

Franco-German Identity Issues and the Use of the Expression ‘Return to Bach’ in the Interwar French Press

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INTRODUCTION

The phrase ‘The Return to Bach’ [Le Retour à Bach] instigated a vigorous polemic between composer and theorist Charles Kœchlin and critic Boris de Schloezer. In an article bearing the same title and published in *La Revue musicale* in November 1926, Kœchlin voiced his strong opposition¹ to the neoclassical composers’ stern image of Bach, an ‘austere cult’ that played ‘the role of a penance’ after the ‘sin’ of the ‘dangerous Debussy religion’.² Moreover, he rejected the idea of a return to Bach, insisting on the continuity of his influence throughout the nineteenth century. A few weeks later, when Boris de Schloezer replied in the same journal, in February 1927, he admitted to a certain imprecision and an often abusive use of a formula which was becoming more and more common in discourse; nevertheless, he insisted on the historical role of the ‘return to Bach’ for a generation that looked to the Leipzig master as a ‘teacher of discipline’, reminding with a pithy expression: ‘[...] the objective was not to resurrect Bach, who was very much alive, but to transform him into a war machine, and to achieve this, to emphasise precisely what distinguished him from the masters who were to be overthrown, left behind and eventually reestablished on their thrones’.³

Founded upon a lexicological investigation of the French general, cultural, and musical press of the interwar period, this study seeks to illuminate the function of the expressions associated with neoclassicism. It endeavours to discern the true

implications of the terms ‘neoclassical’ and ‘return to Bach’, two expressions whose aesthetic parameters appear to coincide. The limitations of the corpus for this article are immediately apparent: the brevity of press articles, which are usually intended to report on a musical event, rather than to develop a theoretical thought over several pages, explains why no musicographer has written in black and white that he used ‘neoclassical’ in place of ‘return to Bach’ or, on the contrary, distanced himself from it. A close reading and analysis of articles mentioning these terms reveals two aesthetic categories with a similar profile, i.e. based on an alleged return to the past in the interpretation or composition of a work, often (but not automatically) accompanied by an awareness of historicity in the way music is made or discussed.

The advent of digitised press materials, precipitated by the evolution of application programming interfaces (APIs) such as Gallicagram, has engendered a novel methodological paradigm for the analysis of press sources and archives. This paradigm facilitates the understanding of the genesis of an aesthetic movement through the lens of contemporaneous writings. Furthermore, it enables a more precise description of the term ‘neoclassical’, which, as Michel Faure asserts, ‘[...] emerged only after the Second World War, coinciding with the neoserial revolution in Darmstadt’.⁴ A systematic study of these occurrences in the writings of various speakers (music critics, composers, *etc.*) reveals the spirit of the time and highlights the different and sometimes contradictory uses of a vocabulary denoting a particularly heterogeneous repertoire. From this perspective, the objective of this article is not to validate or invalidate the choice of the terms ‘neoclassical’ and ‘return to Bach’ (and their overlap) in retrospect, but rather to highlight the heterogeneity of these uses from the moment they appeared, without placing them in the context of the historiographical discourse on their subject beyond the corpus of the French press of the interwar period. The present article does not seek to examine the correspondence between the neoclassical traits retained by the press and their musical reality. While such an undertaking might be considered laudable, its methods, objectives and perimeter are beyond the scope of this article.

The aim of the present paper is to map out the various usages of these expressions between 1918 and 1939,⁵ in the belief that the uses underscore the processes at work in narratives in France, the vast majority of which expel any reference to the Franco-German political and aesthetic context. Despite referencing a German figure who had become universal (Bach), neoclassicism appears to pay little heed to works composed on the other side of the Rhine, favouring an international aesthetic – or rather, a very internationally French one⁶ – based on the obliteration of contemporary German music.

METHODOLOGICAL PRELIMINARIES

Two catalogues were explored in parallel: those of the *Répertoire international de la presse musicale* (RIPM) and Gallica. Specifically, Gallica was subjected to a lexicometric analysis using the Gallicagram API, which processes resources hosted on Gallica. The various graphs in this article show the occurrences hosted on Gallica (and Retronews, seeing as the Retronews catalogue is indexed in the Gallica catalogue). To the best of our knowledge, no database or API currently exists that permits joint analysis of queries relating to the Gallica and RIPM catalogues, nor to analyse overall trends relating to the general and specialist press. This article is therefore based on a lexicometric analysis (excluding journals hosted on the RIPM and not accessible via Gallica, such as *La Revue musicale* or *La Revue Pleyel*), supplemented by a more traditional analysis, combining these two corpora to identify the main lexicological trends. For a more detailed presentation of the lexicometric work that can be carried out with Gallicagram, readers can refer to the literature produced by the API authors.⁷

The corpus under consideration, which is distributed in the Gallica and RIPM libraries, is the result of the digitization, in January 2024, of the following periodicals: *Beaux-arts* (fortnightly); *Comœdia* (daily); *Esprit* (monthly); *Europe* (monthly); *Gringoire* (weekly); *Je suis partout* (weekly); *L'Action française* (daily); *L'Ami du peuple* (daily); *L'Art musical* (weekly); *L'Aube* (daily); *L'avenir* (weekly); *L'Express de l'est* (daily); *L'Express de Mulhouse* (daily); *L'Intransigeant* (daily); *L'Œuvre* (daily); *La Dépêche algérienne* (daily); *La Liberté* (daily); *La Revue des jeunes* and *La Nouvelle revue des jeunes* (monthly); *La Revue de Paris* (fortnightly); *La Revue musicale* (monthly); *La Revue Pleyel* (monthly); *La Semaine à Paris* (weekly); *La Vie intellectuelle* (monthly); *Le Bien public* (daily); *Le Figaro* (daily); *Le Journal* (daily); *Le Matin* (daily); *Le Ménestrel* (weekly); *Le Mercure de France* (monthly); *Le Petit démocrate de Saint-Denis et de la région* (weekly); *Le Petit Havre* (daily); *Le Petit journal* (daily); *Le Petit Marseillais* (daily); *Le Petit Parisien* (daily); *Le Quotidien* (daily); *Le Temps* (daily); *Les Annales politiques et littéraires* (weekly); *Les Cahiers d'art* (monthly); *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (weekly); *Marianne* (weekly); *Notre rive* (monthly); *Notre temps* (monthly); *Ouest-éclair* (daily); *Paris midi* and *Paris soir* (daily); *Radio marocaine* (weekly); *Revue critique d'histoire et de littérature* (fortnightly); *Revue hebdomadaire* (weekly); *Rouen gazette* (weekly); *Sept* (weekly).

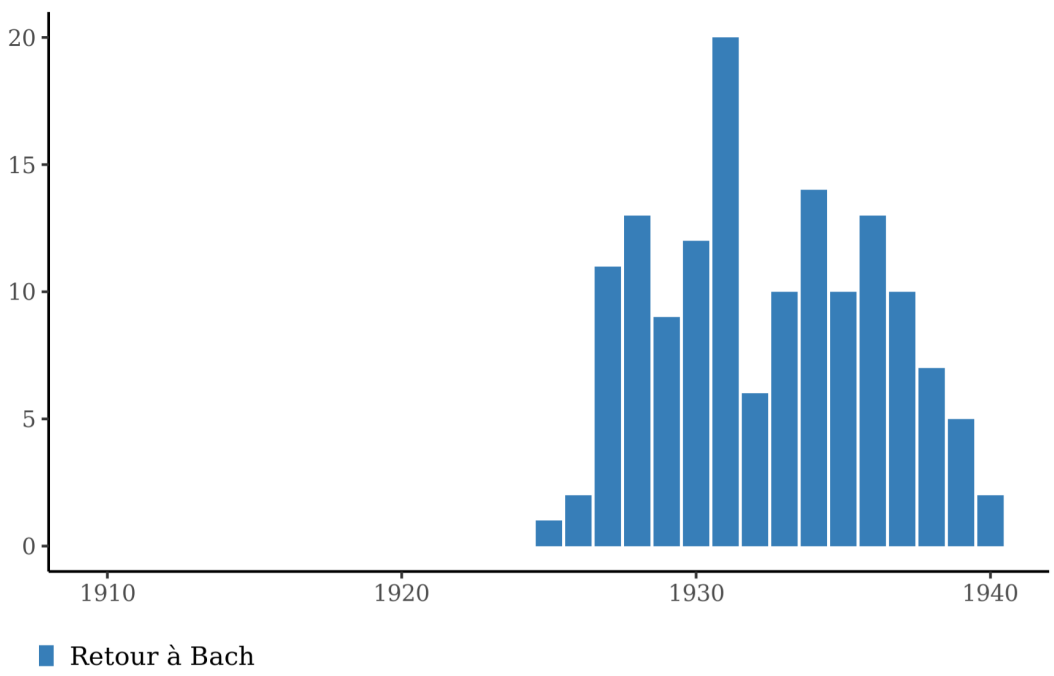
As the expression 'neoclassical' did not have a stable spelling in the interwar period, the following French spellings were used: 'néo-classique', 'neo-classique', 'néoclassique' and 'neoclassique'.

DISTRIBUTION OF OCCURRENCES OF ‘RETURN TO BACH’ AND ‘NEOCLASSICISM’

It is interesting to note that, in the French press, the expression ‘return to Bach’⁸ was more frequently used than the term ‘neo-classical’. Indeed, between the wars, the former was mentioned more than 150 times in the French general, cultural and musical press, while the latter appeared in just under 90 instances.⁹ While some musicologists embraced the term, such as Florent Schmitt, who employed it on numerous occasions in *Le Temps* – a total of 14 times between 1929 and 1939 – the extensive circulation and flexibility of the term is underscored by the diversity of the press outlets in which it appears and the speakers¹⁰ who utilised it. The expression was frequently employed by critics, who expeditiously used it for disparaging purposes. It was not confined to the specialist press but was also widely used in the general press between the wars, primarily by musicographers.

The Gallicagram tool, which is built from documents hosted on Gallica,¹¹ thus demonstrates that the expression was widely circulated in the general press (FIGURE 1).

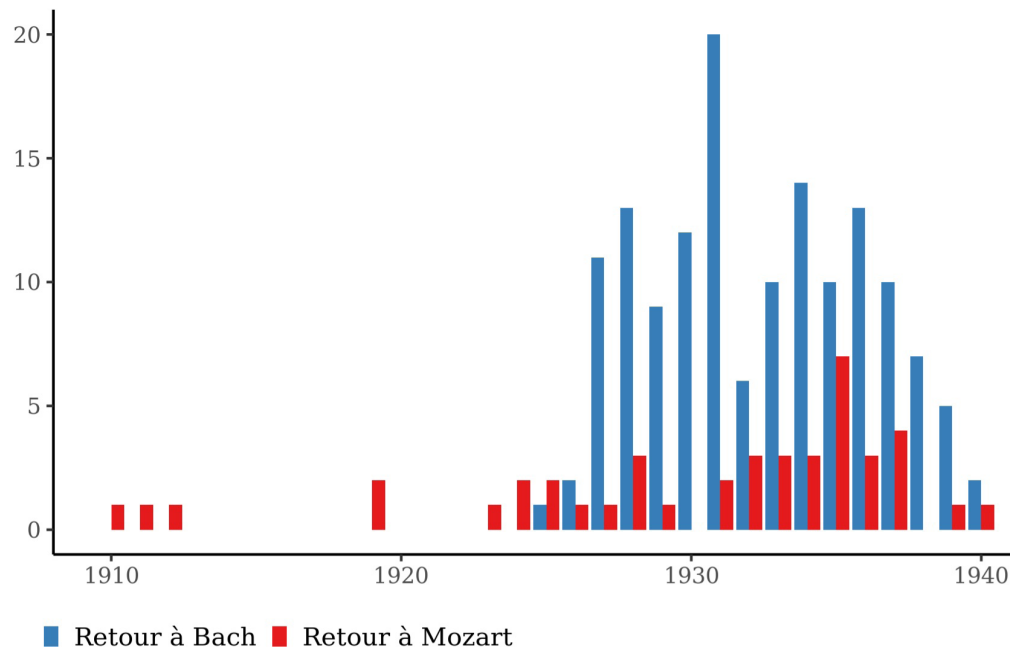
FIGURE 1. Trends in the use of the expression ‘Retour à Bach’ in the French general press between 1910 and 1940. Graph produced with Gallicagram.



Usage demonstrates that the expression ‘return to Bach’ is understood as a general return to the Baroque and Classical repertoires. This is underlined by the associations or equivalences frequently inferred by critics. The ‘return to Bach’ is just as much a return to Mozart (‘I accept more and more the thesis of the so-called “objective” music so dear to our contemporaries and the “return to Bach” or Mozart’),¹² Scarlatti, Clementi,¹³ or even Handel (‘Igor Stravinsky’s “Symphony of Psalms” follows the same trend [as Casella’s *Serenade*]. Here Stravinsky makes a happy use of the least original forms of classical polyphony. It is a singular return to Bach and Handel’).¹⁴ The expression is often used evasively, without being tied to a particular musical work, and functions as a synecdoche of learned Western music composed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, as Henri Rimbaud points out in an article on Stravinsky’s *Symphony of Psalms*, considering that the formula [of a return to Bach is] ‘too brief to be entirely accurate: in reality, a return to the masters of the eighteenth century, and even, with *Apollon musagète*, to Lully’.¹⁵

The press critics’ focus on the figure of Bach is evident in the variety of lexical forms they use, including the use of inverted commas (‘le retour à Bach’), capital letters (‘le Retour à Bach’), and hyphens (‘le retour-à-Bach’). A comparative

FIGURE 2. Comparative evolution of the use of the expressions ‘Retour à Bach’ and ‘Retour à Mozart’ in the French general press between 1910 and 1940. Graph produced with Gallicagram.



analysis of the frequency of appearance of the two expressions ‘return to Bach’ and ‘return to Mozart’ is particularly eloquent, in that it highlights, on the one hand, the concentration of occurrences over a decade in the case of Bach, and, on the other, a dilution extending to the inter-war period in the case of Mozart (FIGURE 2).

GENESIS OF AN EXPRESSION

We might consider the high concentration of the expression ‘return to Bach’ over the period 1925-1940 as a biological organism characterised by a genesis, a peak and a phase of decline. The term was first coined in an article published in *Europe*, a Parisian periodical, by the Belgian artist Marcel-Louis Baugniet. The text, although broadly devoted to architecture and the history of art and entitled ‘Towards an aesthetic and social synthesis’, was merely the occasion for a brief commentary on the ‘return to Bach’, ‘In music, the return to Bach is also a symptom. A return to the essential construction’.¹⁶

While the term ‘return to Bach’ was initially used without particular emphasis, it was an article by Koechlin, published in 1926, in *La Revue musicale* that first intertwined neoclassicism, ‘return to Bach’ and the figure of Stravinsky.¹⁷ Schloezer’s response in the same journal a few months later expanded on the (contested) idea of a paradigm shift in compositional sensibility, and the expression subsequently rapidly spread through the general press.¹⁸ Although commentaries on Stravinsky’s music accounts for a significant number of instances of a “return to Bach”, the expression was actually used in reference to a fairly wide range of composers. Examples include Henry Barraud’s music,¹⁹ Germaine Tailleferre’s *Le Marchand d’oiseaux* (1923),²⁰ Darius Milhaud’s *Concerto pour piano* (1933)²¹ and *La Création du monde* (1923),²² Honegger’s *Prélude, Arioso et Fuguettes sur le nom de Bach* (1932) and Albert Roussel’s *Suite en fa dièse pour piano* (1909):²³ all these works were designated by the expression and assimilated to a French aesthetic. Prokofiev’s *Piano Concerto No. 3* (1921)²⁴, Goffredo Petrassi’s *Partita* (1932)²⁵ and Nabokov’s *Sonata for Piano* (1926),²⁶ conversely, emphasised the international dimension of the aesthetic.

However, the term is highly polysemous: the ‘return to Bach’ does not solely refer to neoclassical movement that drew inspiration from the Baroque and Classical masters. Far from being limited to a compositional practice (which was the meaning of the articles by Koechlin, Schloezer and Lourié),²⁷ the expression also refers to a more global movement aiming at the rediscovery of Bach, reflected in the increased presence of Bach’s works in concert programmes²⁸ and the recordings he inspired.²⁹ Finally, the expression is frequently associated with Wanda

Landowska, whose important role in the rediscovery of the composer has been regularly emphasised³⁰ – even if the use of the term ‘return to Bach’ is, according to some musicographers, inappropriate in this case.³¹ However, it is important to acknowledge that the two aspects are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In some articles, the transition from one musical dimension to the other is achieved by using ‘return to Bach’ as an indistinct, the expression mixing the two concepts.

APEX

Following the publication of Lourié’s article and the subsequent Kœchlin-de Schloezer controversy, the expression gained increasing popularity during the latter half of the 1920s. At the time, it was not uncommon for the very articles in which it was used to be meta-commentaries underlining the vitality of the expression. In 1930, T. Klingsor lamented in *La Semaine à Paris*: ‘Return to Bach: that’s all we hear about anymore’,³² in tune with André Coeuroy, who considered in 1931 that, in retrospect, ‘the “return to Bach” that dominated the post-war decade had taken shape and became a reality’.³³ In a similar vein, Florent Schmitt, almost a decade later, reflected on the success of this formula, when he evoked: ‘[...] this famous return to Bach, whose incendiary fury of ten years ago cannot be extinguished without leaving a few lingering flames here and there [...]’.³⁴

DISAFFECTION

During the 1930s, there was a gradual disaffection with the ‘return to Bach’, which culminated in the term being used in a largely disparaging manner. The phrase was considered outmoded and consigned to the status of a passing fad. Many acknowledged the decline of this aesthetic in a self-referential vein. Florent Schmitt was among the first to voice support for this new movement, expressing delight upon the performance of the *Sonate transatlantique* at the Concerts Padeloup in 1931, which he attributed to a ‘[...] revived Tansman, back from his return-to-Bach[...]’.³⁵ However, a few months later, Schmitt would go on to assert that Germaine Tailleferre’s *Marchand d’oiseaux* represented a ‘return-to-Bach’ that was ‘not in itself invented by [Tailleferre] and which quickly became dated’.³⁶ In 1938, Suzanne Demarquez wrote in a similar manner, observing that ‘the post-war wheel has turned very quickly and the need for novelty has subsided considerably in recent years. Even the return to the works of Bach, Scarlatti or Clementi, which was novel in its own time, appears to have lost its appeal’.³⁷

The term had become synonymous with a perceived lack of inventiveness and sterile academicism and had been exhausted to the point of no return. Consequently, it no longer aligned precisely with the neoclassical aesthetic – or, at least, with the concept of a salutary return to the classical style. In 1938, for instance, Florent Schmitt drew a comparison between the classical spirit of German Wolfgang Fortner's *Concerto*, performed at a concert at the Triton, and the poverty of his French contemporaries' 'return to Bach':

And if Wolfgang Fortner's concerto, with its fine classical allure, shows a somewhat exclusive fervour towards the composer of the well-tempered harpsichord, is it not, unlike all our little 'return to Bach' pieces – for he knows his trade very well – by standing tall and proud in a style that he has voluntarily chosen?³⁸

The same disparagement applies to the *Partita* by the Polish composer Alexandre Tansman, performed at the Salle Gaveau on 2 May 1938:

The final *Presto*, which in its implacable roundness finds a way to insert a non-intrusive *fugato*, is a brilliant, frenetic piece, happy to be alive. Sweeping away all uncertainties, it leaves the best impression of this *partita*, which, while stemming from Bach in title and, to some extent, in form, resolutely avoids any return to Bach in spirit.³⁹

This gradual devaluation is also reflected in the trivialisation of the expression 'return' and the entailed inflation of substitutes. The trivialised expression is particularly present in the press, where it gives rise to sometimes surprising, even hazardous, comparisons or substitutions. The 'return to Bach' thus raises the question of symmetrical 'returns' to Beethoven⁴⁰ and Offenbach.⁴¹ But, more importantly, it provides an opportunity to underline the inherent inconsistencies associated with the use of these expressions. Like a magnet, the phrase thus summons the returns to Gounod,⁴² Delibes and Ambroise Thomas mocked by A. Coeuroy;⁴³ those of Liszt and Verdi ridiculed by C. Cuvillier;⁴⁴ and finally, that of Massenet whose time, as J. Bruyr deplores in *Le Petit Havre*, is long overdue.⁴⁵

BACH MADE IN FRANCE: NATURALISATION

Bach's association with a classical aesthetic that functioned as a 'neutral' marker meant that he did not appear to be a 'German' musician. When considered in a de-Germanised way, the composer was seen as part of a universal heritage⁴⁶ – or rather, a universality made in France. An article by Paul Morand, entitled 'Retour à Richard Wagner' ('Return to Richard Wagner') published in the *Revue de Paris*

in September 1931, underlines the extent to which Bach is conflated with French music, in a very clear discursive context (the pilgrimage of a French listener to Bayreuth):

Then Wagner moved away; already in our childhood, in 1900, the mists were closing in on his painted gods; Russian music, Mussorgsky, Debussy, came to us from the East; then Stravinsky in his first style... Today, in France, our reaction is a return to Rameau, a return to Bach, who did not need all this apparatus to please us. Let the Steel Helmets make their political return to Wagner. Let's go back to bed...⁴⁷

The press published in the aftermath of the First World War shows the diversity of responses from the musical world during the postwar transition.⁴⁸ While a significant number of articles merely disregarded the composer's nationality as a contextually inconsequential element, others exhibited greater complexity. In a context where the rebranding of certain German composers to favour their reception in France has been observed (e.g. Beethoven's supposed Flemish origins being used as a token of acceptability), Marcel Delépine took great care, in 1919, to record the end of the conflict as far as the musical domain was concerned. He emphasised the dissolution of the superficial rejection of German composers: 'Thus, the war is over... There is no longer any need to write that Beethoven was Belgian. Bach and Wagner will have the right to be Germans and to express the genius of their race, and an important part of human genius'.⁴⁹ Concomitant with this discursively necessary rehabilitation, and in a movement that has been underway in France for several decades, a number of articles, while celebrating Bach's genius, aim above all to qualify the Germanic exclusivity of European classicism. Camille Saint-Saëns' remarks in *Le Ménestrel* for the inauguration of the École des Hautes Études Musicales in Fontainebleau on June 26, 1921, should be read in this light:

Until now, young American musicians have tended to seek instruction in Germany, attracted by the names of the great masters it has given the world and for which it prides itself. But it is wrong to give Germany all the credit; too often, we forget too that the modern musical world was born in Italy. If the great German masters, dazzling us with their genius, concealed their truth from us for a moment, the thunder that has rattled the world has now dispelled many clouds, and what do we see? These geniuses, even those who seemed the most Germanic, like the Bachs, a constellation of which Sebastian is the brightest star, have undergone, in high proportion, the beneficial infiltration of Italian blood. Later, the French influence was mixed in, and from the happy blend of Italian, German and French temperaments emerged this admirable school, which is German in name only, and truly worldwide in its spirit.⁵⁰

In contrast to a specifically Germanic identity of classical style, this account reinforces the legitimacy of its aesthetic judgment for its French readership. The divide between works of such a musical pantheon and the boycott implied by the war effort is resolved by invoking a Latinity that, while preserving it, also moderates the Germanity of German composers. A few years prior while at the heart of the conflict, this position had been very clearly expressed by Clément Besse in his essay *La Musique allemande chez nous*, referencing the ‘great Germans’ of the classical era:

For us, it's a licence to admire without reticence works in which the Mediterranean soul is so intertwined with the Austro-German soul. When we applaud foreigners, we feel a weight lifted from our conscience, and a joy swollen with pride from not being at odds with our own race. We welcome the proof that our devotion to Handel, Schutz and Mozart is strictly orthodox.⁵¹

In the press, the discourse surrounding Bach's hybridity and Latinity was coupled with a rhetoric questioning the very idea of a ‘return’ to Bach in France. These tensions can be readily elucidated by the rupture they would entail in the French reception of the composer. The expression ‘return to Bach’, as employed by Henry Prunières, instigated a heated debate with Gustave Bret. According to Bret, the phrase suggested that Bach had temporarily disappeared from the French compositional pantheon, which he considered a serious historical and political error. In a 1931 article published in *L'Intransigeant*, he expressed his concerns on the subject:

The question, need I say it, is not to know whether Strawinsky – who, by honouring Bach, Donizetti or Rimsky to suit his whim, remains, thank God, Strawinsky – triggered this or that movement in what is commonly called the young French school. Mr. Henry Prunières is free to have his own opinion on this. What is important is the effect of this opinion on the audience: this is particularly important when it's a foreign audience. And yet, as I have seen twenty times to one, the interpretation too commonly given to his article by the German reader is that, without Strawinsky, France would be in virtual ignorance of the greatest of musicians. Even in the musical realm, there are errors that should not be allowed to propagate.⁵²

There are many echoes of this seeming challenge of the very idea of a ‘return’ to Bach, particularly in the general press. In a 1932 interview published in *Le Petit Marseillais*, Jacques Larmanjat is quoted describing the phenomenon as a mere ‘fashion’, and disputing the rupture implied by the expression: ‘– Are you as certain as some young people that Bach is back? – There is no return to Bach. We never left him; we merely abandoned him temporarily. However, it appears that

we are indebted to Bach for a considerable amount. The return to Bach is merely a passing fad'.⁵³ Robert Brussel articulated a similar perspective in *Le Figaro*, stating: 'To be honest, some musicians, though not among the least talented, feel no need to "return to Bach", for the simple reason that they have never stopped drawing from his works'.⁵⁴ Similarly, Emmanuel Bondeville, in a 1928 article in *Rouen Gazette*, asserted: '[...] Bach's art remains a wellspring of vitality from which musicians will always draw, and the current much-discussed "return to Bach" is no more than the public affirmation of a cult that has long counted notable devotees'.⁵⁵

GERMAN TRACES

An exhaustive exploration of the various occurrences of the expressions 'Return to Bach' and 'neoclassicism' in the French press between the wars demonstrates that German works – German or Austrian – are far from being regularly associated with this level of expectation, thereby confirming the asymmetry already pointed out by Scott Messing.⁵⁶ As Messing observes, Germany is not an exception to this return to the past, conceptualised as a response to the Wagnerism of the preceding century: Reger's *Konzert im alten Stil* op. 123, composed by Reger, in 1912, and notable for its first movement's resemblance to the *Brandenburg Concertos* (published by Reger himself in 1906), along with the *Gavotte und Musette* 'im alten Style' for string orchestra (1897) and the *Suite* op. 25 (1921-1923) composed by Schoenberg and Strauss's *Chevalier à la rose* all testify to a certain return to the eighteenth century. Works by Pfitzner and Hindemith, composed between the wars, can also be seen, in their own way, as coherent with this strand of neoclassicism.

However, it is noteworthy that among French musicographers, there is a paucity of links between these works and the present corpus, with the exception of brief references to Max Reger (see below), Paul Hindemith⁵⁷ or Max Butting.⁵⁸ Conversely, their German counterparts, such as 'Neue Klassizität', 'Neoklassizismus' or 'Junge Klassizität', remain absent within the corpus analysed by Gallicagram. Despite the close association of neoclassicism with Stravinsky, the lexical field of the term appears to be employed only with great difficulty in relation to German music, despite the nationality of the composer with which it was primarily associated (Bach).⁵⁹

It should be noted, however, that a small number of articles have associated Reger with neoclassicism, albeit in a roundabout way. For instance, an article by Boris de Schloezer, published as early as 1921, demonstrates that German

composers were closely linked to the birth of neoclassicism in the minds of Russian-born French musicographers:

Prokofieff was declared a neo-classicist and many hailed him as the musician who would finally establish in our country the healthy traditions of the great German musicians, put Russian music back on the right classical path and overthrow the power of the rival schools – neo-romantic (Scriabin) and national (Rimsky-Korsakoff, Mussorgsky).⁶⁰

Five years later, in 1926, he further elucidated this association by invoking the figure of Reger while continuing to discuss Prokofiev:

The first exegetes were quick to classify Prokofieff as part of the neo-classics, and even made him a disciple of Reger, who was still relatively unknown at the time. Today, this comparison may seem highly comical, but Prokofieff's early piano pieces (Toccata, Gavotte, etc.) justify the confusion between the German master's pseudo-classicism and the young Russian's sonorous playfulness up to a certain extent.⁶¹

A comparable interpretation of history can be found in Pierre Maudru's 1927 account:

The evolution of German music, which was to be so rapid, first manifested itself in the concert hall. The movement began with a reaction in favor of Brahms, then with the appearance of Max Reger – who died some time ago – and Bruckner. Neophytes were not afraid to put Max Reger on the same level as Bach, because of his contrapuntal richness. The famous 'return to Bach' was to have its extreme consequences here.⁶²

The notion was previously articulated by an unidentified contributor in the October 23, 1936, edition of *L'Art musical*, who evaluated Reger's way of composing as 'of exceptional intricacy, to the extent that contrapuntal excess frequently eclipses the melodic line.' Moreover, they observed that, towards the end of his life, Reger 'reverted to a more elementary manifestation of his art, being among the earliest to advocate for a "return to Bach"'.⁶³

In spite of the French press's reluctance to categorise German works as 'neo-classical', they did not entirely dismiss them as a return to the past. A number of articles attest to a certain reluctance to differentiate them from the authentic return to Bach, and instead invite the reader, as Henry Prunières suggested in 1926, to consider that there are 'multiple paths that lead to Bach', as Casella and Hindemith have just 'eloquently proved'.⁶⁴ In 1938, for instance, Georges Auric faced the challenge of directly equating a 'return to Bach' with classical influence

in the case of two German composers, Wolfgang Fortner and Karl Holler, when he inquired about the *Concerto* that was recently performed in concert:

This music goes straight to the point without wasting any time along the way. But where does it take us? The truth is that, underneath the sometimes sprightly contrapuntal writing, there is a poorly concealed substance. The so-called 'return to Bach' of some of our contemporaries has often been joked about. What can we say of these young people who seem to have deliberately set off on a great journey into the past, in the time machine: they come back to the most ungrateful and sterile scholastic writing.⁶⁵

André Coeuroy employs a similar circuitous route, utilising a sonata by Kurt Thomas to illustrate a different form of return to the past, namely Reger's German way:

Finally, Kurt Thomas's Sonata in A minor (1928) is resolutely linear in character, in the general line of Bach and Reger; and although its musical substance is less rich than that of the two preceding works, it seems to represent the German spirit in music with the greatest fidelity, or if you like, the least external borrowings.⁶⁶

The quotations presented in this article seemingly demonstrate that, in the context of the teleological narrative that has been posited as a true 'return to Bach' in France, there have been endeavours to revive the strands of a German neoclassicism (a term not employed in this context) that also draws inspiration from Bach. More surprisingly, and without overestimating its representativeness, an article by Albert Febvre-Longeray endorses a two-track neoclassicism when he writes of Schoenberg: 'Honegger explains that returning to Bach is quite different [from "Stravinsky returning to Rossini, Liszt, Pergolesi"]. It is imperative to distinguish between the letter and the spirit. The letter: pastiching the *Inventions in two voices*. Schoenberg, for his part, returns to Bach in spirit'.⁶⁷

The dissociation of letter and spirit, apparent, for example, in the Viennese composer's *Drei Satiren* op. 28 (1924), which parodies Stravinsky's neoclassical style, reveals the strong aesthetic tensions behind claims to Bach's heritage. It recalls, finally, that the story of the return to Bach is pinned against the background of oppositions between Stravinsky and Schoenberg, naturalising the idea that the return to French Bach (the form) and German (the spirit) represents two discrete realities.⁶⁸

We thus hypothesise, by way of conclusion, that the values associated to the expressions 'Return to Bach' and 'neoclassical' and underlying a historicity of this aesthetic for French speakers only concern French music, or international music linked to French music. On the contrary, for French speakers, German music

would belong to a different musical essence, thus not justifying the use of these expressions. It is therefore appropriate to consider neoclassicism in France in the light of a double movement based, on the one hand, on the de-Germanisation and naturalisation of Bach; and on the other hand, on the impermeability of German music which, also nourished by sources from the eighteenth century, seems to be too heavily characterised by Germanness to be able to be assimilated, in France, to neoclassicism.

Notes

- 1 On the place of this article in Kœchlin's career as a composer and intellectual, see Philippe Cathé, 'Charles Kœchlin: The Figure of the Expert', in: *Music Criticism in France, 1918-1939: Authority, Advocacy, Legacy*, ed. by Barbara L. Kelly and Christopher Moore, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018, pp. 63–90.
- 2 '[un] culte austère', 'le rôle d'un cilice', 'le péché', 'la dangereuse religion debussyste' (Charles Kœchlin, 'Le "Retour à Bach"', *La Revue musicale*, VIII/1, 1 November 1926, pp. 1–12: 2).
- 3 '[...] il ne s'agissait pas de ressusciter Bach qui était bien vivant, mais d'en faire une machine de guerre et pour cela, de souligner en lui précisément ce en quoi il différait des maîtres qu'il fallait jeter à terre, quitter plus tard, et les [*sic*] replacer sur leurs trônes' (Boris de Schloezer, 'Réflexions sur la musique : à la recherche d'une discipline', *La Revue musicale*, VIII/4, 1 February 1927, pp. 165–167: 167).
- 4 '[...] n'apparaîtra[it] qu'aux lendemains de la Seconde guerre mondiale, aux beaux jours de la révolution néosérielle de Darmstadt' (Michel Faure, 'Peut-on définir le néoclassicisme?', *Analyse Musicale*, 33, 1 November 1998, pp. 69–78: 73).
- 5 Based on the study of an exhaustive corpus of articles published between 1918 and 1939 on neoclassicism and the return to Bach, at a point when Gallica is gradually being updated, this article also considers articles published before and after this chronological milestone for contextualisation purposes.
- 6 In his article on neoclassicism, Makis Solomos uses the term 'neoclassical international' ('internationale néoclassique') to refer to a general trend observed in Germany, Italy, France, Spain and the United States among composers '[...] who imposed a return to order – often after having themselves sown the seeds of "chaos" – in the 1920s and 30s' '[...] qui imposent le retour à l'ordre – souvent après avoir eux-mêmes semé le "chaos" – dans les années 1920–30]' (Makis Solomos, 'Néoclassicisme et postmodernisme : deux antimodernismes', *Musurgia*, 5/3–4, 1998, pp. 91–107: 94). In a similar vein, Raffaele Pozzi sees 'the strong demand for a "call to order" shared by many European musicians during and after the First World War' as 'the only common element' in the various works that can be associated with neoclassicism. Raffaele Pozzi, 'L'idéologie néoclassique', in: *Musiques : une encyclopédie pour le XXI^e siècle*, ed. Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Paris: Actes Sud-Cité de la musique, 2003, 1, pp. 348–376: 353. Michel Duchesneau points out that the tonal framework, linked to a conservative conception of music, remained, for some of the music critics of the 1920s and 1930s, the only valid system; works associated with neoclassicism would fall within this framework, unlike atonal, dodecaphonic, atonal, serial or polytonal works. Michel Duchesneau, 'Music criticism and aesthetic during the interwar period: fewer crimes and more punishments', in: *Music Criticism in France, 1918-1939: Authority, Advocacy, Legacy*, ed. by Barbara L. Kelly and Christopher Moore, Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2018, pp. 17–42.
- 7 See <https://shiny.ens-paris-saclay.fr/app/gallicagram> [last accessed 26 May 2025]; for a presentation of the contributions of this API to press research, see Benjamin Azoulay and Benoît de Courson, 'Gallicagram : un outil de lexicométrie pour la recherche', 8 December 2021. Available: <https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/84bf3> [last accessed 26 May 2025]; Benoît de Courson et al., 'Gallicagram : les archives de presse sous les rotatives de la statistique textuelle', *Corpus*, 24, 15 January 2023.
- 8 On the appearance of the expression 'return to Bach', see below, 'Genesis of an expression'.
- 9 The objective of this comparison is not to map the complete circulation of an expression, but rather the difference in circulations between one expression and another. Measuring the

- absolute circulation of an expression in the press would imply having a benchmark term to which to relate the circulation of this expression and being able to discriminate between occurrences deemed irrelevant. For instance, what is to be done with an item that is very relevant to our subject, but which is repeated identically in several publications? How much does it ‘count’?
- 10 They include Georges Auric, Gustave Bret, Raoul Brunel, André Coeuroy, Jean Delaincourt, Arthur Hoérée, Pierre Maudru, Henry Prunières, Lucien Rebatet, Boris de Schloezer and Florent Schmitt.
 - 11 Excluded from this corpus – and from their histogram representation – are important music journals such as *La Revue musicale* and *La Revue Pleyel*, which are not supported by Gallica as they are not hosted on Gallica. These journals are nevertheless included in the scope of this article, thanks to a separate analysis; see above, ‘Methodological preliminaries’.
 - 12 ‘J’admets de mieux en mieux la thèse de la musique dite “objective” chère à nos contemporains et le “retour à Bach” ou à Mozart’ (Paul Landormy, ‘Saint-Saëns’, *Le Temps*, 17 October 1935, p. 5).
 - 13 See footnote 37.
 - 14 ‘La “Symphonie des [*sic*] Psaumes” d’Igor Stravinsky obéit à la même tendance [que la *Sérénade* de Casella]. Stravinsky utilise ici avec bonheur les formes les moins originales de la polyphonie classique. C’est un singulier retour à Bach et à Haendel’ (Georges Ralli, ‘Classicisme ou de Casella à Alban Berg’, *Notre temps*, XIII, 4 January 1931, pp. 549–551: 550).
 - 15 ‘[...]ce “retour à Bach” comme on a dit (dans un formule trop brève pour être tout à fait exacte: en réalité, retour aux maîtres du XVIII^e siècle, et même, avec *Apollon musagète*, à Lully)[...]’ (Henry Rambaud, ‘À propos de la “Symphonie de Psaumes” d’Igor Stravinsky’, *La Nouvelle revue des jeunes*, 10, 15 October 1931, pp. 434–445: 439).
 - 16 ‘En musique, le retour à Bach est un symptôme lui aussi. Retour vers la construction essentielle’ (Marcel-Louis Baugniet, ‘Vers une synthèse esthétique et sociale’, *Europe*, 35, 15 November 1925, pp. 323–339: 335).
 - 17 In an article published in 1927 (*The Dominant*), Igor Stravinsky expressed his discomfort with the use of the term ‘neo-classical’, the accuracy of which he was not convinced was appropriate to describe some contemporary production. Igor Stravinsky, ‘Avertissement – A Warning’, *The Dominant*, December 1927, p. 106.
 - 18 The article Arthur Lourié devoted to *Oedipus-Rex*, a few months after the exchange between Kœchlin and Schloezer, helped to establish the association between Stravinsky and the return to Bach. Arthur Lourié, ‘Oedipus-Rex’, *La Revue musicale*, VIII/8, 1 June 1927, pp. 240–253.
 - 19 ‘[Barraud] also started from counterpoint, he was influenced, like so many others, by the “return to Bach” movement which dominated post-war music’. ‘[Barraud] est parti, lui aussi, du contrepoint, il a subi, comme tant d’autres, l’influence du mouvement de “retour à Bach” qui a dominé la musique d’après-guerre’ (Gilbert Brangues ‘Musique moderne’, *Sept*, 174, 25 June 1937, p. 10).
 - 20 ‘[...] le *Marchand d’oiseaux* by Germaine Tailleferre, a return to Bach that she did not invent and which, was rapidly to be dated [...]’. ‘[...] le *Marchand d’oiseaux* de Germaine Tailleferre, d’un retour-à-Bach qu’elle n’inventa pas et qui, très vite, devait dater [...]’ (Florent Schmitt, ‘Les concerts’, *Le Temps*, 25488, 6 June 1931, p. 3).
 - 21 Judged by Jean Delaincourt as ‘[...] one of the most acceptable of the “return to Bach”’. ‘[...] l’une des plus acceptables du “retour à Bach”’ (Jean Delaincourt, ‘Les grands concerts’, *L’Ami du peuple*, 2452, 22 January 1935, p. 5).

- 22 '[...] *The Creation of the World*, by M. Darius Milhaud, directed by the author, and of which we especially liked the first part, one of the best successes of the "return to Bach" [...]' [*La Création du Monde*, de M. Darius Milhaud, dirigée par l'auteur, et dont on apprécie surtout la première partie, l'une des meilleures réussites du "retour à Bach" [...]] (Jean Delaincourt, *L'Ami du peuple*, 9 April 1935, p. 5).
- 23 Lucien Rebatet wrote thus, about the two works of Honegger and Roussel, in 1936: 'The three pieces of Tuesday evening would serve well as epitaphs for defunct aesthetics. In the suite on the name of Bach (the famous "return to Bach", alas! this excellent attempt in its principle, a musical reconstruction coming after Impressionism, but which was only carried out by poor architects), Mr. Honegger would like to achieve sobriety, simplicity, and only encounters the flattest poverty. Mr. Albert Roussel's neo-classicism is never emptier, never concedes its serious shortcomings of technique and invention more than in his chamber music, in particular this suite in F sharp for piano'. [*Les trois pièces de mardi soir serviraient bien d'épithètes pour des esthétiques défunctes. Dans la suite sur le nom de Bach [le fameux "retour à Bach", hélas! cette tentative excellente dans son principe, une reconstruction musicale venant après l'impressionnisme, mais qui ne fut menée que par de piètres architectes], M. Honegger voudrait atteindre à la sobriété, la simplicité, et ne rencontre que la plus plate pauvreté. Le néo-classicisme de M. Albert Roussel n'est jamais plus vide, n'avoue jamais davantage ses graves lacunes de technique et d'invention que dans sa musique de chambre en particulier cette suite en fa dièse pour piano*] (Lucien Rebatet, 'M. Gil-Marchex – Le répertoire contemporain', *L'Action française*, 150, 29 May 1936, p. 5).
- 24 Mr. Imbert wrote in 1936: 'The *Finale* was born under the sign of the "return to Bach", of jazz also of which we perceive some distant echoes'. [*Le Finale est né sous le signe du "retour à Bach", du jazz aussi dont on perçoit quelques échos lointains*] (Maurice Imbert, 'Ce qu'on a entendu la semaine dernière dans les concerts symphoniques à Paris', *L'Art musical*, 42, 25 December 1936, p. 11).
- 25 According to Florent Schmitt, '[...] the spirit is resolutely of our days, if not ahead of them, with just this hint of a return-to-Bach, which opportunely comes to legitimise a violent, burning *fugato*, from which the sonorous sparks will burst out in waves'. [*Car l'esprit en est résolument de nos jours, s'il ne les devance, avec juste cette pointe de retour-à-Bach, qui vient opportunément légitimer un violent, brûlant fugato, d'où jailliront en gerbes les étincelles sonores*] (Florent Schmitt, 'Les concerts', *Le Temps*, 26372, 11 November 1933, p. 3).
- 26 A. Hoérée thus writes, about his second movement: 'His spontaneity which dictates undulating and incisive melodies will save him from this tension of language suddenly sinking back into the most trivial excerpts. This is the case in the second movement [*Adagio*] where the melody, otherwise good, accompanied accordantly [*sic*], is lost in banal progressions imitating from a distance the music of the eighteenth century (is this the return to Bach?) and in overly simplistic modulations, while the *Finale* stealthily directs its frenzy towards the epoch of tonality'. [*Sa spontanéité qui lui dicte des mélodies ondoyeuses [*sic*] et incisives le sauvera de cette crispation du langage se détendant subitement en enchaînements les plus anodins. Il en est ainsi dans le deuxième mouvement [*Adagio*] où la mélodie, d'ailleurs heureuse, accompagnée accordiquement [*sic*], se perd en progressions banales imitant de loin la musique du XVIII^e [est-ce là le retour à Bach ?] et en modulations trop simplistes, tandis que le *Finale* oriente à la dérobée sa frénésie vers le temps de la tonalité*] (Arthur Hoérée, 'Chroniques et notes : *Sonate en la majeur et mineur* par Nicolas Nabokoff', *La Revue musicale*, VIII/3, 1 January 1927, pp. 83–84: 83).
- 27 See in this regard Valérie Dufour, "Néo-gothique et néo-classique". Arthur Loulié et Jacques Maritain: aux origines idéologiques du conflit Stravinski – Schoenberg', in: *Musique, art*

- et religion dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, ed. by Sylvain Caron and Michel Duchesneau, Lyon: Symétrie, 2008, pp. 31–41.
- 28 To just cite one example, Paul Le Flem rejoiced in *Comoedia* in 1930: 'In Bach's *Brandenburg Concerto No. 2* (this week was definitely the "return to Bach") Alfred Cortot, from his position as conductor of the *Continuo*, watched over the balance of a perfect execution of style and nuances with intelligent vigilance'. ['Dans le *Concerto Brandebourgeois n°2* de Bach [ce fut décidément cette semaine le "retour à Bach"] Alfred Cortot de son poste de réalisateur du *Continuo*, veilla avec une vigilance intelligente, sur l'équilibre d'une exécution parfaite de style et de nuances'] (Paul Le Flem, 'L'aide des mélomanes aux associations', *Comoedia*, 8000, 6 January 1930, p. 2).
- 29 An article by G. Mussy in *Le Figaro*, in 1932, is particularly eloquent. The author writes: 'The return to Bach, outlined at the beginning of this year, is for it [the phonographic industry] a certain way of rejuvenating itself. The record has seen the first musicians in the world come to it; it perpetuates auditions which, because of the costs they require, would not take place if they were to be short-lived; its technique is now close to perfection. Bach needs all these qualities; this is the chosen moment to do it, if not to do it again in good artistic conditions. The two wax records offered are, in fact, remarkable recordings, also good for dispelling the prejudice of aridity which can still be attached to the music of the old master in the great family of the phonograph'. ['Le retour à Bach, esquissé au début de cette année, est pour elle [l'industrie phonographique] un moyen certain de se rajeunir. Le disque a vu venir à lui les premiers musiciens du monde ; il perpétue des auditions qui, en raison des frais qu'elles exigent, n'auraient pas lieu si elles devaient être sans lendemain ; sa technique est maintenant voisine de la perfection. Bach a besoin de toutes ces qualités ; c'est le moment choisi pour le faire, sinon le refaire dans de bonnes conditions artistiques. Les deux cires proposées sont, en fait, de remarquables enregistrements, bons également à dissiper le préjugé d'aridité qui peut être encore attaché dans la grande famille du phonographe à la musique du vieux maître'] (Georges Mussy, 'Auditions par disque : deux vidéos de Bach', *Le Figaro*, 25, 25 January 1932, p. 6).
- 30 See Alain Délot, 'Wanda Landowska: phonograms and sound documents', 2011, Cité de la musique. Available at https://www.citedelamusique.fr/pdf/insti/recherche/wanda/7_landowska_disco.pdf [last accessed 26 May 2025]. See also, for a broader overview, Chloé Dos Reis, 'Les premiers enregistrements de pièces françaises de clavecin en France (1908-1950) : conséquences interprétatives sur la redécouverte d'un répertoire spécifique', in: *Musique, disque et radio en pays francophone : 1880–1950*, ed. by Michel Duchesneau and Federico Lazzaro, Paris: Vrin, 2023, pp. 237–250.
- 31 An anonymous author of *L'Express de Mulhouse* wrote in 1934: 'We can say that Wanda Landowska, through her recreative genius, has brought back to life a sumptuous and rich past. This sort of return to the past that has been improperly called the "return to Bach" is not only due to the current vogue for the harpsichord linked to the desire to restore the authentic sound of works, but to an anti-romantic movement whose effect is clearly being felt'. ['On peut dire que Wanda Landowska, par son génie créateur a rendu la vie à tout un somptueux et riche passé. Cette sorte de retour au passé qu'on a appelé improprement le "retour à Bach" n'est pas dû seulement à la vogue actuelle du clavecin liée au désir de rendre aux œuvres leur authenticité sonore, mais à un mouvement antiromantique qui se fait nettement sentir'] (Anonyme, 'Concerts : 2^e concert d'orchestre de chambre, Wanda Landowska à Mulhouse', *L'Express de Mulhouse*, 60, 13 March 1934, p. 2).
- 32 'Retour à Bach : on n'entend plus que cela' (Tristan Klingsor, 'Musique : les concerts de la semaine écoulée', *La Semaine à Paris*, 413, 25 avril 1930, pp. 14–15: 14).

- 33 'Le "retour à Bach" qui domina la décade issue de la guerre a pris forme et a pris corps' (André Coeuroy, 'Renouveau de la symphonie', *Gringoire*, 136, 12 June 1931, p. 2).
- 34 '[...] ce fameux retour à Bach dont la fureur incendiaire d'il y a dix ans ne saurait s'éteindre sans laisser traîner ça et là quelques flammèches attardées [...]' (Florent Schmitt, 'Les concerts', *Le Temps*, 28338, 15 April 1939, p. 3).
- 35 Un '[...] Tansman tout ragaillardi, revenu de son retour-à-Bach [...]' (Florent Schmitt, 'Les concerts', *Le Temps*, 25418, 28 March 1931, p. 3).
- 36 See footnote 20.
- 37 'Certes, la roue de l'après-guerre a très vite tourné et le besoin de nouveauté est fort apaisé depuis quelques années. Même le retour à Bach, Scarlatti ou Clementi qui fit neuf en son temps semble déjà usé' (Suzanne Demarquez, *L'Art musical*, 93, 27 June 1938, pp. 917–919: 919).
- 38 'Et si le concerto de Wolfgang Fortner, de belle allure classique, témoigne envers l'auteur du clavecin bien tempéré une ferveur un peu exclusive, n'est-ce-pas, à la différence de tous nos petits "Retour à Bach" – car il possède fort bien son métier, – en se maintenant haut et fier dans un style qu'il a volontairement élu ?' (Florent Schmitt, 'Les concerts', *Le Temps*, 27935, 5 March 1938, p. 3).
- 39 'Le *Presto* final, qui dans sa ronde implacable trouve moyen d'insérer un *fugato* qui n'y fait pas figure d'intrus, est un morceau brillant, frénétique, heureux de vivre. Balayant toute incertitude, il laisse la meilleure impression de cette *partita* qui, issue de Bach quant au titre et jusqu'à un certain point à la forme, se garde résolument, quant à l'esprit, de tout retour à Bach' (Florent Schmitt, 'Les concerts', *Le Temps*, 28004, 14 May 1938, p. 3).
- 40 On the occasion of the Beethoven–Weingartner festival at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Guy de Pourtalès notes: 'And this time we were able to observe that young people attended in large numbers. Could this be a return to the "old deaf man of the 9th", just as we had a return to Bach, Mozart, Wagner?' [Et l'on a pu observer cette fois que la jeunesse y avait assisté en masse. Serait-ce un retour au "vieux sourd de la IX^e", comme nous avons eu un retour à Bach, à Mozart, à Wagner ?] (Guy de Pourtalès, 'Musique : festival Beethoven–Weingartner', *Marianne*, 56, 15 November 1933, p. 5). Charles Kœchlin also wrote a 'Return to Beethoven' in 1927. Charles Kœchlin, 'Le "Retour à Beethoven"', *La Revue musicale*, VIII/6, 1 April 1927, pp. 125–131.
- 41 'The music [of the operetta *Pomme d'api*] has remained very young and the current return to Offenbach – without having the breadth... and the ambiguity of the famous "return to Bach" – allows us to taste its flavor [...]' ['La musique [de l'opérette *Pomme d'api*] en est restée fort jeune et l'actuel retour à Offenbach – sans avoir l'amplitude...et l'équivoque du fameux "retour à Bach" – nous permet d'en goûter la saveur [...]]' (Maurice Brillant, *L'Aube*, 702, 23 September 1934, p. 2).
- 42 Paul Dambly wrote in 1939: 'The anxiety of our times is revealed through its need for "returns"; in music, almost everywhere the famous "return to Bach"; in France, for some years now, a return to Gounod whose disdain was, moreover, among a certain cult only a fad and perhaps a prejudice that was not entirely disinterested'. ['L'inquiétude de notre temps se décèle à son besoin de "retours" ; dans la musique, un peu partout le fameux "retour à Bach" ; en France, depuis quelques années déjà, retour à Gounod dont le dédain n'était, d'ailleurs, chez une certaine secte qu'une affaire de mode et peut-être un préjugé non entièrement désintéressé'] (Paul Dambly, 'Mireille reparait à l'Opéra-Comique rajeunie pour sa 569^e représentation', *Le Petit journal*, 8 June 1939, p. 6).
- 43 'Then came the "return to Bach", and many other returns – returns to Gounod, to Delibes, to Tchaikovsky, to Ambroise Thomas – which were, for maturing music, only returns of age'.

- [‘Puis vint le “retour à Bach”, et des tas d’autres retours – retours à Gounod, à Delibes, à Tchaïkowsky, à Ambroise Thomas – qui n’ont été pour la musique mûrissant, que des retours d’âge’] (André Coeuroy, ‘La musique: incertitude’, *Gringoire*, 161, 4 December 1931, p. 12).
- 44 ‘When, about fifteen years ago, “jazz” was imported France, there were cries of “Miracle” among all the young musicians of the time, sure to renovate music thanks to its use: soon they realised that it was only a monotonous process, incapable of improvement, so, quickly changing their tune, they proclaimed with enthusiasm that the salvation of musical art lay in the return to Bach, Liszt and Verdi’. [‘Lorsque, il y a une quinzaine d’années, le “jazz” fut importé en France, presque tous les jeunes musiciens d’alors crièrent au miracle, pensant rénover la musique par son emploi : bientôt ils s’aperçurent que ce n’était qu’un procédé monotone, incapable de perfectionnement, aussi, changeant rapidement leur fusil d’épaule, ils proclamèrent avec enthousiasme que le salut de l’art musical était dans le retour à Bach, Liszt et Verdi’] (Charles Cuvillier, ‘Concerts’, *Le Petit Parisien*, 21553, 3 March 1936, p. 7).
- 45 ‘There has been much talk of “returns” in our post-war music. Return to Bach first, then to Gounod, Chabrier, Tchaikowsky. We are waiting for the return to Clapisson. Why not return to Massenet? I sincerely hope so’. [‘On a beaucoup parlé de “retours” dans notre musique d’après-guerre. Retour à Bach d’abord, à Gounod, à Chabrier, à Tchaïkowsky, ensuite. Nous attendons le retour à Clapisson. Pourquoi ne pas faire retour à Massenet ? Sincèrement, je le souhaite’] (José Bruyr, “Semiramis” d’Arthur Honegger ; “Rolande” à l’Opéra; “Tante Marie” à la Comédie-Française; “Marie l’Égyptienne” à l’Opéra-Comique”, *Le Petit Havre*, 18654, 17 June 1934, p. 7).
- 46 See, on the subject of the distinction – including on a cultural level – between a humanist Germany and an imperialist Germany, the following article: Esteban Buch, “Les Allemands et les Boches”: la musique allemande à Paris pendant la Première Guerre mondiale’, *Le Mouvement social*, 208, 2004, pp. 45–69, as well as Charlotte Segond-Genovesi, *Musique et musiciens à Paris pendant la Grande guerre : les chemins du patriotisme*, Paris: Vrin, 2022. The theory of the two Germanys, recurring since 1870 and updated by the First World War, is nevertheless characterised by its plasticity: if Wagner and Bach each embody one of the two poles of opposition, (Wagner pan-Germanic, Bach universal), this thesis undergoes a certain number of ideological adaptations. Thus, Bach, at the heart of the First World War, is considered the first step of a musical pan-Germanism by the musicographer Clément Besse in his work *La Musique allemande chez nous* (see Aurore Flamion, ‘La musique allemande chez nous (Clément Besse, 1916): divertissement universel, ou art impérialiste?’, paper presented at the 5th International Doctoral Congress of Music and Musicology, Sorbonne, 2023). Conversely, Rachel Orzech underlines in her thesis how Wagner is presented as universal by French musicographers who, in 1933, sought to emancipate the composer from his appropriation by the Third Reich (see Rachel Orzech, *Claiming Wagner for France: Music and Politics in the Parisian Press, 1933–1944*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2022). For a more in-depth study of these ideological adaptations, see Aurore Flamion, *La réception de la musique allemande dans la presse française de l’entre-deux-guerres*, Paris–Brussels, EHESS–Université libre de Bruxelles, thesis in progress under the direction of Esteban Buch and Valérie Dufour.
- 47 Widely quoted in the general press, this article partly explains the peak of occurrences noted for the year 1931: ‘Puis Wagner s’est éloigné ; déjà, dans notre enfance, en 1900, les brumes se refermaient sur ses dieux peints ; la musique russe, Moussorgsky, Debussy, nous arrivaient d’Orient ; puis Stravinsky première manière... Aujourd’hui, en France, notre réaction, c’est le retour à Rameau, le retour à Bach, qui n’avaient pas besoin pour plaire, de tout cet appareil. Laissons les Casques d’Acier faire leur retour politique à Wagner. Rentrons nous coucher...’ (Paul Morand, ‘Retour à Richard Wagner?’, *La Revue de Paris*, V, 1 September 1931, pp. 5–13: 12).

- 48 See in this regard *Music and Postwar Transitions in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. by Anaïs Fléchet, Martin Guerpin, Philippe Gumpłowicz, Barbara L. Kelly, New York: Berghahn Books, 2023.
- 49 'Ainsi, la guerre s'en va... Il n'est plus besoin d'écrire que Beethoven était Belge. Bach, Wagner auront le droit d'être Allemands et d'exprimer le génie de leur race, et une part importante du génie humain' (Maurice Delépine, 'Aux concerts Padeloup', *Le Populaire*, 330, 11 March 1919, p. 2).
- 50 'Jusqu'à présent, les jeunes musiciens américains avaient une tendance à s'en aller chercher l'enseignement de l'Allemagne, attirés par le nom des grands maîtres qu'elle a donnés au monde et dont elle se fait gloire. Mais c'est à tort qu'on lui en attribue tout le mérite ; on oublie trop que le monde musical moderne a pris naissance en Italie. Si les grands maîtres allemands nous éblouissent, par leur génie, nous ont caché un moment cette vérité, le tonnerre qui vient d'ébranler le monde a dissipé bien des nuages, et que voyons-nous ? Ces génies, même ceux qui paraissent le plus germanique, comme les Bach, constellation dont Sébastien est la plus brillante étoile, ont subi, dans une forte proportion, l'infiltration bienfaisante du sang italien. Plus tard s'y est mêlée l'influence française, et du mélange heureux des tempéraments italien, allemand et français est sortie cette admirable école qui n'a d'allemand que le nom, qui est véritablement mondiale' (Camille Saint-Saëns, 'Sur la musique : discours lu à l'inauguration de l'École des Hautes Études Musicales à Fontainebleau le 26 juin 1921', *Le Ménestrel*, 29, 22 July 1921, pp. 303-304: 303).
- 51 'C'est pour nous un permis d'admirer sans réticence des œuvres où l'âme méditerranéenne est à ce point mêlée à l'âme austro-allemande. On se sent un poids de moins sur la conscience, avec une joie grossie d'orgueil, en applaudissant des étrangers, de n'être point en désaccord avec sa race. Nous saluons avec allégresse la preuve que notre dévotion à Haendel, à Schutz, à Mozart est d'une stricte orthodoxie' (Clément Besse, *La Musique allemande chez nous*, Paris: Lethilleu, 1916, p. 34).
- 52 'La question, ai-je besoin de le dire, n'est pas de savoir si Strawinsky, qui, en honorant, suivant sa fantaisie, Bach, Donizetti ou Rimsky, demeure, Dieu merci, Strawinsky, a déclenché tel ou tel mouvement dans ce qu'on est convenu d'appeler la jeune école française. M. Henry Prunières a son opinion là-dessus, libre à lui. Ce qui importe, c'est l'effet de cette opinion sur le public : cela importe particulièrement quand il s'agit d'un public étranger. Or, j'en ai eu la preuve vingt fois pour une, l'interprétation trop couramment donnée à son article par le lecteur allemand est que, sans Strawinsky, la France serait dans la quasi-ignorance du plus grand des musiciens. Même dans l'ordre musical, il y a des erreurs qu'il vaut mieux ne pas laisser propager' (Gustave Bret, 'Musique : "le culte de Bach"', *L'Intransigeant*, 19012, 10 November 1931, p. 6).
- 53 '– Avez-vous la même certitude, que certains jeunes, du retour à Bach ? – Il n'y a pas de retour à Bach. On ne l'a jamais quitté, on l'a délaissé un peu, mais, apparemment, on doit tout à Bach. Le retour à Bach, c'est une mode' (Hector Fraggi 'La musique à Paris : une interview de M. Jacques Larmanjat', *Le Petit Marseillais*, 23118, 29 September 1931, p. 2).
- 54 'À vrai dire, certains musiciens, qui ne sont pas parmi les plus mauvais, n'éprouvent nullement le besoin de "revenir à Bach", pour la bonne raison, qu'ils ne l'ont jamais abandonné' (Robert Brussel, 'Le retour à Bach : le "Concerto" de M. Daniel Lazarus', *Le Figaro*, 86, 27 March 1929, p. 5).
- 55 '[...] l'art de Bach demeure une source de vie où les musiciens vont toujours puiser, et l'actuel "retour à Bach", dont on parle tant, n'est que l'affirmation, sur la place publique, d'un culte qui, depuis longtemps, comptait de notables fidèles' (Emmanuel Bondeville, 'La "Passion" à l'Église', *Rouen gazette*, 186, 14 April 1928, p. 3).

- 56 He writes thus: 'The term neoclassicism occurred even more rarely in Germany than it did in France. In German, *Neoklassizismus* did not appear until after World War I when it was usually identified with French art and architecture of the late eighteenth century' (Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music: From the Genesis of the Concept through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic*, Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1996, p. 62).
- 57 Let us quote Florent Schmitt, in 1929: 'Upon hearing it for the second time, this concert decidedly disconcerted me. I both hated it and loved it madly. I loved it for its incredible mastery, its virtuosity, its violence: I hated it for its insensitivity. But I fear that I love it even more than I hate it because it is inaccessible to me. What one could produce themselves is of no interest. Concerto for orchestra! That is full of promises. And the best part is that these are kept. Not that the musical substance is particularly precious. Far from it. The beginning, very much a *return-to-Bach* as has been appropriate since the Stravinsky concerto, is only a short quartet prelude to a fugal exposition in woodwinds of a theme without much relief; the *Andante* a few bars of transition between two lively pieces; the finale a banal tarantella rhythm. In other words, there is little or no musical substance, which is a mark of good taste for a contemporary German.' [À la deuxième audition, ce concert, décidément, me déconcerte. À la fois je le hais et l'aime à la folie. Je l'aime pour sa maîtrise inouïe, sa virtuosité, sa violence : je le hais pour son insensibilité. Mais je crains de l'aimer plus encore que je ne le hais parce qu'il m'est inaccessible. Ce qu'à la rigueur on pourrait faire soi-même n'a pas d'intérêt. Concerto pour orchestre ! Voilà qui est gros de promesses. Et le plus fort est qu'elles sont tenues. Non que la substance musicale en soit particulièrement précieuse. Loin de là. Le début, très *retour-à-Bach* comme il convient depuis le concerto de Stravinsky, n'est qu'un court prélude de quatuor à une exposition fuguée aux bois d'un thème sans grand relief ; l'*Andante* quelques mesures de transition entre deux morceaux vifs ; le finale un banal rythme de tarentelle. Donc, de substance musicale, point ou presque, ce qui est d'ailleurs une preuve de goût chez un Allemand actuel'] (Florent Schmitt, 'Les concerts', *Le Temps*, 24896, 19 October 1929, p. 3). Henry Prunières subscribes to a similar conception, considering that Hindemith's *Concerto* op. 38 returns 'to a more classical conception of music. Hindemith, too, returns to Bach, but by different means than Stravinsky. If he takes up the old form of the *concerto grosso*, dear to the old Italian masters, it is to accommodate it to the needs of his very modern sensibility'. [à une conception plus classique de la musique. Hindemith, lui aussi, revient à Bach, mais par d'autres voies que Stravinsky. S'il reprend l'ancienne forme du *concerto grosso*, chère aux vieux maîtres italiens, c'est pour l'accommoder aux besoins de sa sensibilité bien moderne'] (Henry Prunières, 'S.I.M.C. : le IV^e festival de la S.I.M.C. à Zurich', *La Revue musicale*, VII/10, 1 August 1926, pp. 160–166: 162).
- 58 André Coeuroy thus counts a 'Max Butting symphony' among the symphonies nourished by the 'return to Bach', alongside works by Rieti, Tansman, Nabokof, Halfter-Escriche, Husanyi, Ferroud and Honegger. See André Coeuroy, 'Renouveau de la symphonie', p. 2.
- 59 It is nevertheless necessary to highlight the exception of the article by Jean Moulenq, mentioning in 1921 in *La Revue musicale* 'the scholastic spirit that the German neo-classical school restored and which infected, for long generations, musical pedagogy in the two central empires [...]' which left, according to him, traces in Szymanowski [L'esprit scolastique que restaura l'école néo-classique allemande et qui infecta, pour de longues générations, la pédagogie musicale dans les deux empires centraux [...]] (*La Revue musicale*, II/4, 1 Februar 1921, pp. 176–177: 176).
- 60 'Prokofieff fut déclaré un néo-classique et beaucoup saluèrent en lui le musicien qui devait enfin établir chez nous les saines traditions des grands musiciens allemands, remettre la musique russe dans le droit chemin classique et renverser le pouvoir des écoles rivales – néo-

- romantiques [Scriabine] et nationale [Rimsky-Korsakoff, Moussorgsky]' (Boris de Schloezer, 'Serge Prokofieff', *La Revue musicale*, II/9, 1 July 1921, p. 51– 60: 56).
- 61 'Les premiers exégètes s'empressèrent de ranger Prokofieff parmi les néo-classiques et en firent même un disciple de Reger, qu'on connaissait d'ailleurs encore assez mal, en ce temps. Ce rapprochement peut nous paraître aujourd'hui fort comique, mais les premières pièces de Prokofieff pour piano (Toccata, Gavotte, etc...) peuvent jusqu'à un certain point justifier la confusion qui fut faite entre le pseudo-classicisme du maître allemand et les jeux sonores du jeune Russe' (Boris de Schloezer, 'Serge Prokofieff', *Revue Pleyel*, 30, 10 March 1926, pp. 10–13: 11).
- 62 'L'évolution, qui devait être si rapide, de la musique allemande, se manifesta d'abord au concert. Le mouvement commença par une réaction en faveur de Brahms, puis par l'apparition de Max Reger – mort il y a quelque temps – et par celle de Bruckner. Les néophytes ne craignirent point de placer Max Reger sur le même plan que Bach, à cause de sa richesse contrapunctique. Le fameux "retour à Bach" devait aller ici jusqu'à ses extrêmes conséquences' (Pierre Maudru, 'Les grandes nations créatrices de formes musicales : l'Allemagne', *Comoedia*, 5363, 12 September 1927, p. 3).
- 63 'Son écriture [celle de Reger] est d'une rare complexité, au point que les surcharges contrapunctiques noient souvent la ligne mélodique [et qu'il, à la fin de sa vie], revint à une forme plus épurée de son art, prêchant l'un des premiers le "retour à Bach"' (Anonyme, 'Ce qu'on entendra dans les concerts à Paris', *L'Art musical*, 33, 23 October 1936, pp. 78–79: 79).
- 64 'Il y a d'ailleurs plus d'un chemin qui mène à Bach, [comme] Casella et Hindemith viennent de nous le prouver avec éloquence' (Henry Prunières, 'S.I.M.C. : le IV^e festival de la S.I.M.C. à Zurich', p. 166).
- 65 'Cette musique va tout droit et sans perdre de temps en chemin. Mais où nous mène-t-elle? La vérité c'est que, sous une écriture contrapunctique parfois alerte, se dissimule mal une assez pauvre matière. On a souvent plaisanté le soi-disant "retour à Bach", de certains de nos contemporains. Que dira-t-on alors de ces jeunes gens qui semblent s'être délibérément installés, pour un grand voyage dans le passé, dans la machine à explorer le temps : les voici revenus à l'écriture scolastique la plus ingrate et la plus stérile' (Georges Auric, 'La Semaine musicale : l'orchestre de Heidelberg', *Marianne*, 278, 16 Februar 1938, p. 16).
- 66 'Enfin, la *Sonate en la mineur* de Kurt Thomas (1928) est de caractère résolument linéaire, dans la ligne générale de Bach et de Reger ; et bien que sa substance musicale soit moins riche que celle des deux œuvres précédentes, c'est elle qui paraît représenter avec le plus de fidélité, ou si l'on veut, le moins d'emprunts externes, l'esprit allemand dans la musique' (André Coeuroy, 'Musique allemande – Filip Lazar', *Beaux-arts*, 202, 13 November 1936, p. 4).
- 67 'Honegger explique que le retour à Bach, c'est tout différent [que "Strawinsky faisant retour à Rossini, à Liszt, à Pergolèse"]! ne pas confondre la lettre avec l'esprit. La lettre : pasticher les *Inventions à deux voix*. Schoenberg, lui, revient à Bach par l'esprit' (Albert Febvre-Longeray, 'Notes et documents de musique', *Le Mercure de France*, 785, 1 March 1931, pp. 473–481: 475).
- 68 The link between dodecaphony and the return to a certain form of neoclassicism is explained by Makis Solomos: 'However, it must be added that, confronted with the atonal works of [Schoenberg], the dodecaphonic technique itself – and not only the ancient forms that accompanied it from its beginnings – ultimately appears as a return to order, without doubt the most terrible of returns to order...' ['Cependant, il faut ajouter que, face aux œuvres atonales de [Schoenberg], la technique dodécaphonique elle-même – et pas seulement les formes anciennes qui l'accompagnent dès ses débuts – apparaît finalement comme un *retour à l'ordre*, sans doute le plus terrible des retours à l'ordre...'] (Makis Solomos, 'Néoclassicisme et postmodernisme : deux antimodernismes', p. 96).