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This comprehensive and authoritative book, a collection of 14 essays that originated from the international symposium ‘Understanding Bach’s B-minor Mass’, held in Belfast in November 2007, provides multiple insights and perspectives on the work and represents a remarkably coherent survey of the current state of research.

It is exceedingly rare that an entire conference is dedicated to a single work and perhaps equally rare that a conference will generate a book as comprehensive and authoritative as Exploring Bach’s B-minor Mass. This also shows something of the value of collaborative publications in providing multiple insights and perspectives on the work at hand. While the type of synoptic overview and synthesis common in single-author ‘handbooks/companions’ is difficult to attain with multiple authors, the essays here do in fact provide a remarkably coherent survey of the survey of the current state of research.

The opening section, introducing the historical background and context, is headed by Christoph Wolff’s general introduction to past, present and future perspectives. This provides a useful summary of the developments in Bach research since the 1930s. Following on from this section is one on structure and proportion, which includes some ground-breaking work by scholars such as Ulrich Siegele and Ruth Tatlow. Part three consists of two essays on sources, which,
admittedly, crosses over into the final section, on reception (Tatiana Shabalina’s essay on a source in St Petersburg could equally well belong to both sections). Reception is one of the biggest areas of growth in Bach studies and, given the fact that most studies are essentially snapshots of a particular area (here Haydn, Mozart, Mendelssohn, Dvořák and nineteenth-century England are the main subjects), this is naturally going to be rather incomplete. Despite the absence of discussions on twentieth-century reception (or indeed on musical analysis, beyond consideration of proportions of movement lengths and formal planning), the volume provides a fairly comprehensive guide to the issues involved, at least for a relatively well-informed reader.

If scholarship on the B-minor Mass has long been dogged in controversy, even misfortune, these same problems seem to ensure that the debate is never effectively closed. Three significant new editions have appeared over the last few years – all very different in their approaches and conclusions – and there is much new work on the political circumstances and music establishment of the Dresden court. Moreover, in the wake of a much more thorough search for Bach sources in Germany and the former Eastern Bloc over the last twenty years, new finds and new possibilities continue to arise. Perhaps one of the most striking new hypotheses in this volume is Michael Maul’s, based on the discovery of Bach’s association with Count Johann Adam von Questenberg in 1749, which may imply that the completed Mass may have been prepared for the celebration of St Cecilia’s Day at St Stephen’s Cathedral in Vienna that year. All this is supposition, although it certainly chimes with the sumptuous scale of the completed work; Maul’s argument is perhaps more valuable for the details and reasoning along the way than in approaching anything close to a definitive answer regarding Bach’s late activity on the Mass. Other new insights are provided by Ulrich Leisinger’s study of Haydn’s copy of the work, identified in recent years in the music collection in Eisenstadt. This reveals a very likely connection with Baron Gottfried van Swieten, which in turn opens up the possibility that Mozart had access to Bach’s Mass, particularly in the run-up to the composition of his own Mass in C minor. Although the course of the argument begins to thin as one speculation becomes grounded on another, there is much useful insight into the attitudes of the classical generation towards Bach, Handel and other composers of their generation.

For those concerned with the possible performers that Bach may have envisioned for the Dresden Missa of 1733, Janice Stockigt reveals that the list of instrumentalists and singers comprises some of the most famous names in early eighteenth-century performance (such as Bindi, Nicolini and Venturini in the upper vocal parts, Buffardin, Quantz and Pisendel among the instrumentalists). What seems clear is that this is perhaps the only case where Bach would have anticipated the performance of his music by castrati. Furthermore, Dresden practice would suggest that at least some of the chorus parts would have been supported by single ripienists, and Stockigt concludes (contrary to previous statements about the scale of Bach’s setting) that the music was simply too long to have been considered for actual performance in the Dresden liturgy.

It is perhaps almost inevitable that there will be some contradictions or disagreements between authors. Stockigt’s conclusions about the problems of scale are contradicted by Szymon Paczkowski (in a very engaging essay about Dresden and the Polish connection, including the political and spiritual implications of the polonaise). He adheres to the view that the massive scale of the Missa was inspired by the Italian music in the Dresden repertory. Robin A. Leaver provides an excellent guide to the fluid divisions between Catholic and Lutheran practices (indeed it provides much interesting material beyond just that affecting the Mass). Most importantly, it shows that many things that in recent writing are assumed to be Catholic were quite
standard in Bach’s Lutheran Leipzig. So Leaver concludes that C. P. E. Bach’s designation of the work as the ‘great Catholic Mass’ refers to the universal church rather than the Roman one. Nevertheless, once we get to Michael Maul’s article on the possible Viennese connection, the suggestion is made that ‘Catholic’ always means ‘Roman Catholic’ in the everyday parlance of eighteenth-century Lutherans.

Siegele and Tatlow do not directly disagree in their study of structure and proportions, but they do not exactly agree either. Siegele’s essay is based on strong historical sources advocating rules-of-thumb for the calculation of the length of pieces, by which (among many other measurements) 162 bars become equivalent to 7’ 30” of music for Bach. As is typical of Siegele’s approach to musical analysis, he produces a dazzling array of calculations by which Bach is shown to compensate for shortness in one area with added length in another. While his assumption that the ‘Et incarnatus’ is an addition that Bach made at some remove from the original scheme, Melvin P. Unger, looking for chiastic patterns in the Mass, regards it as an addition that was decided during the course of Bach’s writing of the manuscript. Tatlow, also very well versed in a large range of historical sources (and more concerned with notational bars than their duration), claims that Bach invariably makes up totals of bars in multiples of 100 and also observes ‘perfect’ proportions on at least two levels of construction. Thus, in all, her starting point is slightly different from Siegele’s, and generates very different elements of proportional structure across the Mass. Nevertheless, her calculations do produce some interesting results and she accounts well for Bach’s noting of bar totals for two movements in the Mass manuscript. Her system is particularly convincing in the way it relates the large-scale proportions of the Mass to other works, such as the St John Passion.

Perhaps the largest and most enduring controversies surround the text and editions of the Mass, and these very clearly surface in Uwe Wolf’s paper, which accompanies his new NBA edition of the Mass (coming a few years after the conference of 2007). It also comes after a critical essay by Joshua Rifkin on the problems of using modern scientific means for analysing Bach’s manuscript. The priorities between hard scientific ‘fact’, traditional stemmatic source editing and stylistic criticism are extremely difficult to establish when the work’s sources bring such a wide array of problems. At a more obvious level, the dispute between Wolf and Rifkin often centres on the quandary surrounding the Dresden parts, which introduce so many refinements to the original score, and which were not available to (or even remembered by?) Bach when he came to edit the finished manuscript. Rifkin sticks to the imperative to present the work as closely as possible to the state in which the composer left it, while in Wolf’s view the omission of these readings constitutes a withholding of valuable, authentic information in the text of an edition.

In all, it would be unrealistic to expect perfection and agreement in a volume of this kind. Nevertheless, it requires careful reading and critical judgment on the part of the user. Provisional though so many of its conclusions must be, this collection is going to remain indispensable to B-minor Mass scholarship for many years to come.

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