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J. S. BACH

and the German motet



DANIEL R. MELAMED

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PREFACE

This book started as my doctoral dissertation, so my acknowledgments must begin with thanks to those who supported it (and me) when I was a graduate student. First comes my adviser, Christoph Wolff, who guided the study and taught wise lessons about turning interesting observations into good ideas. Next, many scholars have given me large amounts of their time and the benefit of their expert advice, especially Kirsten Beißwenger, Robert Hill, Klaus Hofmann, Yoshitake Kobayashi, Michael Marissen, Joshua Rifkin, Hans-Joachim Schulze, Anne Stone, and Peter Wollny, and I thank them all.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABA	Altbachisches Archiv
AmB	Amalien-Bibliothek (now in SBB)
BG	Bach-Gesellschaft, <i>Johann Sebastian Bachs Werke</i>
<i>BJ</i>	<i>Bach-Jahrbuch</i>
<i>BT</i>	Werner Neumann, ed., <i>Sämtliche von Johann Sebastian Bach vertonte Texte</i>
BuxWV	Georg Karstädt, <i>Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke von Dietrich Buxtehude</i>
BWV	Wolfgang Schmieder, <i>Thematisch-systematisches Verzeichnis der musikalischen Werke von Johann Sebastian Bach</i>
DDT	Denkmäler deutscher Tonkunst
<i>Dok</i>	Bach-Archiv Leipzig, <i>Bach-Dokumente</i> , vols. 1–3
EDM	Das Erbe deutscher Musik
<i>MGG</i>	<i>Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart</i> , ed. Friedrich Blume
NBA [KB]	Johann Sebastian Bach, <i>Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke</i> [Kritischer Bericht]
<i>New Grove</i>	<i>The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians</i> , ed. Stanley Sadie
P, St	SBB Mus. ms. Bach P (score), St (parts)
SA	Sing-Akademie zu Berlin
SBB	Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin/Preußischer Kulturbesitz

CONTENTS

<i>List of tables</i>	<i>page</i> x
<i>List of music examples</i>	xi
<i>List of figures</i>	xiii
<i>Preface</i>	xiv
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xv
Introduction	1
Part one: the term and concept “motet”	5
1 The term “motet” in the first half of the eighteenth century	7
2 J. S. Bach’s use of the term “motet”	19
Part two: Bach’s motets	31
3 Bach’s motets and their relation to the genre	35
4 Bach’s earlier motets: rethinking authorship and dating	45
5 Bach’s later motets: rethinking compositional history	63
6 Chronology, style, and performance practice of Bach’s motets	98
Part three: motet style in Bach’s concerted compositions	107
7 The concept of the motet-like movement	109
8 Motet style in Bach’s church cantatas	112
9 Motet style in Bach’s Latin works and oratorios	133
10 Bach’s use of motet style in concerted works	151
Part four: Bach’s contact with seventeenth-century German motets	159
11 The history of the Altbachisches Archiv	161
12 J. S. Bach and the Altbachisches Archiv	178
13 Sebastian Knüpfer, “Erforsche mich, Gott”	189
<i>Appendix: Original texts of motet definitions cited in this study</i>	198
<i>Bibliography</i>	214
<i>Index of J. S. Bach’s works</i>	219
<i>Index of manuscript music sources</i>	223
<i>General index</i>	225

TABLES

2-1	J. S. Bach's use of the term "motet" in autograph musical sources	page 22
2-2	The term "motet" in non-autograph musical sources from J. S. Bach's library	23
2-3	Original parts for BWV 226 (SBB St 121)	23
3-1	J. S. Bach's motets and their texts	36
3-2	Motets from J. S. Bach's library and their texts	37
5-1	Copyists of original vocal and continuo parts for BWV 226 (SBB St 121)	83
5-2	Distribution of variant versions of "Jesu, meine Freude"	87
6-1	Chronology of J. S. Bach's motets	102
8-1	Motet-like movements in J. S. Bach's church cantatas	113
8-2	Biblical texts from motet-like church cantata movements	113
8-3	Motet-like chorale movements from the church cantatas	117
8-4	Church cantata movements with sections in motet style	122
8-5	Selected church cantata movements combining the motet with other principles	126
9-1	Motet-like movements from J. S. Bach's Latin works	133
10-1	<i>Colla parte</i> doublings in motet-like church cantata movements	154
10-2	J. S. Bach's use of cornetti and trombones	156
11-1	Sources of the Altbachisches Archiv	172
11-2	Bach family motets in three Amalienbibliothek manuscripts (SBB AmB 90, AmB 116, and AmB 326)	176
12-1	Compositions from the Altbachisches Archiv showing J. S. Bach's contact	181

MUSIC EXAMPLES

2-1	BWV 118 (first version), mm. 1-29	page 26
3-1	BWV 229, "Arie"	40
4-1	Johann Christoph Bach, "Fürchte dich nicht," mm. 39-57	55
4-2	BWV 228, mm. 77-86	56
4-3	BWV Anh. 159, mm. 84-96	57
4-4	BWV 21/9, mm. 1-24	58
4-5	BWV Anh. 159 (mm. 1-5) and J. B. Lully, Gavotte from <i>Armide</i> , mm. 1-4	59
4-6	Versions of "Warum sollt ich mich denn grämen"	61
4-7	BWV 63/7, mm. 50-57	62
5-1	BWV 226, mm. 1-24	68
5-2	A hypothetical duet model for BWV 226	71
5-3	Duet and chorus versions of BWV 249/3, mm. 24-48	72
5-4	BWV 226, mm. 108-36	74
5-5	BWV 226, mm. 178-86	81
5-6	Versions of "Jesu, meine Freude"	87
5-7	BWV 227/9, Tenor, mm. 22-35	88
5-8	BWV 28/2, mm. 1-25	91
5-9	BWV Anh. 160, mm. 1-14	92
5-10	BWV 24/3, mm. 1-11	94
5-11	BWV 231/Anh. 160, mm. 1-25	97
8-1	BWV 108/4, mm. 1-14	116
8-2	BWV 182/7, mm. 1-14	118
8-3	BWV 2/1, mm. 1-26	119
8-4	BWV 121/1, mm. 1-28	120
8-5a	BWV 6/1, mm. 1-30	123
8-5b	BWV 6/1, mm. 80-91	125
8-6	BWV 101/1, mm. 1-49	127
8-7	BWV 25/1, mm. 1-21	130
9-1	BWV 233a, mm. 1-27	134
9-2	BWV 233/1, mm. 1-27	135
9-3	BWV 179/1, mm. 1-25	138

Music examples

9-4	BWV 236/1, mm. 1-25	139
9-5	BWV 232/15, mm. 1-20	140
9-6	BWV 243a/A, mm. 1-12	142
9-7a	BWV 248/21, mm. 1-4	144
9-7b	BWV 248/21, mm. 25-29	145
9-7c	BWV 248/21, mm. 31-35	146
9-8	Anon., "Der Gerechte kommt um," mm. 1-16	147
9-9	Johann Kuhnau (attrib.), "Tristis est anima mea," mm. 1-15	148
9-10	Orlando di Lasso, "Tristis est anima mea," mm. 1-14	149
13-1	Sebastian Knüpfer, "Erforsche mich, Gott," mm. 1-23	194

FIGURES

2-1	Violin 1 part for BWV 226 (SBB St 121) in the hand of J. S. Bach, f. 1	page 24
4-1	Score of BWV Anh. 159 (SBB P 4/1) in the hands of J. S. Bach and Philipp David Kräuter, f. 1	47
4-2	BWV Anh. 159 in the edition by Johann Friedrich Naue (Leipzig, c. 1823)	49
4-3	BWV Anh. 159 in the edition by Johann Gottfried Schicht (Leipzig, 1802)	52
5-1	Autograph score of BWV 226 (SBB P 36), f. 1	66
5-2	Autograph score of BWV 226 (SBB P 36), ff. 3'-4 (detail)	77
5-3	Soprano I part for BWV 226 (St 121) in the hands of Johann Ludwig Krebs and J. S. Bach, f. 1'	79
5-4	Autograph score of BWV 226 (SBB P 36), f. 5	82
12-1	Continuo part in the hand of J. S. Bach for Johann Christoph Bach, "Der Gerechte, ob er gleich" (Sing-Akademie zu Berlin, lost; photograph EDM 1)	183
12-2	Oboe 1 part in the hands of J. S. Bach and Anon. H for Johann Christoph Bach, "Lieber Herr Gott, wecke uns auf" (Sing-Akademie zu Berlin, lost; photograph SBB Fot Bü)	184
12-3	Score in the hands of J. S. Bach and an anonymous copyist of Johann Christoph Bach, "Unsers Herzens Freude hat ein Ende" (SBB P 4/2), f. 1	185
12-4	Score in the hand of Johann Christian Bach and anonymous copyist of ?Johann Christoph Bach, "Herr, nun läßest du deinen Diener" (SBB P 4/2), f. 1	187
13-1	Score in an unknown hand, with annotations by J. S. Bach, of Sebastian Knüpfer, "Erforsche mich, Gott" (SBB Mus. ms. autogr. Knüpfer, S. 1), f. 1	190
13-2	Alto I part in the hand of J. S. Bach for Sebastian Knüpfer, "Erforsche mich, Gott" (SBB Mus. ms. 11788)	191
13-3	Plaque bearing the text "Erforsche mich, Gott" in the Nikolaikirche, Leipzig	196

Introduction

On a trip to Leipzig a few years ago I had the opportunity of visiting the room where the Thomanerchor rehearses. On the walls are portraits of past Thomascantors, with Johann Sebastian Bach's portrait occupying the place of honor. There was no music in sight, with one exception: on a small table at the front of the room sat neat piles of the scores of Bach's motets, stacked like some kind of bar graph of the choir's work. It seemed particularly fitting that these compositions, which have apparently never left the repertory of the Thomanerchor since their composer's tenure as its director, should be symbolically displayed as the heart of the choir's repertory even today.

The splendid isolation of Bach's motets in the choir's rehearsal room also supplies a telling metaphor for the place of these works in the motet tradition. Bach's motets are among the most often published, performed, and recorded of his vocal works, but the general consensus among specialists and non-specialists alike has long been that they have little to do with the motet tradition in Germany in Bach's time. Writers from Philipp Spitta on have looked elsewhere for clues to the origins of Bach's motets – to organ music, to concerted vocal works – anywhere but to the motet. Bach's motets have been cut off from their context; they sit on a pedestal rather than at the summit of the genre.

The tendency to isolate Bach's motets is well illustrated by their treatment in the long-standard history of the motet, Hugo Leichtentritt's *Geschichte der Motette* (Leipzig, 1908). Leichtentritt presents a chapter called "The German motet from Heinrich Schütz to J. S. Bach," and then one called "The motet since J. S. Bach," but his discussion of Bach's motets themselves occupies exactly one page – about the same as the treatment of those of his ancestors Johann Michael Bach and Johann Christoph Bach, and six pages fewer than are devoted to the motets of Andreas Hammerschmidt. The structure of the book suggests that Bach's motets represent some kind of watershed, but its content is hardly affected by them. Leichtentritt explains that Bach's motets "stand entirely apart in the motet genre," and that in their design they "diverge completely from that which one otherwise calls a motet" (pp. 362f.). Later he writes that Bach was, in fact, of little importance as a motet composer. His incomparably great compositions bear the name "motet" unjustly; they are, he avers, rather "cantatas for chorus" (p. 429).

The reluctance to consider Bach's music in the context of the musical conventions and traditions of his time – *Leichtentritt* is by no means alone, and the motets were not the only compositions to be so treated – is a little hard to explain. Perhaps the nineteenth-century images of Bach as a musical genius on the one hand and as a religiously inspired composer on the other have left their mark, making us less inclined to seek the roots of Bach's music in such relatively mundane explanations as musical traditions and conventions. Also, we know so much more about Bach than about other composers, especially in the realm of unglamorous genres like the motet, that there is a temptation to measure them and their music against Bach rather than the other way around. In the case of the motets, it is probably true that Bach's are the most sophisticated ever composed, and it is understandable that commentators should be disinclined to try to make sense of them in relation to lesser repertory. There is no real need, because the works stand up magnificently in isolation.

But surely there is much to be gained from looking at Bach's motets in context. At the moment, doing so is problematic. Our control over the history of the motet in early eighteenth-century German-speaking lands is incomplete, so a full study of the repertorial context of Bach's motets is not yet possible. Nonetheless, we can still examine Bach's motets in light of the norms of motet writing of his time, primarily by turning to written sources on the motet and its characteristics. It is clear from a study of these sources that musicians of the time had definite ideas about what a motet was and how it should be constructed, and that they used the term discriminately for certain kinds of compositions. It should come as no surprise that a careful investigation shows that Bach, too, was discriminating in his use of the term.

Perhaps more importantly, if we look at Bach's motets from the point of view of the early eighteenth-century understanding of "motet," it becomes clear that the works he called by that name do, in fact, agree with the contemporary understanding of what a motet was. Bach brought a level of musical sophistication to the motet that is apparently not found in other composers' music, he did enlarge the conception of the motet slightly, and there is little doubt that he borrowed techniques from other musical types. But his fundamental conception of the motet was that of his contemporaries, and the special qualities of his contributions to the genre are all the more striking in light of an understanding of his starting-place: the early eighteenth-century norm of the motet.

The special status awarded to Bach's motets has led to some misconceptions that need to be addressed. If Bach did indeed create his motets entirely apart from the tradition of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as was the premise for many years, then the idea that the young Bach composed motets in the mold of his predecessors was essentially unthinkable. And if his motets were the towering works of original genius that admirers made them out to be, then unthinkable, too, was the possibility that parody, arrangement, and reworking of musical materials might have played a role in their creation. The chronology and compositional history of Bach's motets, although still not fully illuminated, turn out on close examination to resemble those of his other works: motet composition spanned Bach's professional career, some

of Bach's motets were the product of musical reworking of extant material, and his works in the genre show a change from earlier motets that resemble seventeenth-century models to later compositions that are more modern and innovative.

An understanding of Bach's conception of motet style has other consequences as well. Commentators have long identified motet-like elements in Bach's concerted compositions, especially the cantatas, but for the most part they have not recognized the extent to which the motet-like movements in concerted works reflect the norms of the motet genre. Many of the textual and musical features of motet-like movements in concerted works can be better understood from the perspective of the contemporary motet. This insight puts in our hands a potentially useful analytical and interpretive tool for examining Bach's concerted music.

Motets and motet style also turn out to play an important role in Bach's exploration of the musical past and in his interest in his distinguished musical ancestry. Late in his life, Bach performed a substantial number of late seventeenth-century vocal works, most of them motets. Most of the motets, in turn, were compositions by an older member of the Bach family. Motet style was thus a locus of Bach's exploration of his musical patrimony. Not only does the examination of this repertory and Bach's use of it illuminate his later years and his historical interests, it also gives us a glimpse at the kind of music with which he grew up – a repertory otherwise difficult to identify. It was from this repertory, of course, that Bach learned his craft and the conventions of musical practice that governed his own compositions. Thus, in his last years, Bach explored through the motet his place in the music of his time.

PART ONE



The term and concept “motet”

The term “motet” in the first half of the eighteenth century

It is by now a commonplace that J. S. Bach rarely called his church cantatas “cantatas,” referring to them instead as concertos, or church pieces, or principal music for the worship service. Nonetheless, the term cantata has stuck because it is convenient and because there is a clear historical reason for its use: we can draw connections between Bach’s concerted sacred vocal works and pieces that are explicitly called “cantatas.” These connections are well studied and much discussed, and the position of Bach’s compositions in the history of the cantata is reasonably clear. Bach’s cantatas have a place in the genre and a connection to the term.

In the repertory of J. S. Bach’s sacred vocal works there is another small but important group of pieces that the composer, his students, and his copyists called by the same name used today: the motets. Dozens of works Bach did not call cantatas are now routinely included under the rubric “cantata,” but among the motets there is the opposite tendency to doubt Bach’s own label – to question whether a piece he labeled “motet” really is one. What is more, his motets are generally considered so superior to those of his contemporaries and predecessors that little thought is given to their connection to the genre or to the early eighteenth-century German understanding of the term.

“Motet” was, in fact, a technical term in the first half of the eighteenth century. It described a particular genre and an associated musical style, and brought with it conventions of text selection, musical construction, and performance practice. If we start with an examination of the general understanding of the word “motet” in Bach’s time, we will then be in a position to appreciate what the term meant to Bach, to make sense of when he used it and when not, to understand his cultivation of the musical genre and style it described, and to assess whether he applied it in the same way as did his contemporaries in central Germany. There is ample evidence that his understanding of the term was in fundamental agreement with that of his contemporaries, and a study of the term and Bach’s use of it illuminates strong connections between the motet tradition in Germany and Bach’s own remarkable motets. A study of the term and the musical concepts behind it also provides valuable insights into Bach’s concerted music, and can help refine the concept of motet style as an important analytical tool for that repertory.

Fortunately, the eighteenth-century understanding of the term is well documented in written sources of the time. Not all writers are in complete agreement – there are inevitably individual points of view – but the various discussions nonetheless give a clear view of the scope of the term and of the points of contention over its use and meaning.

Like many other words, "motet" presents several fundamental problems that make its meaning difficult to establish exactly. First, there is the question of exactly what kind of composition the term refers to: a type of piece (a genre), a way of writing (a style), or – later in the eighteenth century – perhaps even a musical form. Second, as eighteenth-century writers themselves occasionally note, several different types of compositions were referred to as "motets." These pieces are musically different enough that some definitions of the term appear to struggle with internal inconsistencies in an attempt to accommodate them. Finally, in different languages the term could refer to different kinds of pieces, making the musical identity of a motet hard to pin down, even in the limited context of German writings and compositions. One needs to understand and keep in mind the various possible meanings of "motet" in deciding what the term signifies in a particular context.

Despite these ambiguities, it is usually not difficult to figure out what a user of the term intended, and there is little question that the term "motet" had a definite meaning. My aim here is to use contemporary writings and definitions of "motet" to establish what musicians in central Germany in the early eighteenth century meant by the term, and to explore the most important musical issues surrounding the motet and motet style.

Johann Gottfried Walther's definition in his *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732) makes a good starting-point because it raises most of the issues that eighteenth-century writers apparently found most important, and because it is likely that J. S. Bach was familiar with it. Walther and Bach were cousins, colleagues in Weimar, and correspondents; Bach was also a sales agent for Walther's dictionary.¹ The first part of Walther's definition, which begins by clearly laying out the motet as a musical genre with particular characteristics, is as follows:

Motetto, plural Motetti [Italian] Motet, plural Motets [French]. Others write: Motteto; still others, Moteto; Latin: Motettus or Mottetus, Motetus, Motectum, Moteta, etc. is properly a musical composition written on a biblical *Spruch*, just to be sung without instruments (basso continuo excepted), richly ornamented with *Fugen* and *Imitationibus*. But the vocal parts can be taken by and strengthened with diverse instruments. Foreigners nowadays extend the meaning of this term Motetto, to a sacred composition whose text is in Latin, consisting of arias and recitatives, and to which various instruments are supplied, with *a parten* melodies by turn; as to be seen, among others, in the first opus of Gio. Batt. Allegri.²

¹ Dok II/260.

² Johann Gottfried Walther, *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732). The complete original text of Walther's and other motet definitions discussed here will be found in the Appendix.