



# THE HUMAN CONDITION THROUGH CLASSICAL MASTERPIECES

*A course in classical music appreciation*

**Lectures by Jonathan FIELDS, musician and composer**

**Monday, June 7, 2010: Bach and the search for a new musical universe**

Em Lee Concert Hall, Turtle Bay Music School  
244 East 52nd Street, New York

**Crossroads:** Welcome on behalf of Crossroads New York Cultural Center. I am pleased to introduce the first in a series of four talks by Mr. Jonathan Fields on the human condition through classical masterpieces. We start tonight with *Bach and the search for a new musical universe*.

The focus of this series of talks is not just musicology or musical history in a strict technical sense. Rather, the emphasis is on discovering the very foundation of music, viewed as the most sincere and moving expression of human experience, of the universal human desire and expectation for beauty, for happiness, for a mysterious Other who will fulfill the promises of the heart. In this sense, the work of the great composers represents a prophecy of the ultimate meaning of human existence and history. The late Msgr. Luigi Giussani, speaking about the role that music played in his life and in his pedagogical method, once said, "In music, in nature's landscape, in a nocturnal dream, ...what man pays homage to is something else, something he is waiting for: he is waiting for it. His enthusiasm is for something that music, or whatever is beautiful in the world, has awakened inside him. When man 'fore-sees' this, he immediately bends his soul to wait for the *other* thing: even in front of what he can grasp, he awaits something else: he grasps what he can grasp, but he waits for another thing."

Mr. Jonathan Fields is a composer, music teacher and lecturer who in his career has explored many regions of the musical world. After graduating first in his class from Mannes College of Music in 1981, he joined David Horowitz Music Associates, one of the leading commercial music production companies in the world, and has been an award-winning composer of over a thousand television and radio spots. At the same time he has composed a variety of musical works spanning multiple genres, including film scores, soundtracks for TV, a mass, hymns and many others. An accomplished guitarist, he has toured the world playing with jazz, rock, folk and pop bands playing with first-rank musicians from the New York studio recording world. He has also worked with New York downtown experimentalists and minimalists such as Phillip Glass and Glen Branca. In recent years he has been a frequent lecturer and musical educator, and the author of several publications aimed at introducing new audiences to the treasures of European and American classic and traditional music. Currently, Mr. Fields is composing music for television and film through his company L-SID Productions. His recent clients include GE and Samsung. He also works as organist and music director for Holy Rosary Church in Staten Island, and teaches private lessons for guitar, composition and studio music. Mr. Fields resides in Brooklyn with his wife and three children.

**Fields:** Thank you all for coming, and thank you, Crossroads.

The idea is to give an hour presentation and half an hour for questions. I've got to go quickly because I've got to be able to present all of western music in four lessons.

The first thought that came to me was when I first encountered classical music...I didn't start with classical

music. I started with Jimmy Hendrix, Cream and the Beatles, and people who could just play their instruments incredibly well, invent melodies—I loved improvisation, I loved the energy, the passion. Those days of music, if anyone remembers, were quite exciting. There were real stars out there. They didn't last though. Unfortunately many died, and groups broke up, and I was left with the question: Well, where do we go from here? And it just so happened that my parents who happen to be here, on Sundays would play this weird, strange music. And it was very nice. It kind of caught my ear. It was old people's music. It was Bach. They loved to play Bach every Sunday morning. As I grew older and I left home and went to college, my nice, secure life that seemed to be wonderfully taken care of was not there anymore. My destiny was out in front of me. I didn't come from a family where we talked much about God or ultimate meanings. I was kind of there on my own, so I began to feel more pain than I remembered, and that pain was good in a sense because it threw me toward a search for something.

I went to Yale and I had two great roommates who were classical musicians and they saw that I was into rock and roll. I was also very much into jazz at that time. I was playing in a jazz band which was a fantastic experience, incredible players. But my roommates introduced me to classical music. They said, "Sit down, Jon. Put the Hendrix records away. We're going to play you some music right now." And they played me *The Rite of Spring* by Stravinsky, which had that rock and roll intensity. It used to grab me. "Oh wow! That's cool! Listen, that's intense." So they got me, and once they had me they put on Mozart's 40<sup>th</sup> Symphony. I just stopped in my tracks. I didn't know that there was beauty like that in the world. There were beautiful girls, there was beauty in nature, I had a beautiful family, but when I heard that G minor symphony which starts very anxious and has this sort of unstable theme at the beginning, but when that is over, that beginning of a search, it's almost like Beethoven's 5<sup>th</sup> before Beethoven wrote it. All of a sudden that second movement comes, and it's like the universe is being created. You know all those theories of physicists, the Big Bang? No. That's not how it happened. I know exactly how it happened. God played Mozart's music and just threw things out there. And it just unfolded in the most beautiful order, the most beautiful order. I think I was looking for order, beauty and order, and at that point I said, that's all I want to know, that's all I want to learn. And I started to study music deeply.

When a composer begins to study, and I wanted to be a composer, and I wanted to do that, silly person that I was, I thought, what could be greater than putting tones together that made that much beauty? From my own heart, I don't think I was thinking about other people too much, just those tones put together, I wanted that. So there is one place you go, one place composers have gone to learn that since the 1700s, and that is to Johann Sebastian Bach. So that's why I chose the first lesson to be on Bach.

The second reason I chose this...there are a lot of ways to listen to music. I think most of us listen to music like it's wallpaper. "Oh, that's a really nice melody." But these composers, when I started listening with that kind of heart so full of unease and need, I understood that these composers were communicating meaning—beauty means a journey, a story, there were themes, themes would come back, and it revealed something to me about myself. And I learned to listen like this.

When I got older and I met the group that puts this lecture series on, Communion and Liberation, and I heard Fr. Giussani speak about music, I was blown away because he spoke about music in a way that was almost better than my teachers spoke about its meaning. I also related to it because he always spoke about his father. His father was the one who made his family listen to music growing up. He wouldn't have enough food on the table, but he would hire a string quartet to come to the house. And that reminded me of my Dad who was so passionate about music and wanted us to constantly know this marvelous, marvelous world.

So from these two perspectives I wanted to talk about Bach. I'm starting with Bach because Bach invents the system that will be used by the other composers I will talk about in the series. We'll start with the system that Bach invented, the harmonic system, and we're going to end with the guy who basically destroys it,

Schoenberg. It's a long journey to that destruction, but that period of time is really all I can cover and really briefly, I'm not going to get into that much stuff.

The material that Bach puts together is what Mozart and Beethoven and Schubert are able to then take to another level of incredible, incredible poetic expression. It may be the highest form of artistic expression we've known. So let's begin.

What is this system? It's called the well-tempered system. What does that mean? That means that before the music that was played you could play in one or two or three or four keys and you would tune the instruments as you changed keys. So you could do some beautiful things with counterpoint. Basically Palestrina is an example of that—the person who Bach inherits everything from. Palestrina, by the way, was the first married man who was hired by the Holy Father, and the monks were so jealous they tried to kick him out of town. So Palestrina was a commercial musician like myself who hated commercial music and he begged the pope, "Please give me a job so I can write beautiful music." And he got the job.

This music that I'm going to play is from a mass. All of the music, this language, was generated in the Church. It begins with Gregorian Chant and develops and develops. Here's where you get the height of Renaissance music, music before Bach. Let me just give you a sample of its sound. This is the *Agnus Dei* [why is font smaller starting here?] which is the last part of the ordinary of the mass and you'll hear some melodic things, and you'll hear them repeated like a cannon, like "Row, row, row your boat." This type of imitation is a way of composing which Bach would assume into himself. But here it's before we've reached the system that Bach uses.

[plays Palestrina's *Agnus Dei*]

The lower voices answer the higher voices...the voices enter in one at a time...

It's very beautiful music and Palestrina was considered by the Church...this was the path that music could go and Palestrina had a balance between technique and keeping the meaning alive, keeping the meaning of the words so that it could be devotional, but also lifted up by intense beauty at the same time. They went together.

If you look at the third sheet, *Some cantus firmi*—this is a technique that composers still learn today to be able to understand this method of writing which is the beauty of the melodic line and then how we can have a few melodic lines moving so elegantly and beautifully together, where each line has a perfect identity and there's a perfect unity between the four parts. The composers were trying to reflect the idea of the Trinity—the perfect identity, the perfect unity. So this music grew from a desire to express that. And every composer, even to this day, in every conservatory still learns this. And what these little melodies are called...[goes to the piano]...these are abstract melodies but this is how you learn to write melodies. This clef that you see, it's called an alto clef, and it's a very simple melody in minor. [plays] And if you notice, the melody has a direction, only one high note, very singable. But the idea was that a beautiful melody should have a sense of movement towards a goal, a high note, point of tension, a movement away from home, and then a movement back to home. And then from these *cantus firmi*—the firm voice, which blew me away because I grew up really not thinking or nobody talking about a firm anything. I grew up with relativity, that there is no real truth, there's nothing, and then there was Hendrix, your own personal expression, so the idea of a firm voice, something on the ground, that's true and real and outside of you, objective, blew me away. And to hear the beauty of that melody! I would spend hours. First you would put one note over each of those notes, then two notes over each of those notes, but very specific rules. Then in three notes, then in four notes, then in combinations. And this is your introduction into writing like Palestrina. And it was fascinating because you could hear it.

One thing that I didn't write in your "Glossary of Basic Terms" is *consonance* and *dissonance*, that you had notes, intervals that felt a little bit unstable, and some that did not. [plays] Something like this. That's called a perfect fifth. It's very stable. And then you have a perfect fourth, a little less stable. A major third, it was considered not as stable as this [plays]. There's a real dissonance and it wants to resolve. This idea of consonances and dissonances is where the monks and the composers after understood how you could make something beautiful because life is tension and resolve. It's not just something you meditate into. It's not something just always intense. It's a journey, a journey.

So what happens is in this system you could only work in a few keys. It was beautiful. I'm not saying that one is better than the other because these composers composed beautiful melodies and incredibly moving things, but something changed with Baroque music in the 1600s. It started in Italy with the composer Monteverdi. Bach understands that we can now start a system called well-tempered, meaning the intervals are all not quite perfect, but I can make a piano, I can make a scale, and I can make twelve keys, twelve different homes, and I can go between them. So the sense of journey and tension now increases. And what Bach does, he says, "I'm going to show you now what the system does, how much farther or what more we can do with music." Again, Palestrina or Gregorian Chant is in some ways more intimate and more beautiful, but I want to go on to Bach.

What does Bach do? Let's just talk a little bit about him. Bach is German. He's a Lutheran. He's a voracious, hungry person for knowledge. He's a commercial musician. He's hired by the Church. He has to write a cantata a week. He's really a hired man. He teaches. He hates teaching. He beats up his students. He gets thrown in jail. I'm not kidding. If Bach were alive today he wouldn't write anything. He'd be in jail. He'd be in the paper all the time like Tiger Woods! Anyway, here's about twenty seconds of music. [shows paper] Bach wrote about 8,000 hours of music. This is just twenty seconds! So we're going to talk about four or five minutes of music and hopefully you can discover Bach on your own.

Bach wrote plenty of music for his Lutheran services. He also wrote Catholic masses. He would journey just to hear musicians play because he was hungry to learn new techniques, so he learned from the Italians, from the French, from the English, every dance, both sacred and secular... Even though it develops in the sacred world, it's very secular from the beginning because all the stories of the Bible are about things and events and places in both the Old Testament and New. So you can have music about the sea where Jesus was, and you could have music about King David in his palace because they were actual events in history. These were not meditations. This music reflects real life experience and a relationship with real life facts. So the music was secular even though it is about God; it always could move in the direction of secular music. So Bach, we're going to hear, is an incredible secular musician, an incredible sacred musician, and it's one man.

Let's first start with his secular music. You're going to know this piece. It's the first one he wrote and it's almost as if he's saying to us, "Here is the beautiful world that this new harmony is going to give to you, and I'm going to show it in the most simple way." The key of C—he writes in all 12 keys, major, minor. There are 48 in this book. Later in his life he revisits it with another 48 because Bach said, "Music should be for the glory of God and the recreation of the mind." That's it. That's what music is for. And he obviously worshipped and recreated a lot because he worked a lot. So this first piece, although you could say that it's secular, you can feel it's evoking another world at the same time... at the same time that it's so simple and takes you somewhere, at the end it leaves you asking for something else. I think this is also what I loved about classical music. It was always calling me. What is that *thing*? How can my heart be so big? And this is a very little piece. Everyone loves it. Let's hear it from the beginning. This is the prelude and then there will be a fugue. If you look on your sheet, the fugue is more formal with a theme or motif, not quite a melody, that is used according to very strict rules, but in the journey through these rules, the maestro tells a story and the theme becomes a familiar friend. In these 48 preludes and fugues, every one of them is absolutely different from the one before. The character, the depth... it's like a Dostoevsky book. There are billions of

characters that are all related to each other. Bach is showing us that this system can unlock the secrets of life and the soul. In music this new beauty has tremendous potential, poetic potential. And here's the first kernel from where that potential comes.

[plays music] There's the first statement. Now he's going to move... move right away... stable for only a second... more movement... unstable... dark... lighter... Where Chopin is also learning from... now he's back home for a second... he's building... there's the technique of a piano, the low note stays the same...

How much is said? Now here's the fugue.

[plays music] The theme... the second entrance... third entrance... there's another theme... they're coming in on top of each other now... they're coming closer to each other now...

He's worked with 48 others of these and each one is more inventive than the next. The creativity, the level of variation, yet it feels like one thing. It's not just ideas thrown together.

I got to the point at school where all I wanted to do was write fugues. I didn't write them like Bach. Bach could improvise these. He could improvise at the piano and then remember them and write them down. I couldn't do that. I would work through the night pulling my hair out. Did you hear the dissonances and consonances working? You'd go from peaceful consonant areas, then it would get a little more tense and gnarly, thorny. I wanted to be able to express that because that's what my heart wanted. It would take hours and hours and days to do one. He probably did these in a week!

Let's go to his sacred music. We heard Palestrina. The counterpoint of Palestrina is the fugue; it's the inheritor of that. Also we'll see how Mozart and Beethoven used the fugue in gargantuan ways, expressive ways. Bach is also in B minor mass. I just don't have enough time to play everything. I think we'll just be able to get to two more pieces. One is one of the greatest musical experiences of my life which was seeing the *St. Matthew Passion*. It's really probably considered one of the four greatest works in music. It's Bach's personal meditation on the passion of Christ, and you feel it. I think the joy of being a composer and of being a listener is feeling the soul of the composer. He becomes your friend. He becomes somebody that you know because he is being so generous as to share himself, his heart, his ideas, his love with you.

I want to show you the technique of how he uses harmony. *St. Matthew Passion* is a huge architecture, and one of the primary things he uses is chorales which are very simple melodies that everyone in church knows. So Bach would harmonize them in very deep ways, daring ways that he would get in trouble for by his bosses. His use of harmony would color words, color content. The chant does that and so does Palestrina, but in this new system this is how he does it, and it's going to be picked up by Mozart and Beethoven when we talk about them next week. But this is also the way every composer is taught harmony. You have to listen to all these and then you have to write a ton of them. (There's a student from Brooklyn Conservatory. Get ready! Just lock yourself in a room and write tons of these.) You know this harmony. It's earlier in the *Passion* before the crucifixion, during the drama, and the crowds... people can stand up and sing, and also it's commenting on the gospel. "Oh Sacred Head Surrounded" is the melody. Here is the first segment of it.

[plays music] This is the normal harmonization for most of the *Passion*.

Next is during the actual crucifixion. After he approaches this melody and he changes the harmony under. I don't know if you can get this. You're going to feel... it's just going to be in a lower key. A higher key is a little more tension. Now this is hushed silence in front of the event. He lowers the key and he decides to harmonize it in a way that you can feel the pain of Christ more, and you feel the pain of the moment, the pain in Bach's heart too. And it ends in an uncertain key. It doesn't end the way the others do because of what's

going to happen. So he uses harmony to tell the story. The same melody.

[plays music] This is the same...it's going to repeat...now listen to what he does...listen...

Did you hear the difference? Yes, he's weeping. He's making us weep. It's a tremendous thing to be helped to weep, and Bach helps us.

So here's the brilliance of Bach: He has 371 of these, and 160 cantatas, before *Passions*, two of which are lost...*The Christmas Oratorio*, *The Magnificat*...I mean, it's unbelievable.

I just want to play one more sacred thing he does. It's an incredible moment of art. When I was learning this stuff, I didn't know anything about the religion, but I was completely moved by content, by what this content was. I got to know what the content was, but Bach moved me. That type of search inside your heart, and the tools of this new system that allowed that search moved me. I was going to play the whole opening of the *St. Matthew Passion*. If you know the *Passion*, it was written in 1727. Bach never left Germany. He just stayed there. The *Passion* has two choirs and then sopranos—a third choir. Let's see. I'll play a little bit of this. This is the opening of the *St. Matthew Passion*. Setting up the whole passion he has the two choirs.

One choir says, "Who?"

And the other choir says, "The Lamb who is slain."

And the other choir says, "Why?"

"For our sins."

And you're going to hear he does this back and forth between the two choirs. This is extra-musical. This is pure drama. Not only is he doing this. Now he's orchestrating the drama. This is why he used to beat up his students; they wouldn't listen to him, and he knew that this was right. And then it's the boy sopranos, the boys' choir that sings over the top, like eternity, like another time against the other...this pulsing, kind of sobbing time...heartbeat time. And you'll hear these long cantus firmus, the cantus firmus melody. Some people say it represents the cross, the cross, the lamb—all these things he's trying to symbolize. So here's the opening:

[plays music] He's moving away harmonically...he's preparing us for the drama...here they come...now the children's choir...

And that goes on. He brings that high voice in. At the high points of the drama these boy voices come in and it's a spectacular expression. I say that you should, at least once in your life, go to a performance of this piece because you'll come out changed. Whether you believe or don't, you WILL come out changed.

If you've ever seen the film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* by Pasolini when Peter denies Christ, Bach just captures it better than any film score alive. I just think he's so sensitive to that moment. The words are saying, "Oh my God, how awful I feel to have hurt a friend!" The journey of this feeling awful is part of the story, not as the end in itself. It's part of the story that will end well. But the bad part is part of the story.

[plays music] Just feel the heart breaking in front of Peter...it makes you understand that a person living 400 years ago is exactly the same as you...melodies too...a woman's voice...have you ever seen Pasolini's *Passion*? It's fantastic with this music...themes...commenting...

I'm sorry. If we did the whole thing on Bach we could listen to it all. Anyway, please go see this. It's nice to

do it this way, but music is meant to be an event, and event means real people playing it, and you leave your house and you go and it's part of something bigger than you. That's where music can impact, so go see it. It's pretty hard to sit through two hours, but those are the high points.

I wanted to play one last thing for you from Bach that also was something that really made me understand what classical music is. This is a piano piece that he wrote for an insomniac called *The Goldberg Variations*. Gigs, you know. The guy said, "Write something for me. I'm up, so at least let my mind be occupied." This is later in Bach's life. Composers, as they're approaching their end, the relationship between their heart and their real life and their music—there's no separation. So the music becomes something extraordinarily expressive and evocative. This piece is based on Passacaglia-Chaconne, and you know what that is because you've heard *Pachelbel's Canon*. [plays piano] It's a chord progression that repeats over and over and over again, and you vary. What ties the whole thing together is this chord progression. And that was the technique of Passacaglia or Chaconne. For young people, you know the song by U2, "With or Without You." That's a Chaconne. It's four chords and most Indy Band music now that young people like is four chords and what's changed are textures and different melodic things, but the chords stay the same. Well Bach didn't really like four chords. He wanted sixteen chords, and from that he developed a huge piece of music called *The Goldberg Variations*. I'm not going to play all of them, but just so you get an idea, and that will be it. This is played by a very strange pianist who is sometimes considered the greatest Bach interpreter, Glenn Gould. So you're going to hear humming. He hums when he plays, but there's something extraordinary about his involvement with Bach. So this is the first three of four variations. You're going to hear what is called "The Air," this beautiful opening melody, very slow. The second variation will be brighter and faster. Then there's a dance-like movement. Then there's a cannon, like we said, "row, row, row your boat" imitation, and then there's something where he just simply shows off how incredible a musician, an instrumentalist he is. This goes through sixteen themes, and for me, when the theme came back the first time, it was like a revelation. It was the exact same thing after having traveled through this journey using that chord progression, with all those different variations, using tons of experiences in life—dances from France, dances from Italy, counterpoint techniques, singing melodies, all these different parts of life that he's trying to entertain this insomniac with, that theme comes back and it's as if it's been washed whiter than snow. It's so beautiful and so full of nostalgia, and it's the exact same theme. We don't have time to get there, but that's what you're going to hear when we get to the sonata form next week. You have the theme, it goes through the development, it comes back and it's new; it has revealed its inner life. Something has been revealed about its reality, its identity. It feels like that. There's something revealed, and all he's doing is playing exactly what he did earlier. It's the same thing that jazz musicians do. The music has lots of improvisation, and then the melody comes back. It's a way of staying completely connected to his humanity and to ours. So here is a little bit of *The Goldberg Variations*.

[plays music] That was sixteen measures...now here's the second sixteen measures...now he's in a minor key and he has to get back to a stable key...here's the build...like a dance...it's the same chord progression...Bach has tremendous energy...exploring...God took seven days...this is a variation...the imitation...the imitation again...this is what I wanted you to hear...this is the fun in him...his hands are criss-crossing.

So if you can't sleep one night. I think Goldberg would hire a guy to play while he was trying to sleep. So Bach wrote all this stuff, everything we talked about, and expressed his heart in everything he did, just about. I played a fraction of it. He was a maestro. There's a story about Bach conducting his students playing the violin and he'd cue the guy with his foot, point to the other guy with his hand. If he heard anything out of tune, he would look at the guy. His sons apparently said that nobody could tune the instruments except Bach. Only Bach's tuning was right. He was the first wild conductor.

This was the introduction to Western music, the well-tempered system, and the beautiful artistry of Bach.