

The b-a-c-h drawings

Extracts from an interview

Ray Malone

Can we talk about the title of these drawings, and the musical connection?

In principle, it's a very simple one, because it's purely formal, though arguably more elaborate connections develop out of that. In the first instance, Bach—indirectly, of course—suggested to me a solution to a problem. Some time ago, I'd done a series of drawings, which had come out of nothing more complex than playing around with sticks of compressed charcoal, drawing lines, then smudging them, and trying to find ways of adding them together, isolating them, framing them, and so on. I reached a limit with those particular pieces, and put them aside.

For me, the drawn line is a fundamental. In most art it's either an accidental or an incidental—it's on the way to being something else, a painting or a representation. So it was something I was bound to turn to again, but this time, when I did, two simple connections occurred. There I was, drawing lines, in charcoal again, wondering what to do with them. And there on the radio was a musicologist, Laurence Dreyfus, talking about Bach. What he said, among other things, as I remember it, was that Bach, unlike, say, Beethoven, was not so much interested in developing a musical idea, as extending it. It seemed to me a crucial, and useful distinction. And then, there was Bach, as I was listening to him in the studio, threading one idea in and out of itself, or of some other idea, in that endlessly inventive way of his. And suddenly a solution occurred to me.

Firstly, the square: a classical, clearly delineated, but neutral space, a space, at one and the same time empty, as we say, and loaded with resonance and reference—to symmetry, to painting itself, to architecture, and so on—so, a resounding space, a veritable echo chamber, waiting for something to happen. And secondly, four lines matching, in their own linear, time-bound way, the square-ness, the openness of the space. Four lines crossing from one side to the other, left to right, right to left, left to right, and back again. Crossing the space in their own time and their own way, with all the certainty of destination in that, and all the uncertainty of what would 'happen' on the way—a short, but, depending on the particular character of the particular piece, more or less adventurous trajectory. So I felt, without any conceit as to the lines matching the mathematical precision of Bach's figurations, a kind of kinship between the two, sufficient anyway to permit what I hope is a modest reference to Bach and the music itself in the title.

And the particular form of the title? Not Bach, but precisely ,b-a-c-h'?

Well, clearly, the four letters of his name echo the four lines; and

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the reference to musical nomenclature—here specifically German nomenclature—allows a further musical connection, though, as I said, a modest, indirect one.

Are there further parallels beyond the formal, nominal ones?

I think so. Whereas, for instance, music's ground is, essentially, silence, so drawing's is what we choose to call the blank, usually white sheet of paper. As with the 'silence' against which music 'sounds', this ignores so much that is neither silent nor blank. Perhaps it serves as some sort of ideal, but it's certainly not real—there is no such thing as silence, nor any such blank as a piece of paper. The b-a-c-h pieces draw attention to this by inducing from the paper evidence of its texture, its fibrous origins, just as music that incorporates so-called silence induces an awareness of what is there when the music isn't: the quietness of the hall, the hum of our surroundings at home, our own breathing, or simply the sound of our own listening. So, the first action, when I make them, is to declare a space (I mask it), and then attend to the paper itself. As I introduce the charcoal to it, brush the particles across it, I watch the way the paper reveals itself. I use brushes of various sorts for this, each having its own particular effect on how the two, charcoal and paper, interact. I attend to the variety of ways in which the texture appears, to the differences in the density and distribution of the charcoal. This is an open activity, where my only guide is a sense of the moment, that is, how it feels, or looks to me at any given time—but it's the paper 'telling itself' that I'm most interested in.

This presumably extends to the 'lines' themselves. How do you go about what must be the crucial stage?

Imagine them, for a moment, as a performance—taking up an instrument, say, and instead of doing the conventional things with it, of treating it as the known thing with its familiar set of methods and routines (its academic burden, if you like), finding other things to do, the sorts of things curious minds and fingers find to do. Think of a musician, a composer, such as Stefano Scodanibbio, exploring other ways of inducing sound from a double bass. Think of them that way, as improvisations if you like, and you'll have some idea of how I approach them, and how I think of them myself, and the way I work when I'm doing them—for instance, how I hold the charcoal, how I bend and twist my wrist sometimes in a deliberate subversion of what one might be taught, how I vary the pressure on the paper, the direction, the breadth of the line, the speed of each one as it finds its way across the space.

As I understand it, there are two principal directions in these drawings, which reflect the basic geometry of perception: horizontal movements from left to right and right to left, and vertical ones.

The grid is always an imposition, perception is not geometrical. Geometry is a way of holding things together, of simplifying our perceptions so as to control them, to order them. There is much pleasure to be had from this—only witness the way most of our constructed world is organized, in combinations of the horizontal and the vertical, or variations of the upright and the prone. Here, in the b-a-c-h drawings, the grid is in a way infinite, and being constantly undermined, at least horizontally. Because of the way I work, the movements across the space are subject to a whole range of distractions, interruptions, arabesques, ruptures, and so on. As I said, the tempo varies a lot, from fast to slow, from aggressive to lyrical.

For me they also evoke a variety of graphic (even representational?) ideas: great slashes of black, swooping waves, tracteries, flight paths, tangles, knots, meaningless scribble, calligraphic scrawls, and so on. Yet somehow, in the resulting work, all this seems poised, and beautifully balanced, like a well-executed design.

The formal element is crucial here: the not quite square format which forbids chaos, the basic measure of 4 (the lines traversing the space, the four sides of the square), and the stabilizing effect of the vertical dragging, which is the last stage in making them.

You've described them as an infinite series. There's no end to them?

As an idea, no. That is, for me they're symbolic of the freedom essential to art, and the artist, and more personally, of my own difficulty with the notion of the master-piece. It's so central to our culture, but it both inhibits the artist and privileges a certain sort of work—the ultimate museum piece. As to them going on and on, well, I may tire of them, and no doubt you may see too many of them—that is, they may cease to work for both of us.

Perhaps that's another question. What I was getting at was, can there be no aesthetic distinction between them, that is between any two of them compared?

Of course there can. It's not a matter of whether some work or some don't, but that some work will be done by the worst of them—there's still action there, there will still be qualities to be identified, and maybe appreciated. The idea is what they all share, regardless of one being better or worse than another, and the idea is infinite, and in that sense beyond judgement, because judgement is a matter of time—that is, the opposite of infinity. After all what matters at any one moment is what is there in front of you. Art is always in the way of something else, that's why we do it.