JETS 62.3 (2019): 583–97

A RATIONAL AND SPIRITUAL WORSHIP: COMPARING J. S. BACH AND JONATHAN EDWARDS

MATTHEW RALEY*

Abstract: *Our world of connectivity seems to challenge spiritual formation, with technology pushing ever more distractions at us. Can spirituality survive this onslaught of information and entertainment? Concepts of the created order held by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and J. S. Bach (1685–1750) offer us a theology for this challenge. As a literature review documents, Bach's music reflects God's creation as a vast unity-in-diversity in which spirituality participates in the rational connectedness God has made. Edwards's thought portrays God's creation and redemption of the world as beautiful in its proportions and relationships, in which human rational participation is spiritual in nature. Their conceptions of the created order placed them in uneasy tension with Pietists in their respective traditions, who tended to value subjective spirituality against any formalism. By exploring these tensions, we may find the theological rationality of the eighteenth century serving a deeper spirituality in the twenty-first.*

Key words: *J. S. Bach, Jonathan Edwards, technology, rationality, spirituality, church history, beauty, philosophy*

The world into which my teenage sons are emerging is one of connectivity. Apps that still amaze Gen-Xers like me are routine for them. That is, they expect as a matter of course that code, animation, design, sound, and hardware will be woven together into highly functional tools to connect them with other people. These apps collapse space and time, expose what is happening far away, promote points of view that have been ignored, and empower a gig economy that makes life more flexible. Applied rationality is a large part of their outlook.

Christian teenagers, however, have not necessarily inherited a theological account of how to worship God in this cosmos of connectivity. Adults fret about teens' screen time, their obsession with image, and their distracted social behavior. Teen spirituality needs more introspection and less YouTube. Teens cannot engage in spiritual formation amid constant phone notifications. Adults may have bequeathed teens a theology in which the spirituality of glorifying God is divided from the objective world. The inward and the outward may be split. As often happens, cultural life has collided with Pietism.

There is an account of worship that speaks to our connected world, and that could help us integrate the priorities of applied rationality and of spiritual vitality. A comparison of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) will show a way to anchor subjective life in the deep structure of God's created order so that we can glorify him through connectivity.

* Matthew Raley is a faculty member at The Cornerstone Seminary, 710 Broadway St., Vallejo, CA 94590. He can be contacted at raleymatthew@gmail.com.

I. COMPARISON OF BACH WITH EDWARDS

Bach and Edwards were separated by language, vocation, tradition, and the Atlantic Ocean. They never met, and they were not aware of each other. Edwards was a colonial frontiersman who lived on the edge of the New World with a clear British identity. Bach lived at the center of the Old World, moving from one principality to another, an heir of German culture before there was a German nation. Edwards was a leading pastor, theologian, and philosopher. Bach was a leading musician, not only in performance, pedagogy, and composition, but also in technology. The two were on opposite sides of a deep Protestant split: Edwards was a Calvinist while Bach was a Lutheran.

Yet consider their biographical parallels. Both Edwards and Bach were at the top of their fields and enjoyed international reputations. In their fields, they both became the summative figures of their traditions. Edwards articulated Calvinist theology for the modern era and helped lead the First Great Awakening. Bach gathered the threads of European musical development and wove them together in a compositional system that transcended style. He remains the principal reference point for Western music. Both men had devoted followers who advocated their approaches posthumously.

Edwards and Bach also shared a metaphysic of the origin, purpose, and teleology of the created order. Both men's concepts of creation were central to their work, not merely inherited dogmas. Edwards wrote extensively about the connections between creation and redemption as biblical themes, using his arguments both to attack philosophical materialism and to teach Christian spirituality. Bach regarded music as a physical participation in the deep structure of God's cosmos, a participation that called for rational questioning and mastery. While such concepts were broadly shared in the Newtonian era, this intensive focus on the created order generated a profound coherence in their respective bodies of work.

Consider two of their overlapping priorities. Beauty, for Bach and Edwards, was a central quality of Jesus Christ. Human sin is hostility against God, an alienation that twists good into unrecognizable ugliness. Human beings only become virtuous when they respond to Christ's beauty with the adoration and love he deserves. God's grace empowers this change by forming an apprehension of his beauty in the human heart. George Marsden remarks on this shared theme: "Though Bach was Lutheran and German, he and Edwards were working in similar worlds of discourse where ineffable beauties that pointed to the divine were found in the harmonies of complex relationships."[1]

Edwards expressed a strong aesthetic response to God from early in life. His "Personal Narrative" featured many passages like this one describing his youthful spiritual practices:

> God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in everything; in the sun, moon and stars; in the clouds, and blue sky; in the grass, flow-

[1] George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 79.

> ers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. I often used to sit and view the moon, for a long time; and so in the daytime, spent much time in viewing the clouds and sky, to behold the sweet glory of God in these things: in the meantime, singing forth with a low voice, my contemplations of the Creator and Redeemer.[2]

Elsewhere Edwards says, "Those words (*Song of Solomon 2:1*) used to be abundantly with me: 'I am the rose of Sharon, the lily of the valleys.' The words seemed to me, sweetly to represent, the loveliness and beauty of Jesus Christ."[3] Edwards placed the conversion of the soul to Christ's beauty at the center of piety in *Religious Affections*, God's purpose for creation, and the nature of virtue.[4] Edwards may have been the most aesthetically oriented theologian of the modern era.

It is worth observing his specificity on this issue. The first part of the *Religious Affections* (published in 1746) argued at length that the Bible calls for this change of heart and that God will accept nothing else. He concludes the section: "So has God disposed things ... as to have the greatest, possible tendency to reach our hearts in the most tender part, and move our affections most sensibly and strongly. How great cause have we therefore to be humbled to the dust, that we are no more affected!"[5] He was specific that the affections did not come from physical senses or the human body, but from the mind. By contrast, the passions had violent effects on "the animal spirits" and left the mind "more overpowered, and less in its own command."[6] Edwards taught that the human senses needed mediation with human duty, a mediation that came from the conversion of the affections to the beauty of Christ. There was no place for cold, external religious exercise in his spirituality.

There is a rejection of worldly pleasures in Edwards's view of heart change. In his youthful "Diary," he asked "whether any delight, or satisfaction, ought to be allowed, because any other end is obtained, besides a religious one?"[7] Even though Edwards concluded that such pleasures could be allowed, he nonetheless viewed pleasure as suspicious because of its connection with the passions. In "Images of Divine Things" (No. 195), he said, "We can't go about the world but our feet will grow dirty. So in whatever sort of worldly business men do with their hands, their hands will grow dirty, and will need washing from time to time, which is to represent the fullness of this world of pollution."[8] Edwards's hostility to "the world" was broadly shared among the Puritans.

---

[2] Jonathan Edwards, "Personal Narrative," in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [*WJE*], vol. 16: *Letters and Personal Writings* (ed. George S. Claghorn; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 794.

[3] Ibid., 793.

[4] Jonathan Edwards, *WJE*, vol. 2: *Religious Affections* (ed. John E. Smith; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009); Jonathan Edwards, "Concerning the End for Which God Created the World," in *WJE*, vol. 8: *Ethical Writings* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 403–536; Jonathan Edwards, "The Nature of True Virtue," in *Ethical Writings*, 8:537–628.

[5] Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 2:124.

[6] Ibid., 2:98.

[7] Jonathan Edwards, "Diary," in *Letters and Personal Writings*, 16:763.

[8] Jonathan Edwards, *WJE*, vol. 11: *Typological Writings* (ed. Wallace E. Anderson, Mason Lowance, and David Watters; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 123–24.

Bach's emphasis on beauty might seem clear enough from his vocation. He descended from a line of Lutheran musicians who saw themselves as craftsmen devoted to beautiful sound. As a church musician, he was trained theologically, just as Lutheran pastors were trained musically.[9] Bach also worked extensively with pastors and theologians to craft the lyrics of cantatas he composed for public worship. Words like the opening of *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (BWV 1) are typical in ascribing beauty to Christ: "How lovely [*schön*] shines the Morning Star,/ Full of grace and truth from the Lord,/ the sweet root of Jesse!" Christ has "taken possession of my heart."[10] So much was part of the job of any church musician.

Bach's interest in theology, however, went far beyond this. Christoph Wolff documents that Bach's theological library was unusually large, and would have served any Lutheran pastor well, filled with many multi-volume works from Luther himself and from other scholars within the tradition. Wolff comments on a receipt from a book auction that survives:

> Although an isolated document, this receipt suggests that Bach may have gone about developing his library in a particularly systematic manner, that he was interested in the provenance of his acquisition, that he was willing to pay as much as a tenth of his fixed annual salary at a book auction, and most important, that he saw himself, if only privately, as a biblical interpreter in the succession and company of these eminent theological scholars. But for Bach, theological and musical scholarship were two sides of the same coin: the search for divine revelation, or the quest for God.[11]

The only theological work Bach owned that comes down us is the 1681 edition of the Lutheran Bible in three volumes with extensive commentaries by Abraham Calov. It came to light in the late twentieth century, refuting assertions from some scholars that Bach's piety was merely cultural. With its heavy underlining and marginalia in Bach's hand, it shows his deep interaction with Scripture.[12] One annotation in particular has attracted scholarly notice. At 2 Chr 5:13, where the cloud descends on Solomon's temple when the Levites begin to play, Bach wrote, "When there is a devotional music, God with his grace is always present."[13] Behind Bach's performance and composition of music stood a powerful intellect that probed theological issues. Just as Edwards is one of the most aesthetically oriented theologians, Bach is one of the most theologically oriented composers.

The change of heart that Edwards emphasized is also essential to Bach's music. Robin Leaver traces Bach's personal spirituality to what he calls "pre-Pietism"

---

[9] Robin A. Leaver, "Music and Lutheranism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (ed. John Butt; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 37.

[10] Alfred Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach: With Their Librettos in German-English Parallel Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 666.

[11] Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 335.

[12] Leaver, "Music and Lutheranism," 39; Wolff, *Bach*, 334.

[13] John Butt, "Bach's Metaphysics of Music," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 54–55; Wolff, *Bach*, 339.

in seventeenth-century Lutheranism. In the throes of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), Lutherans sought refuge in "a more intimate spirituality." Books such as *School of Piety* (1622–1623) by Johann Gerhard, and new hymns with words by Martin Rinckart and melodies by Johann Crüger urged devotional warmth in response to God and warned that externalism was insufficient.[14] These pre-Pietist influences lead directly to Bach. For example, Bach owned five volumes of sermons by Heinrich Müller, a pastor whose mystic spirituality and vocabulary found their way into Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* (BWV 244).[15] Bach biographer Martin Geck notes the beginnings of the Lutheran cantata, a sacred *Konzert* based on a biblical text or a hymn, in the same seventeenth-century period: "The congregation did not want simply to receive God's word in passive devotion and respond in standardized forms like the Credo or in chorale; they wished to enter into a living dialogue with the divine message, and wanted this dialogue to reflect their dynamic and spontaneous emotional response to it."[16] This tradition matured into devotional dramas in Bach's church music, with personal affection for Christ expressed as in this stanza from Paul Gerhardt's *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden*, which Bach used in the *St. Matthew Passion* immediately after the death of Jesus: "When one day I must depart,/ do not depart from me,/ when I must suffer death,/ come forth thou then to me./ When in my fears/ thou hast my heart possessed,/ then snatch me from anguish/ by the power of thy fear and pain!"[17]

Another common priority between Edwards and Bach is their commitment to reason, which created troubled relationships with Pietist movements within their traditions. Though each man emphasized the response of the heart to God, they also contended with Pietists who placed an even greater emphasis on subjective spiritual experience. Both Edwards and Bach sought to ground personal spirituality in theology and reason, a priority that kept them in uneasy tension with those who viewed subjectivity as the realm of authentic experience.

While Edwards aimed *Religious Affections* and *Charity and Its Fruits* at cold externalism, those works and others were equally concerned with the abuses of "awakenings." Part Two of *Religious Affections*, for example, analyzed phenomena that are not signs of true religion. "'Tis no sign one way or the other, that religious affections are very great, or raised very high."[18] "'Tis no sign that affections have the nature of true religion, or that they have not, that they have great effects on the body."[19] "'Tis no sign that affections are truly gracious affections, or that they are not, that they cause those who have them, to be fluent, fervent and abundant, in

---

[14] Robin A. Leaver, "Religion and Religious Currents," in *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach* (ed. Raymond Erickson; New York: Amadeus, 2009), 123–24.

[15] Ibid., 125.

[16] Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach* (trans. John Hargraves; New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 277–78.

[17] Robin A. Leaver, "The Mature Vocal Works," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (ed. John Butt; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 106.

[18] Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 2:127.

[19] Ibid., 2:131.

talking of the things of religion."[20] Edwards showed that stirred-up emotions reduce to mere "enthusiasm" unless they flow from a genuine change in motivation. Points of this kind can be found in many works of Edwards throughout his life, and show his determination that the colonial awakenings not be dismissed as mere hysteria, and equally that they not *be* mere hysteria. But this position meant that Edwards was often rejected by the young New Lights even as he resisted Old Light rationalism. Paul Ramsey comments, "We may say that [Edwards's] ideas involve a greater sensibility than [Old Light Charles] Chauncy's rationalism could grasp and that his sensibility involves more of idea than the emotionalism of [New Light] James Davenport could allow. … Part of the tragedy is that neither extreme understood the genius of this transcending third position."[21]

Bach's relationship to Lutheran Pietists was similarly difficult. Just as Edwards's controversies with New Lights concerned the defining events of his pastoral ministry, so Pietistic controversies among Lutherans concerned the legitimacy of Bach's vocation. Was art music true worship or merely an external show—or worse, corrupt sensuality?

Like the New England Puritans, Lutherans were divided over the status of the visible and impure church, in which baptized congregants received the sacraments without necessarily living holy lives. Pietists taught that the true church purified itself not with the sacraments, but in small group meetings for the study of Scripture and prayer. The meetings were motivated by a six-point agenda published by Philipp Jakob Spener in 1675, which called for weekly meetings, holy Christian living, de-emphasis of theological controversy, and sermons that illustrated practical piety rather than making rhetorical arguments.[22]

Inevitably, the role of music in Lutheranism was debated along with other liturgical practices. Erdmann Neumeister, a pastor-theologian in Hamburg from 1715 to 1755, was drawn both to Pietist preaching and to elaborate liturgical music. Neumeister was an innovator who crafted a sacred cantata form based on the operatic recitative and *da capo* aria—a genre Bach would not only perfect but also raise to new heights. Bach used Neumeister's libretti for his cantatas 18, 24, 28, 59, and 61. The texts are filled with the warm-hearted devotion of Pietism, but in an artistic form that the Pietists detested.[23]

The terrain seems complex. For Leaver, Bach was not a Pietist but practiced a spirituality that was held in common between Pietist and Orthodox Lutherans. For other authors, like Jaroslav Pelikan, the personal devotion to Jesus that saturates the cantatas is a stronger link between Bach and Pietism.[24] Yet, Pelikan also points out that "Bach shared none of Pietism's niggling prudery about 'frivolous pleasures.' It would be impossible to square such an attitude with all the 'Allemanden,

---

[20] Ibid., 2:135.
[21] Ibid., 2:3.
[22] Leaver, "Religion and Religious Currents," 125–27.
[23] Ibid., 127; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Bach Among the Theologians* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 43.
[24] Pelikan, *Bach*, 57.

Couranten, Sarabanden, Giguen, Menuetten, und anderen Galanterien' that comprise part 1 of the *Clavier-Ubung*."[25]

For our purposes, it is enough to observe that Edwards and Bach both occupied a difficult middle ground between formalism and Pietism in their respective traditions. Their priority was a deep response of the affections to the glory of God in Christ. Yet their emphasis was equally on the theological and rational structure that provoked such a response—Edwards in the doctrinal and philosophical logic of God's created order, Bach in the physical and musical laws that God made in his universe. Neither man would permit a neglect of one priority or the other.

II. BACH AND THE CREATED ORDER

What did this rational priority look like in Bach's work? When Bach went to Cöthen in 1717, he began a six-year sojourn away from the courts of Lutheranism in a Calvinist principality. Prince Leopold hired Bach as *Kapellmeister* not for church music, which was sharply limited according to Calvinist strictures, but for completely secular purposes.[26] Leopold was like many German princes of the time in his devotion to the secular arts. Geck writes that Leopold wanted "to transform Cöthen into a court of the Muses."[27] The prince wanted those dances that Pelikan listed.

Bach likely provided weekly performances of instrumental music for Leopold and his court. The works that scholars confidently date from the Cöthen period form the heart of Bach's instrumental corpus: "the *Brandenburg Concertos*, the *French Suites*, *The Well-Tempered Clavier*, the *Sonatas and Partitas* for solo violin, and the *Suites* for solo cello (even if some of them may be of earlier origin), were performed at various courtly functions."[28] The purely instrumental music offers a look at his thinking about the large questions of the created order. For example, the "Chaconne" from the *Partita No. 2 for violin solo* (BWV 1004) is like a quarter-hour cosmos with its intricate variety held together by a repeated harmonic pattern—the ostinato.

Bach left no treatise, letter, or essay addressing these matters. As Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola wrote in their "Obituary" (published in 1754), "Our lately departed Bach did not, it is true, occupy himself with deep theoretical speculations on music, but was all the stronger in the practice of the art."[29] The treatise, for J. S. Bach, was the music. Don't go to a book. Go to the "Chaconne." But how can one understand his thinking without a theory in his own words?

---

[25] Ibid., 64.

[26] Geck, *Bach*, 99; Friedrich Smend, *Bach in Köthen* (trans. Stephen Daw; St. Louis: Concordia, 1985), 27.

[27] Geck, *Bach*, 101.

[28] Wolff, *Bach*, 196.

[29] Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach and Johann Friedrich Agricola, "Obituary," in *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (ed. Hans T. David; New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 307.

Research on this problem uses three approaches. In the first approach, scholars use inductive analysis of Bach's styles, genres, forms, harmonies, instrumentations, etc., to reach conclusions about his goals and worldview. The "Chaconne," for example, offers a look at how Bach designed individual movements in the larger schemes of sets, like the six sonatas and partitas for violin, and how he developed material within a movement itself. It is a case study in how Bach created a world of sound.

This approach yields a variety of conclusions. Robert Marshall argues, for example, that Bach was aiming at a universal style of music that invites players and focused listeners into a transcendent experience, belonging "not in a recital hall … but on one's own music stand. They are not so much meant to be merely 'listened' to, but to be played—and studied."[30] Another example of this approach is Geck's treatment of the "demonstration cycles" Bach composed in Cöthen, like the violin sonatas and partitas. He shows how Bach explored such fields as counterpoint, new technologies for tuning keyboard instruments, unusual combinations of instruments, or multi-voice writing for a single violin. These sets of pieces constituted a statement of "the fundamental skills of his art."[31] Wolff analyzes the editions Bach published of the same corpus and concludes that they have "symbolic implications. Bach's cyclic dispositions emanate apparently from the thought that the microcosmic order must be mirrored in a macrocosmic order in rational correspondence."[32] Wolff also analyzes Bach's transcriptions of Antonio Vivaldi's concertos, concluding that Bach absorbed a kind of "musical thinking" from Vivaldi's compositions, "nothing less than the conscious application of generative and formative procedures—the meticulous rationalization of the creative act."[33]

Friedrich Smend underlines an important theological issue in his examination of Bach's compositions in Cöthen, namely that Bach made little distinction between sacred and secular music. Bach would later appropriate many of the secular Cöthen works for sacred purposes in Leipzig. Bach's own music library "did not contain separate cupboards for the [sacred and secular] compositions; clearly the composer himself did not make that distinction, which today is regarded as so fundamental."[34] Smend says that there is no recorded instance of theological authorities objecting to Bach's use of secular music for sacred purposes in Leipzig.[35] (There were plenty of other controversies, such as the scope of his authority, the focus of his position, and the finances allotted to his projects.) In his reflection on these issues, Smend writes, "The complete unity of existence that for Bach was

---

[30] Robert Lewis Marshall, "On Bach's Universality," in *The Music of Johann Sebastian Bach: The Sources, the Style, the Significance* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1989), 70.

[31] Geck, *Bach*, 525–49.

[32] Christoph Wolff, "Principles of Design and Order in Bach's Original Editions," in *Bach: Essays on His Life and Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 358.

[33] Wolff, *Bach*, 170.

[34] Smend, *Bach in Köthen*, 137.

[35] Ibid., 158.

utterly self-evident no longer exists for modern man."[36] Bach did not have to choose between a secular or sacred cultural life.

A second approach to Bach's work examines the arguments of Bach's disciples, who sometimes wrote under his direction. For example, Johann Abraham Birnbaum's reply to Johann Adolph Scheibe's notorious attack on Bach's style in 1737 is a document that scholars believe Bach helped prepare and has become another important source of insight into Bach's thought.[37]

In a progressive musical journal just after Bach's fifty-second birthday, Scheibe charged that Bach would be admired everywhere "if he did not take away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a turgid and confused style, and if he did not darken their beauty by an excess of art."[38] Scheibe was referring to Bach's dense polyphony and the complexity of works like the "Chaconne" in contrast to the melodic style that was becoming more fashionable.

Birnbaum's reply gives us a view of how Bach understood his relationship to the created order.

> [Scheibe] contradicts the nature of true art. … The essential aims of true art are to imitate Nature, and, where necessary, to aid it. … Many things are delivered to us by Nature in the most misshapen states, which, however, acquire the most beautiful appearance when they have been formed by art. Thus art lends Nature a beauty it lacks, and increases the beauty it possesses.[39]

The artist's job is to improve the world. The layering of diverse voices in Bach's music, then, is both an imitation of the diversity and unity of nature, but also a rationalization of nature, a deliberate working-out of its potential. Polyphony is an improvement.

The third approach focuses on Bach's intellectual environment. Scholars reconstruct the cultural, aesthetic, and philosophical movements of the time and seek to place Bach in relation to them. The literature surveyed above regarding Bach's relationship to Pietism exemplifies the approach. Collections of interdisciplinary essays survey not only the theological but also the political, theatrical, and literary currents that affected Bach's work.[40] More specialized studies from fields such as dance yield insights into the cultural significance of Bach's use of forms like the "Chaconne."[41] Laurence Dreyfus's study of the meaning of "invention" in light of

---

[36] Ibid., 162.

[37] Johann Abraham Birnbaum, "'Impartial Comments on a Questionable Passage in the Sixth Number of Der Critische Musicus,'" in *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 338–48; Johann Adolph Scheibe, "Letter from an Able Musikant Abroad," in *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* (ed. Hans T. David; New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 338.

[38] Wolff, *Bach*, 1.

[39] Birnbaum, "Impartial Comments," 345.

[40] E.g. Raymond Erickson, ed., *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach* (New York: Amadeus Press, 2009).

[41] Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne, *Dance and the Music of J. S. Bach* (exp. ed.; Music—Scholarship and Performance; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

the tradition of classical rhetoric is another example of this scholarship, giving new tools for understanding how Bach thought of his own craft.[42]

An essay by John Butt is of special relevance to our attempt to understand Bach's concept of the created order.[43] Where many assert Bach's vision of the rational correspondence of music to the laws of the universe, Butt seeks to correlate that vision with the thought of Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677). Though Leibniz's philosophy reaches Bach's Leipzig through Christian Wolff (1679–1754) and Bach's associate Lorenz Mizler, Butt does not argue for their direct influence on Bach. Still less does he assert any theological connection between Bach and Spinoza—which Spinoza's pantheism renders impossible. Rather, Butt argues that "Bach's attitude to music, his way of musical thinking, closely paralleled the way in which Spinoza and Leibniz saw the world and its constitutive substance cohere."[44]

The parallels Butt describes are specific to the nature of matter, goodness, and divine immanence. Leibniz analyzed the created order in terms of what he called "monads," or simple, irreducible substances. The universe has an infinite variety of monads, arranged by God in a hierarchy with himself as the keystone. This view of substance exalts the particularities of creation without sacrificing their coherence: it allows the integration of diverse perspectives in a single creation. Butt says that Leibnizian thought "sums up a dynamic specific to Bach's music, where the tendency towards variety is constantly challenging, and being challenged by, the tendency towards order and unity."[45] Thus, when Bach writes an instrumental work like the "Chaconne," he views himself as expressing the essence of the whole created order in microcosm. The potentialities in the work's ostinato are to be explored in the particularities of each variation, just as the perfections of God are reflected in the particularities of the universe.

According to Butt, Spinoza's thought adds God's immanence to this structure. Spinoza believed that goodness was an individual's active progress toward reflecting the divine perfections. Genuine pleasure for the human soul comes from the process of performing what God has chosen him to perform. Butt suggests that Spinoza's view is a helpful way to understand Bach's devotion to musical composition and performance. As Bach composes the "Chaconne," ceaselessly tinkering with it, he is enjoying the process of reflecting God's perfection. When a violinist performs the "Chaconne," in Bach's view, he is giving life to that musical concept—another process of goodness in which God is immanent. Butt's correlation is helpful, as long as one maintains a distinction between a classic doctrine of God's immanence, which Bach held, and Spinoza's equating of God and nature.

---

[42] Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

[43] John Butt, "'A Mind Unconscious That It Is Calculating'? Bach and the Rationalist Philosophy of Wolff, Leibniz and Spinoza," in *The Cambridge Companion to Bach* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60–71.

[44] Ibid., 61.

[45] Ibid., 62, 64.

In such a view of the created order, there is no distinction between sacred and secular, but all of life is an interconnected unity. Music, therefore, is a crucial way in which spirituality pervades every sphere of life.

III. EDWARDS AND BACH

The outlines of Bach's concept of creation are well established in his work and in his cultural and intellectual context. Jonathan Edwards's theories about the nature of the created order are, in some ways, easier to examine because Edwards argued them in detail.

1. *Unity in diversity*. Bach's music bears witness that creation's unity in diversity is essential to its beauty. Similarly, Edwards's concept of beauty assumed unity in diversity because he defined beauty relationally. He wrote of "The Beauty of the World" that it "consists wholly of sweet mutual consents, either within itself, or with the Supreme Being."[46] He articulated a principle for evaluating the beauty of relationships in "The Mind":

> Some have said that all excellency is harmony, symmetry or proportion; but they have not yet explained it. We would know why proportion is more excellent than disproportion, that is, why proportion is pleasant to the mind and disproportion unpleasant. Proportion is a thing that may be explained yet further. It is an equality, or likeness of ratios; so that it is the equality that makes the proportion. Excellency therefore seems to consist in equality.[47]

"Equality" served as Edwards's aesthetic rule for reconciling diversity in complex relationships. Even further, Edwards found typology in complexity. In No. 154 of "Images of Divine Things," Edwards describes the intricacy of the greater and lesser "wheels" of bodies revolving in the heavens as a type of God's elaborate providence, admiring the complexity and coherence of the whole.[48]

This belief about the beauty of creation is foundational for a renewed theology of connectivity. If the diversity of creation is a good, then the diversity of individual human beings reflecting God's image is the apex of that good. The faith, hope, and love of the individual in relation to God and others is part of the world's beauty. Human potential is not measured by collective experience alone, but by the direct relationship each individual has to the Creator. The contrast with the totalizing, assimilating, impersonal power of Hegelian history remaking collective humanity is striking. This is a vision for relational vitality.

2. *God's immanence*. Bach's annotations in his Calov Bible show that he believed God to be present in his grace wherever there is devotional music. Edwards emphatically agreed that God is immanent in the physical world, arguing for divine immanence philosophically. For instance, Edwards did not define solidity the way philosophers usually did, as extension. Edwards defined solidity as resistance. For

---

[46] Jonathan Edwards, *WJE*, vol. 6: *Scientific and Philosophical Writings* (ed. Wallace E. Anderson; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 305.

[47] Ibid., 6:332.

[48] Edwards, *Typological Writings*, 11:104–5.

him, resistance was not a physical quality, but an act of will. Thus, he argued that God's mind is upholding every atom.[49]

Still, consider Bach's Calov annotations further. The composer saw musical acts as spiritual in nature. Did Edwards agree that human artists participate in spiritual realities through physical acts? This question calls for more caution. On the one hand, his "Personal Narrative" (quoted above) often seemed to merge the observation of nature with divine encounters. Edwards did not seem to bother whether his spontaneous singing in the fields was a form of participation with God. Rather, his singing was part of the encounter. On the other hand, Edwards argued that our perception of and participation in divine things comes only through the light of the Holy Spirit. Our natural faculties are not excluded, but the perception of God comes immediately from him.[50] It is more likely that Edwards saw physical things only as types, or images, of divine things, as he says in "The Beauty of the World":

> As to the corporeal world, though there are many other sorts of consents, yet the sweetest and most charming beauty of it is its resemblance of spiritual beauties. The reason is that spiritual beauties are infinitely the greatest, and bodies being but the shadows of beings, they must be so much the more charming as they shadow forth spiritual beauties. This beauty is peculiar to natural things, it surpassing the art of man.[51]

While Edwards agreed about the immanence of God in the created order, he likely would have rejected the idea that music was a medium of God's grace. He would only have accepted music as a type.

Both the agreement and the qualification on this point are significant for understanding how Bach and Edwards related to the larger Reformation account of human need and potential. God's immanent presence in his creation meant that human beings were not tied to sacerdotal trappings and sacred spaces to commune with God. In Christ, believers had unfettered access to God wherever they were, whatever they were doing. For Bach, in his workmanlike understanding of music, this meant that God was with the boy pumping air through the organ, with the voices of the singers, and with the gut strings on the violins, and that his grace was available through all these means because of Christ—the only priest. Edwards, however, reflecting English Puritans broadly, would have detected a residue of papal sacramentalism in Bach's statement. He would have resisted the interposition of anything fleshly between human beings and God.

Even so, the two men's emphasis was the same: human need is met by God directly. God is not distant. He is here. Again, their vision is one of connectivity.

---

[49] Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, 6:350–51.

[50] Jonathan Edwards, "A Divine and Supernatural Light," in *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader* (ed. Wilson H. Kimnach, Kenneth P. Minkema, and Douglas A. Sweeney; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999), 121–40.

[51] Edwards, *Scientific and Philosophical Writings*, 6:305.

3. *Improvements*. Birnbaum wrote on Bach's behalf that an artist should improve nature. Would Edwards have agreed that what is "misshapen" in nature can be improved by human artistry?

Edwards's comments on human artistry were rare. In "The Nature of True Virtue," he mentioned the beauty of a building, "gracefulness of motion, or harmony of voice," and also of "understanding and speculation."[52] But he passed on directly. He mentioned lively singing or affecting preaching, but only in connection with exciting a deeper heart response to God.[53] By contrast, Miscellany 108, "The Excellency of Christ," described one's being "charmed" by beauty "not under the notion of a corporeal, but a mental beauty." And when one observes the beauty of nature, which Edwards described at some poetic length, one only sees aspects of the beauty of Jesus Christ.[54] There was not much room in Edwards's rapturous accounts of nature for anything "misshapen." Nor did he have much interest in human improvements.

Would Edwards agree with a Spinozian concept of process—or at least with Bach's priority on perfecting his works, tinkering with pieces, and performing as a way of realizing a musical concept? Edwards certainly believed that God launched a cosmic process of realizing his glory and love in the created order. In "The End for which God Created the World," he wrote,

> He would therefore determine that the whole universe, including all creatures animate and inanimate, in all its actings, proceedings, revolutions, and entire series of events, should proceed from a regard and with a view to *God* [original emphasis], as the supreme and last end of all: that every wheel, both great and small, in all its rotations, should move with a constant invariable regard to him as the ultimate end of all; as perfectly and uniformly as if the whole system were animated and directed by one common soul: or, as if such an arbiter as I have before supposed, one possessed of perfect wisdom and rectitude, became the common soul of the universe, and actuated and governed it in all its motions.[55]

It could be that the process inherent in God's redemptive plan is one of Edwards's most central themes. He would likely embrace this aspect of Bach's thinking without reservation.

Again, the two men share a vision of the spiritual and the rational wedded in the processes of a connected universe.

4. *Diversions*. A painfully specific question remains. Would Edwards approve of Bach's "Chaconne?" Suppose one could somehow strip the French dance of its German bourgeois connotations in the 1720s. Suppose further one could separate it from a social context that Lutheran Pietists thought was characterized by vanity and worldliness—court events and bourgeois balls. Moreover, suppose one could position Edwards to admire the work's design and virtuosity without an instinctive

---

[52] Edwards, "True Virtue," 8:539.

[53] Edwards, *Religious Affections*, 2:121.

[54] Jonathan Edwards, *WJE*, vol. 13: *The "Miscellanies," a–500* (ed. Thomas A. Schafer; New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 278–79.

[55] Edwards, "The End for Which God Created the World," 8:424–25.

reaction to the rhythm, form, and mannerisms of a popular dance. If all those feats could be accomplished, then, one has to admit, Edwards never said anything against a chaconne.

IV. THE LEGACIES OF BACH AND EDWARDS

Bach's legacy continues to fuel the development of Western music. Mozart's reaction in 1789 to hearing a performance of *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* in Leipzig became typical of composers ever since: "Now there is something one can learn from!"[56] Across many styles, philosophies, and cultures, Bach is still the reference point for musicians—even transcending East and West. His coherent worldview and deep rationale for music has to be considered a primary reason for this legacy. He founded the soul's delight in beauty on the bedrock of how the external world worked.

Edwards's theological and philosophical rationale for the role of beauty at the macro-level of redemptive history and the micro-level of spirituality was equally coherent. Like Bach, he anchored subjective life in the structure of God's created order. Life in God's world was a unity, and God was immanent in his world, contrary to materialistic philosophy. Edwards had a category for human expressiveness and saw the need to adapt artistic means to ends, as is evident in his own rhetoric as a preacher. In particular, Edwards saw congregational and private singing as important in spirituality. Why, then, did Edwards's philosophy not yield an artistic legacy?

The regulative principle that restricts music in Calvinist public worship is not an adequate explanation. The court at Cöthen held the principle as a matter of conviction, yet Prince Leopold assiduously developed his orchestra and commissioned many of Bach's secular compositions. The later Kuyperian Dutch Reformed tradition also held the principle yet articulated a rationale for the arts that has helped ignite broader evangelical engagement today. Edwards's rationale for the role of beauty is just as strong as these two Calvinist examples, yet there was no artistic result.

Dane Ortlund suggests that Edwards "sometimes sounds like a latter-day Gnostic—implicitly commending the spiritual world to the neglect of the material world."[57] Indeed, there is a strong sense of neo-Platonism in Edwards.[58] It could be that Edwards's marked subordination of the physical world to the spiritual and his preoccupation with typology undercut any artistic legacy at a theoretical level. Even so, Platonic axioms alone would not explain the lack of an artistic legacy. There is a long history of Platonic ideas fueling artistic movements, from the high Renaissance up to the present day. Art scholar James Elkins, for example, argues that the

---

[56] Wolff, *Bach*, 463.

[57] Dane C. Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 186.

[58] E.g. Michael J. McClymond and Gerald R. McDermott, *The Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 413–16; Emily Stipes Watts, "The Neoplatonic Basis of Jonathan Edwards' 'True Virtue,'" *Early American Literature* 10.2 (October 1, 1975): 179–89.

religious presuppositions of the contemporary art world are Gnostic.[59] There is no historical reason why Edwards's Platonism should not actually inspire art.

Still another explanation might be that American Puritanism had no artistic heritage from which followers of Jonathan Edwards might have drawn. This observation may be accurate, but still does little more than kick the need for an explanation back to the previous centuries. Why, then, did Puritans not have an artistic heritage?

The best answer may lie in the similarities between Edwards and the Lutheran Pietists. While Edwards was in a middle ground between New and Old Lights among Puritans, it was not the same middle ground that Bach seems to have occupied among Lutherans. Bach, together with the other innovators of the Lutheran cantata, expressed Pietist spirituality in a form that Pietists condemned as worldly. Pelikan was right to say that the Pietist attitude against frivolous pleasures could not be reconciled with the dances in a Bach partita. For an explanation as to why Edwards's rationale for beauty lacks a corresponding artistic legacy, his Pietistic conception of worldliness serves very well. In such matters as a chaconne, Edwards's silence communicates best. Such things do not redeem the time.

If our theology does not root the soul in the structure of the objective world, then we create a split screen for spiritual life. Our subjective life has to look back and forth between an inner view of relationship with God and an outer view of distractions. Such a split-screen does not allow a rational account of how play, or any social or cultural connection, might glorify God. In the world of my sons—one of connectivity, globalization, and heightened emphasis on visual narrative—a spirituality that offers no rational connection between the intimate events of the soul, the macro-events of culture, and the eternal significance of Christ's Kingdom has a grave, even fatal, defect. My sons will participate in their culture—even if their spirituality requires them to have a guilty conscience about it.

This split-screen, however, is unnecessary in Edwards's account of the created order. Edwards did not believe in a divided world but a unified one. I propose that we would do no violence to Edwards's system by applying his rational and spiritual worship to media and technology. This kind of enterprise connects individuals globally, iterates toward greater and greater functionality, and unites the diverse strengths of visual animation, coding, hardware, sound design, and narrative in an app. It can also serve as a theological model of the world. It can be a rational and spiritual worship that both Bach and Edwards would recognize, and that today's heirs of the Reformation should recover—one that demands the appropriation of every aspect of life for the glory of God and the refreshment of the spirit.

---

[59] James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004).