Non-Musical Performances of Bach’s Music as Acts of Critical Analysis

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Non-musical representations of musical performance – for example, illustrations of music making in painting and sculpture – are nearly as old as recorded history. This talk concerns itself with a distinctly more modern development, the non-musical (i.e., non-sonic) performance of music. This substitute mode of musicking has always been available, but in the past was constrained to occur in written and spoken word media such as literature, poetry, and rhetoric. Its purview and influence began growing vastly in the early twentieth century, however, as modern artists – notably those associated with the Bauhaus movement – explored commonalities of concepts such as space and line across multiple arts (Probst 2016). The teaching materials developed by Klee and Kandinsky for this purpose include spatial transcriptions of pieces by Bach and Beethoven. These visual graphics, which closely approximate score notation with occasional expressive flourishes, were intended to model the listening experience.

This paper will first situate these early non-musical performances of Bach’s music as well as later ones they no doubt inspired. In this category are included the animated segments from the Disney Fantasia films (1940, 2000), a sculpture at Leverkusen depicting stretto polyphony in a fugue from The Well-Tempered Clavier (Neugeboren, 1970), and the interpretive accounts of Bach offered in Douglas Hofstadter’s cognitive-philosophic-aesthetic treatise, Gödel, Escher, Bach (1979). Discussion will then focus on interrogating each performance with respect to its selectivity and motivations; is the goal commemoration, interpretation, hagiography, edification, or something else? The insights afforded through this process will enrich our understanding of how a performance of a work, in any medium, constitutes an act of critical analysis.
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