

Review

Rethinking J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue," by Anatoly P. Milka.

Translated by Marina Ritzarev, edited by Esti Sheinberg. Routledge, 2016. 261 + xxiii pp.

The publication of the book *Rethinking J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue,"* by Anatoly Milka is an exciting event for any musicologist interested in the subject. To begin with, it is an intriguing read, since this highly professional musicological research is fascinating simply as a detective story. The main points of a good book's plot, i.e. starting point, development, culmination, and denouement, are built up in a masterful way in order to surprise the reader and hold our attention from the beginning until the very end.

The detective story genre seems to be rather a rare bird in our professional field. Sometimes, however, features of this genre are woven into the musicological narrative, in order to suddenly disclose some unknown but sensational details of the composer's biography, to reveal the concealed logic of the composer's thinking, or to decipher the hidden message of a musical composition. In the case of "The Art of Fugue,"—the famous work that unfortunately lacks a full, authorized version of the musical text—the challenge of the investigation is especially difficult, since the riddle of the overall structure of "The Art of Fugue" cannot be unraveled unequivocally.

Quite naturally, "The Art of Fugue" has long been the subject of numerous research studies, in many languages. Because of the language barrier, the Russian publications on the subject have sometimes remained on the periphery of the worldwide Bach dialogue. In such circumstances, the translation of Anatoly Milka's "The Art of Fugue" from Russian into English, undertaken by Marina Ritzarev and edited by Esti Sheinberg, is a very encouraging event that will pave the way to fruitful intellectual dialogue.

Anatoly Milka, the author of the book, is a distinguished professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and St. Petersburg University, and has been involved in Bach studies for several decades. All of his numerous publications on Johann Sebastian Bach are fundamentally substantiated as well as extremely captivating. Milka's first book on Bach, *Bach's Musical Offering: Towards Reconstruction and Interpretation* (Moscow, 1999), suggests a solution to the mysteries of Bach's unfinished work while applying an interdisciplinary approach. His other books on Bach, written together with Tatiana Shabalina, another respected Russian Bach scholar, are named "Intriguing Bachiana" (St. Petersburg, 1997, 2001). In both of these quite amusing collections, the authors come to several unanticipated conclusions about the imprecisions in some of the popular Bach materials.

In the book *Rethinking J.S. Bach's "The Art of Fugue,"* the author has undertaken a challenging intellectual journey, while at the same time managing an imaginative dialogue with many revered colleagues, each with his/her own vision of Bach's famous work. Very aware of the different points of view, Milka concentrates his efforts on an exploration of three main questions: whether "The Art of Fugue" was ever completed; what the author's intended design looked like; and why the version published by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, the composer's devoted son, was different from his father's well known autograph?

Every answer to each question posed (or, strictly speaking, each well-founded hypothesis by the author) is constructed on a variety of arguments, while applying a

multidisciplinary approach in the best possible way. Many sub-subjects are explored: the circumstances of work's composition; the reasons for the changes in the composer's medical condition; the process of preparing the printing; the interaction with assistants in the process; and the relations between the members of Bach's family. The results of the exploration are used, in addition to the detailed handwriting analysis, a demonstration of Bach's expertise in contemporary fugue theory and practice, and his keen interest and deep knowledge of the contemporary German culture. Offered in a well-balanced counterpoint, these arguments taken together are highly illuminating as an explanation of the intentions and motivations for the way things were in fact done.

The book provides the reader with many different insights, each one worthy of serious consideration and discussion. To mention the most significant ones: Milka is convinced that "The Art of Fugue" had no fewer than four versions; he also has his own vision of Bach's planned conclusion for the work. Last but not least: at the end of the book, Milka introduces his concept about the hidden message of "The Art of Fugue." His insightful and penetrating parallel between the final version of "The Art of Fugue" and the St. John Revelation is based on the similarity of numerical structures that "by allusion, *echo* similar meanings" (p. 245). It seems that the numbers here symbolize perfection, a divine Harmony that perhaps can be revealed to us if we make an effort to think and rethink "the affinity between two works" (p. 246), as Milka suggests to us in the last sentence of his book.

As for the style of the book: Anatoly Milka is well known among his colleagues as a man of humor, who is capable of being not only serious, but also ironic in his texts if he so desires. One example: all Bach scholars, and even many of his admirers, obviously remember Philipp Emanuel's inscription on the last page of "The Art of Fugue:" "Over this fugue, where the name BACH is stated in the countersubject, the author died." This sentence is particularly impressive, especially when observed in the score of the last unfinished fugue. Nevertheless, Milka reminds the reader that, firstly, Johann Sebastian was completely blind some months before his death and would have been incapable of writing on his deathbed. Secondly, according to the handwriting data, Philipp Emanuel undoubtedly wrote this sentence no earlier than the 1780s, a considerable time after his father's death—and his reasons for writing this inscription are still not clear even now.

Looking for a plausible explanation, Milka describes Emanuel's connection to the mystical atmosphere typical of the *Sturm und Drang* period, during his years in Hamburg. In such a milieu, Emanuel's adoration of his late father possibly induced him to add a mystical tinge to the scene of Johann Sebastian's death. In Milka's formulation,

The picture is of Bach parting this world not as a sick and infirm old man on his deathbed, but—as befits an outstanding person and a great musician—at the moment of his greatest inspiration, the conclusion of his opus magnum. How could one resist posing such a picture for posterity? "Ueber dieser Fuge, wo der Nahme BACH in Contrasubject angebracht worden, ist der Verfasser gestorben"—this was a far more appropriate description.

The author concludes that "the simple way of describing what happened is that the beauty of the pictured idea was favored over the actual facts. It sometimes happens with creative people" (p. 239).

However, Milka's analysis of the inscription could well be a model for all commentators, regardless of their field. Such mindfulness, presented in gentle humorous attire, can teach us all a lot.

The translation of the book from Russian into English deserves its own evaluation, as an honorable work. Translating a book from your own mother tongue to another that is not your native language demands not only knowledge and talent, but also patience and permanent self-criticism. Marina Ritzarev, a scholar of great repute, devoted five years to this translation project, together with Esti Sheinberg, also a well-known, distinguished musicologist. Sheinberg, as the editor of the book, was involved in all the details of the book's content, as well as the problems in its translation, which demanded a fundamental study of the subject and of Bach's epoch. Such dedication by both scholars to the book of a colleague is worthy of our deepest appreciation, and is testimony to the impressive collegial solidarity and unconditional love of musical scholarship that is so dear to us all.

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