

# THE ULTIMATE GOAL OF BACH'S ART<sup>1</sup>

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*Indeed, it seems as if Bach, about this time, desired to attempt everything that could be done in many and in few parts.*

Johann Nikolaus Forkel, 1802<sup>2</sup>

*For all is found in Bach's work: the development of cyclic forms, the conquest of the range of tones—the aim for highest concentration.*

Anton Webern, 1933<sup>3</sup>

When Johann Sebastian Bach submitted his resignation to the city council of Mühlhausen on June 26, 1708, he made reference to his “ultimate goal, namely a well-regulated church music to the Glory of God.” The position in Weimar of court and chamber organist now offered to him would make it possible for him to pursue this ultimate goal—one he had not been able to attain in Mühlhausen “without hindrance.”

There is no reason to assume that Bach was using a carefully formulated phrase to mask his interest in making “a more adequate living” at the Weimar court (of which he also spoke)—in other letters and petitions, as well, he said concisely what was on his mind. Rather,

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<sup>1</sup>Entitled “Bachs künstlerischer Endzweck,” this article first appeared in *Festschrift für Walter Wiora*, ed. Ludwig Finscher and Christoph Hellmut Mahling (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1967), 319–28. It was reprinted in Walter Blankenburg, ed., *Johann Sebastian Bach. Wege der Forschung*, 170 (1970): 552–67. Most recently it appeared with some corrections in *Denn alles findet bei Bach statt. Erforschtes und Erfabrenes* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2000), 46–54.

<sup>2</sup>Johann Nikolaus Forkel, *Über Johann Sebastian Bachs Leben, Kunst und Kunstwerke*, Leipzig, 1802, 58; reproduced in *The New Bach Reader*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, revised and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York and London, 1998), 470.

<sup>3</sup>Anton Webern, ed. Willi Reich, *Der Weg zur Neuen Musik*, (Vienna, 1960), 36.