

Next on

Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection

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Encore presentations of the entire *Discoveries* series every Wednesday at 7:00 p.m. on WRTI-HD2

Saturday, October 4th, 2014, 5:00-6:00 p.m.

Bach Old and New

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), arr. Mahler. [Suite from the Orchestral Works of Bach](#)

Bach, arr. Stokowski. [Tocatta and Fugue in D minor](#), BWV 565

Bach. [Keyboard Concerto No. 3 in D](#), BWV 1054



Every generation comes up with new ways to perform Johann Sebastian Bach. This tells us two things. One: Performance practice is as vital and relevant as ever. Rather than imagining forgotten professors paging through dusty tomes, we might envision performers kicking up dust with brilliant concerts of so-old-it's-new repertoire. But consider that the professors are very often the performers themselves. They are the very ones bringing Bach to us through their own research into the music and instruments of centuries ago.

Two, of course, is this: *Bach* is as vital and relevant as ever. Bach is worth playing and hearing by each new generation. In Bach is the touchstone of music itself, no matter the decade. He is so often the door that opens into the magic of music. It's happening today just as it happened during his lifetime.

But we should remember that while “historically informed performance” (HIP) is a fairly new term, performance practice is as old as music itself. It's just people thinking about how to play music. Performers always balance an appropriate style with the desire to reach an audience: authenticity and relevance. The HIP orchestra of today, playing gut-stringed baroque violins at breathless tempos feels this no more keenly than did Glenn Gould playing harpsichord music on the piano. Leopold Stokowski and Gustav Mahler knew exactly what they were doing with their protein-rich orchestrations of Bach. All of them wanted to be relevant, and wanted Bach to speak. Their audience was worth it. Bach was worth it.

The composer and conductor Gustav Mahler loved to listen to Bach, and gathered movements from two of Bach's orchestral suites to make one four-movement *Suite*, but for an unusual orchestra. With just a few winds and three trumpets along with the strings, but with timpani and organ and piano, Mahler transports Bach to the early 20th century. It's a flexible, colorful orchestration, so unlike Bach and yet so appreciative. We want to find something “wrong” with this approach—this re-orchestrating, let alone this re-cobbling—but we can't help smiling, thinking of what Mahler himself might comment. “Even if people censure me, they should do so hat in hand,” said Mahler.

Leopold Stokowski's famous transcription of the organ *Tocatta and Fugue* is wild and wooly, and we can't help being carried away by it. We know that Bach never heard it this way, but Stokowski has re-imagined a stunning organ piece into a stunning orchestral one. His choices are quite calculated. He wrote this at the dawn of the sound recording industry, and knew that audio fidelity left much to be desired. So he bolstered and buttressed the orchestra, extending the trebles higher and the basses lower, so that Bach could break through the nascent technology. It's a *tour de force*, and we love the audacity of it.

Harpichord music on the piano, played a certain way, was an intentional decision of Glenn Gould's, just as was his choice to record Bach. The clarity of his playing is almost blinding. It's as if he were a miner, or a surgeon, or a biochemist peering ever deeper into the mysteries of Bach's compellingly braided melodic cords. He uses his technique as a searchlight to find the magic of music itself.

His genius, and Stokowski's and Mahler's, thrills. And where's Bach in all this? He's right there, standing up to it, giving as good as he gets. That's *his* genius, and it never wavers over the generations.

Hosted by [Kile Smith](#), former Curator of the Fleisher Collection, and [Jack Moore](#), Program Director of [WRTI](#). In *Discoveries from the Fleisher Collection* we uncover the unknown, rediscover the little-known, and take a fresh look at some of the remarkable treasures housed in the Fleisher Collection of Orchestral Music, at the Parkway Central Library of the [Free Library of Philadelphia](#). The Fleisher Collection is the largest lending library of orchestral performance material in the world. For recording details, please go to our [web page](#). For a detailed list of all our shows, please visit our [archives](#). (215) 686-5313, fleisher@freelibrary.org.