summit of perfection in art which, in the most intimate union of melody and harmony, nobody besides John Sebastian Bach has ever yet attained.

**CHAPTER 11**

*The Spirit of Bach*

When an artist has produced a great number of works which are all of the most various kind, which are distinguished from those of all other composers of every age, and have in common the greatest abundance of the most original ideas, and a most lively spirit which appeals to everybody (whether he be a connoisseur or not), there can hardly be room to ask whether such an artist was really a great genius of art or not. The most fertile fancy; the most inexhaustible invention; the most acute and accurate judgment in the just application, to every object, of the rich flow of thoughts issuing from the imagination; the most refined taste, which cannot endure one single arbitrary note, or which does not duly accord with the spirit of the whole; the greatest ability in the suitable use of the most refined and ingenious resources of the art; and lastly, the highest degree of skill in execution—all qualities in which not one, but all the powers of the soul must act in the most intimate union—these must be the characteristics of a real genius, or there are none such; he who cannot find these characteristics in the works of Bach is either not acquainted with them at all or not sufficiently so. He who does not know them cannot possibly have an opinion of them or of the genius of their author; and he who does not know them sufficiently must consider that works of art, in proportion as they are great and perfect, require to be the more diligently studied to discover their real value in its full extent. That butterfly spirit which flutters incessantly from flower to flower, without resting upon any, can do nothing here.

But with all the great and beautiful gifts which Bach received from nature, he would not have become the accomplished artist that he was if he had not learned betimes to avoid many rocks on which so many artists, perhaps as richly endowed with genius, are wont to split. I will communicate to the reader some scattered remarks on this subject, and then conclude this essay with the discussion of some characteristic features of Bach’s genius.

The greatest genius, with the most unconquerable propensity to an art, is in its original nature never more than a disposition, or a fruitful soil upon which an art can never properly thrive except it be cultivated with indefatigable pains. Industry, from which all art and science is properly derived, is one of the first and most indispensable conditions thereof. It not only enables genius to make itself master of the mechanical resources of art, but it gradually excites judgment and reflection to take part in all that it produces. But the ease with which genius makes itself master of some mechanical resources of art, as well as its own satisfaction and that of others with the first essays, which are commonly far too early looked upon as successful, frequently seduce it to pass over the first principles of the art, to venture on difficulties before it is fully master of what is more easy, or to fly before its wings are grown. If now such a genius is not led back at this period, either by good advice and instruction or by the attentive study of classic works already existing, in order to recover what it has neglected, it will uselessly lavish its best strength and never attain an elevated rank in art. For it is certain that great progress never can be made, nor the highest possible perfection attained, if the first principles are neglected; that people never learn to overcome difficulties if they have not overcome what is more easy; and, lastly, that no one can ever become great by his own experience unless he has previously profited by the knowledge and experience of others.

Bach did not split on such rocks. His ardent genius was attended by an equally ardent industry, which incessantly impelled him, when he could not yet succeed by his own strength, to seek aid from the models existing in his time. At first, Vivaldi’s violin concertos afforded him this assistance; afterward, the works of the best composers for the clavier and the organ of those times became his counsellors. But nothing is more able to excite the reflection of a young composer than the arts of counterpoint. Now, as the composers of the last-mentioned works were distinguished fugue writers in their way, who, at least, were mechanically masters of the arts of counterpoint, the diligent study and imitation of them gradually sharpened his understanding, his judgment, and his reflection, so that he soon perceived where he had left deficiencies and had anything to fetch up in order to be then able to make with certainty greater advances in his art.

A second rock upon which many a fine but not sufficiently cultivated genius has split is public applause. Though we would not so far depreciate public applause as the Greek who said to his disciple who had played with applause in the theater: “You have played ill, otherwise the public would not have applauded you”—it is not to be denied that most artists are led astray by it, especially if it is given them too early, that is, before they have acquired sufficient reflection and self-knowledge. The public requires everything to be human, and the true artist ought properly to make everything divine. How, then, should the applause of the multitude and true art exist together? Bach never sought this applause. He thought, like Schiller:
Kannst du nicht allen gefallen durch deine That und dein Kunstwerk.
Mach es wenigen recht, vielen gefallen ist schlimm.

(If you cannot please all by your art or your work,
Satisfy the few: to please many is bad.)

He labored for himself, like every true genius; he fulfilled his own wish, satisfied his own taste, chose his subjects according to his own opinion, and, lastly, derived the most pleasure from his own approbation. The applause of connoisseurs could not then fail him and, in fact, never did fail him. How else could a real work of art be produced? The artist who endeavors to make his works so as to suit some particular class of amateurs either has no genius, or abuses it. To follow the prevailing taste of the multitude needs, at the most, some dexterity in a very partial manner of treating tones. Artists of this description may be compared to the artisan who must also make his goods so that his customers can make use of them. Bach never submitted to such conditions. He thought the artist could form the public, but that the public could not form the artist. When he was asked by someone, as frequently happened, for a very easy clavier piece, he used to say: "I will see what I can do." In such cases, he usually chose an easy theme, but, in thoroughly working it out, always found so much of importance to say upon it that the piece could not turn out easy after all. If complaints were made that it was still too difficult, he smiled, and said: "Only practice it diligently, it will go very well; you have five just as healthy fingers on each hand as I." Was this caprice? No, it was the real spirit of the art.

This true spirit is what led him to the great and sublime as the highest object of the art. We owe it to this spirit that Bach’s works do not merely please and delight, like what is merely agreeable in art, but irresistibly carry us away with them; that they do not merely surprise us for a moment, but produce effects that become stronger the oftener we hear the works, and the better we become acquainted with them; that the boundless treasure of ideas heaped up in them, even when we have a thousand times considered them, still leaves us something new, which excites our admiration, and often our astonishment; lastly, that even he who is no connoisseur, who knows no more than the musical alphabet, can hardly refrain from admiration when they are well played to him and when he opens his ear and heart to them without prejudice.

Nay more: to this genuine spirit of art it is owing that Bach united with his great and lofty style the most refined elegance and the greatest precision in the single parts that compose the great whole, which otherwise are not thought so necessary here as in works the only object of which is the agreeable; that he thought the whole could not be perfect if anything were want-

It was only through this union of the greatest genius with the most indefatigable study that John Sebastian Bach was able, whichever way he turned, so greatly to extend the bounds of his art that his successors have not even been able to maintain this enlarged domain in its whole extent; and this alone enabled him to produce such numerous and perfect works, all of which are, and ever will remain, true ideals and imperishable models of art.

And this man, the greatest musical poet and the greatest musical orator that ever existed, and probably ever will exist, was a German. Let his country be proud of him; let it be proud, but, at the same time, worthy of him!