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Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies (Book Review)

Abstract

Reviewed Title: *Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies* by Jurgen Thym. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014. 339 pp. ISBN: 9781580464741.

Keywords

book review, Jurgen Thym, Mendelssohn, organ, historical legacies

Disciplines

Music

Comments

- Reprinted with permission from the publisher
- MacInnis, J. "*Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies* by Jurgen Thym (review)." *Notes*. vol. 72 no. 3, 2016, pp. 565-567. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/not.2016.0030



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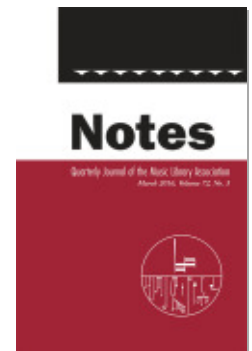
Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies
ed. by Jürgen Thym (review)

John MacInnis

Notes, Volume 72, Number 3, March 2016, pp. 565-567 (Review)

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did the premiere of *A Survivor* seem to take on the air of a commemorative event, and that country was exceptional among these case studies in that it benefited from considerable distance (in every way) from Warsaw and the events of the Holocaust.

The degree to which *A Survivor* was de-Semitized and manipulated to fit a very particular agenda, especially in the Eastern Bloc countries, may also be surprising to modern readers. The Polish premiere in September 1958, by the same ensemble that had performed the East German premiere five months earlier, is particularly bizarre: "There, before an audience of several hundred Poles and international music figures, Germans narrated and sang the roles of Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto, in a work written by a Jewish composer about the German annihilation of those Jews, in the same city in which that annihilation had occurred fifteen years earlier . . . the concert hall was a powder keg ready to blow" (p. 114). But it did not. The press was positive, and the omission of Jews from the reviews left open "the possibility that the 'atonement' could be penance for German atrocities in general" (p. 115).

Calico is able to illuminate the various "codes of silence" visible in commentary about *A Survivor* across these case studies. Only in West Germany and Norway are both the victims and the perpetrators named; the Austrians mention (very quietly) the Jews, but not the Nazis; the Eastern Bloc sites do not name the Jews. Silence, of course, can speak louder than words: the omission of Nazis in the Austrian narrative relieves that country of complicity in the Holocaust and plays into its postwar "first-victim status," and the exclusion of Jews allowed the Soviet satellite states, still thick with anti-Semitism, to generalize *A Survivor* as an expression of antifascism.

Calico's exhausting documentation at times leads to a sense of drowning in detail; each of these six narratives is brimming with complex historical context and unfamiliar players whose roles must be explained, and there is also some redundancy between chapters (which conveniently means that each could be effectively understood on its own). The reader's task might be eased significantly had the publisher chosen to use footnotes instead of end-

notes, facilitating engagement with Calico's sources and allowing a true appreciation of the breadth and depth of her primary source research. But this is a quibble; what makes Calico's book so effective is her ability to offer an incredible density of facts and ideas, many of them groundbreaking, within a readable and relatively slim book. As Peter J. Schmelz suggested in 2009, musicologists were "long overdue" in exploring issues of music's relationship with the Cold War, especially considering that scholars began engaging this way with the visual arts long before the conflict even ended ("Introduction: Music in the Cold War," *The Journal of Musicology* 26, no. 1 [Winter 2009]: 3–16). The present volume, which could serve well as a model for similar explorations, is certainly a most welcome addition to the rapidly growing literature on this topic, and it will be valued far beyond musicological circles.

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Mendelssohn, the Organ, and the Music of the Past: Constructing Historical Legacies. Edited by Jürgen Thym. (Eastman Studies in Music, vol. 118.) Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014. [x, 339 p. ISBN 9781580464741. \$99.] Music examples, illustrations, bibliographic references, notes on contributors, index.

In the first chapter of this volume, R. Larry Todd connects Hector Berlioz's criticism of Felix Mendelssohn, that he was "a little too fond of the dead," to Mendelssohn's abiding passion for the music and compositional practices of J. S. Bach (p. 16). More than simply a devotee of Bach, though, Mendelssohn was a musician and music scholar whose activities contributed to the promotion of German musical tradition, in an era largely concerned with the establishment of a unified German culture.

Indeed, Jürgen Thym, in his introduction, explains that the early nineteenth century was an age that favored monuments, markers commemorating German achievements of the past, which, by extension, also constructed historical legacies (p. 1).

Mendelssohn's role in such commemorative activities is exemplified in his advocacy for a stone monument to honor J. S. Bach at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, no less than in his performance of a recital, in 1840, featuring Bach's music, in an effort to raise funds for that monument. This recital, like the earlier, famous performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, in 1829, was a sort of monument "cast in sound not stone" (p. 5).

The collection of essays here under consideration is quite unified in that each author takes up ways in which Mendelssohn engaged the past as a contemporary response in a wide range of musical activities. This volume extends from the conference "Mendelssohn and the Contrapuntal Tradition," in 2009, organized by the Eastman Rochester Organ Initiative. The 2009 conference included a performance reenacting Mendelssohn's Bach recital of 1840, on the Craighead-Saunders Organ in Christ Church, Rochester, NY; the concert was repeated in 2012, and a recording is freely available online at: <http://www.esm.rochester.edu/organ/mendelssohn> (accessed 18 September 2015).

Several chapters (especially 1, 4, 5, and 8) consider how Mendelssohn came by his esteem for Bach's music, through several channels. Pedagogically, his teacher C. F. Zelter studied under J. P. Kirnberger and C. F. C. Fasch, who were both taught by J. S. Bach himself. It was through these sorts of teacher-student relationships that many of Bach's compositions were transmitted for years after his death, in 1750. In addition, Mendelssohn had access to a large number of Bach manuscripts through his family; his father and mother acquired a large portion of the Bach estate (including over 100 autograph scores) in 1805, thinking to donate the music to the Sing-Akademie in Berlin (p. 216).

The supposed discrepancy between Mendelssohn's sacred liturgical music and his secular instrumental music is considered in chapters 2 and 11. While chapter 2, by Siegwart Reichwald, is very focused in parsing historic Catholic influences in the op. 23 and 39 motets, chapter 11, by Benedict Taylor, reads Mendelssohn's compositional output in terms of the choice proposed by Søren Kierkegaard, his near contemporary, in *Either/Or*: "Either, then,

one has to live aesthetically, or one has to live ethically" (p. 302)—applied here as a supposed choice between art-religion or religious art. In the end, for Taylor, it is an oversimplification to divide Mendelssohn's works into sacred and secular, for a religious impulse lay behind them all, though expressed differently as Mendelssohn grew and matured.

Chapter 3, by Peter Mercer-Taylor, offers a close analysis of Mendelssohn's "Reformation" Symphony, composed for the tercentenary celebration of the Augsburg Confession. Taylor reads this symphony, which quotes the Lutheran chorale melody "Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott," as an engagement with Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* and especially Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, both of which include vocal music.

Mendelssohn's work as an organist is surveyed, in chapter 4, by Wm. A. Little. Mendelssohn preferred to practice the organ at least an hour a day (p. 177), and organists everywhere can thank Mendelssohn for editing, with exacting standards, the first published edition of Bach's *Orgelbüchlein*, which remains a standard in organ pedagogical literature. In fact, in England, Mendelssohn's reputation was primarily as an organ performer and advocate. For example, Mendelssohn promoted the English adoption of German pedal keyboard construction, i.e., long pedals, beginning with C, housed in separate pedal divisions. Chapter 6, by Nicholas Thistlethwaite, describes Mendelssohn's relationship with the English organist Henry John Gauntlett, in the project of English Organ Reform and the promotion of Bach's works in England. Among organists, it is a famous story that, in 1837, on one of his trips to England, Mendelssohn played a recital at St. Paul's Cathedral, only to be cut short because the men employed to pump the organ blowers were bribed to quit early (p. 126).

Chapter 7, "Mendelssohn's Sonatas, Op. 65, and the Craighead-Saunders Organ at the Eastman School of Music: Aspects of Performance and Context," by Hans Davidsson, is the most extensive selection in this volume. Davidsson includes a description of the Eastman Craighead-Sanders (C-S) Organ, which, dedicated in 2008, is an exact imitation of a late Baroque instrument, in Lithuania. Since Mendelssohn would have played historical

works and his own organ compositions on just such an instrument from the eighteenth century, it is instructive to consider how he and his contemporaries discussed organ registration (i.e., the choosing of organ stops to create different sounds and effects) in terms of what can be observed from the C-S organ. The scope and thoroughness of this chapter commend it as excellent reading for organ students working through Mendelssohn's famous organ sonatas, op. 65, especially for historical performance practices such as choices related to registration, slurring, and tempo marks.

Mendelssohn's work as a musicologist, editing scores and preparing editions, is taken up and placed in context in chapter 10 by Glenn Stanley. Mendelssohn's views on the performance of historical musical texts evolved between 1829, in which he conducted an abbreviated performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*, and 1833, in which, for a performance of George Frideric Handel's oratorio *Israel in Egypt*, he argued for returning to the original manuscripts and purposefully approaching what Handel intended (p. 265). Mendelssohn eventually prepared a full-score and piano-vocal edition of *Israel in Egypt*, explaining in his preface, "I think it my first duty, to lay before the Society the Score as Handel wrote it, without introducing the least alteration, and without mixing up any notes or remarks of my own with those of Handel" (p. 282). Mendelssohn's views on what one might call "authenticity" were ahead of their time as far as music is concerned, though he was in line with the sorts of authenticity pursued, in the nineteenth century, in architecture (e.g., completion of the Cologne Cathedral, in the late nineteenth century), painting restoration, and the editing of historical texts.

The final chapter, by Celia Applegate, describes "Mendelssohn's Religious Worlds," the European religious contexts in which Mendelssohn lived and traveled. Simply put, the state of Protestantism, in nineteenth-century Europe, was neither static nor straightforward, and musicians working in this environment had to navigate religious forces from several fronts, e.g., state-mandated liturgical reforms of Friedrich Wilhelm III, spiritual awakenings in Northern Germany and England, etc. The inclusion of this chapter provides addi-

tional context for understanding Mendelssohn generally and nuances the volume's larger thesis that Mendelssohn, in his musical activities, contributed to the formation of a national German musical tradition.

This collection of essays is breathtaking in its erudition and thoroughness. Though particularly of use to organists considering Mendelssohn's compositions as well as organ culture of the early nineteenth century (see especially chapter 7), this volume reflects the sort of full-orbed consideration of music that musicologists prize, music studied in terms of analysis, cultural history, and contemporary context. As such, it is an excellent addition to academic music libraries as well as the private collections of musicologists, particularly nineteenth-century scholars.

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Understanding Boccherini's Manuscripts. Edited by Rudolf Rasch. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014. [xx, 236 p. ISBN 9781443856638. £44.99.] Illustrations, bibliography, indexes.

Though sequestered in Spain, far from Europe's musical capitals, for thirty-five years, Luigi Boccherini worked persistently in artistic seclusion, producing a steady stream of compositions that contributed to an ongoing musical, cultural dialogue without ever monopolizing the conversation. Likewise, Boccherini scholarship is progressing apace, indebted to a fairly small, dedicated group of scholars who are still laying the foundations for an organized, contextualized understanding of his oeuvre. As Rudolf Rasch, the editor of this volume, formulates it, they have "three main tasks concerning Boccherini's music still to be fulfilled: the publication of his works in reliable editions, the realization of a reliable catalogue of his works and the establishment of a reliable chronology" (p. viii). The assessment of a need for a reliable catalog, as opposed to an update to Yves Gérard's respected *Thematic, Bibliographical, and Critical Catalogue of the Works of Luigi Boccherini* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), might seem a tad overstated. Work on the project called Gérard 2 (supported by the