

# From the Divine to the Diapason: Bach in his Religious and Instrumental Context

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**EVAN CORTENS**

Dirst, Matthew, ed. *Bach Perspectives 10: Bach and the Organ*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. viii, 124 pp.

Marissen, Michael. *Bach and God*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. xxi, 257 pp.

**T**HE VOLUME EDITED BY MATTHEW DIRST, *Bach and the Organ*, is the latest in the American Bach Society's *Bach Perspectives* series. Like many of the previous volumes, this one has its origins in one of the ABS's biennial conferences: four of its six articles—those by Lynn Edwards Butler, Robin Leaver, Christoph Wolff, and Matthew Cron—began as conference papers presented at an eponymous conference, “Bach and the Organ.” The conference was held in September 2012 in Rochester, New York and jointly sponsored by the ABS, the Eastman Rochester Organ Initiative, and the Westfield Center. The volume is edited by musicologist, conductor and organist Matthew Dirst, who provides a brief preface, outlining its contents.

The volume begins with Lynn Edwards Butler, who provides a much-needed reassessment of existing evidence and several new pieces of evidence aimed at contextualizing Bach's 1717 report on Johann Scheibe's new organ for the university church in Leipzig. In the past, Scheibe has been unfairly maligned, due in large part to the negative views of Ernst Flade, the early twentieth-century biographer of Scheibe's contemporary Gottfried Silbermann. Flade, who is noted by Edwards as “not the most objective voice as concerns Scheibe” (p. 2), emphasized only the negative aspects of the report, and this view has come to dominate the later twentieth- and even early-twenty-first century view of the report, and by extension the organ and perhaps even Scheibe himself.

Edwards Butler convincingly repositions Bach's report as a “spirited defense of Scheibe” (p. 15), rather than the damning indictment suggested by Flade and others. The article reveals an organ builder who cared deeply for both his

instrument and the integrity of his craft, even to the point of working on it at the expense of his health. On several occasions, Scheibe went above and beyond, bringing the organ into “proper Chorton” for no additional payment, as well as constructing a new chest for the pipes relocated from the removed Rückpositiv (p. 10).

In his report, Bach emphasized to the university that some of the complications arising from a cramped case were not Scheibe’s fault, but rather a consequence of decisions made by the university itself with regard to the configuration and placement of the instrument (pp. 4–5). The now-common complaint that the organ at St. Paul’s had issues with its wind pressure is also shown to be inaccurate: situated within its historical context, the bellows and pressure in fact show no major faults. In a lengthy footnote (pp. 6–7n29), Edwards Butler details nearly 100 years of future repairs to the bellows, showing them to be fully in line with what would have been expected and not indicative of any problems.

Scheibe suffered at the hands of the university time and again, from one incident in which he was forced to play the organ while it was still disassembled, causing the bellows to split (p. 8) to having to wait some three-and-a-half years for full reimbursement of his expenses, and then only once he threatened to remove pipes from the organ (pp. 11–12). In short, one could say that the criticisms Bach did make of the organ are not so much directed at Scheibe and his work, as has been commonly assumed, but rather at the university.

Robin Leaver’s contribution to the volume is also a historical revision of sorts, though in this case contra Philipp Spitta. Leaver’s focus is “Sebastian Bach’s Choral-Buch,” a volume acquired by the Sibley Music Library at the Eastman School of Music in September 1936. (At the end of the article, the reader will find two extensive tables detailing all of the chorale melodies contained in the Choral-Buch as well as alternate settings.) Purchased through a Viennese antiquarian dealer, Leaver shows that the volume came from the personal library of Heinrich Schenker (p. 17). Around 1880, the volume was shown to Spitta by the artist W. Kraukling, who proclaimed that it contained not “a single trace of Bach’s style or spirit” (a claim with which Leaver takes issue) and that it was not an autograph (which is correct) (p. 19).<sup>1</sup>

The earliest source for two of the melodies contained in the volume (Z5991 and Z6465) was identified in the late nineteenth century by Johannes Zahn as a

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<sup>1</sup> See also Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach: His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685–1750*, trans. Clara Bell and J. A. Fuller-Maitland (London: Novello, 1884–85), 3:108, n. 149.

Dresden Choralbuch from 1752 (p. 22).<sup>2</sup> Yet the Sibley volume is written on paper that, according to Leaver's personal correspondence with Mary Oleskiewicz, was present in Dresden in the 1730s, making it an earlier source than the one identified by Zahn by more than a decade. Leaver is quick to note that Zahn focused overwhelmingly on printed sources, and only consulted those manuscript sources he could conveniently examine. While a still-earlier source could conceivably exist, the Sibley volume is definitely earlier than the Dresden one identified by Zahn, and more reliable as well.

While Spitta was convinced that there was likely a lost book of two-part figured settings of chorales by Bach, he dismissed the Sibley volume as not daring enough to be by the same composer who had so confused the Arnstadt congregation with his "many strange tones" (p. 26). Leaver cites several eighteenth-century examples of composers and organists who called for simplicity in the accompaniment of chorales. In particular, he mentions the Hessen-Darmstadt Kapellmeister Christoph Graupner, who, in the preface to his 1728 *Choral-Buch*, faulted those organists who through their "supposed art" are "guilty of [introducing] much confusion into the melodies."<sup>3</sup> Graupner believed that the prelude preceding the chorale was "best played simply and plainly, so that the congregation can hear the melody with excellent clarity" (pp. 27–28). Leaver concludes convincingly that the volume provides important insight into Bach's pedagogical approach to organ instruction, particularly the art of chorale accompaniment.

In his contribution to the volume, George Stauffer notes that Bach's "encyclopedic" works—in which he strives for an extensive, even exhaustive, treatment of a single genre—can generally be divided into two categories: those with evidence of much prior work and exploration in the genre (e.g., the *Well-Tempered Clavier*) and those that apparently came "out of the blue" (e.g., the solo sonatas for violin and violoncello, the Goldberg variations). Stauffer contends that the Six Trio Sonatas for Organ, BWV 525–530, datable to 1730 based on watermarks,

<sup>2</sup> See Johannes Zahn, *Die Melodien der deutschen evangelischen Kirchenlieder* (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1889–1893).

<sup>3</sup> Christoph Graupner, *Neu vermehrtes Darmstädtisches Choral-Buch* ([Darmstadt], 1728), second unnumbered page of the preface. This passage immediately precedes the portion quoted and translated by Leaver and is my own translation. The whole passage in the original reads: "Die Nachlässigkeit derer, die den öffentlichen Gesang zu besorgen haben, wie nicht weniger die überleye vermeynte Kunst einiger *Organisten* unter wehrenden *Choral*, ist auch an vielet Verwirrung der *Melodien* mit Schuld, und der hierinne aus denen rechten *Principius* Geschicklichkeit besitzt, läßt solche viel besser zum *Præludio* vor dem *Choral*, als in selben, hören, und ist wohl das allerbeste, wenn der *Choral* ganz *simpel* und schlecht gespielt wird, daß die *Gemeine* die *Melodie* fein deutlich hören kan."

which have traditionally been assigned to the latter of Stauffer's categories, are more accurately assigned to the former. Stauffer assembles the evidence for this argument by surveying Bach's involvement with organ trios, particularly the so-called "free" trio, meaning one not based on a chorale.

While earlier scholarship suggested that Bach began writing free organ trios in Weimar (p. 41), more recent work, especially by Kirsten Beißwenger, has contradicted this, showing that his first interest in the genre dates from around 1725 in Leipzig. Why the sudden interest around this time? Stauffer suggests it was for pedagogical reasons: while Bach had just a dozen or so organ students in Weimar and Cöthen, in Leipzig he had more than 70. Examining this material, Stauffer states that ten miscellaneous trios and four trio sonata variants predating the final version in 1730 all "share common ties in the early sources," "a striking fact unexplored in the literature" (p. 43). The dense interweaving of earlier sources and models for the Six Sonatas is helpfully summarized in Table 1 (p. 49).

Thus for Stauffer the Six Sonatas are the "logical culmination of the systematic teaching series" (p. 50), serving three primary purposes: pedagogy; exploring the new sonorities then being developed on central German organs; and the adaptation of the principles of instrumental ensemble writing for the organ. Stauffer then turns to a brief consideration of each of the ten miscellaneous trios (pp. 52–58). Stauffer has shown that the Six Sonatas were not "a sudden isolated event, but rather [...] the logical outcome of a period of concentrated study and experimentation" (p. 59). While the miscellaneous trios "do not equal" the Six Sonatas (to paraphrase Forkel), they are nevertheless "fine and worthy of consideration and performance today" (*ibid.*).

Christoph Wolff turns his attention to the rather sudden appearance around 1725 of several concerto-sinfonia openings featuring obbligato organ in the cantatas. (The timing is likely not coincidental: in his article, Stauffer suggested a possible connection between the trios and the cantata sinfonias, but Wolff does not take up that connection explicitly.) These openings are markedly different from a typical cantata beginning: sinfonias "shift the focus from musically enhanced biblical messages ... to an ostentatious instrumental presentation .... A more effective demonstration of Bach's self-confidence and self-esteem is hard to imagine" (p. 60).

More than a decade later, Bach collected seven harpsichord concertos, and a fragment of an eighth, together in one manuscript (D-B Mus. ms. Bach P 234); two of the complete concertos, BWV 1052 and 1053, and the fragment, BWV 1059, are all modelled directly on the aforementioned cantata-sinfonias. Several scholars—Werner Breig, Wilhelm Rust, and Philipp Spitta among them—have

suggested that one or more of these harpsichord concertos were originally for a solo melody instrument (oboe, oboe d'amore, flute and viola have all been proposed). "Surprisingly," says Wolff, "the possibility that Bach may have originally conceived and intended the solo part for keyboard has apparently never been seriously considered" (p. 64). "Did Bach initially write organ concertos," asks Wolff provocatively, "which eventually made it into cantata movements from the third Leipzig *Jahrgang*?" (p. 65).

On September 25, 1725, Bach performed at the Sophienkirche in Dresden. According to a contemporary newspaper report, he performed "preludes and various concertos, with supporting soft instrumental music (*mit unterlaufender Doucen Instrumental-Music*) in all keys" (ibid.). Wolff convincingly suggests that this was the initial venue for the performance of what eventually became the sinfonias in BWV 146, 188, 159, and 49 (ca. 1726), and at last the concertos in D minor, BWV 1052 and E major, BWV 1053 (ca. 1738). In searching for a non-organ instrumental model, Wolff proposes that previous scholars have been misled by the violin-like figuration. Bach himself was a violinist in addition to a keyboardist, and may well have been inspired by such figuration—there were no models for keyboard concertos, after all. Wolff furthermore demonstrates the development of the keyboard concerto idiom, from its earliest versions in BWV 1052a, through the final harpsichord version preserved in P 234. He also argues that BWV 1053 was originally an E-major organ concerto, which solves several transposition difficulties (p. 74).

Speaking of BWV 1053, Gregory Butler also focuses in detail on the compositional and performance history of this work. Indeed, he reaches similar conclusions to Wolff—in effect, the articles support one another. The three articles in this volume by Butler, Wolff, and Stauffer form something of a trio, each focusing on different aspects of Bach's increasing focus on organ repertoire in the second half of the 1720s. Butler's particular entry point is the Collegium Musicum in Leipzig: rather than seeing this activity as something opposed to Bach's role at the church, what if instead it were complementary? To demonstrate this, Butler turns to BWV 1053.

Butler focuses on a particular detail of the third movement of BWV 1053, the E-major movement based on BWV 49/1. While the source history seems on the surface to be straightforward, among the set of parts for the opening movement there is a viola part in D major, the wrong key! While the Critical Report for the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe* mentions this fact, it does little to explain it. Yet, zeroing in on the very beginning of the first system of music, Butler notes that there is a bass clef immediately followed by an alto clef, both of which precede the key

and time signatures. If one reads the part as though it were in bass clef, Butler says, it is as though it is in E major; in other words, the double clef is a “cue to transpose the part into E major” (p. 78). Combined with watermark evidence, this suggests a D-major performance between the end of June and early November of 1726. When the movement was reused in the cantata on November 3, Bach simply had the copyist reuse the existing part. For this and other reasons, the traditional view that BWV 1053 is modelled on a concerto for melody instrument in E major or E-flat major “is no longer tenable” (p. 79). Butler goes on to show further examples of this approach, concluding that more than a year before the first cantata-sinfonia performances, “Bach had initiated a ‘choir loft as chamber’ approach to organ performance” (p. 86).

The final article in the volume, by Matthew Cron, is notably different than the other five. While the first five authors focused primarily on source-based historical examinations, Cron says that he will approach the use of the obbligato organ in cantatas “from the perspective of an original listener” (p. 87). Cron states outright that Bach’s congregation in Leipzig would not have associated the concerted organ movements in church cantatas with the nascent keyboard concerto, rather associating the organ itself exclusively with the church environment. In particular, he argues, there was “a strong association of the organ with Heaven: this instrument, above all others, prepares one for service in the heavenly choir while providing a source of solace and joy on earth” (p. 88). Cron provides significant evidence for this, singling out four ways in particular: through imagery (e.g., angels), accessory stops (e.g., cymbelstern), toy stops (e.g., Vogelgesang), and the physical placement of the instrument (generally up high; an extreme example is the Weimar Himmelsburg). Additionally, he shows examples of the association between the organ and heaven in devotional literature (e.g., Heinrich Müller’s *Göttlicher Liebes-Flamme*, of which Bach owned a copy) and in contemporary sermons.

Cron offers valuable context for concerted organ movements in eighteenth-century cantatas: while Bach wrote eighteen cantatas making use of the organ, there are at least 130 cantatas by other composers, including Gottfried Heinrich Stölzel and Georg Philipp Telemann.<sup>4</sup> Cron provides very convincing musical examples from both Telemann and Stölzel toward his argument of an association between the organ and heaven. In Telemann’s cantata *Der Himmel ist offen*, TVWV

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<sup>4</sup> For a full inventory of these works, see Matthew Cron, “The Obbligato Organ Cantatas of J. S. Bach in the Context of 18th-Century Practice” (PhD diss., Brandeis University, 2004). See especially Appendix A, pp. 735–830.

1:296, Cron shows how Telemann “[saves] the obligato organ for precisely that moment in his cantata where a heavenward ascent is assured not only for Jesus but for all the faithful” (p. 101). Stölzel’s cantata *Singet und spielt dem Herrn in euren Herzen* uses the organ to similar effect.

However, Cron’s examples from Bach’s cantatas are less convincing—he is, I would argue, sometimes too eager to see associations between the organ and heaven. For instance, in the the case of the alto aria “Wenn kömmt der Tag” from the cantata *Wachet, betet, betet, wachet*, BWV 70, as it was performed in Leipzig in November 1724, Cron says that the obligato organ “expresses the joyful anticipation of being in heaven” (p. 107, n. 43). He implies that the presence of the organ is a key component of this heavenly vision, yet he does not discuss how the organ is actually used. Unlike the other movements he discusses, both by Bach and other composers, the organ in this movement is playing the continuo line in the left hand and figures in the right hand, alongside the rest of the continuo group playing a simplified version of the line. While the organ is undeniably present as an obligato instrument, in that it is not simply *doubling* the continuo line, it is very closely tied to it and is still realizing a figured bass. Would this subtle difference have been enough for the Leipzig congregation to hear this movement in a manner different from any other continuo aria? Indeed, elsewhere he suggests that the organ must “[step] out of its normal continuo role” (p. 116) to take on this symbolic significance, exactly the opposite of what the organ does here.

The discussion of the aria “Wie jammern mich, doch die verkehrte Herzen” from *Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust*, BWV 170 also seems a bit problematic. The aria, as Cron describes it, “represents a world that has been turned upside down” (p. 110)—in other words, the very opposite of the heavenly and the divine. In fact, it is the organ itself that depicts “mankind’s many perversions” with the “serpentine nature” of its music—the chromatic writing is, in my view, some of the most tortured ever written by Bach.<sup>5</sup> This leaves us with a somewhat conflicted interpretation: in representing the very opposite of the heavenly, the organ is still evoking heaven.

I readily grant that Cron takes a different approach in focusing on the congregation’s perception of a given movement. Yet I would suggest that his article could have been strengthened by dealing with the compositional history of the movements he cites. The obligato line in the BWV 70 example was originally

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<sup>5</sup> In the second book in this review, Michael Marissen calls this movement “one of the most peculiar in Bach’s output” (p. 22).

performed on violoncello and the BWV 170 example was likely transcribed from a non-vocal model.<sup>6</sup> He mentions in passing that “in some cases the obbligato organ was a substitute for an unavailable instrument in a particular cantata performance” (p. 115). If we are concerned only with audience perceptions, this is irrelevant, but if we are interested in Bach’s compositional choices—in whether he was seeking to make a specific, symbolic point—surely it matters a great deal whether the work was written with the organ in mind.<sup>7</sup> I am not privileging one approach over the other, but suggesting that a marriage of the two, particularly when they can be placed into productive conflict, makes sense. Finally, Cron’s approach would have been further strengthened by dealing with some of the points raised by other articles in the volume, particularly those of Wolff and Butler, who attach a very different significance to the obbligato organ.

All in all, *Bach Perspectives 10: Bach and the Organ* is a valuable contribution to the literature. The essays all expand the field in important ways, from reconsiderations of primary sources to recontextualizations of the organ and Bach’s writing for it. This volume is an important addition to the library of any scholar of Bach.

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Michael Marissen is no doubt already well-known to many readers of this journal. On a variety of topics throughout his career, he has regularly produced high quality, and often controversial, scholarship.<sup>8</sup> In *Bach and God*, he has collected together seven essays, six of which have been previously published in earlier

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<sup>6</sup> On BWV 70, see Alfred Dürr, *Critical Commentary to BWV 70*, Neue Bach-Ausgabe, Series I, Volume 27 (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1968), 111–12. On BWV 170, see Gregory Butler, “The Origins of J. S. Bach’s ‘Wie jammern mich doch die verkehrten Herzen,’ BWV 170/3,” in *Music and Its Questions: Essays in Honor of Peter Williams*, ed. Thomas Donahue (Richmond, VA: Organ Historical Society Press, 2007), 227–36.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the use of the organ as a substitute, see Gregory Butler, “Instrumente Mangel’: Leipzig Cantata Movements with Obbligato Organ as a Reflection of Bach’s Performing Forces,” *Keyboard Perspectives* 3 (2010): 131–46; and Evan Cortens, “Ein Musikdirektor hat an einem Instrumente Mangel’: Obbligato Organ in the Bach Cantatas,” in *SECM in Brooklyn 2010: Topics in Eighteenth-Century Music I*, ed. Margaret R. Butler and Janet K. Page (Ann Arbor, MI: Steglein, 2014), 52–77.

<sup>8</sup> To name just one topic, readers of this journal may be familiar with his “Rejoicing against Judaism in Handel’s *Messiah*,” *Journal of Musicology* 24, no. 2 (2007): 167–94 and the abbreviated version of the same argument published on Easter Sunday in the same year as “Unsettling History of That Joyous ‘Hallelujah,’” *New York Times*, April 8, 2007, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/08/arts/music/08mari.html>.



versions; the remaining one is forthcoming separately. The volume is clearly intended to appeal not just to the musicologist, but to the more general reader as well: it is a compact hard cover with small margins, a format typically seen in general, non-fiction books. (The volume still provides footnotes, thankfully, rather than the often sparse endnotes typically found in such non-fiction, if indeed there is any source citation at all.)

As James Oestreich in the *New York Times* noted, the volume was, coincidentally, published in the same month as *And After the Fire* (HarperCollins, 2016), a novel by Lauren Belfer—a highly regarded novelist and Marissen’s spouse.<sup>9</sup> Though I am not reviewing the novel here, it is worth a brief tangent. The central focus of the book is an imagined lost Bach cantata with a troublingly anti-Semitic text. In the present day, the protagonist is Susanna Kessler, who comes into possession of the manuscript of the cantata and is herself Jewish, and gradually learns more about the work and its difficult status. In the eighteenth-century, the protagonist is Sara Itzig Levy. The book is extraordinarily well-researched; indeed, Oestreich “suspect[s] that [it] is the most musicologically vetted novel ever.” I highly recommend the book—some readers of this journal might even recognize in the fictional characters some, shall we say, uncanny similarities with actual musicologists.

*Bach and God* begins with a detailed and fascinating preface followed by a thorough introduction. Rather than providing a summary of each chapter, I will instead focus on summarizing Marissen’s *approach* to the topic. In the preface, Marissen details his personal involvement with Bach, from growing up in a community of “extremely conservative Dutch Calvinists” (p. ix) in rural Ontario, Canada, through his time in graduate school and his research in Germany, to his career as a scholar and professor at Swarthmore College. In my view, the personal provides valuable context for the scholarly. For example, Marissen traces his challenging relationship with the Internationale Arbeitsgemeinschaft für theologische Bachforschung, from being their “golden boy” (p. xii) with his writings on the cantatas (chapter 1) and the St. John Passion (chapter 5), to making them “violently angry” (p. xiii) with his work on *Schauet doch und sehet*, BWV 46 (chapter 3) and the “anti-Judaic tendencies” (ibid.) in Luther’s translation of the Gospel of Matthew (chapter 6).

I still recall the first time I read the article on which chapter 2 is based, in which

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<sup>9</sup> James Oestreich, “A Literary Couple Grapple With Bach and His God,” *New York Times*, May 25, 2016, accessed September 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/arts/music/a-literary-couple-grapple-with-bach-and-his-god.html>.

Marissen digs deep into the challenging issue of how to accurately translate the librettos of Bach's cantatas. Too often, the accurate meaning of the original text falls by the wayside. Marissen sets forth a number of examples from Bach, contrasting them with a variety of modern translations, showing how historical biblical or theological knowledge gives insight into a more accurate understanding of the text's meaning. In the preface, he tells us that this piece, ultimately published in a *Festschrift* for Robin A. Leaver, originated in his work vetting Richard D. P. Jones's translation of Alfred Dürr's now-classic survey of the Bach cantatas. In my view, this essay ought to be required reading for anyone dealing with Bach's vocal music or translating eighteenth-century religious texts.

The preface closes by turning to the "somewhat sensitive matter" of religion, and here Marissen addresses the reader directly. "I am interested in religion," he writes, "principally for its explanatory power in understanding Bach's music. I am not at all interested in discussing the theological or spiritual usefulness of Bach's music" (p. xv). He acknowledges that the reader will find many "positive" aspects of religion in Bach, but he urges them not to ignore the "negative" ones, including negative views toward Catholics, Muslims, and Calvinists. "Christian believers, especially in America and Germany," says Marissen, "often celebrate the central truths of the Christianity found in Bach and deny or ignore or sweep under the rug any darker content and contexts of Bach's life and music" (p. xvi).

Marissen's book fulfills its goal admirably. It challenges many long-held preconceptions (or even misconceptions) about Bach, his religious context, and the role and function of religion in his music. While some readers may have already encountered one or more of its essays, the attractive presentation from Oxford University Press and the prefatory material, updating, and editing of the essays makes for a volume that bears acquiring and (re-)reading.