have wanted. The museum has walled out of the neighborhood certain people and livelihoods, and it reflects the practice of architectural preservation in Egypt, with its narrow focus on "monuments"—the government's favored term for valuable historic buildings. Inherited from the colonial era, the term suggests buildings devoid of local use, to be protected from Egyptians and preserved for the visiting tourists. But after the eighteen-day uprising that ended Mubarak's presidency, the tourism industry took a nosedive, and the economy with it. Throughout 2011, al-Muizz Street was quiet, especially the *shisha* cafes (although the cars returned, since the police who enforced the pedestrian-only zones were gone). Needless to say, the Muizz project, with its huge but opaque budget and administration, was never open to public participation or review.

When asked about this, Rashidy took a drag of his cigarette and said simply, "The people are benefiting," then quickly repeated the mantra. It wasn't a dodge so much as a stark reminder of how the Egyptian state, from its urban planners in the Ministry of Housing to preservationists in the Ministry of Culture, views the management of a metropolis like Cairo and many of the people who live in it. Shawkat expressed this institutional attitude another way: "To the government planners, it's actually much better to work in the dark, outside of the public scope, and get something done—and then say, well, they're doing it for the greater good."

The update of Cairo 2050 that UN-Habitat is drafting with GOPP continues to endorse this perspective—and even includes on the cover of its draft document a photograph of al-Muizz Street illuminated at night, along with a rendering of Khufu Avenue. The draft promotes the Historic Cairo project as an initiative "to upgrade El Moez [*sic*] street and transform it into a world-class open museum." Three photos of the street glowing at night match those that appear in glossy Ministry of Culture publications. The transformation of al-Muizz into a pedestrian zone and open museum, according to the draft, "was carried out in coordination with the inhabitants of the area."

The chief slogan of the popular uprising that brought down Mubarak—"The people want the fall of the regime!"—was coupled with three basic demands: bread, freedom and social justice. These were not just a rallying cry to get people into the streets, but a concise, elegant platform for the essentials that a new government must provide. The Mubarak regime had treated state budgets and assets—among them, the military-controlled land that underwrote Cairo's desert transformation—as private portfolios. Urban control came to mean not just the deployment of the security forces to contain protests, but a network of governing, planning and business interests that grew wealthy building Mubarak's Cairo.

Mansour at the Habitat International Coalition is part of an emerging group of housing rights activists who argue that little has changed since the uprising. "Housing is not just a commodity or a commercial good," he told me. "It is a right. It's a social good. So urban planning should be a social good, too. You are planning for people's lives, not for a particular category of people at the top." The urban nature of Egypt's revolt might seem apparent with every reference to Tahrir Square, but Tahrir itself does not capture the role of the state's urban planning and development policies in producing cities of extreme social and spatial disparities. "It's top-down for a reason," Shawkat said. "If you look at something like Cairo 2050—if people got in and wanted their way, or wanted their rights, then you'd never have it the way that they're doing it."

Mohamed Lotfy at Amnesty International cautioned against dismissing Cairo 2050—as well as the kind of socially destructive urban development that it represents—as simply an artifact of the old regime. "Even if they realize 10 percent of it," he said, "that would be catastrophic for many, many people." For her part, Dina Shehayeb recalls that even during the presidential campaign, candidates like Amr Moussa, former secretary general of the Arab League, spoke of plans for a Maspiro Central Business District. "We need to have a revolution in the universities, in planning education, in urban planning and architecture faculties as it is taught and practiced," Nairy Hampikian insists. "Everything needs a revolution now." ■

# Off-Key

**by MICHAEL O'DONNELL**

**Reinventing Bach**
By Paul Elie.
Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 498 pp. $30.

Glenn Gould, the virtuoso pianist and great interpreter of Bach, once described the way recordings of music "insinuate themselves into our judgments, and into our lives," thereby giving recording artists "an awesome power that was simply not available to any earlier generation." Listen to a favorite record often enough, and it becomes authoritative; a different interpretation, however fresh and ingenious, arouses suspicion. Is there a better performance of the "Et in terra pax" from Bach's Mass in B minor than Nancy Argenta's on the 1986 recording by the Monteverdi Choir and the English Baroque Soloists (for example)? Yet while repeated listening may accentuate our tastes, it does not necessarily refine them. For that we go to the concert hall, where we also encounter risk. A live performance is subject to constraints that a beloved CD or MP3 file is not: differences in interpretation, an off night, a patron's abrupt cough and, above all, no second takes. But a concert holds various types of appeal that even a perfect recording lacks. For one thing, a concertgoer does not listen to the music while reading or working or making a daily commute, as we so often do today; a concertgoer can concentrate. Also, a concert is an ephemeral thing that exists for a time and is gone. In those brief moments, anything can happen.

Music in the age of recording is the subject of *Reinventing Bach*, an unusual book by Paul Elie that champions recording technology as the means of survival for classical music generally, and the music of Bach in particular. It is the latest in a wavelet of books by authors with no claim to any kind of musical expertise who discover classical music, fall in love with a composer, and write a book about the experience. Two recent titles are Wendy Lesser's *Music for Silenced Voices*, about Dmitri Shostakovich's string quartets, and Eric Siblin's *The Cello Suites*, a book on one of Bach's masterworks. Elie owes a considerable debt to Siblin's research on the history of the suites.

Classical music has experienced years of diminishing ticket sales and the indif-

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ference of young listeners and so must exploit technology, Elie believes, in order to endure. To prove as much, he lived for "a thousand and one nights" with Bach's music on compact disc, MP3 and radio, and he emerged on the other side of the experience eager to proselytize both the music and the recording technology that captured it. Against the instinct of purists to denounce the ubiquitous cheapening of classical music in ringtones, overheated movie trailers and hip-hop songs, Elie contends: "The more various our encounters with Bach, the more objective his genius is."

In its approach to the subject, *Reinventing Bach* follows in the footsteps of Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club*, which explored the emergence of pragmatism in late nineteenth-century America through the lives of four prominent individuals. Elie profiles four men who took part in Bach recording milestones. His book is a study of an idea, told through the diverse lives of that idea's proponents. But unlike Menand, who assembled a book from four relatively independent profiles, Elie seems to have attempted *Reinventing Bach* as a sort of fugue, wherein a series of independent melodic lines are added to one another and then exist in a complex braid of counterpoint. It is an ambitious undertaking, but it requires Bach's ability to retain clarity in each strand while working the whole into a seamless harmonic design.

*Reinventing Bach*'s four subjects are Albert Schweitzer, the organist and philosopher, who recorded Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D minor in 1935; Pablo Casals, who rediscovered Bach's cello suites and made the first recordings of them in the late 1930s; Leopold Stokowski, the flamboyant conductor who paired with Walt Disney to create the film *Fantasia* (1940), which features Bach's music; and Glenn Gould, whose 1955 and 1981 recordings of Bach's Goldberg Variations were the bookends of his career and a golden era in classical recording. In addition to these men, Elie devotes pages to other figures in classical music, sketches a biographical portrait of Bach, and offers a running discussion of advances in recording technology. The result is an engaging but fairly unwieldy affair.

At times, Elie's selection of his four main subjects seems arbitrary and strained. *Fantasia*, which he explores at length, has more to do with Mickey Mouse and the Disney story than with the music of Bach, even though Stokowski's orchestral transcription of the Toccata and Fugue in D minor opens the movie. As Elie concedes, *Fantasia* was a "one-off"; it did not, as Stokowski hoped, herald the arrival of a new medium combining classical music and Technicolor images. Stokowski himself was known as much for championing twentieth-century composers as for his orchestral transcriptions of Bach's music, which in any event usually pale in comparison with the works' intended settings. Schweitzer is a more fitting subject, but he too has limitations: his organ recordings survive today only as grainy artifacts, and his life's story has as much to do with theology and medical missionary work (he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952) as it does with music. The book's main event is its discussion of the lives and recordings of Casals and Gould.

Casals, a Catalan cellist, famously discovered a copy of the sheet music to Bach's then little-known cello suites in a Barcelona shop in 1890 at age 13. He called it "the great event" of his life, and from that point forward he lived with the music constantly. But he waited a dozen years after discovering the suites before performing them publicly. When he finally did so, he became one of Bach's champions—the most important since Felix Mendelssohn prompted the first major Bach revival in 1829. Between 1901 and 1904, Casals brought the cello suites to Europe, North America and South America, fighting the prevailing belief that they were lifeless technical exercises rather than music intended for dedicated performance. Decades later, over the years 1936–39, he recorded the suites against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War. Today, the recording sounds overly loose in terms of interpretation as well as, frankly, a little screechy. It does not display the disciplined fidelity to score or the perfect intonation of more recent recordings by János Starker, Mstislav Rostropovich or Yo-Yo Ma. But Casals's recording was immensely influential in bringing Bach's music to a wide audience and establishing its place at the center of the canon.

With Glenn Gould's recording of the Goldberg Variations, Elie writes, "Bach became modern." Gould was a young genius with a touch of Marlon Brando about his looks, who in 1955 made one of the landmark classical recordings of the twentieth century. It was a time of new advances in "high fidelity" technology, and Gould—more a recording artist at heart than a concertist—exploited the use of repeated takes and splicing to assemble the perfect record. "The freshness of Gould's approach—thirty-eight and a half minutes; no repeats; no pedal, no

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"God shouldn't be put in charge of everything until we get to know Him a little better."
—Kurt Vonnegut
The Nation, November 28, 1981

"We have to have fun while trying to stave off the forces of darkness because we hardly ever win, so it's the only fun we get to have."
—Molly Ivins
The Nation, November 17, 2003

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rubato; no fidelity to older models"—and the unprecedented clarity in the lines written for each hand dazzled aficionados, and they also imparted to the music a spark and life that ensnared a new generation of listeners. In a section on the 1955 recording sessions, Elie recounts fascinating details, like the way Gould removed his shoes and requested a piece of carpeting so that his foot movements would not be audible on tape. In the ensuing years, Gould retreated into hypochondria and documentary filmmaking and developed bizarre habits like wearing gloves and winter clothes year-round. Yet this somehow renders his incredible moment in the sun even more poignant. He made a second recording of the Goldberg Variations in 1981, in a performance as introspective and wise as the 1955 sessions are dashing and confident.

Casals and Gould are ideal subjects with which to explore *Reinventing Bach*'s topic of recording technology and classical music, as both men forswore the concert hall for significant periods of their lives. Casals silenced his cello by refusing to perform in countries that recognized Spain's fascist government, and Gould withdrew from recitals and concerts in order to concentrate on recording. Certainly it is the case that most people alive today never heard either man play in person, and yet we know them by their famous albums. Gould's 1955 *Goldbergs* sound as lively as ever, and Casals's cello suites, if somewhat less relevant to today's listener, have informed the recordings that we do know.

In both cases, then, Elie is doubtless correct that the act of recording helped preserve and promote Bach's music. But Casals and Gould are hardly representative cases. Most professional musicians, even virtuosos, spend their lives traveling and performing, and their days are harried and hectic because of it. Thus, it grates a bit when Elie reveals that during his thousand-and-one-day project, he attended very few performances of Bach's music, noting that he did his listening "almost completely through recordings." And several of the concerts that he does describe are actually a little suspect. At Christmastime in New York City, he observed notices for many traditional Bach performances, but the "event that drew me was a lunchtime poetry reading punctuated with organ music by Bach and other composers." Another concert that Elie attended was a program of works not by Bach, but by a twentieth-century composer who used the Goldberg Variations as an influence. Elie reveals that it was the first time he could remember listening to music while doing nothing else, and his mind soon wandered to mundane daily affairs.

Making an argument for the centrality of Bach's recordings is well and good, but its exponent should be someone who has also spent time experiencing the magic of Bach performed live. Elie is like a novice hermit who champions solitude before he has ever spent any real time alone. Thus the reader has little confidence in his final judgment that, for today's classical music converts, music performed live "seems insubstantial and elusive." This is a surprising conclusion, because Elie characterizes one Bach concert he did attend—a performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*—as "life extending." (He fell asleep during the *St. John Passion*.) I love my recording of the Mass in B minor as well as anyone, but even though I can take it with me anywhere, when I listen to it I am not really there. It cannot compete with the live sound of the chorus and orchestra in full cry, or the spectacle of dozens of striving musicians attired in concert black. Nor can an iPod quite reproduce the light, running energy of a live Brandenburg concerto as the players perform standing, practically dancing, or the concentrated dedication it takes to bring off one of the partitas for solo violin—to say nothing of the fact that those who believe in the arts (especially arts that are struggling to find young new listeners) should patronize them and support hardworking musicians with their dollars, not merely with their words.

Bach recording has certainly had its extraordinary moments in the twentieth century, but so has Bach performance. One of them occurred quite recently: Elie mentions (but might have explored more closely) the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage undertaken by John Eliot Gardiner from 1999 to 2000. Gardiner and company performed 198 cantatas in fifty-nine concerts in Europe and the United States, at the points in the liturgical calendar for which they were composed. In this way, Gardiner renewed public interest in an overlooked body of Bach's work, using the medium of live performance to remind us that, during Bach's lifetime, many masterpieces were heard only once. Those concerts took place before Elie's Bach journey began, so he could not have attended them. And to be fair, his enthusiasm for Bach's music is infectious; even the greatest of composers needs champions in every generation. But Elie should make some time for the concert hall. ■

## written on a paper bag

clover flowers fleck to dirt
withered ferns nuzzle furl

plaid oak leaf mossy incline
eaten leaf pinholes slunk
rotted hemlocks crocus or
lily-like leaves eclipse pond's

methane edges autumn drunken
yellow jackets bees and reeds

birch branch in beige sand
wind peaks prods flower shadows
wobble pronged bobbing filaments

JESS MYNES