

These days, it's hard to discover something new. History is thoroughly documented and highly accessible, and scarcely a topic exists that hasn't been researched by academics and amateurs alike. But a continuous search for answers is part of the human condition, and Benjamin Martin has set out to debunk one of the many mysteries of the past. The pianist-composer theorises about the encoded messages Bach left behind in his Well Tempered Clavier title page scroll.

The award winning musician – who was described by The Australian as “the best young talent for the new millennium” (2000) – tells CutCommon about his musical experiences, including attending the Juilliard School of Music, meeting Leonard Bernstein, and conjuring a new theory on a subject debated throughout academic history.

What was it like to study at the Juilliard School?

Juilliard was a great place. I was there at a real purple patch of time in terms of the other students, and I had a great time. All the competitiveness apparent at Juilliard is apparent at every musical conservatory.

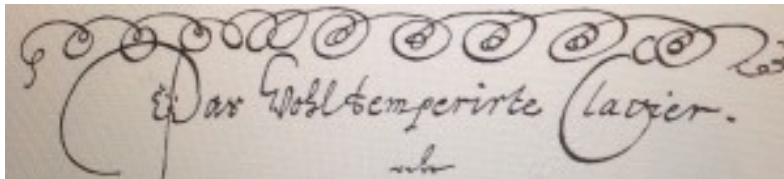
You met Leonard Bernstein at the Tanglewood Summer School, which you attended in '87 as a pianist and '88 as a composer. What was it like to meet the musical legend?

He was my childhood hero. I read his lectures at Harvard, and I still think he is the most remarkable musical influence.

Someone said that Bernstein was the only one who could bring off classical music as being cool without denigrating it. He would wear his Mahler t-shirts in a pop-art style with his stomach hanging out and his sunglasses, but he never denigrated it. He could bring it off really well. He just had an amazing gift.

You've spent a lot of time looking into Bach's Well Tempered Clavier. When did you begin to think there was more to it than meets the eye?

In terms of the Well Tempered Clavier, it started with those loops and scrolls and things on the title page. I am a Juilliard alumni, and one of the newsletters they sent to me quite a few years ago had different interpretations of those title-page scrolls offered by various scholars around the world. I was just looking at them and trying to figure: what in the world a composer (never mind that it's Bach) might be thinking by symbolising something in that way. To be honest, we will never know what they are or what they stand for. It's not possible. As with any hypothesis, you can't prove it or disprove it. Nonetheless, it just occurred to me while looking at it – the idea of symmetry and the relationship with the circle, and the three different types of symmetrical scales; one of them being chromatic, which is the ordering of the Well Tempered Clavier itself. I just thought that maybe it has something to do with a certain way of scales. I was never convinced that it had to do with a way of tuning and I still don't. I can't say it definitely has anything to do with what I'm saying either, but I think it is worth putting forward as a theory.



It was basically intuition. I thought that this seems to me an interesting possibility, because I don't put anything past Bach in terms of the scope of what he was capable of thinking. I think he had a naturally mathematical type of mind. It was just there. It didn't mean that he had to be doing mathematics per se, but I think his genius for conceptualising was so great that I wouldn't put such a thing past him. So it kind of went from there.

I was just connecting dots, but what else can you do? That's what you're left with. In a way the theory I was putting down, it is like an experiment. It's like starting a maze at the other end and working your way back. That's probably the best way of putting it. So you are making that leap to the other side and then saying 'well, actually, this does kind of add up', and the more you go the more it seems to add up and then you are at the start of the maze. It was a bit like that.

Tell me a bit about Bach encoding his name in there, using numbers to represent pitches and that kind of thing.

It's hard to generalise about those things without immediately going into theory. I think many people, myself being one of them, assume that Bach had an interest in gematria – when you associate letters and numbers. The letters J S B A C H in the old German alphabet add up to 41. B A C H adds up to 14. They are mirror images of each other. That's maybe quite a casual assumption, but there has got to be people who will doubt that or dispute that, and that's fine. Again, we can't prove it. I think that there was a numerological fascination with him that many scholars are investigating with his works and coming up with interesting theories. I'm agreeing that there was a fascination in terms of the relationship between the letters of his name and numbers and how they are associated with musical pitches.

So many assumptions are made with Bach so we will never really know, you know? He's just an extremely, an increasingly, enigmatic nature. Perhaps that's what happens with something, when you only start worrying about him over time and there's more and more written about him because actually we aren't sure of any of it. But there's an awful lot of interest being created there and it's worthwhile. He's a man worthy of a vast array of perspectives.

To quote James Joyce on 'Ulysses', he said he'd 'put in so many enigmas and puzzles that it will keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what I meant'. I very seriously think Bach may have thought something similar with those scrolls. Bach had a funny relationship with academic thinking and often was very much at odds with it. So you can imagine he might have thought, 'yeah, this will keep them busy. This will stir them up a bit'. I don't think he was so cynical though to scribble something that meant nothing. But I also think that he was well aware that they would cause quite a bit of confusion. And they have! The repercussions of each of these investigations have been huge. If there was one thing to take for granted with Bach it's his cryptic mind. We know that from the so-called riddle-cans in his Musical Offering. He loved musical riddles.

So all this conceptualising, how do you learn it? How do you practice it?

I am not a mathematician or even strictly any academic, I'm just a person who's very experienced in terms of conceptualising. It's something which I think you have to look at a lot, all the time. I think it's something that people who love mathematics do all the time. I mean, conceptualising takes practice and it's something that I am very practised at in my own way, and so the idea of conceptualising and putting forward a theory, it comes very naturally to me. You know, that question you have asked is hard to answer in a straightforward way, because I think it's just a passion in itself.

That's exactly why I asked you [sly chuckle].

To be honest, I think it's fun and games. How the abstract ever pertains to the real world, it's always going to be a hugely complex issue, but it is fun, right? It's always got a nerdy aspect to it, but who cares? It doesn't matter. I've just always had a passion for conceptualising things. I just do it. I'm drawn to writers, or composers who have a real gift, and by no means always musicians or composers.

Why did you do all of this research? Purely for fun?

Yes, it is that sort of fun marked with certain intent, a sort of curiosity. A passion, right? It really is. My main vocation, if you like, about being an artist is to contribute and to try to create interest.

Why is art important? I mean, it might sound banal, but seriously, someone should be able to ask and not just assume it as a given. Why does it matter? Why do we need it? I think perhaps people in the world and in this country feel like that. They think, 'well, what is all this for?' and it's a good question, right? A great creative mind is able to simply discover something inside us that without them we can't find, and yet we are looking for it. Bach, through what he contributed, enabled us to access something within ourselves which I think we cannot access without his aid. I think that's a lot to do with why we need great art. Simple as that.

Benjamin Martin's full theory will be published as part of CutCommon's Discover series. Keep an eye out for his writings, and a review of his new CD release. For more about Benjamin, go to www.benjamindmartin.com.