

Dissertations

Richard Carroll Davis—*Self Parody among the Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*

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Scholars have been fascinated by J. S. Bach's practice of parody almost from the very beginnings of Bach scholarship. As early as 1855 Wilhelm Rust, the principal editor of the Bach-Gesellschaft complete edition, briefly discussed Bach's parody procedures in the foreword of his first volume of cantatas for the BG (Vol. V¹). Eighteen years later, in Vol. XX² of the BG, Rust presented a more thorough description of the extent and nature of Bach's use of parody. He reported there for the first time that large portions of such important lost works as the *St. Mark Passion* and the funeral music for the death of Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen were almost entirely preserved in the music of the *Trauer-Ode*, BWV 198, and the *St. Matthew Passion*, respectively. In the same year, 1873, the first volume of Philipp Spitta's classic biography appeared, containing further discussion of parody-related pieces. Since then the potentialities and importance of investigation in this field of Bach research have been abundantly clear. But, as Mr. Davis remarks in the introduction of his dissertation, although many valuable articles and monographs on this subject have been written in the 20th century, no one has "undertaken a complete analysis of all extant parodies and their models."

The dissertation under review here does not attempt to embrace *all* the surviving parody compositions but only those cast in the form of cantatas and based on other cantatas written by Bach himself. It therefore does not consider such works as the *B minor Mass* or the *Christmas Oratorio*. Those compositions are the subject of a companion doctoral dissertation, "The use of *Contrafacta* in the Large Choral Works of J. S. Bach," submitted to Boston University in 1960 by Robert William Holmes. The present review is concerned only with the study of Mr. Davis.

The dissertation is in two parts. Part One, *General Discussion of Parody Works and Movements*, is just under 200 pages long and, in the words of the author, "reflects the work of many musicologists of the past and present."

It is a review, then, of the secondary literature, dealing with biographical, chronological, and philological information, "and other pertinent historical facts" designed to "familiarize the reader with the parody cantatas." Part Two, *Classification and Analyses of Changes*, represents "the original contribution of the author." This section is close to 300 pages long and is followed by an appendix.

The four chapters of Part One (Ch. 1: Parodies from Weimar Models, Ch. 2: Parodies from Coethen Models, Ch. 3: Parodies from Leipzig Models, Ch. 4: Parodies of Miscellaneous Isolated Movements) present the historical background to each parody pair in chronological order. Throughout this part traditional broad generalizations are quite naïvely accepted or new ones just as naïvely proposed without sufficiently rigorous or critical evaluation. Before turning to a critique of details, it is more profitable to consider first some of the larger questions raised or latent in Part One.

Davis assumes that all the models discussed in his thesis have "at least one point in common. Bach himself considered each of them important enough for parody. . . ." There is, however, no biographical information concerning Bach's attitudes that justifies this remark. Surely it would have been sufficient to assume only that Bach found these works *suitable* for parody. This assumption, of course, raises the question: what makes a work suitable for parody? This question, highly relevant, is not considered in the dissertation.

The author maintains several times that "Bach's revision of existing music for new works often seemed to require as much if not more effort than that required for the composition of fresh musical material," a statement which evidently assumes that a large-scale change reflects a large-scale effort. While there is no way of knowing precisely how much effort any compositional act—large or small—represented for Bach, it would have been possible to approach an answer to this question by examining the autograph scores. The author was convinced, however (p. xxi), that a "pilgrimage to European libraries to seek out manuscripts and lost originals was not necessary for the analysis in Part Two." Such a pilgrimage would not only have been thoroughly enjoyable but also a revelation. It would have prevented a number of erroneous judgments bearing not only on the degree of effort Bach expended in a particular situation, but, more significantly, on whether a composition is indeed an original or a parody.

But if, for the moment, we share Mr. Davis' assumption that a parody often represented a considerable creative effort, then it puzzles one how often parody compositions are deemed by him to be of "inferior quality," or how "poor declamation" can be put forth as a criterion for establishing that a work is a parody. There is, in fact, a certain ambivalent attitude on the part of the author toward the entire parody process. This is perhaps most clearly evident in the following passage:

All of the musical examples presented in this chapter [on declamation and interpretation of the text] so far show that Bach's somewhat mechanical manipulation of phrase and note [?] structure was not wholly an

instinctive process. Some of the changes were obviously rendered with considerable deliberation and care. At times the original beauty of a phrase was damaged by a necessary alteration, sometimes it was improved. Considering that a seemingly insignificant change made by a tyro can easily reduce great art to a mere banality, most of the alterations are commendable and disclose the flourishes of a master's touch (p. 366f.)

The internal inconsistencies of this passage—along with the confused use of “all,” “some,” “most,” etc.—reveal that the author is uncertain in deciding whether the parody compositions are to be considered refinements and improvements of works which Bach thought “important” enough to submit to revision and often transformation, or whether they were more or less successful rearrangements and adaptations of earlier compositions that happened to be handy when a new work had to be prepared on short notice. It is possible, of course, that in some cases the one explanation applies and in some cases the other. Perhaps this is even what the author had in mind when, as a justification for the existence of Part One, he wrote that an analysis of the kind to be presented in the second half of the dissertation “obviously” requires the knowledge of the correct chronology. But nowhere is the chronological information made relevant to the study. It merely provides a convenient means of determining the order in which compositions or examples are discussed. The question whether Bach's technique of parody or his attitude towards the practice changed during his career is not investigated in the dissertation.

This whole complex of issues—the “importance” or “suitability” of the models, the criteria for determining whether a composition is a parody in the first place (and if so, whether it is or is not successful), the evidence bearing on the degree of “effort” or mere “mechanical manipulation” in the parody process, and the relevance of chronology to all these questions—should have been sorted out and considered somewhere in the dissertation.

Part One, unfortunately, is also unreliable as a summary of earlier research. A few examples taken from Chapter I should illustrate this. The description of pitch and tuning perpetuates the misunderstanding of Spitta and the older Bach research that the Weimar organ was tuned in *hoher Chorton*, a minor third higher than the *Kammerton* pitch of the woodwinds. The publications of Alfred Dürr (*Studien über die frühen Kantaten J. S. Bachs*, cited in Davis' bibliography), Arthur Mendel (“On the Use of Pitch in Bach's Time,” *The Musical Quarterly*, 1955, not cited in the bibliography), and others, however, have long established that the Weimar organ was not tuned in a high key, but rather that the woodwinds at times were tuned in the *Tief-Kammerton*. In the same chapter Erdmann Neumeister is referred to as Bach's librettist. While there are a number of librettists with whom Bach collaborated closely, such as Salomo Franck, Christian Hunold, and Picander, Neumeister was not one of them and indeed was no more closely associated with Bach than Metastasio was with Mozart.

With no mention of his source, Davis asserts that Bach performed the "Hunting Cantata," BWV 208, at Weissenfels "against the will" of his Weimar patron Duke Wilhelm Ernst, and that this "cost Bach his promotion to Kapellmeister." Spitta claims, though, that Wilhelm Ernst in fact directed Bach and "his librettist" Salomo Franck to compose the cantata for the festivities at Weissenfels.

In the course of Chapter II Davis offers a generous summary of the findings in Friedrich Smend's *Bach in Köthen* and cites Smend's method for finding lost Cöthen works: deduce the characteristics common to known parodies whose originals were written in Cöthen and then attempt to locate missing ones by comparison of these identifying elements. Davis himself makes no attempt to apply this method, or, for that matter, to develop any new criteria for identifying parodies, or for reconstructing lost originals from parody compositions. (On p. 442 one reads that "Bach's methods are so unpredictable that some [sic] movements cannot be authentically reconstructed with absolute certainty." Which ones can be, and how does one go about it?) As mentioned earlier, he frequently resorts to the traditional criterion—poor declamation—as confirmation, or even proof, of parody. Thus he maintains (p. 32) that the declamation in the chorus "Nimm auch, grosser Fürst, uns auf," BWV 173a/8, is "curious enough to prove that the music existed previously in some other form." But in discussing the parody pair BWV 173a/1–BWV 173/1 a few pages earlier (p. 27), Davis concedes that the text of the parody represents an "improvement in declamation and artistic content" over the original. He writes in another place that "it is axiomatic that wherever faulty accentuation exists, or that absolute agreement between text and music is lacking, the movement is a parody" (p. 193). There is, however, no such axiom. Poor declamation is no infallible proof of parody. Friedrich Blume proposed at the New York Congress of 1961 that many of the arias written by Bach during his first few years in Leipzig surely must be parodies, for there were numerous instances of poor declamation and missed opportunities for word-painting. Of the five movements mentioned by Blume at the Congress as possible parodies, however (BWV 144/2, 5, BWV 25/5, BWV 2/5, and BWV 38/3), three (BWV 144/2 and 5, and BWV 2/5) exist in autograph composing scores and are clearly not parodies. (There are no surviving autograph scores for BWV 25 and 38.) The autograph score of BWV 173a, too, is clearly a "composing" score throughout and not a parody.

Part Two of the dissertation, representing the "original contribution of the author," is an "analysis of the various musical techniques used in parodies, such as instrumentation, declamation, fragmentation." The author's method was to make a "note by note comparison of all parody cantatas with their models for which music is available. Wherever differences exist, an attempt is made to determine Bach's reasons for making these changes. . . ." The five chapters of this part are entitled (1) Instrumentation, (2) Octave Displacement of Melody, (3) Ornamentation, (4) Declamation and Interpretation of Text, (5) Fragmentation.

The material presented in the first three chapters of Part Two—over 100 pages of the text—describes compositional acts that are not peculiar to the process of parody. Almost all the instances of substitution, addition, or deletion of instruments recorded in Chapter I are attributed by Davis, no doubt correctly, to external circumstances concerning the availability of instruments or performers and related matters. Similar revisions often accompanied later performances of original works as well, when circumstances, or taste, dictated. Alterations such as the transposition of a note or group of notes up or down an octave to secure an effective melodic accent or a strong structural bass line, or to keep a part playable; the subsequent addition of ornaments; the correction of outright errors such as parallel fifths and octaves or inexact repetition of identical material—all such gestures are observable in the surviving manuscript material of original compositions, as well as in the scores of parodies. They thus testify to Bach's working habits in general rather than casting any special light on the technique of parody.

The same comment applies even to the chapter on "fragmentation." In the words of the author, fragmentation

refers to insertions, deletions or exchanges of measures or fractions of measures when parodies were formed. Usually fragmentation was necessitated by a new and dissimilar text. Sometimes it occurred for less obvious reasons within instrumental sections. In either case, fragmentation changes are of special interest because they alter the symmetry [i.e., structure?] of a movement (p. 400).

He continues, "Considering the difficulties encountered while fitting a new text of different meter and proportions to an existing work, Bach's reasons for troubling himself with these problems are a mystery" (p. 402). His speculations about Bach's possible reasons reveal again his ambivalence about parody: (1) "the need for a number in a hurry with nothing more appropriate available" (i.e., the negative—and paradoxical—attitude: why employ a particularly difficult technique when the work has to be done in a hurry?); (2) "a requirement [desire?] for music which fits the meaning of a new text rather than its physical form" (a good explanation, but not always appropriate. As Davis points out in discussing the parody pair BWV 75/7–BWV 100/6, fragmentation technique—here the addition of measures—is employed even though the two texts have exactly the same structure and are indeed different verses of the same chorale); (3) "recognising the potentialities of old music with a desire to improve it and use it again" (i.e., the positive attitude towards parody).

In fact, the fragmentation technique is not peculiar to parody compositions. Werner Neumann's description of "permutation" and "combination" in Bach's choral fugues, Alfred Dürr's description of the "ritornello quotation" in the arias, Emil Platen's analysis of the structure of Bach's chorale choruses all call attention to the large-scale use of the fragmentation technique, i.e., to Bach's facility in combining and recombining component parts (measures or groups of measures) into new configurations. The implication

to be drawn from the pervasiveness of this technique seems clear; it is surely that the notion of an "organic" theme is essentially irrelevant in a discussion of Bachian melody. "Phrases" are rather chains of motives that, like molecules, could be joined together or detached as the composer saw fit. The fragmentation technique thus afforded Bach a flexibility that enabled him to adjust pre-existent phrases to new texts, and Davis' examples amply illustrate Bach's resourcefulness in applying it in choruses, arias, and recitatives.

Only the fourth chapter of Part Two is concerned with the particular problems of parody composition. Bach's methods of replacing few syllables with many, or the reverse, are imaginative yet usually simple. Often apparently nothing more was involved than texting a melisma, subdividing a long note, or adding or deleting one or two notes or rests. Of course, something more was involved, at least in the more successful passages: the unfortunately (or fortunately) unanalyzable factors of artistic instinct—of taste. At other times the structure of a vocal line seems quite transformed, although, as Davis points out, the resemblance to the original is still discernible. Even these techniques, however, can be found in original compositions. They are all in some way manifestations of the baroque *ostinato* and *concerto* principles: free *obbligato* lines continually spun out against the recurring theme or *tutti ritornello*.

Appended to the dissertation are two forbidding compilations, giving in volume, page, and measure numbers the location of every instance in which discrepancies between model and parody appear. The tables are intended, of course, as a convenience for the reader and future scholars, but any prospective student of the parody process will doubtless prefer to place the scores of the related works side by side and see the changes for himself in context rather than turn to these lists.

The last straw in this dissertation, however, is the last paragraph. One reads there in this age of enlightenment the following:

An interesting study would be the further investigation of other works by Bach which indicate carelessness in writing, but which have no extant parodies. Based upon observation of analogous situations in the known parodies, one may correct and refine all of Bach's work in a manner which the master himself may have done. Practical editions of Bach's works should strive for perfection of these musical forms, a perfection for which Bach continuously strived. They should not always strive for perfect fidelity to the manuscript, which often contains great errors that escaped a hurried hand (p. 474).

Before anyone is tempted to embark upon that interesting study he may be reminded that the "complete analysis" of Bach's parody technique still has to be written. That study will be supported by a sturdy biographical and bibliographical foundation; it will make extensive and thoughtful use of all relevant manuscript material; and it will consider the technique and practice of parody within the larger context of the Bachian compositional technique in general.