answered by the cantus firmus also in the augmented version, in the treble, and with the two middle parts' quavers canonically heralding the final clause of the cantus firmus (bar 40 *et sec*).

The last clause of the cantus firmus moves entirely by step, with only two ornamental notes, coming to rest on a long inverted tonic-pedal note. Beneath this still (and speechless?) word, undulating 6 3 chords, with the F naturalised and the E flattened, remain thematic, though melodic definition is slightly hazier, less 'graspable', in the counterpoint's hierarchy of speeds (quavers, crotchets, minims), as the protracted final cadence singingly sighs a plagal Amen, (bars 40-45). The music runs down as the pulse flags beneath the cantus firmus' inverted tonic pedal. Yet the flagging of pulse, and its ultimate cessation, induce beatitudes: there could be no more precise musical synonym for the acceptance of death, identified with the will of God; and God's will is here his Peace, which 'passeth understanding'.

On the evidence of his library it would seem that Bach was acquainted with the work of the 17th-century Dutch-Jewish mathematical philosopher, Spinoza, who was born in Amsterdam in 1632, and died young, in 1671. Like Bach, he was born in a Lutheran community though, unlike Bach, he regarded his theology as a matter relevant to practical, everyday life, but not to the philosophy which, starting from Carterianism, he evolved with extraordinary subtlety and scrupulosity, defining a pantheism both naturalistic and mystical. Spinoza believed that there is one infinite substance, of which all finite existences are modes or limitations: so that God is the immanent cause of the universe, though cause is not identified with will. We have no evidence in the form of commentaries or even random opinions as to how much the Portuguese-Spanish-Jewish-Dutch philosopher meant to Bach; but it seems probable, not merely possible, that Spinoza's Baconian and Descartian 'system' would have appealed deeply to Bach over the last decade of his life, whilst he was working on his late, so-called 'abstract' creations such as the *Goldberg Variations*, *The Art of Fugue*, *The Musical Offering*, the Canonic Variations on *Vom Himmel hoch* and (most of all) the chorale prelude *Vor deinen Thron*, subject of this essay. Born in a Lutheran community, and reared on the Talmud, the Cabbala, and other Jewish mystical lore, often with Eastern rather than 'Western' affiliations, Spinoza none the less fought strenuously on behalf of the truths he discovered empirically, for which he was several times victimised by church or state. He deliberately resolved, inspired by Descartes, to 'construct', on the principles of geometrical science, a complete system of 'the knowledge of God, of the universe, and of man. Human nature obeys fixed laws no less than do the figures of Geometry. I will therefore write about human beings as though I were concerned with planes and solids'. Although we may have no doubt that Bach – on the evidence of the sublime final chorus (in 'tragic' C minor) of the St Matthew Passion, is the supreme composer of Christian humanism and suffering, it may also be possible that in his late, 'abstract' works he was entering into a new vision, most especially when he metaphorically 'died' into the G major beatitude of the last chorale prelude.

Spinoza maintained that there were three kinds of knowledge, the first of which is presented to our intellect 'fragmentarily, confusedly, and without order, through our senses'. The second kind of knowledge, which Spinoza termed *ratio*, is 'that based on notions common to all men and on adequate ideas of the properties of things', the word 'adequate' presumably being synonymous, in that context, with 'rational'. These two kinds of knowledge are roughly equivalent to the truth of the imagination and the logic of geometry and science. But Spinoza also believed that there was a third kind of knowledge (significantly called *intuito*) which 'proceeds from an adequate idea of the absolute essence of God to an adequate knowledge of the essence of things'. This is 'the highest endeavour of the mind and the highest virtue'. If we are able to achieve it, we will reach the summit of human *Perfection*: from which emerges in turn the highest possible mental *Acquiescence*. Whatever we understand in this act of acquiescence we take *Delight* in; and delight is accompanied by the *Love* of God as Cause.

This sequence of Perfection, Acquiescence, Delight, and Love-of-God is surely incarnate in the technique of the last chorale prelude – as it is, hardly less, in the 'perfect' lucidity and canonic inevitability of the ostensibly secular *Goldberg Variations*. Bach's apprehension of God would seem, like Spinoza's, to be no longer a theological matter but rather a vision of quasi-mathematical order and grace that transcends alike both physical suffering and intellectual joy. Listening to the final, protracted 'Amen' cadence to the last chorale prelude we may think, as the lines resolve into the beatitude of G major, of Spinoza's reflection that 'death becomes less hurtful in proportion as the mind loves God more. Those parts of us that perish with the body are of little importance when compared with the part which endures'. I think that means something to me, who am not a Christian; and I am certain that *something* 'persists' in the perfection that is the last chorale prelude: at once an epiphany and an epitome of Bach's millennially manifest life-work. ■

This essay is a very comprehensive rehash of the final section of my book, Bach and the Dance of God, *published in 1980, but out of print by 1990. Its 'cosmic' import, however speculative, seems appropriate to Bach's standing at the outset of the New Millennium.*

My quotations from Spinoza's Ethics are translated from Latin by R H M Elwes, in an edition published in New York in 1936.