Pre-Christmas reconciliation in the German film *Bach—A Christmas Miracle*

Bernd Reinhardt
20 January 2025

This year marks the 275th anniversary of the death of German composer Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750). A prelude to the anniversary was provided in December by the German television film *Bach—A Christmas Miracle* (*Bach—Ein Weihnachtswunder*, directed by Florian Baxmeyer, scripted by Christian Schnalke), which was watched by over four million viewers.

The largely fictitious plot is set in the run-up to Christmas 1734. Bach, played by the popular German actor Devid Striesow, is planning a major new composition. Spread over six church services, the piece is intended to shake up and change its audience. Self-interest and selfishness still prevail in this world. Music, according to Bach's vision, is supposed to achieve what the spoken word of the sermon cannot.

The plan for the *Christmas Oratorio* is met with resistance from the city authorities in Leipzig. They are angered that Bach, cantor-music director at the public St. Thomas School and composer for the city's Lutheran churches, is composing "operatically" instead of modestly accompanying church services with music. They say that his former work, his *St. Matthew Passion*, had already stirred up and confused people emotionally.

The visit of Bach's oldest sons Wilhelm Friedemann (Dominic Marcus Singer) and Carl Philipp Emanuel (Ludwig Simon), who are also musicians and composers, provides further fuel for conflict. Emanuel has always felt neglected by his father. Now he accuses the latter of wasting his time imbibing beer with a group of students instead of finally applying what he taught his sons.

Bach's second wife, Anna Magdalena (Verena Altenberger), no longer has the strength to hold the family together. Seven children have died in recent years. Pregnant again, she is very afraid of another birth. The bright eight-year-old daughter Elisabeth (Lotta Herzog) helps her, fetching a Christmas tree for the family and keeping an eye on her apparently autistic brother Gottfried (German von Beug), unsettled by the clashes and friction.

The city councillors and church representatives are particularly outraged that Bach makes artistic decisions without consulting them. They initially ban the performance of the oratorio, but then lift the ban at the last minute. They do not want to appear provincial in front of the Dresden court composer Johann Adolph Hasse (Dominik Weber), who has come to Leipzig expressly hear the new music.

Bach's music captivates his audience, and the conflicts among his family and friends surrounding the oratorio are also captivating to watch, with personal conflicts fading into the background. Something bigger is at stake. Emanuel, in a moving statement to city councillor Stieglitz (Thorsten Merten), demands respect for an art form decided upon by artists themselves.

Current research sheds little light on the conflicts surrounding Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* in regard to its suppression or even prohibition. The filmmakers were apparently less concerned with historical accuracy than with drawing attention to contemporary grievances in front of a historical backdrop. What could be a better prelude to the Bach year than a warning against today's tendency to suppress and instrumentalise art?

Unfortunately, the filmmakers express their criticism and concerns rather half-heartedly, and *A Christmas Miracle* ends with conciliation toward Bach's opponents. Thus, the sharpness of the conflicts portrayed is relativised and reduced to the merely "personal." Questions of art production are limited to individual weaknesses combined with a dash of feminism.

The energetic figure of Bach in the film, who defends the truthfulness of his music, is not entirely free of masculine egoism. His opponent, an unsuspecting, not entirely heartless bureaucrat, could be moved, according to the script, if he just listened to Bach's new music. This requires above all the emancipated wiles of a woman and the sensitive outsider Gottfried.

When, in the heat of the moment, Bach inadvertently puts Gottfried in danger, his wife accuses him of "ignoring people" due to his artistic stubbornness. She says he will be judged by this later. Bach is affected and confesses to his wife that, like her, his thoughts are always with their deceased children and he hopes his music will reach them.

The first academic Bach biographer, Philipp Spitta (1841-1894), pointed out that Bach's Leipzig conflicts as cantor of the St. Thomas Boys Choir, which the film loosely refers to, cannot be explained merely by Bach's personality, and that similar conflicts occurred in other places in Germany and also at earlier times.

Presenting a historical overview, Spitta established that Bach represented the burgeoning self-confidence of the middle classes and therefore had elevated cultural aspirations, which could be less and less reconciled with the traditional, financially limited infrastructure of a municipal music service for church masses, funerals and weddings.

Spitta also takes a historical approach to the demand for a "truthful" music consciously evoking painful issues, which Bach defends in the film. Spitta, however, lays his emphasis less on the immediate difficulties of everyday life at that time, including the

© World Socialist Web Site

high infant mortality rate, but rather addresses the social atmosphere in the decades following the end of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648).

The early musicologist, who particularly appreciated the universality of Bach's music, aimed as it was at neither Catholics nor Protestants, attributed this fact to the painful historical experience of the catastrophic Thirty Years' War, which had begun as a religious war.

In *Johann Sebastian Bach—The Learned Musician* (2000), biographer Christoph Wolff observes that Thuringia, the region of Germany in which Bach was born, was one of the

> most densely populated areas in Europe, dotted with countless small towns in a politically fractured landscape ... [It] developed into an economically and culturally vigorous region soon after the catastrophic Thirty Years' War ended in 1648. Some of the most important intersections of east-west and north-south continental trade routes made the area particularly susceptible to foreign influences—in art and architecture, most notably from Italian and French traditions. Here, as almost nowhere else to such an extent, the manifold European trends met and merged, generating a unique climate that also paved the way for the early eighteenth-century concept of a mixed style in music.

The huge sigh of relief after the long war triggered a hunger for culture, education and research. Representatives of the early Enlightenment, such as Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716), philosopher and mathematician, or the universal scholar, mathematician, lawyer and philosopher Christian Wolff (1679–1754), all assumed that "God's will" must be subjected to research in order to make it possible for human beings to live in harmony guided by reason.

In his own field, Bach made outstanding contributions to this end. The architecture of his musical structures opened up new harmonic horizons. In his late work (*The Art of the Fugue*, *The Musical Offering*, among others), he created a monument to the work of several generations of composers who explored the laws of musical movement. Three years before his death, Bach joined the Corresponding Society of Musical Sciences, founded by Lorenz Christoph Mizler, following in the footsteps of Telemann and Handel.

Biographer Wolff points out that Bach "considered himself a musical scholar producing works of musical science." Parallels were drawn during his lifetime and afterward between Bach and Isaac Newton. For example, "What Newton was as philosopher, Sebastian Bach was as musician," asserted C. F. Daniel Schubart, in 1784–85.

Newton, more than a generation older than Bach, writes Wolff,

> had earned a legendary reputation across Europe by the early eighteenth century, and by 1750 he represented the undisputed paradigm of the scientist as genius. … Bach's music—his search for truth—was affected more, both subconsciously and consciously, than that of any other contemporary musician by the spreading culture of Newtonianism and by the spirit of discovery that followed the Scientific Revolution, which no bright and keen intellect could escape.

The fact that the new film juxtaposes Bach's music, which "opens hearts," to the spoken word, which fails to reach people, relates to contemporary skeptical moods and has nothing to do with Bach. In fact his entire catalogue of compositions testifies to the opposite. The concentrated character of his music, evident to every careful listener, is inconceivable without an overarching concept.

Bach's son Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714–1788) is correct when he explains in the film that music that reaches people's feelings also evokes passion. However, his own music and that of his brothers—the youngest of whom, Johann Christian (1735–1782) went on to influence Mozart— also demonstrates the importance of clear musical insight.

Despite its sympathetic portrayal of Bach, the film ultimately follows the tradition of sentimental Christmas reconciliation. In the end, the authorities are moved and even feel a sense of relief upon hearing Bach's music. The "operatically" composed *Christmas Oratorio* fails to spark a revolution. Instead Gottfried weaves through the church dancing, while Elisabeth stands among the St Thomas Boys Choir singers, defying the ban on female singers in church.

Audio samples:

Johann Sebastian Bach – Christmas Oratorio
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MVewzMm1uts
Johann Sebastian Bach - Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9Dh43kVL1Q
Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach – Symphony in E Moll
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wgmi2QQpRc

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site