

# Aēsop.

Bach: Donal Fox



For keyboard master and composer Donal Fox the music of Bach can be used as the building blocks for greater, more original ventures in contemporary music, writes CHRISTOPHER LYDON

If Johann Sebastian Bach was to pop into Donal Fox's piano room in his Fort Hill townhouse in Boston, Fox says: 'My impulse would be to say "Check out this thing I did with your invention, man... sit down on the bench with me and lets make some music." ' The acolyte can imagine his loving, all-encompassing, secular god responding: ' "You've got my scores – all that paper I thought was for wrapping fish," Bach would also say: "It's great you know my fugues, so show me yours. I want to hear sounds I couldn't make on my organ in Leipzig." ' He'd be counting on me to express these times and my true person to *him*.'

Keyboard master and composer Donal Fox, acclaimed for his virtuosic and 'bracingly original' interpretations from Bach to Monk, is an exponent of the odd idea that the foundational composer of Western music left the roof open – left the upper stories, even of his masterpieces, available for extension and development.

He's the provocative, encyclopaedic, irresistibly swinging embodiment of Paul Elie's thesis in *Reinventing Bach* (2012): that the greatest composer of them all is not yet finished in the sense that his music is organic and alive, still evolving in minds like Bobby McFerrin, Yo-Yo Ma and many, many more. If the question is why does Bach (1685 -1750), 'the Leonardo of sound', sit virtually alone and god-like at the peak of all artistic creation? Paul Elie's answer is that it is because Bach left us not just a super-abundance of masterpieces but also the source-code, the bone-marrow cells that will keep re-inventing music until the last trumpet sounds.

When I recorded a radio conversation last winter with Paul Elie on his theme, I asked my friend Donal to sit in with us at the keyboard, and suddenly we had two authorities of one mind and Donal's brilliant chops to nail the point. Elie's 'thrill of a lifetime' was finding the half-blank notebook that Bach had given to his son Wilhelm Friedemann at age 9. It was a manual of patterns and exercises that father and son would complete together. Donal affirmed that every beginner gets nearly the same gift in Bach's inescapable primer of 'inventions'.

'When we start out,' Donal said, 'Bach's inventions let us know about coordination, imitation, harmony, finger technique, vertical structures. They open up the world of composition... There's very little information on the page. They're a blueprint. There's an invitation to use your imagination, without breaking the fabric of Bach. After the Baroque period it was different. Composers gave you more information that said, in effect, no messing with my music. Bach didn't write tempo or dynamic marks. Beethoven says, "Maestoso, brother. Not Presto!" With an implied "or else!" Bach asks you to put yourself into it.'

Listening to his impromptu variations on the spot, Paul Elie noted that Donal's reputation for blending Bach and jazz – Bach and Thelonious Monk in particular – is 'not quite right. When Fox plays, you can hear that the music has long since been blended by his sensibility, so that words like "crossover" are brittle and unnecessary.' You can hear it, Elie writes, in Donal's **Variations on a Bach Fugue** with quartet, or his composition **Toccata on Bach**.

I have my own favourite Donal Fox recordings. In *Bach's Soul Food* you may be reminded of the late Dinu Lipatti and also McCoy Tyner, but you will come to hear a singular voice in Donal Fox. Check his *Blues on Handel* for the strut and fun of it, and for the intense swing in it. In *Coda Blues* you'll hear a dazzling version of Bud Powell speed in the right hand, and also rock-steady Rolex time-keeping in the left. But you're never in doubt that something new is being hatched.

That blending of sensibilities might just date from his first recital, at age 6, when he played the Bach invention in D-minor. 'I remember a finger slip – a mistake! Then I thought I'm going to learn to improvise just to get out this box.' He was bound for that Art Tatum zone where there are no mistakes, where as Miles Davis said if you know where to go next, there are no wrong notes, ever. 'It's a way of creative thinking, isn't it?' he considers.

Watch Donal Fox enter a club scene or concert stage – always in elegant, absolute black, often with white scarf. 'If you see everybody's idea of a modern jazz artist, he says, you don't know who I am. If you see a composer-pianist, you can explain how I can play a TJ Anderson piano concerto and write my own concerto and play it at Carnegie Hall, and then swing at the Blue Note. Jazz artist is more confined. It's not the black church I'm coming from, not the South. That's not how I got the music. I got it from the music I've heard and the people I've studied with.'

So the blending started early, with art-sensitive parents and adroit connections. His father was an acoustic physicist whose white Jewish father had emigrated from Russia and studied to be a composer. Donal's mother, from a family of schoolteachers in Panama with roots in Jamaica and Colombia, focused on philosophy at Boston University and became a speech pathologist. 'My mother used to say, "My son Donal loves Bach because, while he was in my womb, every Sunday we listened to E Power Biggs broadcasts from Boston." ' Donal played French horn in the marching band and orchestra at the superlative Brookline High School. A teenager in the late Sixties, he was getting his head into politics and his ears around Monk and Miles' 'Birth of the Cool'. He had his own high-school band, Head, and he itched to jam with The Grateful Dead. At 15 he found his way into the Berklee College of Music for summer school in jazz, then to **Tanglewood** for lessons in composition with Leonard Bernstein and Gunther Schuller. At Elma Lewis' fabled **National Center of Afro-American Artists** in Boston, Donal got to see Eubie Blake and Billy Taylor close-up. The composer TJ Anderson urged him to study and write at Tufts University. And then Gunther Schuller brought him to the New England Conservatory.

'You can never master Bach – no more than you can master anything that's really great. There's always something to learn from Bach. You can't outgrow him. You can't outsmart him. You'll never be the smartest guy in the room with Bach.'

Today, Donal Fox aspires to the company of those who gained some priceless part of their education from Bach, and kept growing on it. In conversation the names that keep coming up are Bud Powell, whose *Bud on Bach* must have helped show the way; Astor Piazzolla, who wrote fugues into his tangos in Bach's honour; Keith Jarrett, the jazz improviser who recorded *Books I and II of Bach's Well-Tempered Clavier*; Esperanza Spalding, the young bass player who plays jazz and Bach, and sings; and Bill Evans, who taught and recorded Bach preludes and fugues and compared friendly notes on piano touch with Glenn Gould.

I hear Donal these days as a blessed original.

'Bach's music embodies the heights of intellect and emotion and it stands every test of time. It is my place of reflection. It's my spiritual life, my place of solace where I can go and figure things out.' And the beauty is there's plenty of room for individual interpretation, 'Your first and last responsibility playing Bach is to be yourself.'