

Listening to Bach and Handel
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Part I: Introduction.

Chapter 1: A Marvelous Synchronicity

Bach and Handel were born less than one month and 125 kilometers apart, heirs to the exact same culture. But if culture determines the character of art, why is it that their music differs so greatly, not only from each other's but from that of all their Baroque colleagues? Bach and Handel's divergent approaches to the shepherd and angel scene from the Christmas Oratorio and *Messiah* begin the exploration.

Chapter 2: Recovering the Critical Ear

Why has no one accepted such an obvious invitation for critical comparison? A survey of the historical methods and interests that have prevented it, followed by a strategy for a modern musical criticism that takes into account principles of music perception and cognition. A brief critique of traditional concepts of structure establishes an architectural metaphor for musical structure to apply for the rest of the book.

Part II: The Baroque Musical Language

Chapter 3: Phonology, Syntax, and Semantics

A completely new summary of the Baroque musical language, illustrated with analogies to principles of speech perception, principles to be applied through the rest of the book. Examples from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the E Major Partita for Solo Violin, and Handel's *Messiah*.

Chapter 4: Gift of the *Seicento*: the Aesthetic of Music Drama

How the revolutionary aesthetic of music drama that drives the entire Baroque produces the particular rhythmic qualities of Bach's and Handel's music. New ways of hearing meter are gently illustrated with examples from the Brandenburg Concertos and *Messiah*.

Chapter 5: Gift of the *Seicento*: Instrumental Drama

A novel characterization of the insights of Arcangelo Corelli, essential resources of Bach and Handel, which solved the problem of how to make instrumental music as dramatic as opera. Examples from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, *Messiah*, and *Acis and Galatea*.

Part III: Bach, Handel, and Six Essential Concepts

Chapter 6: Cantus Firmus

How do Bach and Handel, each in his own imitable way, transform this ancient technique from its staid foundation in sacred music into something dramatic, a new kind of Baroque rhythmic tension? Examples from Cantata 140, the Christmas Oratorio, *Acis and Galatea*, *Athalia*, and *Solomon* illustrate how to hear the Baroque cantus firmus.

Chapter 7: Dance

“ . . . their music almost constantly alludes to a paradoxical relationship with dance, a kind of love-hate relationship. On one hand, the influence of dance forms and rhythms goes far beyond the explicit suites to pervade every kind of music that they wrote. . . . On the other hand, neither Bach nor Handel seems willing to accept without severe qualification the easy organization that dance phrasing offers.” Out of this paradox they turn dance into drama. Examples from a French suite, a keyboard partita, and the Christmas Oratorio of Bach, from the *Water Music* and the opera *Giulio Cesare* of Handel, and one allemande of Couperin.

Chapter 8: Ostinato

The critics’ desire to understand the Goldberg Variations, the great Chaconne for Solo Violin, and the “Crucifixus” from the Mass in B Minor as organic wholes contradicts the plain facts of listeners’ cognition, a contradiction resolved through a dialectical way of hearing them, which also accounts for Handel’s ability to make his ostinatos key dramatic points in his oratorios *Saul* and *Israel in Egypt*.

Chapter 9: Cantilena

The apparent simplicity of a long-breathed, single melody, such as those heard in the slow movement of Bach’s F minor harpsichord concerto and Handel’s “O sleep,” from *Semele*, depends upon a handling of harmony and harmonic rhythm every bit as subtle as found in their most complex counterpoint.

Chapter 10: Fugue

Bach and Handel arrive on the world stage at a moment when the academic prestige of fugue writing nears its peak while the actual use of fugues in music for the stage, the keyboard, and even the church is in severe decline. Examples from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, the St. Matthew Passion, *Messiah*, and *Saul* demonstrate how to hear the great fugues of Bach and Handel as fluid variation sets on one hand, as dramatic shapes on the other.

Chapter 11: Ritornello

How is this most Baroque of compositional strategies distinguished in the hands of Bach and Handel? A new understanding of “ritornello form,” the relation of a ritornello with other music in a movement, the ability of Bach and Handel to make something special of its final playing, and their entirely idiosyncratic “super ritornellos” (a new category) find illustration in Vivaldi’s “Spring” Concerto, Bach’s Second and Fourth Brandenburg Concertos, and Handel’s *Israel in Egypt*.

Part IV: Music and Drama

Chapter 12: Opera Seria

How to explain paradox of the tortured critical history and problematic dramas of the *opera seria* genre and the rapidly rising popularity of Handel’s works in the opera house today? A re-examination of some of the most basic principles of music and drama opens listeners’ ears to a few of the beauties in *Giulio Cesare*, and provides a new way of approaching Baroque opera in general.

Chapter 13: Passion

Bach’s musical settings of the unapologetically Christian passion stories on several narrative levels at once explains why these dramas remain the most accessible and revered of all Baroque music dramas in a secular age. The discontinuities of language and genre Bach astonishingly turns into virtues. By contrast, even Handel cannot overcome the flat narrative of the Brockes libretto.

Chapter 14: English Oratorio

After outlining what his acquaintance with Jean Racine and his own evolution of the English oratorio meant for Handel as an artist, the oratorio chorus, the most famous feature of all his works, is surveyed in its many dramatic roles: as an articulator of acts and scenes, as a spotlight to the most important moments, as actor, as commentator, as great tableaux, and as philosophical meditation. Principal examples from *Athalia*, *Saul*, and *Messiah*.

Chapter 15: Solo Sonata and Solo Concerto

The metaphorical concept of music drama in instrumental music: the soloist as a character who acts, in opposition and in synthesis, and as researcher, one who seeks. Examples from Bach’s Harpsichord Concerto in E major (II), the Sonata for Violin and Harpsichord in E major (IV), Handel’s Organ Concerto in B-flat, Opus 4 (I), and his Sonata in D for Violin (I).

Part V: Epilogue

Chapter 16: Bach and Handel: Synchronicity and Freedom

Illustrated with their contrastive settings of a similar text, “Gloria in excelsis Deo” from the Mass in B Minor and “I will sing to the Lord,” from *Israel in Egypt*, and armed with the perspectives won from the intervening chapters, the epilogue revisits the problem of cultural determinism and the individuality of Bach and Handel’s music that opened the book. The culture is given its rightful due while restoring the freedom of composers to fashion the infinite possibilities of their native musical language into utterly distinct and individual new creations.