

## Persönliches zur Geschichte der jüngeren Bach-Forschung

Von Arthur Mendel (Princeton, NJ)

h

Dear Alfred Dürr:

Over a quarter-century ago, in a letter to Professor Friedrich Blume, I asked some questions which prompted him to pass my letter on to you, and your reply of December 1951 was the beginning of a correspondence that by now fills four heavy binders. It has been to me an ever rewarding exchange that I hope will continue indefinitely.

Your friendly readiness to be helpful, which became so important to me, shone through the formality of that first communiqué. It was quickly followed by a copy of your *Studien über die frühen Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs*, which was to become the vademecum for my research during the next several years. In writing it you had been almost totally dependent on secondary sources; you had had no evidence that had not been available to others for years; but you had had the imagination to see how to put that evidence together in new ways that revealed many of the stations of Bach's development up to his thirty-third year – by a happy coincidence, the same age that you had reached when you published that remarkable book. In browsing through our correspondence, I came across what in retrospect are amusing ironies.

A year or two after that first letter, I received from Hans Albrecht – doubtless at your suggestion – the invitation to edit the Johannes-Passion for the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*, and from then on we had even more to correspond about. An early topic was the probable date of completion of our Passion edition, and it is amusing to read, with hindsight, a passage in your letter of 25 January, 1954: „Von Seiten des Verlages besteht durchaus die Möglichkeit, sie dieses oder nächstes Jahr herauszubringen. Andererseits besteht aber auch keine unbedingte Notwendigkeit, den Band überstürzt (!) herauszubringen, wenn Sie noch etwas Zeit dazu brauchen.“

Two years later, a semester's leave of absence gave me my first opportunity to work for several months steadily on the edition. I lost no time in coming to Göttingen (by way of Tübingen, where I had the privilege of comparing notes with Georg von Dadelsen, Wolfgang Plath, and Paul Kast on the copyists' handwritings that the students in my seminar and I had sorted). Then for many weeks in Göttingen I enjoyed the hospitality of the little office you had near the top of that famous Treppenhaus of the Kunstgeschichtliches Institut, where you and Dorothea Stephan and I sat on three sides of a square, and where all the help you gave me must have cost you almost as much time as it saved me.

I remember that when we first met, and I was able to congratulate you in person on the brilliance of your chronology of the Weimar cantatas, you

replied with a sigh that you were a man with „a brilliant future behind him“ – that you never expected to have as fortunate an „Einfall“ as the one that had resulted in the *Studien*. That one had depended on the document that records Bach's promotion in 1714 to the rank of Concert-Meister, and you had no hope that any such clear key to the chronology of his Leipzig works would be found. This barely a year before you wrote me your never-to-be-forgotten letter of 9 March 1957. In it you raised a question („wenn sie auch noch so blödsinnig ist“, as you with a proper show of diffidence phrased it) that changed my world, and was to change yours and that of Bach scholars everywhere. But I am getting ahead of my story.

The performing parts of the Johannes-Passion were a maze from which we spent many fascinating but frustrating hours trying to find a way out.

I remember particularly our trying to unravel together the tangle of deletions, substitutions, and restorations in the Johannes-Passion involving „Ruht wohl“; „Ach Herr, laß dein' lieb' Engelein“; and „Christe, du Lamm Gottes“, in what Rust had called the *b* parts. There were brackets, indications reading "*Sequitur Choral Christe du Lamm Gottes*", crossings-out (in some cases double), markings reading "*Gilli*" and "*dieser Choral gilli*" for the same movement in the same part, etc. At one point I thought I could trace seven separate layers, and irreverently suggested that the Matthäus-Passion must be spurious, since Bach had never had time to perform any Passion but BWV 245.

The tangle was still a thicket after months more of work in Göttingen and at the Staatsbibliothek in Unter den Linden. In 1956–1957, I devoted a second two-semester seminar to it. After the students had familiarized themselves with the original parts and some of the simpler problems they presented, I assigned to each of them one of the places in the Passion where Bach had used different movements on different occasions. They were each to try to establish the order in which the various substitutions for the original movements and restorations of them had taken place. One after another they came in with lengthy reports of all the confusing and apparently mutually contradictory details, and each confessed that he had been unable to devise a hypothesis that would explain the contradictions.

Dramatically timed, your letter asking the „blödsinnige Frage“ came on the day before the last of these seminar reports was due. You reported that you had now examined all the manuscripts known to you in which the handwriting of "Anonymus III" appeared. (While this copyist was still anonymous, he bore many names: at this time you were still using the old appellation given him by Wackernagel; he had been called by me "Schreiber A"; he was to be called „Anonymus 3" by Paul Kast and Georg von Dadelsen, and „Hauptschreiber A" by you, until Werner Neumann in 1967 identified him as Johann Andreas Kuhnau.) You had observed that he used two forms of c-clef and two forms of single 16th-notes. In some works only the one form of each occurred; in some works, only the

other; and in very few works, both. It was clear to you that one form was earlier than the other, and that those few manuscripts in which both forms occurred doubtless belonged to an interim period. From datings on some works you were able to say which form seemed to be the earlier one, and this was partly confirmed by what seemed to be known about the watermarks of the papers on which the different forms appeared. But there was a problem, which you outlined as follows:

Es treten in allen 23 Handschriften mit dem Wasserzeichen IMK nur die frühen Formen auf; [das Papier mit dem] Halbmond enthält teils frühe, teils späte Formen, während die [Papiere mit den] sicher datierbaren späten Wasserzeichen nur die späten Formen aufweisen. Alles würde wunderbar zusammentreffen, wenn nicht die Johannes-Passion wäre:

The difficulty was that in the Johannes-Passion the early form does not occur, and the later form occurs only on what had ever since Spitta been thought to be Cöthen paper, with a watermark showing crossed swords. But, you wrote:

Wenn ich unabhängig von allen bisherigen [die Johannes-Passion betreffenden] Erkenntnissen nur Wasserzeichen und Schreiber betrachte, müßte ich sagen: Die Stimmen mit dem Wasserzeichen IMK sind die ältesten der Passion, während die von Anonymus III geschriebenen Stimmen des Wasserzeichens mit den gekreuzten Schwertern erst in [späteren] Jahren hinzugekommen sind. Aber das ist nach allem, was wir bisher besprochen hatten, vollendeter Blödsinn. Können Sie mir wohl aus dieser Schwierigkeit helfen?

Of the unconscious irony in this last question I had a suspicion as soon as I read it. I showed your letter at once to Paul Evans, who was scheduled to make his seminar report the next day. He, too, saw at once the importance of the point you had raised, but we agreed that he should read his report as he had written it, and introduce your letter only in the discussion that would follow. For he, like all the others, had found it impossible to explain the sequence of events reflected in the sources.

So we saved our surprise until he had made his report. Then I read your letter aloud. I wish you could have been here to see the faces light up as each student realized how your new hypothesis would clear up his confusion. Once we had considered it we wondered how we could have missed it all along. „Sie mir aus dieser Schwierigkeit helfen“ indeed!

The work with the parts in Kuhnau's handwritings was only your first step toward the New Chronology: at this time, you were still inclined to date the later forms of Kuhnau's handwriting in the 1730's. It was only as you worked with the many other handwritings of the parts that you were able to arrange most of the extant vocal works in precise chronological order, and show that the latest extant manuscript containing the handwriting of „Hauptschreiber A“ could not have been written after 1727. Meanwhile you had, as you wrote me less than six weeks later, been

working at a hypothetical reconstruction of some of the cantata-Jahrgänge referred to in the Obituary by C. P. E. Bach and J. F. Agricola and in Forkel's biography. One Jahrgang had been reconstructed in 1906 by B. F. Richter. Its core was easy to recognize, consisting as it did of 44 chorale-cantatas of which the Thomas-Schule possessed the performing parts. The Town Council had bought them, after Bach's death, from Anna Magdalena. The scores had been lent by Wilhelm Friedemann to Forkel, who had referred to them as „den ganzen Jahrgang . . . und zwar gerade denjenigen, der so vortrefflich über Chormelodien gearbeitet ist.”

In the catalogue of Philipp Emanuel's estate, you had observed that all the cantatas listed could be sorted into three groups. Of one group, Emanuel had possessed only scores; of another, only parts; and of a third, scores „und einige Stimmen“. Arranging all these in the order of the church year, you saw that they could all be grouped in two Jahrgänge, for one of which Emanuel had apparently inherited the score „und einige Stimmen“ and for the other alternately the score for one church occasion and the parts for the next.

These were major discoveries. All of the data had been available for many years, but it was only when you had the idea of putting them in order that they became evidence of important aspects of Bach's development. They then proved that at least as early as the division of J. S. Bach's estate in 1750, the cantatas had been arranged in separate series, each according to the church year. And when the evidence was put together with that of the watermarks and of the copyists' handwritings, it became clear that most of the works belonging to at least three Jahrgänge could be dated precisely to the day. Most surprising of all was the simultaneous discovery that except for some earlier cantatas that Bach had brought along with him to Leipzig and used there, virtually all the works in these three series had been composed for performance during his first three years in Leipzig, apparently at the rate of more than one a week.

So you had set another “egg of Columbus” beside the one represented by your chronology of the Weimar works, and dramatically disproved your earlier forebodings that your brilliant musicological future was behind you. Meanwhile and independently, Georg von Dadelsen, working along similar lines with several of his fellow students of Walter Gerstenberg in Tübingen, but devoting primary attention to the development of Bach's own handwriting over the years, had come to substantially the same conclusions as yours. With the church calendar, some fixed datings on manuscripts and documents, and the mass of data behind your conclusions, including thousands of pages providing the evidence of scores of handwritings and dozens of watermarks, the chances were infinitesimal that any hypothesis differing substantially from yours and Dadelsen's could take its place. And many discoveries since the publication of your 1957 Bach-Jahrbuch article, though minor in comparison with yours, have confirmed your brilliant deductions.

While they solved many problems, they of course raised new ones. Why had Bach, after producing church works at such a furious rate during his first Leipzig years, suddenly stopped? What had principally occupied him in the 1730s and '40s? Had he really thought of his church compositions as "nur ein Onus", and what then became of the „fifth Evangelist“ concept? How could Spitta, followed by Schweitzer and Pirro in dating the chorale cantatas mainly from 1735 to 1744, have gone so wrong? Above all, what conclusions must one draw about the relations of internal to external evidence from the fact that Spitta, who had seemed to have an unrivalled knowledge and understanding of Bach, had written these words?

Wer von dieser Stelle aus auf Bachs Leben zurückblickt, dem offenbart sich die Geschlossenheit seiner künstlerischen Entwicklung in greifbarster Gestalt. Von dem geistlichen Volkslied nahm er in früher Jugend seinen Ausgang und mit ihm endete er auch. Er wußte, daß alles, was er auf dem Gebiete der Kirchencantate schaffen durfte, innerlich mit dem Choral und den durch ihn bedingten Kunstformen zusammenhing. Es mußte ihm als das würdigste Ziel erscheinen, seiner Kraft diejenige Richtung zu geben, daß sie sich in einer Form auslebte, welche den Choral in seiner größtmöglichen künstlerischen Erweiterung darstellt. Wohl entbehren die Choralcantaten jener Mannigfaltigkeit der Gestalten, die in ihrem üppig aufquellenden Drange während der früheren und mittleren Lebensperiode zur höchsten Bewunderung hinreißt. Aber die gelassene Beherrschung aller Kunstmittel, der tiefe männliche Ernst, der ihnen aufgeprägt liegt, konnten nur als Frucht eines solchen überreichen Kunstlebens hervorgehen . . .

It was natural that some people should have been attached to this very plausible hypothesis, and reluctant to give it up. Some implausibilities were nicely detailed by you in a text of which only a bowdlerized version has hitherto been published, and of which – ever faithful to the Richtlinien of critical editing – I present in an Anhang the first edition of its [almost] original form.

Over the years, with the combination of brilliance, scholarly scruple, and humor that your letters about the New Chronology and this Capriccio demonstrate, you helped me through the "enigmas wrapped in enigmas" that the sources of the Johannes-Passion presented. And, with only the occasional impatience that highlighted your long-term patience, you bore with me while I stubbornly resisted all attempts to set a date by which NBA II/4 would be ready for printing. Here, too, irony dogged our footsteps. I had vowed not to release the final proofs of the score until the final proofs of the Kritischer Bericht could also be released. But even I was not stubborn enough to stick by my vow, when, having delivered almost half of the latter, the typesetter went bankrupt. To you this was only one of the multitude of crises that your work for the NBA has brought you, for which everyone interested in Bach will forever be in your dept.

But in closing this already overlong epistle I prefer to remind you of the many joyful occasions we have had together in Göttingen, Lüneburg, Berlin,

Ansbach, Arolo, New York, Princeton, Paris, Bovenden, Locarno, and once again Paris. May they be oft repeated, and may you for many more years continue to be the greatly admired and cherished friend of

Arthur Mendel.

### Anhang

#### [Capriccio sopra la lontananza dell' ipotesi diletteissimo]

Hauptkopist A, der Hauptschreiber nahezu sämtlicher Choralkantaten des Jahrganges (auch von BWV 116!) und inzwischen auf Grund eines Bewerberbeschreibens in Grimma von Werner Neumann identifiziert, ist Alumnus der Thomasschule von 1718 bis 1728. 1729 bewirbt er sich in Grimma als Kantor der Stadtschule, nachdem er bereits seit 1725 keine regelmäßigen Kopistendienste bei Bach mehr geleistet hat. Zweiunddreißigjährig, „um 1740“ packt ihn eine unstillbare Sehnsucht nach seiner alten Schule, und weil er nicht allein kommen will, stiftet er eine Reihe alter Schulkameraden, die Hauptkopisten B und C, die Anonymos I p und II e, die er alle noch vom Schreiben der Stimmen zur Johannes-Passion aus dem Jahre 1724 (1723?) gut kannte, und Anon. I o, der in einem der folgenden Jahre . . . an derselben Passion geschrieben hatte, an, mit ihm zu Bach zu gehen und sich – nachdem alle von ihnen in den sicher datierbaren Werken von 1729, 1731, 1732, 1733, 1734 usw. nicht mehr in Erscheinung getreten waren – nun wieder am Notenschreiben zu beteiligen.

Bach empfängt sie mit offenen Armen. „Ihr kommt wie gerufen; denn ich komponiere gerade an meinen späten Choralkantaten“, und gerührt von so viel Liebe zum alten Schulbetrieb (er hatte sie insgeheim immer bemitleidet, weil sie neben ihren Schulaufgaben noch so viel zu schreiben gehabt hatten), sucht er nun seinerseits, ob er nicht noch einiges Papier aus der alten Zeit wiederfinden könne von den Sorten, die er im ganzen letzten Jahrzehnt nicht mehr benutzt hatte. Wahrhaftig, da ist noch IMK-Papier, das wird auf die Kantaten 20, 135, 107 und 178 verteilt, und auch „Schwelter I“ (1723?) findet sich noch und wird vor Begeisterung gleich für „Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern“ aufgebraucht. Selbst Friedemann, der gerade auf Osterurlaub in Leipzig weilt (die Dresdener Kirchenbehörden sind darin großzügig), schreibt gleich mit, und nun ist des Schwärmens in alten Zeiten kein Ende! Daß manchen von ihnen die Schulbänke doch nicht mehr recht passen wollen, wird mit Humor getragen. Nur Rektor Ernesti ist etwas erstaunt über die seltsame Gesellschaft, die sich da in seiner Schule herumtreibt, und brummt etwas vor sich hin, das klingt wie „. . . alle nur Bierfiedler geworden . . .“

[A. D.]

