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Bach and the Dance in 20th-Century France

Through all of the political, economic, and artistic turmoil that beset France in the first half of the twentieth century, there was one surprising constant: J. S. Bach remained an influential model for French musicians. "Père Bach" was considered a source for many of the best attributes of French music, including "clarity," "lyricism," "refinement," and "objectivity." At a time of extreme French and German cultural enmity, Bach's hagiography required significant discursive acrobatics: according to various writers, his universality trumped his Germanness; he was "pre-German;" what he gave to Germany and the world, he originally learned from the French. When other German music was criticized or banned, Bach's influence was omnipresent in French concert halls, in French musical discourse, and in the new music of several generations of French composers.

Bach's influence also extended powerfully into French ballet, or at least into the numerous neoclassical scores composed by Igor Stravinsky, Erik Satie, Germaine Tailleferre, and Darius Milhaud, among others. Less common, however, were ballets danced to Bach's own music. In this paper, I contrast the enthusiasm for Bach's influence on new French music with the reticence of French impresarios and dancers to choreograph his works. Drawing on three exceptions when Bach's music was choreographed, most notably the 1946 Jean Cocteau/Roland Petit ballet *Le jeune homme et la mort* set to Bach's *Passacaglia* and *Fugue in C Minor BWV 582*, I argue that the case of French ballet illustrates the limits of French appropriation of Bach in the early twentieth century.