

Bach: Unrecognized Genius

by Lucia McKelvey

"When Johann Sebastian Bach died in 1750, no wave of grief swept across musical Europe. No commemorative concerts were held. His employers, the city council of Leipzig, met next day and settled the appointment of his successor, but they passed no motion of regret at Bach's death nor any message of condolence to his widow. The man in charge of their church music, a rather stubborn character, had died; that was all."

Bach's grave was lost among the nameless until scientific researchers found it. Anatomists and anthropologists identified an exhumed body and it was re-buried inside the Church of St. John in Leipzig. All this 200 years after his death!

During his lifetime Bach's works were recognized as masterpieces by some. Others, however, called his compositions "turgid and confused." He was also labeled "conservative" because he resisted incorporating the more secular strains (Italian Opera, French dance music) into his scores. He was also reprimanded by his employers for making surprise variations in the chorals and "intermixing divers strange sounds so that thereby the congregation was confounded."

He was, however, sought out by Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, who was an accomplished musician himself. As a result of Bach's visit to Frederick's court, one of Bach's greatest works emerged—the *Musical Offering*. It is said Frederick "challenged" Bach to perform a Fugue in six parts. He proceeded to improvise one on the organ, and after he returned home, put it down on paper and dedicated it to Frederick.

Douglas Hofstadter, in his book, *Godel, Escher and Bach. An Eternal Golden Braid*, says that improvising a six-part fugue is like the "playing of 60 simultaneous blindfold games of chess, and winning them all! To write a decent fugue of even two voices based on it would not be easy for the average musician."

This computer scientist goes on to talk about Bach's genius by describing the *Canon per Tonos*, also part of the *Musical Offering*: "What makes this canon different from any other is that when it concludes—or rather seems to conclude—it is no longer in the key of C minor, but is now in D minor . . . this "ending" ties smoothly onto the beginning again; thus one can repeat the process and return in the key of E, only to join again to the beginning . . . magically, after exactly six such modulations (key changes), the original key of C minor has been restored. All the voices are one octave higher than they were at the beginning . . . the implication (being) that this process could go on ad infinitum."

This would be an example of what Hofstadter calls a "Strange Loop." The Strange Loop phenomenon occurs whenever, by moving upward (or downward) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves

right back where we started." Just as Bach's music can loop around back to its beginning, like a snake eating its own tail, so do M.C. Escher's drawings. Anyone familiar with them could agree with Hofstadter's description: "The genius of Escher was that he could not only concoct, but actually portray, dozens of half-real, half-mythical worlds, worlds filled with Strange Loops, which he seems to be inviting his viewers to enter."

"Implicit in the concept of Strange Loops is the concept of infinity, since what else is a loop but a way of representing an endless process in a finite way? And infinity plays a large role in many of Escher's drawings. Copies of one single theme often fit into each other, forming visual analogues to the canons of Bach."

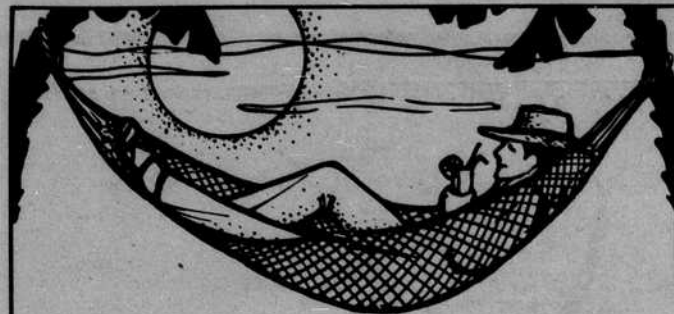
This Strange Loop phenomenon also appears in mathematics (Godel), religion, psychology and in other artistic works. There seems to be a loop itself connecting certain modern geniuses. From different angles they seem to be describing the same paradox: the beginning is the end, the end is the beginning!

And so, Bach's legacy lives on. Each age will probably see him in a different light. Being a church composer and conductor for the city, his works were always available to the people, as opposed to, say, Handel, who was a court composer. After marrying the second time, he searched for a "new home near good Lutheran schools." This would be important to a man with 18 children. The Bach family (before and after J.S.) contributed over 50 musicians to the world. As a musical dynasty, it is unrivaled.

J.S. Bach's choral works carried the genre to its "ultimate and unsurpassable height." The instrumental works were carried to a "spiritual and artistic depth which could not be fathomed by his contemporaries."

Helmuth Rilling, artistic director and conductor of the Oregon Bach Festival, has met with worldwide acclaim for his interpretations of Bach's music. The two-week festival will be attended by over 200 students and performers. Thousands will visit Eugene between June 16-30 to hear this outstanding collection of musicians. An intense schedule of concerts and workshops will keep them all very busy, and many of us, entertained. There will be concerts in the Hult Center and Beall Hall at noon, 5:15 pm and 8:30 pm nearly every day. Special events include UO classes, a Lecture Series, the Bach Supper (the annual benefit picnic on June 22), and the Bach Run (on June 16). Six Master Classes will also be taught. Various concerts will also be re-broadcast as well as broadcast live during the Festival on KWAX 91 FM.

*Quote taken from *A Short History of Western Music* by Arthur Jacobs.



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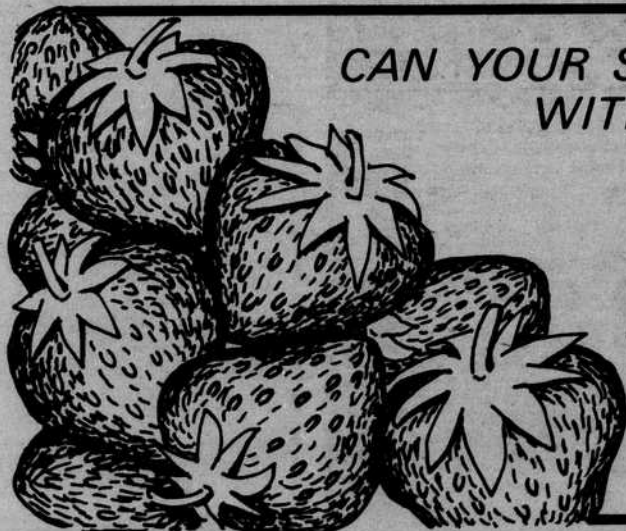
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