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Bach and the Counterpoint of Religion

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Bach Perspectives 12:
Bach and the Counterpoint of Religion

Robin A. Leaver, ed.

Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018.
x + 159 pp. ISBN: 978-0-252-04198-3.

The newest volume of *Bach Perspectives* offers a thematic connection with the *Yale Journal of Music & Religion*, as evidenced by its subtitle, “Bach and the Counterpoint of Religion.” In his Preface, editor Robin A. Leaver writes: “From the earliest beginnings Bach studies have been closely connected with religion” (vii). This volume engages longstanding conversations about Bach and religion within Bach scholarship, while also contributing to the kinds of conversations that are ongoing in the pages of *YJMR*. The book will be of interest to Bach scholars and historians of early modern culture, as well as to others who are curious about the intersections of music and religion.

Bach Perspectives is a publication of the American Bach Society and often reflects the themes of the society’s biennial conferences. This volume originated in the April 2016 conference, “J. S. Bach and the Confessional Landscape of His Time,” held at the University of Notre Dame. Three of the seven chapters—those by Mark Noll, Joyce L. Irwin, and Derek Stauff—are revisions and expansions of papers presented at that conference, with additional chapters by Leaver, Janice B. Stockigt, Markus Rathey, and Rebecca Cypess. While engaging the orthodox Lutheranism that prevailed in Bach’s Leipzig, the volume’s authors further explore how Bach’s music relates to Pietist movements, Calvinism, Roman Catholicism, Judaism, and mysticism.

In addition to treating a wide array of topics, the seven essays reflect a variety of methodological approaches. Particularly

strong are two chapters in which the authors employ a study of historical theology to illuminate a specific composition by Bach. In “Bach’s *Christmas Oratorio* and the Mystical Theology of Bernard of Clairvaux,” Rathey expands upon a connection he proposed in his *Johann Sebastian Bach’s Christmas Oratorio: Music, Theology, Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2016; see esp. pp. 52–59). In much of the writing about the relationship between orthodox Lutheranism and Pietism, a reform movement within Lutheranism with parallels in other Protestant traditions, scholars have often confused the language of Pietism with the strong tradition of mysticism within Lutheran orthodoxy, a mysticism that is reflected in the texts of many of Bach’s sacred vocal works. Rathey clarifies this distinction, while tracing the tradition of mysticism within Lutheranism back to its earlier source in the writings of Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). He discusses the history of such mysticism in Lutheran theology, and particularly how it is realized in the libretto of Bach’s oratorio.

Stauff takes a similar approach in “The Church under Persecution: Bach’s Cantatas for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany,” applying the study of historical theology to the three cantatas that Bach is known to have performed on the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, two composed by himself and another by his cousin Johann Ludwig Bach. Stauff demonstrates how the cantatas’ libretti should be understood in relation to Lutheran writings on persecution by the enemies of the Christian (and particularly

Lutheran) church. Both the Psalm and the Gospel reading for the day were commonly interpreted in this way within Lutheran theology, and the three cantatas clearly reflect this tradition in both their texts and music.

In “Dancing in Bach’s Time: Sin or Permissible Pleasure?” Irwin likewise explores historical theology, explicating Calvinist, Pietist, and orthodox Lutheran perspectives on dancing in Bach’s time. Irwin clearly presents writings relating to dance by theologians in each of these three traditions, citing a wide range of sources. She explains that Bach, like other composers of his time, regularly incorporated dance rhythms in his compositions, including those for the church, and concludes by explaining the distinction maintained within Lutheranism between dance rhythms, which were acceptable within the liturgy, and the act of dance itself, which was not. Otherwise, the connection to Bach in this essay is minimal—Irwin’s goal is clearly to frame a larger context on how dance and dance rhythms were considered in various theological traditions in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Two other chapters likewise have very little to do with Bach and instead explore intersections of music and religion on topics slightly related to the composer. The first is Noll’s “Historical Proximity: John Wesley Visits Leipzig in 1738,” based on his keynote address at the 2016 American Bach Society conference. The story this essay tells is of the 35-year-old Wesley’s visit to the community of Moravians in Marienborn in July 1738, from which he traveled, by way of Leipzig, to Herrnhut, the country estate of Nikolaus Ludwig, count von Zinzendorf. As far as the historical record shows, Wesley and J. S. Bach did not meet during Wesley’s two days in Leipzig. But Noll takes the visit as a starting point to imagine how

Wesley would have reacted had he heard a rehearsal of one of Bach’s cantatas for the following Sunday, the Ninth Sunday after Trinity, and proceeds to frame more broadly the different approaches to music in the Christian church as they developed within Lutheranism and Methodism in the eighteenth century. Noll concludes with two interesting later developments related to the non-meeting of Bach and Wesley: the role of the Moravians—through the Bethlehem Choral Union in Pennsylvania—in promoting the performance of Bach’s sacred vocal works in the United States; and role of John Wesley’s nephew, Samuel Wesley, in helping to establish Bach’s compositions in the English concert repertory.

The second such chapter is Cypess’s “Music Historicism: Sara Levy and the Jewish Enlightenment,” which offers a fascinating interpretation of the music collector Sara Levy, née Itzig (1761–1854), a significant figure in Bach reception in Berlin. Cypess states her framing question for the essay as: “What was the significance of [Levy’s] music historicism as expressed in her collection of musical scores?” (131). Within the context of Levy’s purposeful Jewish self-identification, Cypess argues that Levy’s music collecting should be understood as a contribution to the history of music making among Jews, even her collecting of works by Bach and other non-Jewish composers. She further concludes that Levy “loosened the bonds that linked the Prussian musical tradition to Christianity, forging a common musical heritage that would be accessible to both Christians and Jews” (150). Cypess thus provides new insights into Levy’s music collecting, significantly highlighting Levy’s actions and agency, as well as what such music collecting meant to Levy herself.

Finally, two chapters in *Bach Perspectives 12* focus on the relationship between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism in Bach's Leipzig, with particular attention to the royal Catholic chapel in Leipzig, where members of the Polish royal and Saxon electoral families attended mass. (Friedrich August I, elector of Lutheran Saxony, converted to Roman Catholicism in order to assume the Polish crown as August II.) Leaver's "A Catholic Hymnal for Use in Lutheran Leipzig: *Catholisches Gesang-Buch* (Leipzig, 1724)" tells the story of the chapel's founding in 1710 and then focuses primarily on the hymnal created for the chapel, the *Catholisches Gesang-Buch ... zum Gebrauch der Catholischen Gemeinde in Leipzig*, published originally in 1715 (no extant copies are known) and in a new edition in 1724. Leaver describes the hymnal's contents, which he lists in two appendices, and also reports on the chapel's organ and organists. He concludes with some speculation on how Bach might have interacted with the chapel and its hymnal.

In "Liturgical Music for a New Elector: Origins of Bach's 1733 Missa Revisited," Stockigt likewise focuses on the relationship between Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism in Bach's Leipzig, exploring the possibility that the Missa, BWV 232¹ (later to be known as the Kyrie and Gloria in excelsis Deo of the B-Minor Mass) was performed at the *Erbhuldigung* service honoring the new Saxon elector, Friedrich August II, in Leipzig in 1733.

Stockigt summarizes some of Bach's connections with the Dresden court, then provides a detailed examination of the *Erbhuldigung* services performed in Dresden and elsewhere to honor the new elector. Bach dedicated the Missa to Friedrich August, but it is unknown if the work was ever performed in either Leipzig or Dresden. After examining the evidence, Stockigt suggests that at least the Kyrie I from the Missa may have been performed at the Leipzig *Erbhuldigung* service.

Given the series' publication by the American Bach Society, and the subtitle "Bach and the Counterpoint of Religion," it is curious that so many of the essays are only tangentially related to Bach (I would describe the essays by Noll, Irwin, Leaver, and Cypess in this way). It is similarly curious that only three of the essays – those by Stockigt, Rathey, and Stauff – engage specific compositions by Bach (in fact, only 24 titles are listed in the book's index of Bach's works). As a whole, though, *Bach Perspectives 12* is a worthy contribution to the series, as well as to larger conversations about music and religion. The essays illuminate some of the larger contexts for understanding religion and music in eighteenth-century Germany, and also provide a more nuanced view of the enforcing and transcending of confessional boundaries in Bach's time.

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