

CLASSICAL MUSIC

# What Was Bach Thinking?

By ADAM BAER

Is Bach's famous Chaconne for solo violin an epitaph for his wife, Maria Barbara? That's the question sparked by the work of German musicologist Helga Thoene. And that's the concept behind Christopher Poppen's hit CD "Morimur." The violinist, accompanied by the Hilliard Ensemble and soprano Monika Mauch, brought his ideas to the Church of St. Ignatius Loyola on Saturday night.

Ms. Thoene's two-pronged idea, controversial among scholars, is that using Gematria — the numerological practice that Bach was interested in whereby you assign ideas to notes or words (it's also applied to the Cabbalah) — you can find in the Chaconne's score hidden magic squares and mathematical hints that color this last movement of the composer's D minor Partita for violin as a programmatic death work. Ms. Thoene's second point is more obvious: Certain themes from meaningful Bach chorales (among them, a musical mantra that fits over the work's bassline and translates: "That death no one could subdue") correspond to the work's harmonic structure when sung slowly.

Mr. Thoene claims that due both to this incontrovertible evidence and the fact that Bach wrote the work in 1720 Cöthen upon returning from a trip to Karlsbad and learning that his wife had died, it's obvious the modest Lutheran purposely embedded these private messages in his next monumental work. One that's, incidentally, been offering grief, faith, and resurrection to fiddlers for hundreds of years.

Accordingly, the "Morimur" project is a musical logic proof. It starts by braiding a full solo violin performance of Bach's entire Partita with the chorale themes Ms. Thoene has identified as epitaph source material. The singers open with the theme of the night, "Den Tod" ("That death no one could subdue"), and Mr. Poppen plays the work's Allemande. Then the choir sings another chorale theme ("Christ lag," translated as "Christ lay to death in bondage") before Mr. Poppen plays the work's second-movement Courante.



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**BACH CABAL** Christopher Poppen performed with the Hilliard Ensemble Saturday.

less rubatos (though Baroque players like to indulge in drama, their exaggerations are more improvisational and less cooked up).

The Courante enjoyed crisp double-dotted rhythms played dancelike in the lower quarter of the bow. The Sarabande offered pure, long melodies, but its two first notes were too equal and separate (a Sarabande's second beat should come quicker and with more weight). And the perpetual-motion Gigue was brisk, played off the string, despite a slower rendition of its opening theme; it suffered from instability and a number of missed notes.

The final Chaconne ran moderately fast, and it, too, was unremarkable. Mr. Poppen did not employ the color changes or artistry of a great soloist. The variations (a Chaconne is set of elaborations on a bass theme) did not feature discernible characters. A number of intonation glitches upset the line. And very little drama drove the rising and descending harmonic undercurrents. In all, it came off rather like the performance of an adept court fiddler: Straight and mercenary.

forefront of the hall as well as to float unassumingly as it did in the choir's slow, languid rendition of the St. Matthew Passion's "Befiehl du deine Wege" ("Commit Whatever Grieves Thee"). Hearing her, you get the idea she's actually Angelic: She's without airs and godly at once.

All the singers warrant acclaim for their ensemble skills. During the following "Chaconne for violin and source material," they had to not only match the inconsistencies of Mr. Poppen's rhythm, but his intonation as well, which was faulty in more than a few chromatic sections. He played more quickly and Baroque-like as "den Tod" and other choice words hung and hovered beautifully above his variations (most stunning was a super-high halo sung by Ms. Mauch above the work's first arpeggiated variation).

And so on. Until the Chaconne sounds alone, and a number of chorale themes sound back-to-back before "den Tod" haunts us again. At which point Ms. Thoene's theory gets musical legs with a Chaconne that features both the actual solo violin music and the singing of chorale fragments as accompaniment. Or vice versa, depending on how you listen.

Saturday's performance differed slightly from the "Morimur" recording. Mr. Poppen, a longstanding chamber musician and teacher, used a clean, nimble Baroque fiddle on the ECM disc, and that fit beautifully with the superior Hilliard voices.

On Saturday, however, Mr. Poppen played Bach on a modern violin. Though he sported a thin sound, long unadulterated lines, and brisk tempos (famous Baroque facets), his Allemande was full of smooth heretic, Romantic slurs, a few heavily vibrated notes, and a number of sense-

Thankfully that wasn't the state of the evening's singers. The Hilliard men (countertenor David James, tenor Steven Harrold, and baritone Gordon Jones) sung instinctively and cleanly, like palpitating instruments, matching one another in each necessary aspect while still retaining individuality: Mr. James is the purist, Mr. Harrold the intuitionist glue, Mr. Jones the activist. Together they're a joy.

But it was Ms. Mauch who deserves the most praise. Music critics often say a soprano's voice "soars," but it isn't a case of adjective overuse to exuberantly apply this term to her instrument. Her simple pristine sound is wholesome and agile enough to fill the

The all-in-all question is what to make of the controversy? Anyone who's ever played the instrumental work of Bach knows that he re-processed his own themes, especially those from his chorales. Whether or not he purposefully inserted clues into the Chaconne to brand it a private epitaph, or whether or not the theory fails because the chorale themes are corrupted at slower tempos, or ... or ... or ... it's all immaterial and rather petty.

Mr. Poppen has given the Chaconne new life with this experiment. It is no longer just a solo showpiece, no longer just the grandiose conclusion to an objective multi-movement dance suite. It's a freestanding ensemble work deeply connected to the reverence of a humble creator who constantly found new ways to use his art. It's a qualitative new way to re-hear a work whose meaning will never be, wholly, unearthed. I'm sure it would at least interest Bach himself.