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“Good Hands”: The Music of J.S. Bach in Television Commercials

What do American Express, Wix.com, Healthy Choice, Papa Murphy’s Pizza, the American Cancer Society, Invesco, MetLife Insurance, TurboTax, All-State Insurance, and Time Warner Cable have in common? These (and more) companies have all used the music of J.S. Bach in television commercials in recent years. But why? And how? And which of his pieces? Is there a single theme or function among these uses? What can they tell us, if anything, about the popular perception of Bach? These are the questions that motivate my paper.

Despite Mervyn Cooke’s assertion that the use of Bach’s music in film is, among classical composers, “perhaps the most susceptible to contrasting interpretations,” my analysis shows that in the case of recent TV commercials, Bach has more or less taken on a single function: reassurance. It is no coincidence that half the companies listed above offer financial services, thus requiring a message of trust. But this has also been the case among some non-finance products. Furthermore, a particular subset of Bach’s works continually reappears in such contexts: the Prelude from the First Cello Suite and Prelude No. 1 from the First Book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

Drawing on Bach scholarship, screen music scholarship, my own empirical studies on the reception of classical music in television commercials, and interviews with advertising creative directors, I will demonstrate how and why Bach’s music has in commercials come to represent the sound of “good hands” (to invoke the motto of All State Insurance). In the process I will reveal, however, that what might seem on the surface to be an obvious association is actually the result of complex negotiations between aesthetic, semiotic, socio-demographic, emotional, and financial considerations.

