

## Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcomb and Ruth Solie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi. 257 pp. Plates, musical examples, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-521-80346-2 (hardcover)

Janette Tilley

Volume 24, Number 2, 2004

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014586ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014586ar>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

### ISSN

0710-0353 (print)

2291-2436 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this review

Tilley, J. (2004). Review of [David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism*, ed. Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcomb and Ruth Solie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi. 257 pp. Plates, musical examples, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-521-80346-2 (hardcover)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 24(2), 87–90.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1014586ar>

Guiguet demonstrates conclusively that the “ideal world” of the *Soirée Musical* in mid-nineteenth century Ontario was a complicated mix of music and politics, social hierarchy and gender control, professional and amateur performers, and much else besides. She has gone a long way here towards decoding the arcane mysteries of this ritualized behaviour. Anyone with an interest in the social, economic, political, or musical history of Ontario will find much to instruct and delight them in this book.

Robin Elliott

David Yearsley, *Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint*. New Perspectives in Music History and Criticism, ed. Jeffrey Kallberg, Anthony Newcomb and Ruth Solie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xvi. 257 pp. Plates, musical examples, notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 0-521-80346-2 (hard-cover).

Until recently, counterpoint has typically been the purview of music theorists. Regarded as a self-contained musical system, counterpoint and particularly Bach’s strict counterpoint, was long held to be an arcane intellectual pursuit with little or no extra-musical reference. Recent investigations into tonal allegory and symbolism have begun to explore the possibility of meaning in Bach’s learned compositions (Chafe, 1984; Marissen, 1995). Continuing this line of inquiry, David Yearsley asks what counterpoint might have meant to the musical intelligentsia of the early eighteenth century. Inspired by the belief “that Bach’s most complex music might be better understood by trying to grapple with it as one of his contemporaries might have done, that is, as someone for whom Bach’s contrapuntal insights retained a very real currency and vivid significance” (p. 237), Yearsley unravels a complex web of “highly malleable meanings from which it [counterpoint] has derived so much of its cultural potency” (p. 210). Counterpoint, Yearsley reveals, was anything but an abstract and recondite technique. As his six diverse chapters ably demonstrate, Bach’s counterpoint may be understood as religious, hermetic, political, and aesthetic discourse.

Yearsley presents a multi-faceted picture of Bach, revealing the composer’s humour, wit, and political acumen. Hardly a contribution to Bach’s hagiography, the volume rather exposes Bach to be a man of his times—a participant in his social, religious, and intellectual culture of which counterpoint is shown also to play a part. In fact, five out of the six chapters have as much to do with seventeenth- and eighteenth-century codes and practices as they do with Bach’s music. The first chapter, in particular, is an important consideration of music and seventeenth-century Lutheran eschatology. Counterpoint, with its appeals to higher intellectual faculties and by extension higher metaphysical planes, could serve as a reminder of the music of heaven and as a contemplation on death and dying—a musical extension of Lutheran *ars moriendi*. Although the practice of steadfastly contemplating death began to recede in the eighteenth century, Yearsley demonstrates how the contrapuntal chorale *Vor deinen Thron*

*tret ich hiermit* (BWV 668) served as a potent eschatological contemplation for the dying Bach. In the second chapter, Yearsley explores counterpoint as veiled alchemical discourse. The chapter is largely devoted to the prose writings of musicians such as Johann Mattheson, Heinrich Bokemeyer, and Lorenz Mizler, and the canonic pieces of Johann Theile. Bach's personal engagement with counterpoint as a hermetic metaphor is in no way assured; canonic procedures similar to Theile's and membership in Mizler's "Corresponding Society of the Musical Sciences" suggest that secret alchemical understandings of Bach's counterpoint may well have co-existed with the Enlightenment's rationalistic views.

The central three chapters (Chapters 3, 4, and 5) all deal with aspects of musical taste. Chapter 3 contemplates the intersections between artifice and nature in canonic procedures with particular attention to Bach's *Canonic Variations* (BWV 769) and F major *Duetto* (BWV 803). Yearsley reveals how contrapuntal complexity could be employed in the pursuit of a refined galant *goût*. Chapter 4 presents a new picture of Bach's famous encounter with Frederick the Great and the origins of the *Musical Offering* (BWV 1079). Far from "an unknowing group of decadent moderns who treated counterpoint with condescension and near contempt" (p. 157), the Prussian King and his entourage consisted of "appreciative connoisseurs", well versed in the intricacies of the contrapuntal art. Such an audience would have appreciated the monarchist and autocratic allegories presented in Yearsley's reading of the *Musical Offering*. Finally the fifth chapter begins with a consideration of eighteenth-century musical automata and goes on to explore the tension between the mechanical and the tasteful in *Kunst der Fuge* (BWV 1080). Many of the threads explored in these chapters overlap—materialism, artifice, nature, and taste. Part of the book's success lies in its ability to tease out individual threads for thorough and close examination, while avoiding the pitfalls of repetition.

The volume takes a surprising turn in its sixth and final chapter, which explores views of Bach's counterpoint in the 250 years since his death. Yearsley's critique of Nazi-era musicology is lucid, and he exposes the essentialism inherent in writings about Bach's counterpoint and the "Germanic musical spirit" it purportedly embodied. His comments are important not only for Bach scholarship, but also for the discipline of musicology as a whole, for Bach's lofty status is as much a result of compositional quality, as of the politically tainted scholarship of the early twentieth-century. In this regard, it is surprising how little English-language musicology has engaged the discipline's sordid past. By contrast, German scholarship has actively pursued the topic, perhaps speeded by post-unification concerns for a collective German response to the Third Reich (Wollny, Schulze and Leisinger, 1995; Schmid, 1999; Potter, 1998; Kater and Riethmüller, 2003).

As its title "Physiognomies of Bach's Counterpoint" reveals, the final chapter also explores the unsavory history of Bach's earthly remains and the pseudo-science employed in the search for his likeness. In 1894, in an attempt to determine with "scientific" accuracy Bach's facial features, Wilhelm His constructed a facial model of a skull removed from outside Leipzig's Johanniskirche,

believed to be Bach's skeletal remains. Confirmed as Bach's, the remains were accorded the status of near relics and re-buried in a sarcophagus beneath the altar in the Johanniskirche. In 1949 the remains were moved with much ceremony to their present location in the Thomaskirche as part of the ceremonies commemorating the 200th anniversary of Bach's death. Faith in His likeness persisted well into the twentieth century with a publication authenticating five portraits of the composer based on similarities with the conjectural bust (Bessler, 1956). The significance of Bach's physiognomy for later reception of counterpoint, however, is not immediately apparent. Yearsley employs Bach's bones as a conceptual framework within which to explore "post-mortem" interpretations of Bach's counterpoint. "Like Bach's bones, any contrapuntal framework is nothing but a set of physical data until it is likened to non-musical things, until it becomes one kind of allegory or another." (p. 237) The notion that meaning is ascribed and not inherent lies at the heart of this volume; recourse to Bach's mortal remains seems an esoteric manner of addressing this otherwise obvious statement.

Where the first five chapters succeed by exploring in detail a single circumscribed *topos*, this final chapter is, by comparison, diverse and suffers greater fragmentation. Yearsley's treatment of counterpoint and the development of a German nationalist agenda is tantalizing in its brevity. He mentions Wagner's accolades for Bach's "triumph over the foreign influences dominating German music" (p. 230) but only in the context of Hans Joachim Moser's Nazi-era biography (1935). The line from Marburg and Beethoven to Schumann and Wagner is only very thinly sketched. Likewise the possibility of a gendered discourse of counterpoint is mentioned in passing. Yearsley claims "the idea that manliness in music derived from counterpoint... was firmly embedded in Bach reception" (p. 225). What follows, rather than evidence of this assertion, is a treatment of fugue as embodying the identity of the Prussian *Volk*. Perhaps the twenty odd pages devoted to Bach's physiognomy could have been devoted to elaborating on these provocative and compelling ideas.

Yearsley dispenses with the notion of counterpoint as an arcane and erudite subject, dispelling its myths and imbuing it with cultural significance. His exposé of the crab canon (pp. 148–55) is particularly noteworthy, for an aura of precocious genius remains around the composition of palindromic polyphony. Informed by eighteenth-century practice and pedagogy, Yearsley reveals the canon's technique, exposing not only its simplicity, but also its intrinsic humour. Herein lies one of the book's greatest strengths: a careful and thorough examination of primary source material, much of it in notoriously difficult German, sheds light not only on Bach, but on the contrapuntal practices of at least two generations of musicians from Buxtehude to Mattheson.

*Bach and the Meanings of Counterpoint* makes a compelling case for contextual and hermeneutic considerations of seventeenth and early eighteenth-century compositional practice. It is here, in its widest scope, that the volume could have its greatest impact: by giving equal voice to Bach's

immediate predecessors and contemporaries, Bach has become one voice in a rich historical counterpoint.

Janette Tilley

## REFERENCES

- Bessler, Heinrich. 1956. *Fünf echte Bildnisse Johann Sebastian Bachs*. Kassel: Bärenreiter.
- Chafe, Eric. 1984. "Allegorical Music: The 'Symbolism' of Tonal Language in the Bach Canons". *Journal of Musicology* 3 no. 4: 340–62.
- Kater, Michael H. and Albrecht Riethmüller, eds. 2003. *Music and Nazism: Art under Tyranny 1933–1945*. Laaber, Germany: Laaber Verlag.
- Marissen, Michael. 1995. "The Theological Character of J. S. Bach's *Musical Offering*," in *Bach Studies* 2, ed. Daniel R. Melamed. 85–106. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Moser, Hans Joachim. 1935. *Joh. Seb. Bach*. M. Hesse.
- Potter, Pamela. 1998. *The Most German of Arts: Musicology and Society from the Weimar Republic to the End of Hitler's Reich*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Schmid, Birgitta Maria. 1999. "Musikwissenschaft im 'Dritten Reich'" in *Die dunkle Last: Musik und Nationalsozialismus*, Schriften für Musikwissenschaft und Musiktheorie, ed. Brunhilde Sontag, Hans-Werner Boesch, and Detlef Gojowy, vol. 3, 92–110. Cologne: Bela.
- Wollny, Peter, Hans-Joachim Schulze and Ulrich Leisinger, eds. 1995. *Bach unter den Diktaturen 1933–1945 und 1945–1989*, Leipziger Beiträge zur Bachforschung, vol. 1. Hildesheim: Olms.

Deborah Mawer, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. xv, 294 pp. ISBN 0 521 64026 1 (hardcover).

Published in 2000 to mark the 125th anniversary of Ravel's birth, *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel* offers a smorgasbord of current research on the composer's aesthetics, music, and reception history. One of the mandates of the *Companion* is to "broaden the base for Ravel studies beyond France" and to "bring in 'new blood' from other related areas" (p. 2). To that end, the majority of the contributors are scholars who have established their reputations not in Ravel studies, but in neighboring research areas such as Debussy, Milhaud, Satie, Bartók, and even Webern. Each essayist brings a distinct set of expertise to the discussion, which helps to connect Ravel to the broader trends in music research, interpretation, and criticism.

The book, organized into three parts, contains a total of eleven essays, together with an appendix of a selection of early reviews, some previously untranslated, of Ravel's main works. The first part of the *Companion*, entitled "Culture and aesthetic," contains three essays that contextualize Ravel's aesthetics through references to various aspects of his biography. The first essay, by Barbara Kelly, situates Ravel within French musical and cultural traditions,