

Jean-Marie Straub
The Bach Film (1)
Translated by Sally Shafto

The starting point for our *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* was the idea to make a film where we used music not as an accompaniment, nor as a commentary, but as an aesthetic matter. I had no real point of reference. Except perhaps, as a parallel, what Bresson did in *The Diary of a Country Priest* with a literary text. In practical terms, you could say that we tried to bring music to life on screen, to show, for once, music to filmgoers. Likewise, we wanted to show an exceptional love story. A woman speaks of her husband, whom she loved, until his death. Therein lies the basic story. She is there and can do nothing other than be there for the man she loves, no matter what happens to him and the difficulties he has. She describes how many children they had – they had thirteen together, – what became of them, how many died, etc. So at first it's her story; but then her account establishes an external benchmark. You cannot write a biography or make a filmed version without having an external benchmark, and this external benchmark is Anna Magdalena's consciousness.

One attraction of the film is that we will show people in the process of performing music; we will show individuals who actually perform in front of the camera. It's rarely done in film; and yet what transpires on men's faces when they do nothing more than perform a task is certainly something that is linked to the *cinematograph*. And this consists precisely of – I hate the word, so I'll put it in quotation marks: the film's "suspense." Every bit of music that we'll show will actually be executed before the camera, recorded live (2) and – with one exception (3) – filmed in a single take. The core of what will be shown during a musical excerpt, which may be introduced by a score, a manuscript or an original printed text. Then, in the intervals, will be the sequences; as much as possible we have erased all the scenes and episodes, until there were no more scenes, no more episodes, but only what Stockhausen called "points." All that will be shown, outside the musical performances, will be "points" in Bach's life.

The film will truly be the opposite of the description of the film on Wilhelm Friedemann Bach that I noticed yesterday on the Theatiner Filmkunst's sign, which reads: "His music and that of his father give an abundance of impressive musical summits to the film." My biggest fear with the "Bach Film" was precisely that the music would create lofty heights in the film: the music must remain on the same level as everything else. On the one hand, I chose the music so that there would be an example of every genre, a choral entrance, an instrumental concerto, an organ passage, another for the harpsichord, the minuet, etc.; in addition, each creative period – including before 1720, when the film begins, must be represented. Thus, the film, which is altogether classic, absolutely linear, contains a kind of flashback! On the other hand, "dialectically," we have chosen the music solely in relation to the film's rhythm.

I know exactly where I need a flat surface – and there I didn't choose music that would have put this flat surface, which was necessary, in danger. The overall balance between the piece of music chosen and the film's rhythm must be, in each moment, complete in the construction. Apart from this, I know of course that I can connect a particular piece of music with another, and that in another spot, a gap is needed, a sequence without music, a "moment of life."

The job for me when preparing a shooting script is to arrive in a state that is absolutely empty, so that I'm sure to be absolutely devoid of intention, to be stripped of intention when I'm shooting. I'm always in the process of eliminating all intention – personal expression. That's the scope of the shot breakdown. Stravinsky said: "I'm aware that music is incapable of expressing anything." I think the same is true for a film. A film is not there to tell a story in images; it's become obvious in the meantime; neither does a film exist to show something – an establishing shot doesn't pay in a film, except very rarely; nor is a film there to express

something, feelings or something else. Nor does a film exist – although I'm not absolutely certain – to prove something. In order not to fall into one of these traps, the work of the shot breakdown consists in destroying from the outset these different, expressive temptations. Then and only then can you accomplish at the filming stage a real work of cinema.

Our shooting script relies almost entirely on Bach's texts and his words taken from the obituary article that Carl Philipp Emanuel wrote the year of Bach's death. A part of the text comes from there, another part from Bach's letters and a small part comes from me, but only things like "The Holy Friday of the same year he directed for the first time his Passion music based on the *Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, and transitional texts and chronological markers. In the obituary we recognize Bach himself, in the style and also in the stories. It's possible to imagine that at times Carl Philipp Emanuel captured Bach's way of speaking. Hence, in the film *Anna Magdalena*, to whom we give these texts to say, speaks as Bach wrote – in the manner of his letters – and as he spoke – in the manner of the obituary. For years, these manuscript pages were thought to have been written by Bach, when in reality it was Anna Magdalena who wrote them. Thanks to the most recent musicological research, we now know what Anna Magdalena was responsible for, the voices or entire scores, which she recopied. It was determined that their handwriting was increasingly similar, at least superficially. I don't exploit that in the film, because it's optical; I believe that the optical doesn't translate well to the screen. But the fact that Anna Magdalena speaks the way Bach spoke and wrote reinforces this objective.

I couldn't shoot a filmed biography of someone too close in time, for example a man from the 19th century, or of someone for whom there exists an extensive physical record. None of Bach's personal possessions have survived. Nothing remains, not even a pipe; we don't even know if he smoked a pipe. We have an inventory: we know how many harpsichords he had, how many chairs, etc., but nothing more. So what remains of Bach is his music first of all, then the manuscripts, the scores with the many voices that he copied himself with his students, his sons or his wife, and finally his letters. I make use too of the letters of a cousin, who was a "well established cantor" in Schweinfurt and who was for time enrolled as a student in theology in Leipzig where he "completed his musical training" under Bach, as he says. And I also use several letters of the school director, with whom Bach had a dispute. We have these three realities: the music, the manuscript pages or the original texts, the letters and the obituary. With these three realities we couldn't make a film, with them we could make what is called a documentary, but the attraction of my "chronicle" consists precisely in the fact that we introduce therein the man. What man? Simply the man whom I will not choose myself, but the musicians who will be given to me – from Basel, from the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis, from Vienna, from the Concentus musicus. Then of course I will carefully choose the secondary characters, with as much care as the persons who will play Bach and Anna Magdalena. Everyone knows Bach has been dead for a longtime, and I have no intention to try to give the illusion that I have brought him back to life. That's why I have taken someone named Gustav Leonhardt, who doesn't necessarily resemble Bach, and not at all the Bach that most people have in mind, a little overweight and all that; Leonhardt is very thin. In the beginning, I hadn't even seen him. At the time, he had only recorded a single record, a Bach cantata, and then almost at the same time *The Art of the Fugue* for the harpsichord, which was also written for the harpsichord and not for another instrument – he was the first to have played on a keyboard instrument or a harpsichord. I only saw him afterwards, but I was sure that he was the man I was looking for, even though I had never even laid eyes on him. Only then did we go to Amsterdam to see him. When we saw him, we noticed a certain resemblance with a portrait of Bach at age thirty, the so-called Erfurt Portrait – you can see for yourself the resemblance; it's pretty astonishing. Subsequently it was proven that it's fake portrait! Someone tried to prove that only one of the four, five or seven portraits that we're

taken until now as authentic, is truly genuine; it's a portrait painted in 1746, that is to say four years before Bach's death, by Haussmann, the official painter of Leipzig. But for me this portrait is even less interesting than the apparently fake ones, because it's maker had no talent; he was what Godard would call a civil servant, and not a painter. Plus, this portrait was later painted over by someone else.

Fortunately, no portrait has survived of Anna Magdalena. There was one, we know for sure, but Wilhelm Friedemann lost it. One day in Paris, on the stage of the Voltaire High School where Kurt Thomas directed a Bach motet, we saw among the sopranos a girl – for whom we had an instant *coup de foudre*. . . What I first noticed about her were her hands. She's from Berlin and at that time she was living in Frankfurt. In the meantime, she married a choirmaster – now he's the musical director in Darmstadt; she has children, and I like her even more.

The film is chronological. The first images date from when Bach was thirty-five years old, thus approximately the year of our Leonhardt. I like making a film about a man whom we don't see age. I have no intention either of putting make-up on him – I've never put make up on someone for the camera, not for *Machorka-Muff* nor for *Not Reconciled*. And at the end, when he is standing by the window and we hear how he died "expired gently and happily," as the voiceover says, he will look just as he did at age thirty-five. Maybe I'm wrong, because I haven't seen the film again in ten years, but I believe that in Mizoguchi's *O'Haru*, the woman, the protagonist, was also shown over an entire life, without the attempt to give the illusion of her getting old. Simply, as in the words of a cantata: "May your old age be like your youth." Nevertheless, our Leonhardt will wear a wig and a costume, and the musicians we'll show will be playing on Baroque instruments. And with the film sets we will try to avoid the inevitable anachronisms, with the few pieces of furniture that we'll have to show, and with the organs. We have meticulously chosen the locations; for example for the performance of the cantatas, the one that roughly corresponds to the organ loft of the Saint Thomas Church – little difference between the main organ and the choir organ. And of course we are not going to record Bach's music on organs from the Romantic period. The organ loft of the St. Thomas Church can't be used, because it was refurbished in the 19th century, but we have, for example, found something similar in the Old Country (near Hamburg) (4).

So we will show people in costume; we will show a man wearing a wig and a cantor's costume (5), but we won't necessarily say to the spectator: here is Bach. I could say that the film will be rather a film on Mr. Leonhardt. Even in the "elements" of Bach's life, we will respect Leonhardt as Bach's interpreter. The film's work consists of putting him in contact with these three realities, the manuscripts, the texts, and the music. Only if there is a spark between these four elements will the film become something.

In *Machorka-Muff* I made use of reality so that fiction, let's say satire, became even more realistic; here, I want on the contrary to make use of reality so that the film's imaginary aspect becomes even more obvious, so that at the end you have almost forgotten that it's about Bach. Ultimately, the film will be closer to a novel than even *Not Reconciled* – precisely because I am taking almost exclusively from reality. In *Machorka-Muff* I had very little reality – of course, each image is reality and nothing more, "a building block," it's clear; but what I call here naively reality, is for example the newspaper sequence, but it's only a small fragment of a minute-and-a-half, and the film is seventeen minutes and thirty seconds long. With the Bach film, we could simply reverse the proportions and say: we have almost entirely a documentary reality – the actual music and actual manuscript pages, real musicians – and only one seventeenth of fiction, and despite it all, the totality becomes very nearly a novel.

Bach is for me one of the last individuals in the history of German culture where there doesn't yet exist a divorce between what is called an artist and an intellectual; you find no trace of romanticism in him – we know what in part resulted from German romanticism. There is not

in him the slightest separation between intelligence, art, and life; neither is there a conflict between sacred and secular music; in Bach, everything exists on the same plane. For me, Bach is the opposite of Goethe.

“Only violence helps, where violence reigns,” the Brecht quote that I took as a subtitle for *Not Reconciled*, could also serve as the Bach film’s title. The film tells the story of a man who struggles. In the situations where I show him, he waits always until the last minute before reacting, until the situation is completely filled with the violence of the society in which he lives; only then does he react, because like everyone, he is lazy, because the daily violence that we need, so as not to give up every day – I don’t mean socially, but in everything – demands enormous energy. He doesn’t have to fight against a capitalist society, to which fits the phrase of *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* – but who knows. . . . If the film really resembles Bach, a total equilibrium incarnate – that’s what I wanted to say, when I said that there is no divorce in him between art, life, and intellect, sacred and secular music –, if the film becomes also what the man was, then of course it will penetrate right into society’s roots, then we can employ the phrase “Only violence helps, where violence reigns,” as the film’s title. And it will also be Christian. Resignation was never a theological virtue – it only appeared as such in the 19th century. The dialectic between – the word resignation is not right – patience and violence is hidden in Bach’s art itself; it’s obvious for example in the Fourth Cantata “Christ lay in the Snares of Death,” that is concealed in Bach’s art, not only in his texts and in his cantatas, but also in his music.

Jean-Marie Straub (6)

1. The following was an interview conducted in German with Enno Patalas, in 1966, that he finalized, edited and published in the Munich journal, *Filmkritik*: in an attempt to help us find financing to produce the film.
Thanks to this article, we received donations of 20,000 DM (10,000 from Maximilian Schell, 1,000 from Alexander Kluge, 1,000 from François Truffaut, the rest in small amounts from readers; there was also a lengthy article by Uwe Nettelbeck in *Die Zeit*, which prompted the Hessischer Rundfunk – Television of Frankfurt – to invest 100,000 DM. . . . (Note by Danièle Huillet, November 1995).
2. “Captured with live sound”: the passages that won’t be shown but will be included on the soundtrack, such as the largo for sonata in trio for organ, the soprano and alto on Heaven, excerpt from the last fugue from the *The Art of the Fugue*, the organ choral for “Before your throne I now appear,” were performed for the film with an organ or harpsichord, or directed by Gustav Leonhardt. (D. Huillet, *Ibid*).
3. “With one exception”: the exception disappeared; we anticipated a structure with a lot of editing, with four series of shots analyzing the construction of the choral entry of *The Passion according to Saint Matthew*, in three days of shooting; on the first day, while looking for the framing of the first series (establishing shot), Jean-Marie said: “It’s a mistake; we will shoot the entire choral entrance with this framing, and this one only;” then we had two days of vacation. . . . (D. Huillet, *Ibid*).
4. “The Old Country,” *Stade im Alten Lande*: there wasn’t yet a nuclear power station on the Elba, but two churches, Saint Corne and Saint Wilhadi; they corresponded very nicely with the two Leipzig churches, which had become unusable, Saint Nicolas and Saint Thomas. . . . We undertook the same research for all the places, whether it was the castle of Cöthen (made over during the Napoleonic era), the refectory of the School of Saint Thomas, the Cantor’s living quarters, Silbermann’s organs, the University of Leipzig, and so on. Each time, after consulting with Leonhardt, we devised a different arrangement, or variation for the musicians; there isn’t, for example, two executions of

secular or religious cantatas, where the same spatial arrangement is repeated; as a result of this often restricted space, the musicians, in the Baroque period, often played while standing. . . (D. Huillet, *Ibid*).

5. “Costumes, wigs, glasses. . .”: always as exact or as close as possible (engravings and paintings from the period, as well as earlier, gave us the freedom to enrage all the narrow-minded “costumisti”!). And the enormous white windows of the church lofts are no anachronism, but a faithful reproduction of the Lutheran tradition! No colored stained-glass windows, if there were any, the Lutherans removed them. . . (D. Huillet, *Ibid*).
6. *Filmkritik*, November 1966; French translation in *Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 193, September 1967