

## BOOK REVIEW

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**Denis Collins, Kerry Murphy and Samantha Owens, eds.**  
**J.S. Bach in Australia: Studies in Reception and Performance**  
Melbourne: Lyrebird Press, 2018 (Australasian Music Research 17)  
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**Reviewed by Thomas A. Cressy**

In relation to the recent trend of musical studies moving towards a ‘global history’ of Western Art Music, the importance of reception studies outside of Euro-American contexts cannot be exaggerated. As Christoph Wolff states in the foreword to *J.S. Bach in Australia*, this book is a welcome publication and the first that exclusively deals with the history and reception of Bach’s music in Australia. The impetus for this volume came from the success of the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music’s 2014 Bach Forum; many of the papers from this forum have been reworked into chapters for this volume, each showing different facets of Bach reception in Australia depending on the author’s area of expertise.

The book does not have an overarching argument, but the chapters are unified by their aim to provide historical context, specifics of the conditions and challenges of performances of Bach’s music, and how Bach and Bach’s music were discussed in contemporary written publications. In the introduction, the three editors explain commonalities that run through the chapters. The first of these is the British or German individuals who carried a European heritage of Bach that Australian-born musicians interacted with. Another is the distance to Europe from Australia that was always a constraint in terms of resources for performance (scores, critical literature, instruments, trained musicians, etc.); this distance also acted as a stimulus for the resourcefulness and imagination of enthusiastic individuals who presented Bach’s music to growing Australian communities. The editors state that the book is not a

comprehensive account of Bach reception and performance in Australia, but rather an attempt to use the expertise of their contributors for a varied coverage of Bach's music in a variety of contexts within Australia; eleven authors are given a chapter each. The book is divided into two parts: the first contains four chapters relating to Australian performances of the *St Matthew Passion*, and the second is a collection of chapters that focus on Bach's (primarily vocal) music in Australia. An epilogue on Bach's appearances in Australian novels, and appendices of Bach performances in Australia close the book.

Part One opens with Janice Stockigt's discussion of the 1875 Australian premiere of the *St Matthew Passion* by the Melbourne Philharmonic Society and their repeat performance of it the following year. Stockigt shows the importance of English editions of the *Passion* and Oxford graduate Joseph Summers—a student of English Bach enthusiasts Henry Gauntlett and William Bennett—and other musicians in making such a large-scale work realisable in concert (even if the end result was an abridged and unsatisfactory performance). In the following chapter, Andrew Frampton continues with later Melbourne performances of the *Passion*. The *Passion* was performed in the religious space of Melbourne's St Paul's Cathedral in 1897. Frampton argues that this performance was based on those given in London's St Paul's Cathedral and used Novello's St Paul's edition as the main score. Furthermore, the performance was directed by the English conductor Ernest Wood. An analysis of markings on the documents used for performance is provided by Frampton, as well as reviews of the concert, which claimed it was too long, too dramatic, and not a good rendition for those who knew the work already.

The latter two chapters of this part trace the reception of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, each elucidating the specifics of performances in Sydney and Adelaide, respectively. The Sydney chapter, by Alan Maddox, shows how mid- to late-nineteenth-century music societies and venues laid the groundwork for predominantly British or German amateurs and professionals to perform the *Passion* in 1880 in the Great Hall of Sydney University. Maddox's exploration of music journalism in Sydney shows that there was a debate about whether the piece should be for spiritual or entertainment purposes, as well as its being associated with Germanness and difficulty. Overall, the *Passion* performance served as an ideal medium for the cultural aspirations of the city: a benchmark of what talent and forces the city could muster for performing high art of European heritage. Julja Szuster's chapter on Adelaide argues that the concentration of German migrants and Lutherans in the 1830s and 1840s led to a close-knit German community that had a flourishing choral tradition. There are also records indicating that at least part of the *Passion* was sung domestically in the 1840s. However, the first full performance of the *Passion* came in 1903, by the Adelaide Bach Society, formed two years earlier by English organist Harold Davies (inspired by his Bach-performing brother in England, Henry Walford Davies). Szuster also includes a brief history of Bach-related choral traditions in Adelaide until 2006, which provides a transition to Part Two of the book, as she discusses the Mass in B minor (premiered in 1930) within such traditions.

Part Two of the volume opens with three chapters that discuss the Australian reception of the Mass in B minor. Firstly, Peter Tregear traces the idea of the Mass being 'timeless' and 'universal', established through the humanism of Baron van Swieten and the first edition of the work in 1818, to Australia's inheritance of such persisting tropes. Concluding with the statement that great art requires constant reassessment, Tregear argues that the Mass was never a complete work; the history of instances of its 'completion' as a 'piece', and the construction

of its 'greatness' requires further study. The chapter by Samantha Owens, however, provides specifics (performers, conductor, venues, etc.) on the premiers of the work in 1920s Sydney, Melbourne, and Brisbane. This is followed by a discussion of how the Mass was hyped by the press as a great universal and sublime religious work, contradicted by the audience's concert-like behaviour of applauding each movement rather than listening in reverence. Regardless, Owens argues that the Mass performances were significant in allowing Australians to feel that their own musical resources were being brought in line with the 'Old World'. Niki Ebacioni begins her chapter by discussing the Melbourne Bach Festival's popular concerts of the Mass in the late 1950s and early 1960s, giving much credit to organist Leonard Fullard, who directed the annual festival from 1950 to 1988. Digging through Fullard's personal archive, Ebacioni provides a history of Fullard and the festival, concluding that the annual event was one of the few outlets for 'early music' in mid-1960s Australia.

Chapter Eight, by Peter Campbell, continues with the theme of historically informed Bach performance, but in Canberra. Campbell shows Bach's instrumental music to have been performed in the area as early as the 1910s, and even earlier as vocal music in churches. Following Bach's music through the 1930s, he shows that there was an interaction between touring musicians and local amateurs, and a prevalence of Bach/Gounod arrangements (such as *Ave Maria*) and Busoni, Tausig, and Reger transcriptions of organ works for piano. Furthermore, the 1940s was characterised by 'gatherings' of listeners who heard recordings of Bach's organ works. Campbell discusses how post-war Bach performances in Canberra display imported modes of musical organisation (choirs and orchestras) that allow for large-scale works to be realizable from the 1960s onward, and were increasingly influenced by the 'early music' movement and concerts by foreign musicians. Canberra's only school of music opened in 1976 and, by the 1980s, Bach's music was being sung in German instead of English in the region. Campbell concludes with more recent information on the twenty-first-century performances of the Canberra Bach Ensemble. The following chapter, by Ian Burk, similarly provides a historical overview of Bach-related activity in Tasmania. Although there was a nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century salon, choral society, and private domestic music culture, Bach's music was very rarely played. Burk follows the rising interest in Bach that followed a population increase (thus more professional musicians) through the arrival of sound recordings and other media and improved means of communication with other parts of Australia. He also explores the growing opportunity to study music at an institution, from the Tasmanian premiere of a 'short' *St Matthew Passion* in 1934 through to more recent performances of the Mass and the Passions. Burk concludes that Bach reception in Tasmania is characterised by a lack of specialist journalism and musical expertise.

The final chapter of Part Two is Graham Lieschke's history of Bach cantata performances in Melbourne. He argues that such a tradition probably began with the performance of the three parts of the *Christmas Oratorio* in 1889, although many were well informed about Bach cantatas and had heard them previously in England. Fullard appears again here, as an important figure for the Australian reception of Bach's cantatas. Lieschke also discusses the St Johns Southgate Lutheran Church performances of cantatas from the 1940s to the 1990s.

An epilogue by Leo Kretzenbacher closes the volume, in which she discusses how Bach and his music are portrayed in Australian fiction—particularly Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach* and David Malouf's *Buxtehude's Daughter*—concluding that Australian writers have a fresh

view on Bach beyond traditional conceptions that taint him with ‘Germanness’. Appendices following the epilogue provide useful chronological tables of Australian performances of the *St Matthew Passion*, Mass in B minor, and cantatas.

Overall, this book provides genuinely new contributions to Bach-reception studies. Even as early as 2006, John Butt stated that reception histories of Bach are vital in advancing our understanding of new historical perspectives and our own historicity.<sup>1</sup> Further, the recent *Routledge Research Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach* also contains comments by both Stephen Rose and David Yearsley advocating reception histories in differing contexts as a vital area to advance our own understanding of the changing meanings and associations of Bach’s music.<sup>2</sup> I am also awaiting the publication of Reinhard Strohm’s edited volume *Intercultural Music Studies*, which contains chapters on Bach’s reception in South America and East Asia, including my own on Japan. In other words, this volume on the reception of Bach’s music in Australia is timely and needed within Bach studies as a whole.

As a researcher of Bach’s reception in Japan, I was surprised at how some aspects of Australian Bach reception was also relevant to my work. For example, Stockigt’s passing mention of the violinist Jenny Kraus playing in the Melbourne *St Matthew Passion* performance is significant for me, as Kraus premiered some of Bach’s solo violin works in a similar amateur community in Japan immediately afterwards, showing both contexts to be linked by the transnational circulation of performers and repertoire as early as 1875.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Summers—as a student of Gauntlett—is also of interest to me, as Gauntlett’s relative Edward was also a key figure in nineteenth-century organ performance in Japan. Owen’s discussion of the Mass performances in the mid-to-late 1920s reminded me of Isoyama Tadashi’s findings about the Japanese premier in 1931 as it was also accused of neglecting the religiosity of the work, yet the difficulties in performance gave the students and teachers a sense of pride and achievement.<sup>4</sup> Campbell’s mention of Tausig and Busoni transcriptions being popular in Australia in the 1930s, brought by touring musicians, is identical to what I have found to be happening in Japan in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup> Australians were present in the nineteenth-century Yokohama Foreign Settlement, too: I found the Australian singer Ada Bloxham to have taught the Gounod/Bach *Ave Maria* to Japanese students at the Tokyo Academy of Music in the 1890s; Emily Patton, the self-proclaimed singing teacher of Nellie Melba, was also employed at the Tokyo Academy of Music to teach Tonic Sol-fa to Japanese students.<sup>6</sup> I would be fascinated to learn

<sup>1</sup> John Butt, ‘The Postmodern Mindset, Musicology and the Future of Bach Scholarship,’ *Understanding Bach 1* (2006): 17.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Rose, ‘The Alt-Bachisches Archiv,’ in *Routledge Research Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, ed. Robin Leaver (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 233–34; David Yearsley, ‘Keyboard Music,’ in *Routledge Research Companion to Johann Sebastian Bach*, 316.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Cressy, 「十九世紀の日本におけるバッハ受容史: 新聞記事と未検証からの再考」[‘Bach in 19th Century Japan: A Reconsideration of the Reception History through Previously Unused Sources and Newspaper Articles,’] (MA thesis, Tokyo University of the Arts, 2017), 28–29.

<sup>4</sup> Tadashi Isoyama, ‘The B-Minor Mass and Japanese people,’ in *Understanding Bach’s B-minor Mass: An International Symposium, Queen’s University Belfast, 2–4 November 2007, Discussion Book 1*, ed. Yo Tomita (Queens University Belfast, 2007), 345.

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Cressy, ‘Bach in the Early Shōwa-period Japan (1926–1945): Historiography and Reception,’ in *Intercultural Music Studies*, ed. Reinhard Strohm (Berlin: VWB-Verlag für Wissenschaft und Bildung, 2020, forthcoming), 196.

<sup>6</sup> Cressy, 「十九世紀の日本におけるバッハ受容史: 新聞記事と未検証からの再考」, 82–86.

more about these figures before their arrival in Japan from subsequent studies on Bach and Australia. These are all examples of how historical studies in one context can enrich a global music history through following the transmission of a specific repertoire by social actors in different times and places.

Although the volume emphasises the influence of England's musical press, musicians, and concert activities (and to a smaller extent the influence of German migrants), more work could be done to elucidate Australia's wider role in the circulation of global music culture. The specificity of the European diaspora in Australia (why Australia?), and why some Australian musicians readily and enthusiastically drew from European art forms, are just some areas for further work. The volume privileges Bach's Passions and the Mass (treating them as landmarks), leaving only Campbell and Burk's chapters to discuss a chronology and wider repertory of Bach performance in two geographic areas. A quick search on Trove shows how Bach was discussed in Australian newspapers at least as early as the 1820s, and how reviews of performances of his music from the 1830s were appearing in music journalism. This indicates to me that more work is required even to establish basic facts—beyond Bach's large-scale works—to answer questions such as, 'when was Bach first publicly performed in Australia?' However, it would be unfair to use this as a criticism of a volume that does not claim to be a comprehensive and full chronological study of Bach reception in Australia. Readers interested in Australian music culture and history, English-Australian musical exchanges, Bach performance history, and reception studies will undoubtedly find the case studies in this book illuminating and fascinating.

#### **About the Author**

Thomas Cressy is a PhD student at Cornell University exploring the academic intersection between anthropology and musicology. He holds masters degrees from Glasgow, Oxford and the Tokyo University of the Arts, and has published widely on Bach, music institutions, material culture, and ritual and religion in East Asia.