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JOHANN SEBASTIAN AND ME

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My first encounter with Johann Sebastian was unconscious. No one can attend Christian church services without exposure to Bach's glorious music. Several of the great hymns sung in St Andrew's Anglican Church at Strathfield in Sydney, when I was growing up, were written to music composed by J S Bach. There his name was in the *Hymns Ancient and Modern* that accompanied me on my early spiritual journey. Bach, immortal Bach.

Back in those days, in the 1940s and 1950s, one of the radio stations in Sydney, 2SM (for St Mary's), had a recording of the *Angelus* at 6 a.m., noon and 6 p.m. It was a constant reminder of the separation of Christendom into Protestants and Roman Catholics. The words of the *Angelus* were intoned by Norman Thomas, Cardinal Gilroy, the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney. For me, it was a mysterious prayer. First of all, brought up in the Protestant tradition of Sydney Anglicanism, the invocation to Mary to "pray for us" - a notion of invocation to a dead sainted Mother of Christ which was not part of my instruction. Then, the prayer to Mary at all, given

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that Protestants regarded this as an heretical Roman accretion to the Trinity: itself always something of a puzzle.

But these "errors", according to my spiritual beliefs, were entirely forgiven when, in the musical background to the Cardinal's prayers, I could hear a marvellous solo on the organ of St Mary's Cathedral in Sydney. The solo, which I later discovered to be the Chorale by J S Bach, *Jesu Joy of Man's Desiring*, was alone worth waiting for, listening to and contemplating. Nothing like Bach's music to get the listener in, the mind working on spiritual things.

Then, in 1965, I made my life-altering discovery. Attending a meeting of the National Union of Australian University students at the University of Western Australia in Perth, I stole out of the earnest student debates in the Guild of Undergraduates into the Winthrop Hall. In that marvellous space, so strong and confident, I came upon a choir in the midst of rehearsals. I sat there, entranced by the glory of the music and the mood it engendered. The choir were rehearsing the *St John Passion*. Over and over again, they were taken through the final Chorale ("*Ruht wohl, ihr heiligen Gebeine*"). It is a rather melancholy piece, contemplating the suffering and death of the Saviour. But somehow, Bach's magnificent music seemed instantly hardwired to my brain. The trouble is that every time one meets a new piece in his prolific writing, it is impossible to get it out of the brain for days or weeks to come.

So it was with me and the *St John Passion*. I returned home to Sydney and listened on the Saturday night to the broadcast of the *Passion* on the ABC radio. I was convinced. Hooked, snared, converted. This was music that responded both to my own internal sense of harmony; but also to my spiritual tradition. It was strong, melodious and faithful. I am sure for many unbelievers, and people of different faiths too, J S Bach strikes a similar chord. But for those brought up in the serious, rational and strong-convictioned tradition of Christian Protestantism, Bach speaks with a special intensity. For that was his Faith. There are no doubts lurking there. It is the music of certainty, order and conviction.

Since those days, my spiritual views have softened and I can now see the wisdom that is present in all of the world's great religions. (And also the occasional harshness and unkindness). But my affinity to J S Bach has never altered. Listening to his music takes my mind back instantly to those days of certainty and simplicity.

When I set up my own home in 1967, it was filled with J S Bach's music, mostly his religious pieces, especially the Cantatas. In the decades since, I have occasionally strayed into the works of other composers. In the bloom of youth, I discovered Annaliese Rothenberger's Romantic Songs of Schubert, Schuman and Hugo Wolf. Later still, I was introduced to the songs and symphonies of Gustav Mahler. A long affair with Chopin's *Nocturnes* and *Mazurkas*

followed. Then periods with Elgar and Berlioz. Always a long secret tryst with anything sung by our two Dame Joans - Hammond and Sutherland. But every time, I somehow return to J S Bach. I have tried to analyse why this is so. Is it just the rediscovery of familiar things of teenage years when the world seemed much simpler and safer? Or is it some genetic propensity to love Bach's harmony and discordancy; the mathematical precision, repetition and interaction with the deep emotions, always safely, even tightly, controlled?

Whatever it is, I will always be grateful to 2SM and the Winthrop Hall for bringing my mind into contact with that of J S Bach. Up there in the clouds, flying between the continents, like hundreds of thousands of people every day, I am listening on my Ipod to the music of this great master. Blessed is the human spirit that can leave such a legacy that helps define our human consciousness and requires us to strive to be better and bigger than we often are.

Recordings:

J S Bach, *Johannes-Passion* (St John Passion), Netherlands Radio Chorus and Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Eugen Jochum), Phillips, 289 462 173-2 (2 CDs);

J S Bach, *Cantata No 82 "Ich habe genug"* - Hans Hotter - EMI Classics 7-24356 28072;

J S Bach, *Cantatas: "Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen"* etc (BWV 56) - Thomas Quasthoff, Berliner Barok, Deutsche Grammophon, 00289 474 5052.

The Glen Gould edition of J S Bach's *Concertos for Piano and Orchestra Nos 1-5 and 7*, Leonard Bernstein - Sony Classical - SM 2K 52591-2.