of Germany. One of the greatest things Martin Luther did was to translate the Bible from Latin into German. From then on, not only the people in the church could read the Bible, but all the people had the opportunity to read the Bible for themselves.

Bach believed that music is a harmonious sound that praises God, placing God at the center of human life. His music emerged from the Lutheran hymns, specifically the chorale tunes, which the highly educated composer of the Baroque era fused with the most popular melodies of the period to explore all the potentials of the historical advancement of the art of music in its opulent content.

His compositions range from religious to secular music. His works include cantatas, passions, masses, oratorios for Christmas and Easter, and preludes to chorales. Furthermore, he produced numerous secular pieces with exceptional artistic technique and beautiful melodies, such as keyboard solos, chamber music, concertos, and orchestral works.

In addition to opera, he strove to master every aspect of the contemporary music scene. Although he did not invent any new forms, he perfected all his era's musical languages and expressions. He melds together the customs of French, Italian, and German folk music into a remarkable soundscape. The orchestral suites in the French style, the Grand Concerto, and the Concerto in the Italian style, along with the brilliance of the former and the softness of the latter, are profoundly mirrored in his compositions. The final and most accomplished master of polyphony cemented the Middle Ages and Renaissance musical traditions through his use of polyphony and descriptive styles. His fugue art and counterpoint technique were unparalleled examples that could not be surpassed. He also connected with 17th-century Italy through dramatic arias. His magnificent momentum exquisite and complex technique prepared for Beethoven and Wagner's profound and powerful art in their mature period. His attitude towards music mirrors that of Beethoven, Schumann, Wagner, and Brahms, representing the convictions of an entire generation of German musicians.

During his lifetime, Bach was solely recognized as an outstanding organist. As his reputation as a performer grew, so did controversy surrounding his compositions. He had little recognition as a composer, with few published works that were difficult to sell even after publication. Bach maintained a German style of roughness and did not fully embrace Italian music. He was relatively unknown in the music world of his time. At the time, Italian opera music's frivolous and superficial charm was

immensely popular in Germany, leaving limited room for serious artistic endeavors. In particular, after his passing, Bach was significantly neglected. Bach's polyphonic music and grand art were criticized for being pedantic and heavy in the new artistic climate of the time. During the 18th century, his four sons gained greater fame due to their delicate Rococo style, which was in line with the prevailing artistic tastes of the time. In 1801, the publication of the Equal Temperament Piano Collection marked a slight change in this situation.

However, Bach's enduring legacy in art history is a testament to his genius. Decades after his death, Bach's legacy was celebrated by his sons and pupils. The Romantic period shared a thematic connection with Bach's music, especially his chromatic harmonies, grand structures, and the emotional potency of his polyphonic compositions. Mendelssohn, Chopin, Liszt, and Schumann played key roles to varying degrees in the revival of Bach's work.

Between 1708 and 1717, Bach served as the court organist and chamber musician in Weimar, where his renown as a master organist grew. During this period, the composer produced many significant organ works with a strong theological influence. Between 1717 and 1723, he served as a musician for a prince in Köthen, who had a particular fondness for chamber music. The composer created many secular suites, concertos, sonatas, and keyboard solos during this time. From 1723 to 1750, the composer held the position of music director for the choir at St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, where he composed over 200 cantatas and large religious oratorios, as well as masses, suites, and passions.

Additionally, he composed secular music in 1730 while working as an orchestra conductor at Leipzig's "Musicians' Society." During the last five years, Bach focused on his inner life and spiritual needs, devoting himself to completing his life's work, *The Art of Music and the Art of Fugue*. Bach's work's emotional and dramatic impact continues to resonate with generations. Additionally, he composed secular music in 1730 while working as an orchestra conductor at Leipzig's "Musicians' Society." During the last five years of his life, Bach focused on his inner life and spiritual needs, devoting himself to completing his life's work, *The Art of Fugue*. Through these efforts, he made invaluable contributions to developing the art of music.

Bach's greatness is evidenced by his exceptional musical talent, professional skills, and diverse techniques. His deep thoughts and emotions expressed through his music reveal his sensitivity to harmonious forms and personal inner world. His skillful compositions are passionate and melodic, and he can create without external motivation.

It's as if a divine force propels the music with unstoppable energy.

Nevertheless, Bach's use of colorful harmonies, intricate counterpoint, and florid textures occasionally detracted from the work's overall cohesiveness, rendering it challenging for the listener to perceive its unity. There is no principle for comparing the later classical and romantic themes in the composer's music, particularly in his keyboard fugue. The fugue usually serves as a detailed retelling, explanation, and discussion of a theme, lacking dramatic effect. This makes it difficult for new music enthusiasts to appreciate the composer's skills in arranging the piece, leading them to get lost in the maze of continuous adaptations. However, Bach's brilliance lies in his skillful use of short musical motifs. He overlays them with multiple melodies, develops them, and combines them into a grand and magnificent musical universe. His compositions typically spread out from a central point and are constructed using only a few simple elements. It is amazing to see how something as small as a musical motif can grow and evolve into towering works of art, evoking a sense of infinite wonder and magic in the listener. Bach's instrumental compositions represent the culmination of the old-fashioned, polyphonic, contrapuntal style of music (applicable to his keyboard works) and the dawn of a new era of thematic, harmonic music (seen in his chamber and orchestral pieces). These compositions, alongside his Protestant vocal works, seamlessly blend humanity's reverence for God, its connection to the world, and its appreciation for life, becoming the cornerstone of classical music's initial development.

### J.S. Bach's Influence on later composers

When discussing Bach, it is important to consider his impact on the development of classical music and subsequent composers. Bach established the twelve-equal law of the keyboard instrument and the style of nearly all compositions, which became a cornerstone for future generations. His melodic structure and technique laid the foundation of classical music, and his compositions have inspired great composers like Beethoven, Mozart, and Mendelssohn. They incorporated Bach's musical language and methodology into their compositions, producing classical music.

Although Bach was known primarily as an organist after his death, many famous composers, including Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, considered his works a worthy subject. While it may be difficult to ascertain whether Mozart admired Bach as a composer, there is no doubt that Bach's music significantly influenced him. During Mozart's youth, his father often took him and his sister on tour, where Mozart would frequently play Bach's compositions. From an early age, Mozart showed significant musical

talent, likely influenced by the music he heard. Bach's work on certain pieces probably referenced Mozart while composing music as a child. Bach's polyphonic compositions profoundly impacted Mozart's music, with many of Bach's works featuring complex counterpoint techniques and intricate mathematics, such as in *The Art of the Fugue*, Bach's final composition. The term "The Art of the Fugue" was not coined by Bach himself but rather introduced by later generations. This collection is a summary of fugues and an overview of the use of polyphony techniques, highlighting a high degree of technology and artistry. Mozart's *Fantasy in C Minor*, K. 475 exhibits Bach's counterpoint undeniably influencing Mozart. The work comprises five parts, four main segments, and an epilogue. Initially, through a spectral analysis, we can observe the intricate tonality of the piece. The strong, dark tones are emphasized through the "accident," "disharmony," and "conflict" among the notes, setting a tragic tone for the entire piece. The *Fugue in C Minor* commences with a melodic theme played solo on the piano, which is subsequently imitated in different parts and registers while maintaining the contrapuntal texture. Mozart utilized various components within his fugue to portray the intricate interplay between notes, such as repetition, mutual imitation, and interpenetration. These skills are expertly exemplified in his *Fugue in C Minor*. His counterpoint technique in this piece echoes his admiration and extensive study of Bach's style. In contrast to Bach's fugue, Mozart injected more of his emotions into his composition, crafting a unique melody and harmony. *Fantasia in C Minor* displays Mozart's ability to combine skillful passages, expressive melodies, and contrapuntal techniques, all inspired by Bach's compositional style.

Even though Beethoven was born several years after Bach's death, Bach's Baroque style significantly impacted Beethoven's music. Although some may argue that Beethoven, as a leading composer of the Romantic era, should have been influenced more by classical period composers, it is worth exploring the extent to which Bach's principles influenced Beethoven's music. Beethoven's life as a composer encompasses a multitude of factors. Firstly, his creative personality and unique ideas significantly contributed to his success. Secondly, experiencing deafness, especially as a composer who relies on hearing for music creation, profoundly impacted Beethoven. Despite the devastating blow, deafness also shaped Beethoven into the resilient and determined composer we know today. Bach's hymns are known for their rich harmonies and expressive melodies, which may have influenced some of Beethoven's hymn-like passages. Beethoven incorporated similar harmonic structures and expressive qualities into his choral works, including

his most famous final movement, the *Ode to Joy* in *Symphony No. 9 in D minor*, Op. 125. *Ode to Joy* is not a ubiquitous style in Beethoven's oeuvre. Nonetheless, its overall grandeur conveys the human desire for a better life. The work impresses not only with its musical beauty but also its optimism and positive message. In the final movement, Beethoven introduces a fugue to this theme. As Beethoven demonstrated in his works, Bach's fugue is characterized by a contrapuntal style where different voices enter in sequence, with subsequent repetition and overlap, resulting in a complex contrapuntal texture. The cello and double bass play the main melody of the *Ode to Joy*, producing a rich, deep sound that evokes a deep and serene feeling. After its initial rendition, the viola repeats the melody and gradually makes its way to the alto part. The brighter timbre accentuates the theme song's melody, and the bass is relegated to the background while accompanied by the woodwind section. After the violins repeat the melody, the band takes over, followed by the brass and woodwinds playing the main melody, accompanied by other parts. The scene is grand, transitioning from calm and deep happiness in front of the crowd to a scene of jubilation. The lead's main melody of joy persists throughout. When examining the motifs of cello and double bass, their solemn and sacred style resembles the opening of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. This similarity extends beyond mere musical techniques, highlighting shared themes and emotions. While Bach undoubtedly influenced Beethoven's works, they possess a distinct uniqueness that cannot be replaced. The spirit and expressiveness of Beethoven's music will forever hold a place in the hearts of its listeners.

Bach, renowned as the "father of European music," composed the classic European oratorio, the *Matthew Passion*. "As a voluminous vocal work, it surpasses even Handel's famous *Messiah*." The piece was premiered in 1727 in Leipzig with Bach conducting. However, for a long time after its premiere, it remained virtually obscure outside of Leipzig, known only by a few music lovers. After Bach died in 1750, his works and even his name were rarely mentioned, causing "the father of European music" to disappear from people's view. Bach predicted that Mendelssohn, a composer who would emerge 100 years later, would bring Bach's name back into people's vision and introduce more individuals to the legendary works of this Baroque period composer. Mendelssohn received an excellent education due to his wealthy family background. At age 14, his grandmother, Bella Solomon, gifted him the manuscript of the *Passion of Matthew*, which sparked his excitement. Mendelssohn frequently performed Bach's works in concerts and shared stories about him, demonstrating his passion for the composer.

Sharing the admiration for Bach's exceptional musical accomplishments with people worldwide resulted in an extensive resurgence of his works throughout Germany and other parts of Europe. In addition, Mendelssohn established a choir to analyze Bach's choral compositions, and in 1829, conducted the first public performance of Bach's Matthew Passion since the composer's passing in Berlin. Mendelssohn's performance reintroduced audiences to Bach's masterpieces, promoting the revival of Baroque music. The rediscovery of Bach was Mendelssohn's great contribution to the world. Throughout his short career, Mendelssohn was fascinated by Bach's personality, spending ample time studying the composer's organ music, form, and composing techniques. There are instances within Mendelssohn's fugue where the authorship could be mistaken for Bach's style, even by the most knowledgeable editor. However, discernible through the stability and delicacy of the fugues, they can be identified as modern-age works containing elements unique to Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn produced the Six Preludes and Fugues (OP.35) over nearly a decade.

The structure and form of Mendelssohn's Prelude in D Major exhibit exquisite and concise craftsmanship reminiscent of a song without lyrics. The main melody comprises most of the composition and echoes the Romantic era. The main melody comprises most of the

composition and echoes the Romantic era. The main melody comprises most of the composition and echoes the Romantic era. The right-hand melodies pattern consists of short lines and short hops. There is a clear contrast between them. Mendelssohn's work shows some subtle changes that reveal his inner emotions. This suggests that Mendelssohn is an emotionally delicate musician. For instance, measures 43-45 feature a solo section in the right hand that exhibits a romantic musical quality and abundant vibrant tones while the accompanying vocal part remains fully subdued. This juxtaposition helps highlight the right hand's melody and produce a concluding effect. Such a passage may be described as imbued with rich colors, thus elevating the character of the intro. Mendelssohn's Prelude and Fugue in D Major demonstrate both the traditional techniques of Bach's fugue and the distinct characteristics of the romantic era. Bach's musical compositions hold immense artistic and historical value and have strongly influenced the evolution of music in succeeding eras. Bach's musical compositions hold immense artistic and historical value and have strongly influenced the evolution of music in succeeding eras. Widely recognized and acclaimed across music, literature, art, and philosophy, they remain a crucial element of cultural heritage and continue to garner significant admiration and reverence.