

Loussier Trio Plays Bach: Everybody Wins!

A Multi-Funk (Adumbrative?) Retrospective on a Duo of DVDs, a Bonus CD and, like, whatever ...

Reviewed by Richard Kade
Sunnyvale, CA 94089-1622 (USA)
ubiq_icon@hotmail.com

and

Loussier Trio Play Bach: 1989 Munich Concert

by Dieter Hens

Studio: Decca – deccaclassics.com/dvd

Run Time: 83 minutes

Jacques Loussier Trio: Play Bach... and More:

Leipzig Concert

by Andreas Morell

Studio: Euroarts – euroarts.com

Run Time: 98 minutes

“To the foundation of the edifice of music, Johann Sebastian Bach contributed large

blocks, firmly and unshakably laid one upon the other.”¹ Thus in 1894 did Ferruccio Busoni liken the work of his musical mentor to great architecture. Continuing, in terms almost reminiscent of Leonardo Da Vinci, “... Outsoaring his time by generations, his thoughts and feelings reached proportions for whose expression the means then at command were inadequate. That alone can explain the fact that the broader arrangement, the ‘modernizing’ of certain of his works (by Liszt, ... Raff and others) does not violate the ‘Bach style’ – indeed, rather seems to bring it to full perfection ... without degenerating into caricature.”

What makes the music of *Joannis Sebastiani Magni* so special? Wagner referred to Bach as “the most stupendous miracle in all of music.” Not quite a century later, Leonard Bernstein was only somewhat slightly less enthusiastic in his assessment, “Bach! A colossal syllable, one which makes composers tremble, brings professional musicians to their knees, beatifies the Bach-lover and, apparently, bores the daylights out of everyone else.”²

Beyond the fact that both daVinci and Bach were born too early to be able to develop their most far-reaching thoughts fully (the helicopter that needed Igor Sikorsky to realize, the parachute, armored tank, etc., and Bach writing for screech-trumpets that weren’t really used until Mahler thought to employ them in his

¹ Bach, Johann Sebastian, edited by Ferruccio Busoni *The Well-Tempered Clavichord* – Introduction (New York, NY, G. Schirmer, 1894); p. ii. Beyond citing Raff and Liszt, Busoni could also have noted Mendelssohn, Schumann, Brahms and Saint-Saëns, as well as Schoenberg, Webern, Mahler, Reger and, had he lived longer, even such diverse thinkers as Respighi, Rachmaninoff, Honegger, Villa-Lobos, Stravinsky, Elgar, Holst, Vaughan Williams and Walton to name just a few. Conspicuously absent from the listing in the previous sentence was one of the most enduring names of those who have superimposed upon Bach: Charles Gounod whose “Meditation” (ca. 1854 – later with Latin text added) laid upon the opening “Prelude” of the first book of *Well-Tempered Clavichord* for what became most widely known as his “Ave Maria”. The most egregious flaw in his “add-on” was its needed extra measure (inserted between Bach’s 22nd and 23rd) which all too often persists to this day in performances of the otherwise-“Real McCoy” collections of “the 48”.

² Bernstein, Leonard *Omnibus – The Music of J.S. Bach*, originally aired 31 March 1957 on CBS.

rendition of the opening to the *Third Orchestral Suite*) both share another common link. In much the same way that the thoughts of Leonardo engender a spectrum of discourse on “Art versus Science”, the implied conflict between head and heart spanning Bach to Einstein/Oppenheimer touches (okay, on a microcosmic scale) upon so many of the issues in the silly poser, “What’s it all about to be human?”

A persuasive case could be made that the degree to which one views the music of Bach in terms of intellectual vs. visceral reaction says a great deal about how “higher human thought” (bringing about tools such as nuclear physics in developing the H-Bomb which was exigent when Einstein wanted FDR to use it to stop Hitler but somehow “horrible” when Oppenheimer was blatherin’ on with his misgivings after Truman used it on the “wrong target” ... hmm, where’ve I heard such lib’ral drivels befo’?) is somehow seen as superior to the “base”, gut-survival instinct in the ego-centric eyes of those convinced of their own moral rectitude.

The contention on the part of some that the writing of Bach is more formulaic than emotional is really little more a lack of stylistic affinity than any real dislike for the themes or the techniques used to develop them (fugal counterpoint, inversion or retrograde in canons, etc.) Think of those who find Shakespeare off-putting because of the use of words which have fallen into disuse despite the bard’s invention of far more words which remain common in today’s usage. More than a century ago, Balakirev and cohorts used to scoff when a fugue was about to begin, “Here comes the old man to grind some more flour!”

Perhaps some tiny bit of the formulaic (mis-?)perception can be blamed upon Schoenberg who contended serial music was rooted in the b-minor “Fugue 24” from Book 1 of *WTC* (BWV 869). Maybe the issue resides at a deeper level where some idea of a separation between “head and heart” is nowhere as clear-cut as “cognition-istas” might contend. If acting on hunger³ by a trip to the fridge is too base to be considered thought, than what of the knee-jerk reaction in chess to countering an attack with some variant of a classic gambit? Was Turing wrong in contending that eventual wins by machine-generated chess would begin to signal a turning point in the “Turing Test”?

Who was best at superimposing new over existing matter? That is easy (writing purely in personal terms) so far as appeal to the visceral reaction is concerned. Having grown up on the original “solo violin” versions, it wasn’t until I was a teenager that I first encountered recycled renditions, by Bach himself, of two of these pieces. The “Fugue” from the g-minor *Sonata* (BWV 1001) – when transposed to d-minor for organ and the “Prelude” from the E-Major *Partita* (BWV 1006) – when knocked down a step to D-Major as the “Sinfonia” to the *Cantata Wir danken Dir* (BWV 29). Both were eye-openers in that they revealed a living, breathing, human soul replete with all the passions and emotions (all too often written off as “cold”, “mathematical”, “formulaic” or other such nonsensical descriptions) which had created such great music.

Bach’s unaccompanied pieces have famously been likened to being able to hear only one side of a telephone conversation.⁴ The analogy is fine as far as it goes although revisiting it is three decades overdue if for no other reason than recall of Edmund Burke’s observation that reading “without reflecting is like eating without digesting.” The works of Bach in general (and the unaccompanied ones in particular) are really more akin to Rorschach ink blot tests in that one gains far more insight into those doing the “filling in” than any subtlety to be found in the original.

³ Kade, Richard (Review of Hofstadter, Douglas R., *I Am a Strange Loop*) posted at: leonardo.info/reviews/sept2007/i_kade.html [Search for the word “visceral” as well as the word “hunger”]

⁴ Hofstadter, Douglas R., *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid ... Twentieth-anniversary Edition* (New York, NY, Basic Books, 1999); pp. viii - ix

Two Studies for Piano by Brahms based upon Bach's "Presto" from the *Sonata* in g-minor (also from the same BWV 1001) were published in 1879. In each version Brahms provided Bach's original "text" with a "context". The main difference between Brahms' two versions is that the first has Bach's original violin line verbatim in the right hand with the other voice as a bass counterpart. The second version reverses this with Bach's original transposed down an octave and Brahms' counterpart in the upper voice. For both, Brahms strictly uses most of the contrapuntal devices employed by Bach himself (see "Prelude 2" in c-minor from the first book of *The Well-Tempered Clavichord* – BWV 847). Where contrary motion did not work he would rely upon brief parallel motion in thirds, sixths or tenths. Listening to a performance of these short pieces one can't help but think "Where does the 'Bach' end and 'Brahms' start?"

A variant of that question over the borders between Bach and Brahms resurfaced in 1959 when a young French pianist, Jacques Loussier, gained international fame with a series of 33.3 rpm LPs titled *Play Bach* which, today, would be termed cross-over or perhaps fusion. Up until that time, the worlds of "serious" music and jazz were quite separate and about the only earlier instance of someone doing swing improvisations based on Bach was Django Reinhardt with Stéphane Grappelli and Eddie South in 1937.

The question raised at that time by these *Play Bach* pieces was "What is Jazz?" Perhaps an equally valid but never posed thought (in light of Busoni's architectural analogy) would have been "What is Bach?"

Having sold more than six million records and tired of nearly two decades of seemingly endless travel, Loussier disbanded the first *Play Bach* trio in 1978 to make time for composing and reflection. But in 1984 with the tricentennial celebration of the birth of Bach looming, Loussier was coaxed out of retirement to form a new trio with Vincent Charbonnier on contrabass and André Arpino on percussion.

With the above as background, the Loussier DVDs "speak" best for themselves. Clearest examples of contrasts are found in those parts common to both.

The D-Major "Fugue 5" from the first book of *Well-Tempered Clavichord* (BWV 850) opens both performances and is even amongst the pieces in the "Bonus CD" from the original trio's 1959 recording. Effects of the passage of time are inescapable. Loussier, in the interview included on the 2004 DVD, says that if anything the original recordings were too timid in their exploration of the potential parallels to be found between Bach and the jazz idioms.

Clearly Loussier was at the height of his pianistic technical abilities in the 1989 performance. Following the applause and bows on the 2004 DVD, the camera seems to have caught Loussier in physical pain as he makes his way back to the keyboard. The bass solos at the end of the D-Major "Fugue" give the first glimpse into the stylistic affinities to be found in the artistry of Vincent Charbonnier and Benoît Dunoyer de Segonzac. The contrasts in their approaches are just as evident from their extended cadenzas (their "rides"?) in the "Aria" from the *Pastorale in c-minor* (BWV 590). The closing piano riff of that work shows that while Loussier's technical bravura may have ebbed ever so slightly, the additional decade and a half have afforded him the wisdom and insight to express the essence of the thought with greater economy of effort while perfectly preserving the beauty of the line.

The cadenzas of the *Fifth Brandenburg* also offer stark contrasts. Just as the elapsed time between these performances has had the same effect in this work upon Loussier noted above, so too has it affected André Arpino. With all of this duly noted, the joy of collaboration between members of both trios is infectious and can be seen on the brief camera shots of the audience.

The 1989 Munich performance includes a rendering of the *Italian Concerto*. The slow movement is one of the most hauntingly beautiful ... especially in the second half where Loussier ditches Bach's original filigree substituting his own jazz/blues riffs instead. Not only is this not in conflict with the "spirit" of Bach's original, it lends a sublime poignancy that reaches an emotional climax (especially with the implied passing tensions of g-sharps vs. a-flats) superior to its antecedent. Also the 3/4 = 6/8 feeling in many ways adumbrates the slow movement of the Ravel *Concerto in G for Piano and Orchestra*. (Yes, fragmentary figments persist?)⁵

These DVDs are not without imperfection. To cite only one example, both the chapter label and the printed booklet provided for the 1989 Munich performance lists a "Gavotte" in b-minor which should really have been "Bourrée" (from the *First Partita for Unaccompanied Violin* BWV 1002).

Countless serendipitous delights abound on these two DVDs. To cite only two on the most recent, the respect shown by Loussier for Debussy is every bit as profound as that for Bach. His setting of *L'Isle joyeuse* is just as stunning as the slow movement of the *Italian Concerto* discussed above. In this arrangement, Loussier chucks the middle third and replaces it with an extended riff for all three members of the trio, mostly around the "black keys" of the piano harkening back to the «Impératrice des Pagodes» ("Empress of the Pagodas") from Ravel's *Ma Mère L'Oye*.

Equally rewarding is the interview (in the "extras" features) where Loussier traces the early influence of John Lewis upon his thinking (on jazz, improvisation, etc.) and how such seemingly unrelated forms as calypso fit into the continuing metamorphosis affecting the newest renditions of even some of the Bach works he has been performing for the longest time.

Perhaps even the silliest issue one can raise merits brief consideration, specifically, "What would 'ol' J.S." think of how his music has influenced folks all these centuries later?" The glib answer is probably the most accurate: "That depends upon how quickly this hypothetically reanimated brain, presumably with good ears attached, could be brought up to speed on romanticism, post-modernism, neo-classicism, blues, be-bop, the degree to which he liked or disliked each ..."

A final word, for now at least, before this year slips fully into history. 2009 is doubly auspicious for Jacques Loussier in that he celebrated both his 75th birthday and the 50th anniversary of the release of the first *Play Bach* album. About this he has stated that he has only reached the halfway point and is looking forward to the centennial celebration. In the meantime, others continue to follow the path he has set forth, most notably Black Violin whose hip-hop rendition of the *Third Brandenburg Concerto* has "exploded onto the music scene with the consistency of listeners wanting more."⁶

⁵ http://leonardo.info/reviews/aug2005/encounter_kade.html . As (foot)noted in 2005, *Strashadows* is Michael Smuin's [<http://www.smuinballet.org>] brilliant setting of the middle movement of the *Concerto for Piano in G Major* by Maurice Ravel. Ravel straddles the feeling of 6/8 meter as opposed to 3/4 (i.e. 1,2,3 – 4,5,6 vs. 1,2 – 3,4 – 5,6) even though the meter for the entire movement is 3/4 in the printed score. In much the same way, Smuin has most of the music danced by the three couples separately. Only towards the end, well after the orchestra has entered to join the piano solo, do the three couples interact. In fact, almost as a "visual dramatization" of the "3/4 feel" of the coda, the three men form a circle with interlocked hands-to-elbows to provide "seating" for the three women, facing outward, who they slowly lift and rotate as though on a merry-go-round. Although the "3/4 = 6/8" meter has long been a staple of Spanish composers (e.g. de Falla, Rodrigo), a novel variant opens *Die Schweigsame Frau* by Richard Strauß where the horn starts the Potpourri in 3/4 while everyone else is in 6/8.

⁶ <http://insomniaradio.net/2008/06/16/black-violin-brandenburg> . See also blackviolin.net for further information on Kev Marcus, violin, and Wil B, viola, along with their DJ, TK. As an interesting side-note, Loussier should also probably have an "AKA" designation, perhaps "J. Lu" in light of the protracted litigation pending over copyright infringement by Eminem.