

UMass Amherst Department of Music and Dance

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Abstract

Timbre, Space, and Texture in Bach's Cantatas for Open-Air Performances

Modern performances of Bach's cantatas usually take place in an enclosed space: a concert hall, church, or recording studio. While these modern performance spaces have their obvious advantages, they are not completely historically correct. In addition to the performance of works in the local churches, the city of Leipzig had experienced a long tradition of open-air performances, which usually took place in honor of dignitaries from university professors to the Elector of Saxony. Frequently, these performances were combined with extensive processions, which incorporated music as well.

The paper will trace these traditions in Central Germany during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and show how Bach's own cantatas fit into performative conventions of sonic spaces that are created in and through the music. The paper will also show how Bach employed timbre, instrumentation, and texture to render the cantatas audible to his audiences. It will become apparent that the spatial dimensions of the processions, which preceded many performances, are reflected in Bach's music as well by drawing on similar instruments (especially brass) and polychoral textures that integrate the performance space into the compositional logic of the cantatas.