



MUSIC & THEATRE

5 MAY 2016

Hearing Bach re-imagined makes it clear why he still reigns supreme

Between the delights of reconstructed sonatas and Thomas Gould's "violin hair", the paradoxically intricate simplicity of Bach shone in Baroque Encounters.

BY [CAROLINE CRAMPTON](#)



It was the American billionaire and composer Gordon Getty, of all people, who best summed up the way we think about Bach. “I do not think that music keeps evolving,” he said. “It evolved through Bach; since then, in my humble opinion, all the innovations added nothing.” For many music enthusiasts, particularly those of early music, the paradoxically intricate simplicity of Bach cannot be improved on. Every time you hear an especially good account of the *Goldberg Variations*, or a rendition of an aria from the *St John Passion* that makes your heart hurt, you find yourself slipping further towards Getty’s point of view.

Yet the violinist Thomas Gould and the pianist-composer Gwilym Simcock staunchly disagree. Both often engage in unusual, genre-crossing performance, and both are as active in contemporary music as they are in the classical repertoire (Simcock is probably better known for his jazz work). For the eighth edition of the Baroque Unwrapped season at Kings Place this year, they turned their attention to Bach, devising what they describe as a series of “encounters” with the composer.

Wisely, they chose to begin and end their programme (21 April) with the unadulterated original – Bach’s *Violin Sonatas No 1* and *No 4*. What happened in between, as Gould explained before they started playing, was a “journey” from the known quantity of the first sonata into the unknown, followed by a return “home” to the *No 4*. Their interpretation of the Bach compositions showed some confident, nuanced playing, though the latent early-music purist in me did tut silently at the contrast of the bright tones from the Steinway grand that Simcock was playing with the mellow roundness of Gould’s 1782 J B Guadagnini violin.

What followed was a dismantling and reassembling of some of Bach’s best-known themes, most notably from the cantatas “*Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*” and “*Jesus bleibet meine Freude*”. Simcock found new, crunchy overtones to add to Bach’s harmonies and drew out melodies and syncopations hitherto only hinted at in the original. His relaxed and easy playing style belied the complexity of what he was doing. His manner and movement might have been at home in a jazz club, but the sheets of music he was getting through hinted at the scale of the compositional work that lay behind the apparently improvised work – a very Bach-type contradiction.

Gould’s playing was more adaptable and fluid. At times, he launched into flourishes reminiscent of a lead guitarist in a prog-rock band; elsewhere, he reeled like a fiddler in a folk group. Throughout, he used the full range of his instrument, double-stopping across the strings for a more rhythm’n’ blues-style passage, or interspersing delicate pizzicato while Simcock took the melody. Despite having what I can only call “violinist hair” and the stage demeanour that goes with it, musically Gould is affecting and engaging.

The communication between the two musicians was constant; the genial atmosphere they produced offered a welcome deviation from the rigid way in which early music is all too often performed. Both performers chatted to the audience at the start, explaining how the programme was going to work and what they hoped the result would be. Consequently, everyone knew what to expect and when you were supposed to clap. People felt free to vocalise their recognition of a theme they recognised emerging from the texture, or to clap spontaneously mid-piece at a solo passage they appreciated. The atmosphere was more jazz club than concert hall, and it was delightful.

For all the interest and originality of the Gould and Simcock “encounters”, the best thing you can say about them – and it really is the best – is that at times it was impossible to tell what was Bach and what was not. After such a riot of inventiveness, you might worry whether a centuries-old sonata might not sound flat or stale by comparison, but as Gould navigated the last flourishes at the end of the final movement, you wondered no more.

Caroline Crampton is web editor of the *New Statesman*.

SUBSCRIBE

This article first appeared in the 05 May 2016 issue of the New Statesman, *The longest hatred*



RELATED ARTICLES



Fans before bands: exploring the roots of punk at the British Library



The perfect musical formula for winning Eurovision – and why the UK is way off the mark



“I’m done taking pictures”: Justin Bieber, fandom and mental health

ADVERTISEMENT



FILM 18 MAY 2016

Why Hollywood whitewashing isn't always racist

All of acting is pretending – so why do we demand that a character's race be "real"?

BY [YO ZUSHI](#)



It took Steven Spielberg eight years to get *Ghost in the Shell* into production. His film company, DreamWorks, acquired the rights to adapt the cult Japanese science-fiction comic for a Western audience in 2008. The project was always a gamble: its themes are overtly existential and much of the plot is little more than an excuse to pontificate about the nature of consciousness. Yet Scarlett Johansson's casting in the lead role – as Major Kusanagi, a hacker-hunting cyborg – was a coup, and financial backers were lured by her star power. The money men were happy.

Online campaigners, however, were not. By the time the first image of Johansson as the Major was released last month, they were demanding: "Stop whitewashing Asian characters!" A petition under that slogan has

attracted more than 101,000 signatures.

“DreamWorks could be using this film to help provide opportunities for Asian-American actors,” they said. The comic-book writer Jon Tsuei tweeted that *Ghost in the Shell* was an “inherently Japanese story”, and that the choice of actors represented “the erasure of Asian faces”.

It soon emerged that DreamWorks had attempted to counter claims of racially dubious casting by using digital effects to make a white “background character” seem yellow – but this experiment was abandoned and the actress Constance Wu quickly mocked the move as “blackface employed on Asians”.

Hollywood has a problem with representation – as this year’s “all-white” Oscars demonstrated – and anger over whitewashing is grounded in the palpable paucity of prominent minority figures in the industry. When characters written as Egyptian (as in Alex Proyas’s *Gods of Egypt*), Native American (Joe Wright’s *Pan*) or part-Chinese and Hawaiian (Cameron Crowe’s *Aloha*) are played by the conspicuously white Rufus Sewell, Rooney Mara and Emma Stone, respectively, it’s no wonder that minority activists get angry.

Yet their anger seems misplaced. While derisive “yellowfacing” in the manner of Mickey Rooney’s I Y Yunioshi in the 1961 film *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* should be condemned as racist, the kind of race-blindness that Johansson’s casting as Kusanagi represents feels benign to me – even progressive.

It’s worth thinking back to a similar uproar in 2013, when Benedict Cumberbatch played Khan Noonien Singh in *Star Trek Into Darkness*. At the time, Christian Blauvelt of hollywood.com complained that the character had been “whitewashed into oblivion”. Khan was a Sikh from northern India and the film-makers, he argued, should have chosen “an Indian actor” for the role. The io9 blogger Charlie Jane Anders agreed: “Khan is one of the most iconic people of colour in space opera, so to turn him into another angry white guy seems just kind of sad.”

But although Khan may have been “one of the most iconic people of colour in space opera”, he was a villain, and his villainy had been needlessly racialised in earlier appearances. In the 1967 *Star Trek* episode *Space Seed* and in the 1982 film *Star Trek II: the Wrath of Khan*, he was played by the Mexican actor Ricardo Montalbán. Khan’s heritage went unmentioned until later spin-off novels expanded his biography, yet his name and the use of an ethnic-minority actor to portray him seemed intended to present him as an untrustworthy, foreign “other”.

After the release of *Star Trek Into Darkness*, Roberto Orci, a screenwriter on the film, explained that he had been “uncomfortable” about “demonising anyone” on the basis of their race. By choosing a white actor, the film-makers decoupled Khan’s villainy from his brownness – which was significant, especially in the light of Khan’s terrorist attack on a skyscraper in the film.

The portrayal of non-white characters by Cumberbatch and Johansson, in its small way, disrupts a culture that accepts skin colour as somehow absolute. Major Kusanagi is the heroine of *Ghost in the Shell*, not its villain, and

her embodiment by Johansson will have different implications from Cumberbatch's Khan. But the casting of whites as Asians serves as a reminder that much of what we understand as race is ultimately just performance, make-believe, a put-on.

Accusations of Hollywood whitewashing sometimes carry with them an essentialist attitude that is at odds with an anti-racist agenda. Constance Wu says that the CGI tests to alter the shade of actors in *Ghost in the Shell* reduced "our race and ethnicity to mere physical appearance, when our race and culture are so much deeper than how we look". I agree: those tests were misguided. As the Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "The true self . . . is not flesh or bones or sinews but the faculty which uses them."

Yet if our racial identity is not entirely determined by our bodies – if our essence is "deeper than how we look" – surely the authentic elements of our being can be brought to life by actors with "flesh" that is superficially different from our own. All acting is pretending. None of it is real: so why should an actor's race have to be?

The campaigners' plea for more diversity in Hollywood is valid but their insistence on minorities having exclusive rights over representing those whom they view as "their people" risks reinforcing colour lines. We will remain "people of colour" – a dubious term that means the same thing as "coloured people" – as long as race is fetishised as the core component of who we are. We should fight those who use stereotypes to define us by our race, not those who behave as if race weren't all that mattered.

Yo Zushi is a sub-editor of the New Statesman. His work as a musician is released by Eidola Records.

SUBSCRIBE

This article first appeared in the 12 June 2016 issue of the New Statesman, *The anti-Trump*



RELATED ARTICLES



SRSLY #44: The Argonauts, Jane the Virgin, 20 Feet From Stardom



Zapping your own brain to treat depression? Surely it's too good to be true



Alice Through the Looking Glass: a more focused affair than Tim Burton's first effort

ADVERTISEMENT