

Canadian University Music Review Revue de musique des universités canadiennes

Melvin P. Unger. *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts: An Interlinear Translation with Reference Guide to Biblical Quotations and Allusions*, Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1996. xvi, 776 pp. ISBN 0-8108- 2979-7 (hardcover)

David Hill

Volume 17, Number 2, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1014793ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1014793ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Canadian University Music Society / Société de musique des universités canadiennes

ISSN

0710-0353 (print)

2291-2436 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Hill, D. (1997). Review of [Melvin P. Unger. *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts: An Interlinear Translation with Reference Guide to Biblical Quotations and Allusions*, Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1996. xvi, 776 pp. ISBN 0-8108- 2979-7 (hardcover)]. *Canadian University Music Review / Revue de musique des universités canadiennes*, 17(2), 104–107.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1014793ar>

The highly specialized content of *Dyirbal Song Poetry* is both this book's major strength and unfortunate weakness. Ten references are given in the very limited bibliography given at the end of the introduction, but most of these sources pertain specifically to the language of the Dyirbal people (p. 50). As indicated earlier, there is also no mention of similar studies undertaken with other tribes in Cape York or the rest of Australia which serves to isolate this study from other works on Aboriginal music. Nevertheless, *Dyirbal Song Poetry* is a pioneering work in this field and the efforts of Dixon and Koch should serve to pave the way for more comparative studies in the future.

Richard Hardie

Melvin P. Unger. *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts: An Interlinear Translation with Reference Guide to Biblical Quotations and Allusions*. Lanham, Md. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1996. xvi, 776 pp. ISBN 0-8108-2979-7 (hardcover).

Melvin P. Unger's *Handbook to Bach's Sacred Cantata Texts* is a welcome addition to the body of scholarship devoted to placing Bach's cantatas into their original theological context. At the heart of the book are interlinear translations of the cantata librettos, complemented by copious citations of the Biblical passages to which they allude. Unger also includes details such as the Sunday each cantata was composed for, the biblical readings for the service, and the librettist. Although the translations will be most helpful to those whose German is not excellent, the Biblical citations will serve as a convenient reference for those with varying degrees of familiarity with the repertoire.

The underlying premise of the *Handbook* is that because the cantatas were "placed between the Gospel reading and the Sermon of the Lutheran liturgy ... [they] sought to teach and persuade the listener" (p. xi). Thus, cantatas were used "for the proclamation, amplification, and interpretation of scripture" (p. xi). The problem, as Unger sees it, is that whereas cantatas teem with theological references, "many of these remain enigmatic to the twentieth-century musician for they presuppose a much closer familiarity with the Bible than is common today" (p. xi). Unger's central purpose, therefore, "is to reconstruct something of the receptive framework for Bach's cantata texts; to identify the significant biblical themes that, in Bach's day, would have informed and illuminated listeners' perceptions as they heard these texts on a Sunday morning" (p. xi).

Unger peripherally treats the issue of whether the theology of the cantatas necessarily reflects the theology of Bach himself, and he appears to embrace the intentional fallacy wholeheartedly. Unger concedes that "because Bach composed so little sacred music after his first five years in Leipzig, some scholars conclude he had little personal commitment to the vocation of church musician and probably only wrote church works to the extent his position of Cantor required it" (p. xi). Unger, however, argues that Bach took theology very seriously, his primary evidence being that Bach "added underlinings,

corrections, and marginal notations" to his personal copy of the Calov Bible, many of which "can only signify a genuine interest in the study of Scripture and theology" (pp. xi–xii).

I have always been troubled by the argument that the markings in Bach's Bible indicate a detailed and profound programme of Biblical study. Robin Leaver, for instance, states that "looking at the evidence of the marginalia as a whole, one is impressed by the insight they give of the man, his faith and his attitude toward his profession."¹ Or, as Christoph Trautman puts it, "Bach's annotations ... show the composer at the height of his achievements as a devout artist unshaken in his Christian belief."²

The problem is that the notes in Bach's Bible do not justify the image put forth by this camp of scholars. First of all, considering the length of the Bible, Bach inserted very few comments. From the hundreds and hundreds of pages in the three volumes of Calov's edition, Leaver found only sixty-four marginal comments and corrections that are unequivocally in Bach's hand. In addition to these, there are ninety-two instances of underlined passages or other markings, but only fifteen can unequivocally be ascribed to Bach himself. Of the sixty-four marginal comments, twenty are merely corrections of typographical errors and eleven are additions of missing text. All in all, this hardly provides evidence that Bach extensively studied his Bible or was all that personally concerned with "the integrity and significance of the Biblical text."³ Are we to conclude that Bach found all the typographic errors and missing text? Do the forty-eight remaining markings in the entire Bible represent everything an ostensible Biblical scholar would find worth noting?

This criticism of Unger's philosophical orientation does not, however, take away from the importance of his work. I raise it only as to caution that the image of Bach-as-Biblical-scholar is more complex than the passing treatment in Unger's Preface would indicate. But of course the issue of Bach's personal religious beliefs does not need to be settled (if indeed it can ever be settled) in a Preface to a work such as this.

The cantatas are ordered by their BWV numbering. Following the title we find: the work's location in the *Neue Bach Ausgabe* and the *Bach Compendium*; the Sunday in the Church Year the work was written for and the BWV numbers of other cantatas intended for that Sunday; the service's biblical readings; and the librettist. Each page is divided into two columns. The cantata's German text with an English translation laid beneath each line falls on the left; Biblical quotations the text alludes to fall on the right. For the cantata texts, Unger uses different typefaces to indicate different sources: chorales are in boldface; Biblical quotations are in italics; and freely composed texts are in regular type. Thus, the reader can tell at a glance the source of the libretto. Each movement is also given a summary — a sort of

¹Robin Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture: Glosses from the Calov Bible Commentary* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House), 35.

²Christoph Trautmann, "Bach's Bible," *American Choral Review* 14, no. 4 (October 1972): 10–11.

³Leaver, *J. S. Bach and Scripture*, 29.

yellow-pages synopsis of the theological theme (e.g., “Christmas, God’s gift of salvation: we build on it”).

In his translations, Unger attempts to preserve the word order and literal meaning of the original as closely as possible. Where the syntax of German renders a word-by-word English translation awkward, a more fluent alternative is also provided. For example, Unger presents the following literal translation (immediately beneath the German) and more poetic rendering (enclosed in the braces) for the opening of BWV 135:

Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder

Ah Lord, (this) poor sinner

{Ah Lord, do not punish this poor sinner}

Straf nicht in deinem Zorn

Punish not in thy wrath

{In thy wrath}

Unger is more concerned with presenting literal meanings rather than poetic renderings, which makes it all the more useful for those attempting an exegesis of the text. For instance, BWV 25, *Es ist nichts Gesundes an meinem Leibe*, depicts sinners suffering very real maladies in result of their transgressions. At one point, the bass sings that “Meinen Aussatz, meine Beulen / Kann kein Kraut noch Pflaster heilen.” Unger translates this as “My leprosy, my boils / Can no herb nor plaster heal.” Z. Philip Ambrose provides a slightly kinder, slightly gentler rendition, “All my rashes, all my cankers / Can no herb or plaster cure now.”⁴ Clearly, the enormity of the situation is better transmitted by Unger’s accurate translation of “Aussatz” as the dire disease of leprosy rather than a mere rash. (Incidentally, Charles Sanford Terry refused to dignify this passage with a translation, saying that “it exceeds the bounds of good taste.”⁵ Terry crossed the line from translator to poet, and substituted the doggerel “Sorely smitten, help appealing, / None on earth can work my healing.”⁶)

The biblical passages Unger cites are taken from the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Wherever the RSV differs from Luther’s edition of 1545 — chosen because it is “the last one in Luther’s own hand” (p. xvi) — the sense of the German is inserted parenthetically. Sometimes, however, the difference that Unger notes between the RSV and Luther is very subtle. Does Luther’s “Bösen Rotte” (evil gang) convey a remarkably different sense from the RSV’s “company of evildoers” in Psalm 22:16 (p. 6)? And in another case, Unger tells us (p. 17) that for the word “refuge” in Ps 57:1, Luther actually used the word “Zuflucht” (which according to the *Collins German Dictionary* translates as “refuge”).

⁴Z. Philip Ambrose, *The Texts to Johann Sebastian Bach's Church Cantatas* (Neuhausen-Stuttgart: Hänssler-Verlag, 1984), 79.

⁵Charles Sanford Terry, *Joh. Seb. Bach: Cantata Texts Sacred and Secular with a Reconstruction of the Leipzig Liturgy of His Period* (London: The Holland Press, 1964), 418.

⁶Terry, *Cantata Texts*, 417.

Astoundingly, there is one place where Luther's translation differs in a very poignant way from the RSV, and this difference is not noted. BWV 109, *Ich glaube, lieber Herr*, is based on Mark 9:24. A father brings his son to Jesus to be healed. Because of an evil spirit, the boy "foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid." But Jesus turns the tables on the father and tells him that the boy will be healed only if the father has faith, for "all things are possible to him who believes." According to the RSV, the father "cried out and said, 'I believe; help my unbelief!'" In Luther's version, however, the father's plight is made even more dire by the fact that he cried out "mit Tränen" ("with tears"). This very real distinction between the two texts doubtless warrants attention.

Following the main body of the work are a number of indices which help to guide the scholar through the vast repertoire. These include indices of chorale stanzas, librettists, first performance dates, chronological ordering, and liturgical ordering. One quibble about the organization of the book is that although the cantata texts often go on for three or four pages, the headers do not indicate which cantata is being treated. Searches through this very thick volume would be greatly facilitated if such headers had have been included.

All in all, this is an extraordinarily helpful book. The interlinear translations are accurate and literal and the complementary biblical allusions can save a great deal of time that would have been spent pouring over a biblical concordance. Despite the small criticisms noted above, I would encourage any (English-speaking) student of the cantatas to acquire this volume, and I hope that it will be found in all university library music-reference collections.

David Hill

John Warrack. *Richard Wagner: Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*. Cambridge Opera Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. x, 175 pp. ISBN 0-521-44444-6 (hardcover), 0-521-44895-6 (softcover).

Michael Tanner. *Wagner*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996. x, 236 pp. ISBN 0-691-01162-1 (hardcover). Published in Canada and the United Kingdom by Harper Collins.

The invaluable Cambridge Opera Handbook series has been curiously slow to publish volumes on Wagner and Verdi.¹ As such, the appearance of John Warrack's volume on *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* should be cause for celebration, but unfortunately this celebration is somewhat marred by the old-fashionedness — indeed fustiness — of much of the work. A not-dissimilar reaction is occasioned by aspects Michael Tanner's new *apologia* for the composer, entitled simply *Wagner*. Since *Meistersinger* assumes a prominent

¹Other than the *Meistersinger* volume under review, only *Parsifal* (edited by Lucy Beckett) has appeared in the series to date.