

What is Truth?

The Relationship between J.S. Bach and Arvo Pärt Considered from their Respective Versions of the Johannes-Passion

Ming Wilson

In a Tortoiseshell: *This excerpt exemplifies a successful attempt to find an appropriate language to **analyze a medium** that might at first seem resistant to description — **music**. The author is able to justify his unusual method, describe and problematize the melodic lines of two very different pieces of music, and use that analysis to argue about the pieces' respective influences.*

Excerpt

Before embarking on the exploration, by way of disclosure, I must confess the meager means utilized in this paper. The sources upon which I carry out my analysis include only the CD recording of each Passion, translations of the texts from their respective Latin and German into English,¹ and two academic studies, each focusing on one respective composer's relationship between his faith and music.² No score was consulted, and though this may at first seem like a setback, the limitation in fact allows my judgment of these two pieces to be even more honest. Indeed, the quality of the final sound holds more relevance to my analysis than any potential similarities on score paper. As such, all mentions of pitch value, harmony, and instrumentation given below—while correct—were determined through the aid of a keyboard and the human ear. Finally, while the task of comparing any two musical works always risks subjectivity and the evaluation of non-equals, this paper focuses primarily on the treatment of a word or moment in the text. Thankfully, the unadorned Gospel of John text tethers the two composers, becoming the standard for comparison between the two works.

To uncover underlying links within the two musical landscapes, one must first account for the overt and subtle musical and theological differences. Put another way, one must first peel away the layers grounded in temporal culture in order to uncover a comparable core.

We begin with the surface layer—categories both obvious and permanent throughout the whole piece. In the case of these two pieces, the respective openings give enough to signal their unique qualities. Bach's choral introduction begins with a locomotive of oscillating neighboring tones played by lower strings while winds in the treble mourn dove-like through long

¹Academy of Ancient Music, Richard Egarr, and Choir of the AAM, *JS Bach: St John Passion*, Academy of Ancient Music AAM002, 2014, Compact Disc; Candomino Choir, Tauno Satomaa, *Arvo Pärt: Johannes-Passion*.

² Bouteneff, *Out of Silence*; Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Bach Among the Theologians*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

suspensions; heart-wrenching anguish suspends itself over anticipation. Meanwhile, in Pärt's *Passio* the choir and organ blast a full A minor chord from on high before members descend the stark scale, slowly, and stepwise, arriving at a penultimate B, while other musicians sustain an A minor triad. By pausing before the resolution, Pärt's introduction, in a declarative fashion, informs the attentive listener that he/she will witness the crucial penultimate moment of Jesus' earthly mission, a moment very close to its ominous ending.³ Immediate differences in timbre, range, and tone plainly present themselves, and in fact, these unique qualities remain constant as each piece progresses. The locomotive suspense of Bach contrasts with Pärt's stark declaration. At the same time, however, if one zooms out from the method employed by each composer, both works establish similar themes of grim suspense.

Of course, the presence of common themes alone does not demonstrate Pärt's explicit reliance on Bach. Even as one may note similarities between Bach's and Pärt's versions, how can one distinguish between the categories unique to Bach and those simply belonging to a common Passion structure? Surely all Passions of Christ, even those not based on John's Gospel, must convey some amount of pathos. Therefore, touching on the same theme does not necessarily constitute a significant connection. There must exist something more.

[...]

Admittedly, this paper does not simply seek to analyze the two musical works for their own sake alone. Rather, it uses the two Johannes-Passions to explore a larger point: that of reviving a sacred text for a contemporary audience. We should not view Bach's Passion and Pärt's Passion as two works from two different people from two different cultures. Rather, view them as successive relays following a common witness to a historical event.

³At the time of writing, I had believed the description of Pärt's introduction was largely my own analysis, but as I re-read Bouteneff's description on pg. 193, I recall its influence. However, I also believe Pärt's introduction resonates universally, such that its makeup and message are easily discernible by any listener.

Author Commentary

Ming Wilson

I was being dragged out of the Princeton Record Exchange by my good friend as he chided me for my tardiness to my own birthday celebration when my eyes landed on *Passio* by Arvo Pärt. Call it Divine Providence—certainly to edify my soul, but perhaps also to spark the idea for my Junior Paper. Indeed, having decided early on to devote the paper to the analysis of Bach's *St. John Passion*, I did not even consider comparing it against another work. Few come close to par.

However, since both works base themselves on the same text, a rare opportunity appeared for musical comparison. The business of analyzing music is notoriously fickle. As a result, I also tethered my arguments to the common anchor that holds the two pieces together. The paper, resting on the shared Christian faith of both composers, remains free of the charge that an apple and an orange are being compared. In fact, the very opposite is true, since both composers hold to their orthodoxy dearly.

I surmise that in our culture one challenge to successful writing is finding reasonable grounds for true analysis. Many theories are discarded after their own limits or biases are revealed, especially given the sensitivities of our culture. Furthermore, even if the paper's theory takes off, one must carefully navigate the arguments beyond the subjective limits of one's own interpretation and land the findings into the realm of verifiable objectivity. Thus, from this experience I gain a new appreciation for the value of shared systems of belief. Orthodoxy encourages external analysis because one can assume beforehand the subjects' wish to also transcend their own individuality and hold fast to sacred doctrine. The writer's historical or individual biases likewise evaporate in light of religious faith, for by nature faith seeks to define and unify.

To end on a philosophical note, I offer an insight gained from the process of writing this paper: while music offers transcendence, words provide definition. Even as a Music Major studying effective conveyance of meaning through beauty, I hold the primary vehicle for truth in greater esteem.

Fellow Commentary

Natalie Berkman

One of the most difficult aspects of academic writing is finding an appropriate language in which to analyze a chosen object of study. Of course, this is easier when the subject matter is a written text, for the scholarly writing has no need to transcend mediums and can rely on the same rhetorical devices that composed it as tools for analysis. But when the source documents consist of a string of ephemeral notes, how can an academic writer possibly find a language that can both describe this evidence for a reader who has not heard the piece of music in question and successfully defend an argument about its nature and influences?

In this short excerpt of Ming Wilson’s essay, *What is Truth? The Relationship between J.S. Bach and Arvo Pärt Considered from their Respective Versions of the Johannes-Passion*, the author creates an effective equivalent of a “close-listening” to analyze music of which he has not consulted the score. The featured selection has two parts: first, the second half of the introduction explains this unique methodology, the reasoning behind it, its limitations, and also its unique strengths in defending his thesis; second, the initial analysis of what the author terms the “surface layer” of both pieces demonstrates a compelling use of scholarly language to describe and analyze two drastically different pieces of music.

Wilson’s explanation of his methodology was what originally drew me to the piece. While it seemed to be a great risk for an author to refer to his method as “meager,” declaring his primary sources insufficient and possibly a “setback,” he justifies what might seem at first glance to be a “limitation” as a strength. The following commentary then supersedes this initial reticence, describing what must have been a laborious analytical process, leaving a great impression on the reader.

The second part of this excerpt demonstrates a sensitivity to both the music and the limitations of academic writing to describe it, and Wilson expertly navigates between the two. I was particularly struck by the melodic nature of the prose describing the Bach *Passio* as “...a locomotive of oscillating neighboring tones played by lower strings while winds in the treble mourn dove-like through long suspensions...” In the following lines, an analysis of Pärt’s melodic development relates the dissonance between an A minor triad and the lingering penultimate B to the “...penultimate moment of Jesus’ earthly mission, a moment very close to its ominous ending.” The way Wilson transitions from a rhetorical description of his aurally discerned object of study to a compelling argument about its Biblical influence through his chosen scholarly language is effective, skillfully demonstrating what was claimed in his methodological discussion. While language will always be insufficient to communicate the phenomenological experience of listening to music, this paper proves that it is nevertheless an object that can be studied, analyzed, and comprehended through scholarly work.

Works Cited

Bouteneff, Peter. *Arvo Pärt: out of silence*. Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2015.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *Bach Among the Theologians*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Discography

Candomino Choir, Tauno Satomaa, *Arvo Pärt: Johannes-Passion (Passio Domini nostri Jesu Christi secundum Joannem)*, Finlandia Records 8573-87182-2, 2001, Compact Disc.

Academy of Ancient Music, Richard Egarr, and Choir of the AAM, *JS Bach: St John Passion*, Academy of Ancient Music AAM002, 2014, Compact Disc.

Bios

Ming Wilson '18. Having a propensity for spending too much time in the Princeton Record Exchange and other purported vendors of beauty or knowledge, Ming Wilson '18 fights such temptations by disciplines and joys rooted in a Christian faith. These disciplines include exercising, attending class, service, and interacting with others. Put another way, he finds joy in witnessing beautiful creation as he runs down the tow path; he avidly seeks truth through paths formalized in the Humanities Certificate and Music Concentration; he delights in making music through various singing groups on campus, hoping that the results will edify the listener; and he loves the time spent with dear friends, whether it involves “getting a meal,” cooking, praying, discussing life, or simply witnessing the presence of the image of God in those around him.

Natalie Berkman GS is a PhD candidate in the Department of French and Italian in the final stages of her dissertation, which examines the mathematical methods of an experimental group of French writers founded in 1960. While originally from Buffalo, NY, she has enjoyed many homes — from her undergraduate years in Baltimore, MD to her experience abroad in France, Italy, and Germany, and especially her time in Princeton. In addition to her work with *Tortoise*, Natalie is also a Writing Center Fellow, a Graduate Fellow of the Princeton Institute for International and Regional Studies (PIIRS), and a Resident Graduate Student in Wilson College.