

## ***Bach: Text and Drama***

### **Editorial**

Some years ago I read in a leaflet on a Bach performance: 'Bach composed music in the Baroque style, a very dramatic and expressive idiom.' Well, I thought, now at last I know how he did it: he just selected 'Baroque'! But the question remained why all the other composers of his time who must have selected the same option, did not achieve the same results. Perhaps Bach knew of an additional, special, secret button that gave him that extra bit of drama and expression.

Bach's contribution is itself the main reason why we associate terms such as 'dramatic' and 'expressive' with the music of his era. He never composed for the theatre - and yet, the parameters of text and drama, and the traditional and contemporary discourses about them, were dominant influences on his composing. Philosophy was language-based, Theology endeavoured to mediate the word of God, the Arts were supposed to be rhetorical, gestural, eloquent. In some respect the requirements of text and drama were constraints on musical creativity; in another they provided the channels through which understanding could flow: they helped Bach's audiences to listen to his music. At his time, there would always be a basic expectation that the meaning of the music had to be judged from the words set - whether as congruence or deviation.

In this fourth issue of *Understanding Bach* we present new questions, views and facts about these well-known themes, from diverse angles. Much research exists on Bach's texts, on word-tone-relationships, on rhetoric and expression and other text-related topics. The research group 'Music and Text' of *Bach Network UK* is now working with this material and asking additional questions. The proposal to discuss the concept of 'drama' - including its ambiguities - in a Bach Dialogue meeting came from Yael Sela. Thus the Fourth J. S. Bach Dialogue Meeting of *BNUK* (Oxford, January 2009) offered a session on 'Bach the Dramatist' and another on 'Music and Text' (see the report at the end of this issue). The two domains overlap, especially when, as was the case in the papers presented, we consider words set to music in the context of words said about the music.

**Michael Maul**, who has just published the first comprehensive history of Baroque opera in Leipzig, explores the question - relevant to our context - whether Bach as Thomaskantor would have been able to compose operas had he wanted to. Maul shows that Bach's predecessor Johann Kuhnau did contribute to the genre, and that only special administrative circumstances prevented the Leipzig opera-house from re-opening after its temporary closure in 1720.

**Irmgard Scheitler** reconstructs the literary history of German Passion drama in both Protestant and Catholic cultural traditions, and assigns a meaningful position to Bach's two great Passions in this history. She highlights the traditional and contemporary ideas about religious theatre that have confluenced in these musical works, and shows that literary considerations must play a part in a serious historical assessment of such music.

**Ruth HaCohen** addresses the meanings of drama which Bach creates in his sacred music, selecting cantata 131 and the 'Easter Oratorio' (BWV 245) as contrasting narratives. She shows in surprising analytical steps but with philosophic rigour how Bach, going beyond the traditional (Aristotelian) procedures of 'drama' as an enactment of human stories, embeds such motions in musical modes and moods of a more general, neo-Platonic, conception.

**Reinhold Kubik** and **Margit Legler** had, in the Dialogue meeting itself, given a lecture demonstration, acting out dramatic musical passages by Bach and his contemporaries. In the essay they discuss the common anchorage of Baroque music in gesture, with many textual and pictorial examples drawn from relevant contemporary writings on stage action; they conclude that Bach composed gestural and visual implications so intimately into his music that external action became redundant.

**Tatiana Shabalina** reports on her most recent, extraordinary discoveries of Bach cantata text prints in the Russian National Library at St. Petersburg, illustrated here by facsimile pages. Shabalina reconstructs the circumstances of the respective cantata performances at Leipzig with sufficient certainty to provide evidence as to the fourth cantata *Jahrgang* (1727-28) and further performances of cantatas from the Picander cycle.

**Peter Smaill** presents a survey drawn from his ongoing, wide-ranging research on theological aspects of the cantata texts. The demonstration of so many competing religious doctrines and opinions affecting Bach's cantatas posits the composer in the midst of spiritual uncertainties and struggles, but also suggests the possibility of a conciliatory or open-minded outlook.

**Julian Mincham** researches the form and function of some 'hybrid' recitatives (with examples from cantata *Jahrgang* II), where arioso and chorale passages intrude into the simple recitative line to reconnect the discourse with the underlying chorale or alter the dramatic and didactic impact of the recitative. This seems a fair specimen of the author's broader analyses of the music-text relationship in the cantatas, which we expect to see published in 2010.

It will be a pleasure to publish the paper 'Ways to Bach' by **Margaret Steinitz** (Artistic Director of the London Bach Society), which was delivered at the Dialogue Meeting in the session *Burning Issues*, as an independent contribution on in the *BNUK* website. It does address a burning issue.

*Bach: Text and Drama* has been edited by Reinhard Strohm, replacing Ruth Tatlow as editor of *Understanding Bach* for this issue only. He is hoping to have lived up to the challenge provided by her. He was infinitely helped and encouraged by all the other trustees and members of the Advisory Council of *BNUK*, as well as by language advisor Brenda Strohm and, last but not least, by the authors themselves. Warmest thanks are owed to all of them.

Reinhard Strohm  
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