

Piano Concerto

THE PREMIERE OF A MODERN-DAY BACH

Robert C. Marsh, Music Critic, Chicago Sun-Times, July 12, 1981

J. S. Bach you know. And you probably know a few others: K. P. E. Bach, J. C. Bach, possibly even P. D. Q. Bach.

Add Jan Bach to the list.

He is not one of the sons of the master of Leipzig. He is a reformed 12-tone composer who for 15 years has lived and taught in De Kalb, where Northern Illinois University has one of the best-housed and best-staffed music faculties in the Midwest.

Wednesday and Friday the Grant Park Symphony played his piano concerto with Sheldon Shkolnik the soloist and Christopher Keene conducting. Thursday his work for speaker and orchestra "The Happy Prince" (based on the story by Oscar Wilde), opened the noon concert series at the Petrillo Music Shell. His wife, Dalia (who has sung with Chicago Opera Theater), narrated. It will be repeated Sunday at 1:30 p.m. as part of Mayor Byrne's "Kid's Fair" in the park south of Balbo.

It is high time Chicago learned about Jan Bach. For although he is not, in his own view of things, a Chicago composer, he is an Illinois composer (born in Forrest) and a Chicago area composer (you can drive to De Kalb in about 90 minutes). The rest of the world is becoming quite aware of his music.

At 43, he has been composing 36 years. The early pieces, he admits, are unimportant, but just as some little boys see themselves from the start as doctors, lawyers or firemen, he saw himself as a composer. Later he realized that he needed the special stimulus that comes from performance, so he learned to play piano and French horn - but, he insists, "composition was always first."

He took three degrees from the University of Illinois. In college, he became attracted to 12-tone theories and worked successfully in that style for 10 years, from 1955-65, winning a BMI prize in 1957 and an award at Tanglewood in 1961.

"Then, after joining the De Kalb faculty", he recalls, "I wanted to write more accessible things. I have not rejected serial music by any means. There will always be music written which only the music specialists will appreciate. I came from a small town in Downstate, and when I went to study in Urbana, I found the music of Bartok very difficult. So I can be understanding when colleagues in other departments here at De Kalb fail to share my enthusiasm for Berio or Crumb."

THE PIANO concerto, dedicated to Donald Walker (who also teaches at De Kalb), was composed in 1975 under a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. It represents the kind of work that will stop, or be greatly curtailed, if the conservative budget cutters of the present administration have their way. Why was the world premiere delayed until Wednesday last?

"I saw it as Walker's concerto," Bach explains. "He had helped greatly in my getting the grant, and I wrote it with his taste and musical interests in mind. So it really was his piece, and although he was

having finger trouble, I didn't feel I could rightly take it from him and offer it to another pianist. Besides, although the score was ready In 1975, I had to extract parts for the individual instruments and do a lot of copying, so the whole job really wasn't finished until late 1976."

The waiting didn't get bad until recently. Walker still felt unable to present the public premiere, so the offer of the Grant Park management was accepted and Shkolnik elected to learn the music. He's wild about it now. "Grant Park seemed a perfect platform for this score," Bach says. "It's intended for a big audience and written so they will like it."

The second movement, a series of nine variations that explore various musical styles, begins with William Byrd's "My Sweet Little Darling," which is to be played in a recording by the late Alfred Deller.

"I know there is an obvious question: What happens to the piece when that record can no longer be had? I'll worry about that later. At first I thought of having a singer, but I only wanted one soloist, and the fact that Deller is dead makes this seem for me even more removed from the immediacy of the live performance of the pianist. The key phrase is 'The gods bless and keep thee from cruel annoy.' There Is so much mindless violence in the world today, I was deeply moved by that thought. That's what the concerto is really about, if you can say it is about anything specific. It's an affirmation of all the things that stand against the irrational and violent element in the world."

THE THING that was not stressed in the performances this week is that Bach is a successful American composer of opera. In 1973 he entered a national competition for a new opera suitable for production by college students. He adapted a story by Edgar Allen Poe, "The System," composed a score and found himself the winner of a \$1,500 first prize. The work was performed In New York at the Mannes College of Music. He tried again entering a competition of the New York City Opera Co. for one act scores. Working at full speed, he just made the deadline. As one of three prizewinners, he got \$10,000, a professional production and national publicity for "The Student from Salamanca" staged in New York last October. "It was not a complete success with the press," Bach says. "This is an old-fashioned comic opera: a student, an old man with a young wife, basic elements of many plots. It was called a throwback to 19th century opera styles, but of course it was. That's what I intended it to be." Chicago may see it, eventually. A few possible producers are interested. Meanwhile, It is getting heard elsewhere - there was a fine production in Cleveland in November - an achievement for any new operatic score, especially one by an American.

"Now I'm working on a long opera based on Hugo's Notre Dame de Paris, In other words, The Hunchback of Notre Dame. I know there have been other operas on this theme and that none of them have been a success, but what attracts me is the variety of attitudes toward women revealed in the characters as the plot develops." So far, 14 scenes are planned. Bach thinks he may need help to get the libretto tightened and in shape, and he is looking forward to a sabbatical period this autumn to begin the music. De Kalb has an outstanding electronic music studio, he feels, but he has no attraction toward electronic music at this time. "I'm not sure I have the right kind of mind for it," he muses, "and the improvisatory aspect is alien to me. I like telling musicians what to do: Play a certain note In a certain rhythm for a certain length of time. That's really composing."

JAN BACH - DEKALB MASTER FINDS SUCCESS

Craig Wyatt, Sunday Magazine, Rockford (IL) Star, August 2, 1981

DE KALB - Jan Bach, who carries one of the most luminous names in the history of music, has a bust of Johann Sebastian Bach with a face that closely resembles his father. It offers the tantalizing possibility the two are related. In any event, the two Bachs share the calling of music composition. And, though the latter-day Bach is as much a man of his time as was his predecessors there are many parallels between them, from the musical forms they use to the shapes of their careers.

J.S. BACH made wide use of the fugue, a musical statement repeated like a round and restated with variations. The present-day Bach has used it, among other places, in the third movement of his piano concerto, which had a well-reviewed world premiere at a Grand Park concert in Chicago a month ago. The earlier Bach also made wide use of counterpoint, one or more melodic lines moving against each other. The present-day Bach not only employs it in his compositions, but stresses its importance to his composition students and in the music theory classes he teaches. J.S. Bach attained a measure of greatness near the end of his life, but for most of his career he composed as part of his job, organist and church music director in provincial cities. Jan Bach lives on the edge of the campus of Northern Illinois University, where he has worked and taught since 1966. But he has composed 48 pieces since college, ranging from short chamber pieces to full-length operas. Many are being performed, and commissions and other notice are coming in. "It's been a long, hard struggle," he said. "Thank God I've lived long enough to see some payoff to my labors."

JAN BACH, as was J.S. Bach, is "concerned with other things" in his music. The second movement of the piano concerto is built upon a tender Elizabethan lullaby, "My Sweet Little Darling." It includes the line, "The Gods bless thee and keep thee from cruel annoy," and inclusion of the lullaby, Bach said in his program notes, illustrates "the very real fears of all parents concerned with the task of raising children in America's currently hostile environment."

His "Happy Prince," an orchestral setting for an Oscar Wilde children's story spoken by a narrator, was also performed at a Grant Park concert in early July and has been recorded the Nebraska Sinfonia, with his wife, Dalia, as narrator. This "does not have the rose-colored attitude of children's stories," Bach said. He readily admits to using his music as "a soap-box." Besides bearing both the surname and the tradition of Johann Sebastian, Jan Bach deals with contemporary questions. The largest, for a composer of serious music, is how to be both original and communicative.

HE DOES NOT, Bach said, worry about some phrase in one of his pieces sounding like something else. For one thing, "If you look for them you'll find them." For another, "Maybe there aren't that many styles, given the 12 notes in the scale, and the instruments and articulations we use." In a world so saturated with music, "People will no longer deny the variety of music, and musical influences, they hear today," Bach said. "There is a danger of being derivative, but most critics have said my work stands by itself." Bach reached his conclusions about music and communication the hard way: at the end of an 11-year period of composing 12-tone pieces in the manner of Arnold Schoenberg and Anton Webern, pieces with their own logic, unrelated to conventional notions of melody and harmony. It began when Bach was in college, when "the Romantic tradition was being ostracized," he said, and it ended when "I had to admit to myself that I had no interest in it." "The pieces became so difficult. I began to think a piece should make sense from the first beat to the last, and not just be a

collection of notes. I wanted to realize the world in each piece, and make it accessible. "I was very naive. I thought the greatest composer was Don Gillis (a contemporary American), and I thought Bartok was a madman," Bach said. But then "I became heavily influenced by Bartok, and by Benjamin Britten.

Britten remains a key influence, Bach said, for the way he uses the earlier musical tradition. He quoted Britten: ... I learned when the language (of music) was not as broken as it is today." Music as communication has, in effect, an oral tradition, Bach said. "I want to communicate," he said. "Otherwise, there are all sorts of ways you can make a piece more difficult. "It's almost as though some composers are afraid to be understood," he added. He compared such music to "pure poetry," so pure in its structure and form that it has no meaning and cannot be comprehended. But the trend in composition today is toward simplicity, Bach said. "I think everybody, except Elliott Carter, is becoming more simplified in musical language. It's rare to find it becoming more detailed. "I don't flatter myself by calling myself totally original, nor totally obscure," Bach said. "I use fugue, counterpoint, other old forms. But 90 percent of it hasn't been done." Bach, 43, grew up in Forrest, a farm town northeast of Bloomington; his father was a lumber dealer. It was a "not particularly musical" family, but he began composing simple pieces, he said, almost from the time he began studying piano at age 6.

"IT WAS FRUSTRATING - there were few people who could share my interests," he said of his youth, but he took up violin and French horn, performed in school bands and had finished three piano concertos by the time he finished high school. "The first was in the style of Mozart, the second of Beethoven, the third of Gershwin," Bach said of these early pieces. He received his early violin instruction and musical guidance from L.J. and Carolyn Bert, who had worked and taught elsewhere and who "lived and breathed music in that little tiny town where I grew up." He still counts the Berts as his most important early influences, Bach said. He attended the University of Illinois, studying piano with Claire Richards, earning a bachelor's degree in composition in 1959, and a master's two years later. He enlisted in the Army and was associate principal horn in the Army band in Washington, D.C., where he played for John F. Kennedy's funeral. After a year of teaching in Tampa, Fla., Bach came to NIU and DeKalb. He finished his doctorate in composition 10 years ago. His composing career really began in 1957, he said, when he won the nationwide Student Composer Contest sponsored by Broadcast Music International. Pulitzer Prize winner George Crumb was third in the contest, Bach said.

"IT WAS BAD in a way, because for the next couple of years I had trouble composing music," Bach said of the contest. But he went on to share first prize in the Serge Koussevitzky competition in 1961. His other awards include a \$1,500 prize in 1973 for his first opera, "The System," adapted from an Edgar Allen Poe story; and one of three prizes in a New York City Opera Company competition last year for his opera "The Student from Salamanca," based on a Miguel de Cervantes story. For this, he received a \$10,000 award, a professional staging of the opera and national publicity.

Bach is now at work on another opera, an adaptation of Victor Hugo's "The Hunchback of Notre Dame." "It's very much grand opera, and it's been done many times, but it's not in the repertoire," he said. Here also his work is a bit of a soapbox. "It's relevant today - the attitudes toward women displayed, the archbishop's infatuation with the gypsy girl," Bach said, "I'm very much against violence. In this story the characters can't control their lust, and everybody gets killed."

OTHER WORKS in progress, Bach said, include a piece for contrabass for New York bassist Richard Frederickson, a short anthem for the organ dedication at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in DeKalb, and a 15-minute orchestral piece for the 75th anniversary of the community orchestra in Greenwich, Conn.

He counts the two complete operas among his major accomplishments. Another is "Spectra," his doctoral thesis, a large, complex piece built upon the verse constructions of the "Spectralists" Archibald Ficke and Witter Benner.

Bach works in a small book-lined study in the basement of the two-story ranch home he shares with his wife and their two daughters, Dawn, 11, and Eva, 3. Bach leaves the concert grand in the living room to the family and uses a small electric keyboard for sketching, a habit born of his experience with that "very unreliable instrument," the French horn. The composing process does not happen at the piano, however, nor is the composer limited to instruments he plays, Bach said. "I can't play more than eight bars of the concerto's finale." But "some of the joy is lost if you know beforehand exactly how it's going to sound," he said. "Sometimes you can make all kinds of new discoveries that way,"

Old J. S. thought the same way.