

## **Bach's Tone-Pleasure**

Bach's use of timbre is a multi-faceted as it is under-researched. On the one hand, tone colour is overlooked in our study of his crystalline counterpoint, his intricate fugues, or his dazzling harmonic development. On the other hand, our analyses of Bach's orchestration often take a strictly hermeneutic approach to musical meaning: we may interpret the basso continuo as symbolic of the divine law that is the basis for composition as it is for creation, the alto voice as a representation of the praying soul, the oboe d'amore as an index for love.

These scholarly approaches to timbre in Bach contrast sharply with the timbral aesthetics emerging during the eighteenth century. In the wake of Kant's philosophy, timbre became the focus of musical aesthetics and, later, the core of "absolute music". Tone colour was celebrated as a sonorous expression reaching beyond meaning, a musical sublime which was able to touch the body as well as the soul in what Herder calls "tone-pleasure".

Given that these ideas began to gain influence during Bach's lifetime, we must ask ourselves whether our approaches to his use of timbre require reconsideration. Listening through the ears of Kant and Herder, Lyotard and Goehr, my paper will explore the aesthetics of timbre in Bach's music. Does pure tone-pleasure have a place in instrumental counterpoint? Is it blasphemous to find it in deeply religious works such as the Matthew Passion? Did the great composer himself find delight in sonorous difference?

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