Reviews

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Book Reviews

John Michael Cooper, *Mendelssohn, Goethe, and the Walpurgis Night: The Heathen Muse in European Culture, 1700–1850*, Eastman Studies in Music (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2007). xvii + 284 pp. $75.00.

While John Michael Cooper's first monograph illuminated a standard repertory piece,[1] his second tackles altogether less familiar terrain. Mendelssohn's *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* was acclaimed during the composer's lifetime, yet, like most other secular choral works from its period, has subsequently receded almost entirely from view. Its ambiguous genre and awkward length are partly to blame, and so perhaps are its internal proportions: as with the *Lobgesang*, contemporary commentators criticized the excessive length of the instrumental introduction, which takes up nearly a third of the total work. Mendelssohn's cantata – a setting of a ballad by Goethe from 1799 – is something of a problem piece in other ways too. The textual questions it raises are unusually complex, since two very different versions were premiered by the composer.[2] And while other compositions proved more controversial during Mendelssohn's lifetime, none has elicited such a wide range of responses from modern scholars. For some, it is a colourful yet none too profound essay in programmaticism, exploiting idioms that the composer employed more successfully elsewhere (the eerie 'elfin' style of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture and the Ossianic tone of *The Hebrides*). For others, it carries considerably more weight, functioning as a critique of cultural philistinism, a celebration of enlightened values, or as the embodiment of Mendelssohn's relationship to his Jewish heritage. Cooper's monograph aims to do more than simply add a provocative new interpretation to this list. Rather, he seeks to redefine how we approach the work, and in doing so provide the foundation for a comprehensive overhaul of our view of the composer.

In spite of the subtitle, Mendelssohn's cantata and Goethe's ballad are the focus of all the chapters except the first. But if the phrase '1700–1850' is a little misleading, Cooper nonetheless gives a very thorough account of the historical and cultural resonances tapped by these two works. The opening section of Chapter 1 may deter potential readers, since it offers a rather dense exposition of the Christian–pagan conflicts of the eighth century. But if that material seems more inert background than pertinent context, the same cannot be said of Cooper's explanation of how the Walpurgis night and the Brocken (the highest peak in the Harz mountains) acquired their connection with the demonic. Of particular interest is his detailed, well-illustrated discussion of seventeenth-century tracts on witchcraft and of the Enlightenment texts which sought to debunk them. Indeed, as Cooper notes, one of the latter, Heinrich Ludwig Fischer's *Das Buch vom Aberglauben und falschen Wahn* (1790), offers a demystified account of the Walpurgis night very similar to that presented in Goethe's ballad. Rather than

[1] John Michael Cooper, Mendelssohn's 'Italian' Symphony (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[2] Cooper's edition of the earliest version, hitherto unpublished, is a valuable adjunct to his monograph: Die erste Walpurgisnacht: First Complete Version, 1832–33 (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 2007).

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perpetuating the notion that Germanic pagans had indulged in demonic orgies, Fischer argued that such spectacles were conceived as a means to intimidate their Christian conquerors by playing on their own superstitions (pp. 22–3).

Goethe's ballad offers a very different perspective on the Walpurgis night than his other treatments of this material. Instead of revelling in the depiction of demonic malevolence, Goethe presents a sympathetic account of the Druids and their religion. The Druids, intent on preserving their own monotheistic rites in the face of Christian persecution, head for the secluded summit of the Brocken, posting watchmen at a lower level to prevent the Christian sentries from interrupting their ceremony. As the Christians ascend the mountain, the watchmen seek to scare them off by staging a visitation of the devil; while the Christians flee in terror, the Druids' celebration continues undisturbed. This material appeared diffuse and unappealing to Carl Friedrich Zelter, whose first contact from Goethe was the invitation to set this ballad to music. For Mendelssohn, however, it not only provided attractively varied material, but posed several intriguing compositional challenges. Chief among these was the task of representing three distinct groups of simultaneous events: the Druids' mountain-top ceremony, the watchmen's mock devil-worship, and the actions of the Christian sentries. In addition to giving a detailed account of the musical subtleties prompted by this challenge, Cooper offers insights into the other innovative aspects of the cantata. Of particular interest are his commentaries on the truncated sonata process in the orchestral introduction – a refinement that emerged only in the revisions of 1842–43 – and on the ways in which the later version presents a new reading of Goethe's text.

Cooper's detailed discussions of the music are complemented by a wide-ranging investigation of the work's reception. As with some of Mendelssohn's other problem pieces – one thinks immediately of the incidental music to *Antigone* – the flurry of interest stimulated by the initial performances quickly abated: there is little material around which to construct an appraisal of its reception, and the danger in such cases is that the views of individual authors are equated with broader trends. Cooper does not entirely avoid this pitfall, or that of exaggerating the degree of attention which the cantata received. I was particularly puzzled by his claim that 'German-language reviewers consistently interpreted the cantata in terms of the work's "symbolic import"' (p. 188), since none of the German texts he cites support this viewpoint. It was an inspired move, however, to open the section on reception with a comparison of the posthumous reputations of Goethe and Mendelssohn: there are many points of similarity between the verdict on Mendelssohn upheld by the New German School and Goethe's treatment by Young Germany a quarter of a century earlier. Just as interesting is Cooper's discussion of the staged performances of Mendelssohn's cantata in the 1850s, and of the earliest monograph on the work, Friedrich Zauder's *Ueber Mendelssohn's* Walpurgisnacht (1862).

Cooper's reappraisal of the work's significance is the driving force behind the entire book. In keeping with his aversion to verbal explications of his music, Mendelssohn never gave an explicit account of his interpretation of *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*. His prefatory page for the work, which quotes some comments by Goethe on the ballad's symbolic import, offers a clue as to how Mendelssohn regarded it in 1843: as an epitome of how world history is animated by the clash between the old and the new, in which the former is 'corralled into the tightest space by emergent new forces', yet flares up again with 'joyous, indestructible enthusiasm' (p. 62). As Cooper points out, Goethe's remarks – from a letter

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to Mendelssohn of 9 September 1831 – postdate the composition of all of the original version of the cantata aside from the orchestral introduction. Indeed, Mendelssohn's initial decision to set the text appears to have been motivated by much less lofty considerations: 'The thing … can become very merry, for at the beginning it is full of spring songs and more such things; and then, when the watchmen make a ruckus with their prongs and pitchforks and owls, there is also the witches' spookiness, and [you] know that I have a particular fondness for that' (p. 81).

If gauging Mendelssohn's intentions is tricky, that has not prevented a welter of competing interpretations from accumulating around the work. In recent decades, several scholars, including Leon Botstein and Michael P. Steinberg, have viewed the cantata as an expression of the composer's continuing affinity to his Jewish background. The most vehement statement of this view is from Heinz-Klaus Metzger, who argued that 'whatever Goethe meant in his ballad and Mendelssohn may have said or withheld in connection with his composition', the cantata is a 'Jewish protest against the domination of Christendom'.[3] Following Jeffrey Sposato's groundbreaking reappraisal of the composer's relation to his Jewish roots, Metzger's perspective now seems erroneous. Yet Sposato's own view of *Die erste Walpurgisnacht* appears unduly limiting, since it assumes that Mendelssohn's conception never moved beyond the factors that initially attracted him to the poem.[4]

Cooper resists equating Druids with Jews, or viewing the cantata as merely an elevated fairy-tale. Instead, he argues that it epitomizes Mendelssohn's broader quest to foster intercultural dialogue and to dissolve the boundaries between Self and Other. This is an attractive perspective, and one for which I have much sympathy: indeed, Cooper generously acknowledges my own work in his account of 'Mendelssohn's self-identification as a musical translator of the mid-nineteenth-century's discourses of identity and alterity, tolerance and acceptance' (p. 96). Cooper's approach is sophisticated and persuasive, and his view that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* provides a key to Mendelssohn's intercultural endeavours has much to commend it. But his emphasis on tolerance and pluralism does not fit comfortably with the liberal perfectionist strain within Mendelssohn's thinking. Neither, to my mind, does it sit well with the intolerance and conflict portrayed in *Die erste Walpurgisnacht*.

His solution to the latter problem hinges on his reading of the cantata's finale, more specifically, its stylistic affinity with some of Mendelssohn's religious music. By celebrating '"the foulness of heathenism" in the same sacred idiom cultivated for the glorification of Christianity', Mendelssohn hints that 'the religious gap that separates the poem's pagan protagonists and their Christian antagonists … is illusory' (pp. 96, 194–5). At first glance, this perspective is plausible, given the role that allusions to sacred *topoi* play in other secular works by Mendelssohn (such as *Antigone* and the incidental music to Racine's *Athalia*). But the trouble here is the one-sided nature of the conflict depicted earlier in the cantata. Mendelssohn, like Goethe, intends the Druids to have a monopoly on the receiver's sympathy,

[3] Heinz-Klaus Metzger, 'Noch einmal: Die erste Walpurgisnacht, Versuch einer anderen Allegorese', *Musik-Konzept* 14–15: *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, ed. Metzger and Rainer Riehn (Munich, 1980): 93–6 (94), as quoted in Jeffrey S. Sposato, *The Price of Assimilation: Felix Mendelssohn and the Nineteenth-Century Anti-Semitic Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): 110.

[4] Sposato, *Price of Assimilation*, 112.

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and the dignified portrayal of their religious ceremony merely corresponds with what has gone before. Rather than resolving the conflict between the two sides, Mendelssohn's music continues to have a partisan function. The evocation of modern church music thus serves to enhance the parallels between the Druids and modern Christians, not to dissolve the conflict present in the work itself.

I have no doubt that Cooper will welcome such amicable dissent, since it demonstrates the capacity of his monograph to generate debate and stimulate new interest in this work. There is much to admire in his monograph, and his conception of intercultural translation will doubtless form a point of departure for future Mendelssohn scholarship. In addition, it is to be hoped that Cooper's achievement will encourage musicologists to engage with the many other neglected choral masterworks of the period.

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Daniel M. Grimley, *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006). 258 pp. $85.00

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Norway, like many European countries, began to assert itself musically through an exploration of its native folk music. L.M. Lindeman arranged a number of Norwegian folk songs for piano in a modified, early Romantic style, normalizing the more exotic elements of melody and harmony in accordance with contemporary 'continental' (that is, Austro-German) practice. Ole Bull, now mainly remembered as a concert violinist, tried for a greater degree of authenticity in his piano arrangements, unapologetically retaining the more characteristic, rugged sound of the original tunes.

Understanding the tension between these two approaches is critical for understanding the music of Edvard Grieg, the most famous of all composers from Norway. Indeed, Grieg's music is perhaps a study in contradictions: he was a Norwegian with German training ('I was educated in the German school. I have studied in Leipzig and musically speaking am completely German'[1]), and a nationalist composer who denied any conscious effort to sound national ('Regarding my songs, I do not think that on the whole they have been greatly influenced by the folk song'[2]). But the true key to Grieg's work, argues Daniel M. Grimley in *Grieg: Music, Landscape and Norwegian Identity*, lies in his musical depictions of nature.

'Landscape in Grieg's music serves a number of functions,' Grimley writes.

> As a spatial phenomenon, it is associated with a series of pictorial images drawn from Norwegian nature and folk life whose cultural meaning was partly determined by their role in the definition of an independent Norwegian identity in the second half of the nineteenth century. But as a temporal phenomenon, landscape is also concerned with the recovery (or reconstruction) of past events, a sense of historical

[1] Quoted in Finn Benestad and Dag Schjelderup-Ebbe, *Grieg: The Man and the Artist*, trans. William H. Halverson and Leland B. Sateren (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988): 334.

[2] Letter of 17 July 1900 to Henry T. Finck. Edvard Grieg, *Letters to Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Finn Benestad, trans. William H. Halverson (Columbus, OH: Peer Gynt Press, 2000): 226.

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