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Completing Bach: The Mass in B Minor and the Art of Fugue in Tovey's Hands

As a composer, scholar and performer, Donald Francis Tovey's (1875-1940) engagement with the works of J. S. Bach provided the impetus for some of his most remarkable feats of intellect and creativity. Today the fruits of this activity are most obviously apparent in Tovey's published writings, but traces of his engagement with Bach's music can also be found in the rich array of books, printed music and manuscripts that survive in the Tovey Collection in the University of Edinburgh Library. Of particular note here are the annotations Tovey made within his personal copy of the Bach-Gesellschaft Edition, the fifty-three volumes of which contain pencilled thoughts on performance practice, his personal memories of past performances, sharp-tongued complaints about idiotic editors, and an abundance of analytical insights.

In this paper I consider Tovey's multi-faceted involvement with two of Bach's late compositions during the 1930s by drawing on his published writings and a range of archival materials. Tovey produced important prose commentaries on Bach's Art of Fugue and the Mass in B minor – texts which remain fascinating and valuable in their own right. Of equal interest, though, are the results of his engagement with these works as a composer and performer: his own hypothetical conclusion to Bach's incomplete cycle of fugues, and his written-out (but unpublished) continuo realization of the mass. I examine Tovey's extraordinary grasp of Bach's style in relation to the contemporary reception of the composer's works, and reflect on these late musical offerings in the context of Tovey's lifelong delight in handling Bach's music.