

IN MUSIC, A NEW APPROACH



—Black Star.

"The first buildings at this hospital were paid for by Johann Sebastian Bach."

By ROSALYN TURECK

THE DEATH of Albert Schweitzer has brought an era to an end. Schweitzer was one of the first heralds of the modern renaissance of Bach that began at the inception of the twentieth century. The quality of his particular insight into Bach's music was revelatory. Emerging from his own strength of mind and depth of being, revelation was to him a recurring phenomenon. The grief for the loss of such a man in our present culture is matched only by the sadness of recognizing that his death has taken from the world a rare figure where the music of Bach was concerned. He believed that Bach's music could be played well only if one felt it as always sublime. Today musicians are more musicologically and technically minded. How many performers would be free and unafraid to experience and perform Bach with Schweitzer's aim? The question answers itself.

I met Albert Schweitzer for the first time in London in 1955. At the end of our meeting he gave me a photograph of himself seated at the organ. I learned later that this was one of his favorite photographs and had been taken forty

years earlier. By that time Schweitzer had already written his famous two-volume work on Bach, entitled in the first French edition, published in 1905, *Jean-Sebastian Bach, le Musicien-Poète*.

Brahms once said that the two greatest events of the nineteenth century were the formation of the German Republic and the creation of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition. I extend the historical parallel by saying the two greatest events in the modern Bach renaissance at the turn of the twentieth century were the completion of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition (fifty years in the making) and the publication of Schweitzer's Bach volumes. The importance of this work is due not so much to Schweitzer's research, considerable though this was, as to his insight into the relationship between Bach's music and his text. Spitta far surpassed Schweitzer in research, but as a result of this one perception Schweitzer gave scholarship a fresh approach. At the same time the implications of this perception pointed out a radically different musical situation. This was the necessity for acknowledging a broader involvement of the composer than had been generally supposed. The modern performer also became implicated in this discovery.

The recognition of the musical relationship to the word was bound to come, but Schweitzer was the first to make the definitive statement and to elaborate it in full. Naturally, his work created a great stir in the music world, for definitive statements often appear too soon. Inevitably a large faction in the field is not ready for it. In Schweitzer's case, a great number of musicians and scholars refused to believe that Bach was so involved with the spirit of the word in linking his music to the pictorial situation. The main objections to Schweitzer's premise arose from his shattering of established notions about Bach's "objectivity" and remote intellectuality.

Charles Marie Widor relates in his preface to the German edition of 1908 how Schweitzer enlightened him in an area of style that heretofore had confused him. And Ernest Newman, the eminent translator of the English edition published in 1911, said in his preface, "Its convincing demonstration of the pictorial bent of Bach's mind must necessarily lead to a reconsideration, not only of the older view of Bach as a mainly 'abstract musician,' but of the esthetics of music in general."

The general view of Bach in the nineteenth century had suffered from three diverse schools of thought: one being Bach as finger exercise, another regarding his music as dry intellectualism, and the third expanding irrepressibly—and in many cases irresponsibly—into a copy of the full-blown idiom of the late nineteenth-century romantic and virtuoso styles.

Schweitzer's own mind reflects the nineteenth century, but his brilliant insight into the deep relationship of word and music takes the best from this period and transcends it. Research through several decades since Schweitzer has revealed the validity of his thesis. In the light of recent research we have found that fashioning the music to the text was the general practice of baroque composers and that Bach was following a way of composing rather than creating it.

Schweitzer brought a brilliant light into the conceptual sphere of Bach and a new view of his style. The substance of his ideas, however, was shackled by a theory that Schweitzer created from them. For example, he regards the musical figures that depict precise pictorial situations or moods in the choral works as being typical patterns and, in addition, applies the same connotation to similar figures in purely instrumental music. Schweitzer's intent was to prove that there are specific formulae for musical figures and that they convey a parallel significance of mood when met in an instrumental work. He says:

Bach has a dual expression for grief.
To depict lamentation of a noble kind,

he employs a sequence of notes tied in pairs; torturing grief is represented by a chromatic motive of five or six notes. . . . For joy, again, Bach had two formulae of expression.

The explanation of the "formulae" are then elaborated. These are but two instances of many examples constituting about one-third of his second volume.

While it is true that striking representational figures appear in the choral works that often create a dramatic frame of reference, it is highly questionable that these are employed as formulae in choral music or when transferred to the instrumental works. It would be very convenient for both composer and performer were this true, but art is not created so neatly or so mechanically. Thus the theory cannot be followed. The principle of formulae as expressed in this theory emanates from the mechanistic attitudes of the nineteenth century, these forming the other side of the coin of individualistic romanticism. The twentieth century has greater flexibility and fantasy; it emphasizes the unpredictability of creative thought rather than its orderliness, whether it be in science or in art.

Schweitzer's greatness as a performer consisted in his poetic vision. We have no records of his playing at the beginning of the century, but in recent times his performance was greatly limited by inadequate instrumental technique. This is understandable since for over half a century he did not work as a performer does at his instrument.

Although Schweitzer played regularly on his organ at Lambaréné, his other work and interests prevented him from devoting himself to music with the single-minded concentration and inten-

Schweitzer on Bach: In the last resort . . . Bach's real religion was not orthodox Lutheranism, but mysticism. In his innermost essence he belongs to the history of German mysticism. This robust man, who seems to be in the thick of life with his family and his work, and whose mouth seems to express something like comfortable joy in life, was inwardly dead to the world. His whole thought was transfigured by a wonderful, serene longing for death. . . .

Wagner conceives nature through his emotions; Bach—in this respect like Berlioz—through his imagination. Bach is not satisfied until he is sure that the hearer actually sees the dust of the whirlwind, the clouds scudding across the sky, the falling leaves. . . . When his poets came to the end of their tether, all they had to do was to bring nature on the scene; they could be sure of satisfying him in this way. That is the explanation of the fact that the secular cantatas are veritable nature poems. . . .

—From "J. S. Bach" (1905).

sive labor that great instrumental art demands from a performer. Therefore Schweitzer's performances were open to criticism and were often severely criticized by musicians, performers, and musicologists. Although I agree with the general criticism, I must urge the importance of not condemning the whole. For Schweitzer played with the spiritual vision of an artist and of the man he was. Instrumental techniques and musical style form the whole of most performers' achievements. To stop here in listening to Schweitzer is to miss the distinguishing factor in his playing—the spiritual vision. I believe it is important to acknowledge this vision.

As a teacher of Bach performance, his strength lay in his profound perception of structure. By this I do not mean his emphasis on the pictorial musical figure but rather his detailed understanding of a musical score. But his applications to performance were limited by two factors: 1) a substantial residue of unconscious romantic orientation, and 2) a limited experience in testing and thinking through the whole solution that is required by the totality of a performance.

Schweitzer's performances were unquestionably focused toward a truer Bach style than had been the aim of most twentieth-century performers. But many of the performing recommendations in his volumes arise from romantic sources and a confined experience. Perhaps it is too much to expect that one person can achieve a total breakthrough from the era in which he was born and create a total artistic idiom as well.

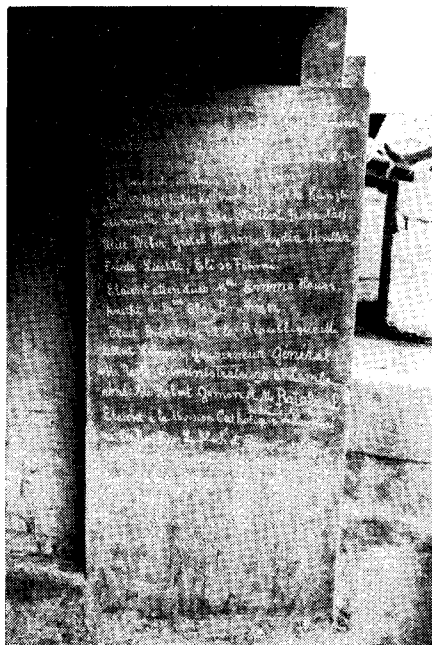
No one is more sympathetic to the task of a total solution in Bach performance than I am, for I know the labor and depth of absorption that is demanded. Therefore, when I witness attempts to break down Schweitzer's musical accomplishments, I am impelled to defend him. Having known and experienced the totality of the task of discovering the immense problems and solutions in Bach performance, I will argue with his mistakes, but I urge the full acknowledgment of his achievements.

The effect of Schweitzer's book was extensively felt. It has long been regarded as a major contribution in overthrowing the pedantic approach that viewed Bach's music as severe and intellectual. It also broke down, at the other extreme, the romantic sentimentality with which Bach performance was infused. Schweitzer's writing emphasized a fresh view and in certain aspects a break from past tradition.

SINCE the Twenties and Thirties, musicological research has grown into a highly specialized and diversified historical study. The mass of information and its availability reaches far beyond the possibilities available at the turn of the century. At the same time certain performers have contributed a great deal of thought and experience to the subject. Therefore Schweitzer's modern influence has subsided. But I pay tribute to his original contribution as a major breakthrough from pedantry and sentimentality. His work offered the first steps of development toward the understanding of Bach's true style and the art of playing this great music. It created a dawning realization for many musicians and students of the meaning of Bach's musical structures and it introduced insistence on adherence to the original score.

At the time of its writing, Schweitzer's work was revolutionary. Although it no longer tells us anything new in research and workable performing applications, it stands today as a monument upholding imagination and perception in scholarship. His work expresses, also, the amalgamation of an artistic experience with thoughtfulness and research rather than blank reporting of historical findings or self-exhibitionist performances (whether they be shy or aggressive) built on the tenuous foundations of "taste" or "intuition."

Today the time has come for a new revelation that emerges from a still wider foundation of research and experience in performance. Schweitzer would be the first to welcome it. Just as he felt reverence for all life, I am sure he would feel reverence for a new vision engendered through unremitting scholarship and spontaneous identification with Bach.



Plaque, carved by Schweitzer, at hospital in Lambaréné.

SCHWEITZER IN AMERICA

By EMORY ROSS

IN 1949, Robert Hutchins persuaded Albert Schweitzer to come to America. Many had tried previously, with no success. But the Goethe bicentennial commemoration that Hutchins and his colleagues were planning at Aspen, Colorado, won his consent. He and his wife came by ship, and my wife and I went to meet them when they docked.

Sixty-five men and women of the American and world press, radio, and television were also there, pencils and cameras poised. The first thing Schweitzer did was to bow deeply and say in French, "Ladies and gentlemen, in my youth I was a stupid young man. I learned German and French, Latin, Greek, Hebrew—but no English. In my next incarnation, English shall be my first language." Tumultuous applause! Everyone wanted stories, impressions, opinions. Schweitzer was factual. He was willing to speak a bit about Goethe, or about the functioning and need of the hospital at Lambaréné. He was willing to play the organ or piano, to sit or stand for pictures. But he declined to talk of European politics, of Africa's multiple problems. "I only know a bit about Gabon," he would say.

At breakfast time on the morning after their arrival the Schweitzers came across the street from their hotel to our house, where they were to eat most of their meals. Mrs. Schweitzer was carrying a huge basket of cut flowers.

"Albert can't bear to see flowers cut, you know," she said, "so I brought these over here."

In the days ahead, cut flowers poured into our house for our distinguished guests. Finally my wife asked the doctor, "What shall I do with all these flowers that are coming for you?"

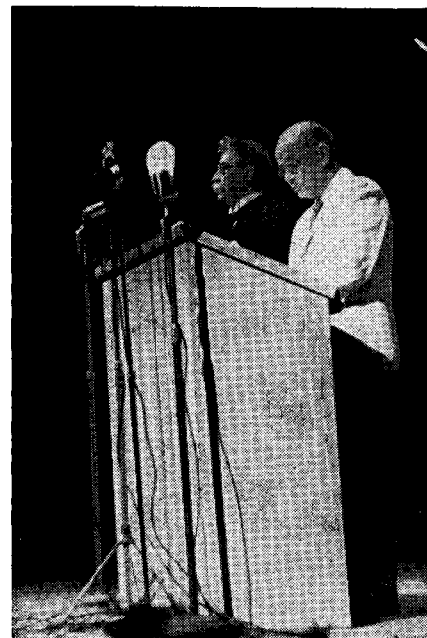
"Put them in vases with nice cool water," he said. "I don't like to see flowers hurt, but we mustn't hurt the people who sent them, either. Put them out where they will see I appreciate them."

The days before starting for Aspen were busy ones for the doctor as we got the final translations of his speech under way. Then came the train trip to Colorado, on which I accompanied Dr. and Mrs. Schweitzer. We were in roomettes, and the porter and Dr. Schweitzer had great fun together as he tried all the gadgets never seen at Lambaréné. Finally we settled down, Mrs. Schweitzer in a bedroom and Schweitzer and I in

roomettes opposite each other, both of us working on his speech and its translation into English. I was roused out of deep concentration by rollicking laughter across the aisle and looked up to see two young women standing in the opposite doorway. After a burst of laughter and much fun the girls left and Schweitzer came across to me, chuckling.

"Do you know what those girls wanted? They stopped at my door and asked, 'Would you be good enough to autograph our books, Dr. Einstein?' I took the books and signed them; 'With best wishes, Albert Einstein, by his friend, Albert Schweitzer.'"

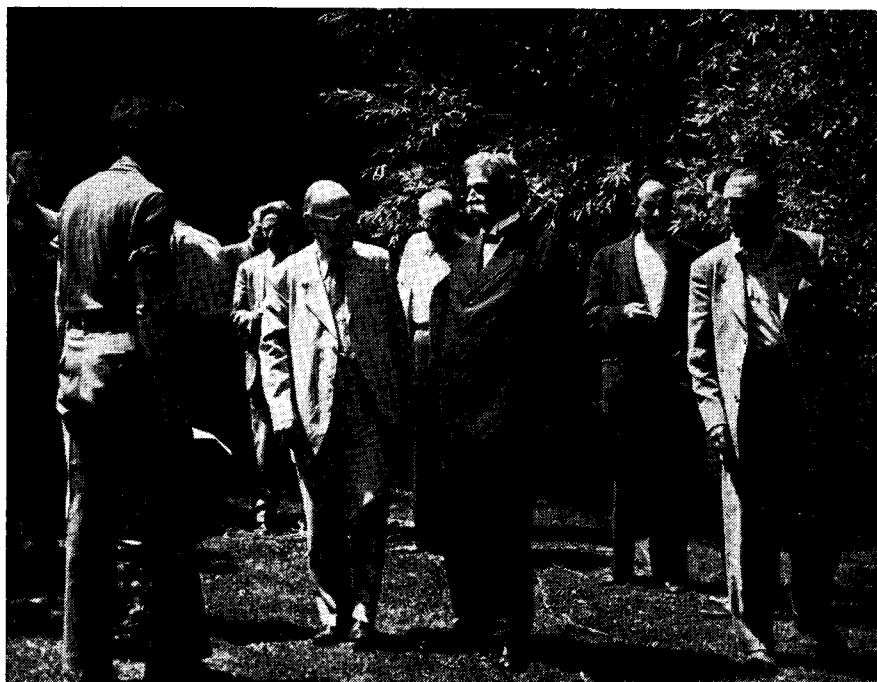
Aspen days were hectic—not only with speeches but with private conversations, which everybody sought and which the doctor gave freely. One evening while we were at dinner an eager individual came to speak with him about his philosophy, pulling a chair up alongside the table. Patiently Dr. Schweitzer tried to enlighten the young seeker, letting his dinner go untouched. At last, after repeated explanations, Schweitzer, with that special twinkle that always indicated mirth, said, "Look, my philosophy is reverence for life. I am a life," and with that he glanced down at his cold dinner plate. The youth burst into laughter. "That's a good one," he said. "That makes me understand your philosophy."



Schweitzer preparing to speak at Aspen.

One morning later, the early-rising Schweitzer met his hostess on the stairway as she was coming from some preparations for breakfast, still in her long, lovely, flowing housecoat. Embarrassed, she apologized for her attire and said she was going up to get dressed. In telling this story Schweitzer always laughed and said, "And soon she came down in her short summer slacks and shirt."

Schweitzer's warmth and deep feeling for human friendship expressed itself often in the plans for his visit to the United States and during his days here.



—Ross Madden (Black Star).

At the Goethe Festival—dinner went untouched.