

• Book Reviews/Recensions/Buchbesprechungen

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A Gift of Music: Great Composers and Their Influence

J. Stuart Smith and B. Carlson

Carlisle: Solway, 1998, xx + 317 pp., pb, ISBN 1-900507-74-9

RÉSUMÉ

Les publications qui traitent de l'impact des présupposés religieux et philosophiques sur l'histoire de la musique occidentale sont trop peu nombreuses. Malheureusement, le présent ouvrage n'apporte ni une contribution satisfaisante quant à la vie et l'œuvre des compositeurs, ni une analyse critique édifiante. Au contraire, la présentation des compositeurs occidentaux est irréaliste et plus grande que nature, et leur analyse est simpliste en ce que l'on considère seulement si un compositeur était chrétien ou non et qu'on assimile la présence d'éléments chrétiens dans la musique à l'harmonie, la joie, l'ordre et la capacité à stimuler aux œuvres bonnes.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Publikationen, die auf die Auswirkungen von religiösen und philosophischen Voraussetzungen auf die Geschichte der westlichen Musik eingehen, sind selten im Bereich der Musikwissenschaft. Bedauerlicherweise bietet aber A Gift of Music weder eine zufriedenstellende geschichtliche Einführung in Werke und Biographien von Komponisten noch eine hilfreiche kritische Untersuchung derselben. Stattdessen zeichnet die von den Autoren gebotene Geschichtsdarstellung ein unrealistisches und überdimensionales Bild westlicher Komponisten, während die kritische Würdigung ausgesprochen schablonenhaft ist, da es nur darum geht, ob ein Komponist Christ war oder nicht. Zudem werden christliche Elemente in der Musik einfach mit Harmonie, Frohsinn, Ordnung und der Fähigkeit, jemanden zu guten Werken anzu-spornen, gleichgesetzt.

There is something about the lives of famous figures in history that intrigue us. Perhaps this is why *The Gift of Music*, which abounds in biographical details about composers' lives, has continued to be reprinted. Their book includes 5–8 page summaries of the lives and works of forty-six famous classical composers,

from Schütz to Shostakovich. These Reader's Digest slices of music history include tales of child prodigy, struggles with poverty and sickness, romance, family squabbles, and famous friendships, while also commenting on works of historical importance or artistic merit. Stuart Smith and Carlson, who both work at the Christian L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland, have also attempted to analyze the worldviews of these well-known figures and make connections between composers' beliefs and their music. Publications which look not only at historical incidences and musical works, but also at the philosophical assumptions behind these works are sadly lacking in the musicological field. Regrettably, this book not only gives poor historical and biographical accounts of composers, but also offers simplistic and unhelpful discussions of composers' worldviews.

In general, the authors' history relies too heavily on a nineteenth-century legacy which exalts a small canon of European 'geniuses' as the heroes of classical music. The composers are painted larger than life, such as Schütz, who was apparently 'the most spiritual composer the world has ever known', or Chopin, who was 'the musical soul of Poland', and Mozart, whose gift of writing music was 'like a cosmic phenomenon'. Dubious biographical legends of these Great Men are described in melodramatic language: Mendelssohn had a 'shining Christian purity', Berlioz was a 'lonely, tortured man ... haunted by the fear of death', Strauss was 'happily married with no scandal in his private life', and Beethoven died dramatically after 'a great flash of lightning which illuminated the death chamber'. In a similar Romantic tone, their historical account is riddled with references to musical works as 'masterpieces', or as having a 'universal' quality, and descriptions using such sweeping accolades as 'one of the most amazing works ever written', 'one of civilization's incomparable masterpieces', or 'among *the best*' (their italics).

Even ignoring the Romantic concepts of high art, universalism, and a 'Great Man' view of history (concepts which this reviewer finds unrealistic and unhelpful), one cannot help being offended at the idea that the works of western Europeans are definitively superior over all other music throughout the world and history. That the book is limited in scope (i.e. western art music) is recognized by Carlson in

the Prelude. However, the absolute language with which the authors describe most music of the Great Composers speaks far louder than this token qualification and betrays the authors' belief that these examples of art music are indeed 'the best'. This bias is also clear in the narrow-minded and idealistic hope, also expressed in the Prelude, that 'the more people acquaint themselves with what is truly great and beautiful, the more they will dislike and turn away from that which is shallow and ugly'. The category of 'truly great and beautiful' music becomes frustratingly smaller as you read through the book, excluding not only non-western music, but also twentieth-century music which they refer to as 'irritating', 'uninspiring', a 'battery against the listener', and even harboring 'less talent than [the song of the] cuckoo birds'.

More inappropriate even than all of this is the trite way in which a superficial 'Christian perspective' has been tacked on to this history in an attempt to make a critical and relevant analysis for Christian readers. The authors have analyzed the relationship of faith and music by a) divulging what they deem the most important biographical detail of each composer discussed in the book: whether or not he was a Christian, and b) determining 'Christian' elements in a composer's works, defined by them as consonance, cheer, order, and the ability to inspire one to do good works. Ignoring musical-historical contexts, Stuart Smith and Carlson actually suggest that the reason Bach resolved musical dissonances was because he was a Christian and believed in the 'resolution . . . for each individual and for history'. It was this wholesomeness and a 'firm Christian base' in his music that allowed Bach to have such influence on subsequent composers. Similarly, although Haydn was not as devout a believer as Bach, his music is a Christian witness because of its happy and cheerful mood. On the other hand, music which displays disorder and dissonance (Beethoven, Wagner, all twentieth-century music) should be treated with caution, because it proclaims an 'untruthful' hopelessness about the world, and never inspires us to do good.

This critical analysis leaves much to be desired. It not only makes crude, dualistic assessments of what and who are 'Christian', but also ignores a host of other types and levels of belief and the variety of ways that these beliefs could be seen in music. In addition, it assumes that music can be evaluated as an extra-cultural autonomous entity, and that what was true of Bach's music in the eighteenth century

is true of it now. Ironically, this 'Christian perspective', which was meant to enrich their historical account, has in fact worked against the purpose of their book. By evaluating music only as either Christian or non-Christian, the authors have robbed it of much of its rich, complex interest, and by showing a patronizing disappointment in those composers and works which fall short of heavenly stature, many Great Composers have at last been knocked off their pedestals.

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Nahum (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament)

K. Spronk

Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1997, pp. xxi + 153, pb, ISBN 90-242-6355-7

RÉSUMÉ

K. Spronk considère que le livre de Nahoum est l'œuvre d'un scribe royal, qui a écrit sous un pseudonyme à Jérusalem autour de 660 av. J.-C. Ce commentaire est remarquable pour le travail minutieux sur le texte, que le lecteur suivra mieux en ayant le texte hébreu sous les yeux. Il est utile et instructif pour une étude sérieuse du livre de Nahoum et de ses liens avec d'autres littératures, mais les prédicateurs seront peut-être déçus d'y trouver moins de synthèse et de réflexion théologique qu'on pourrait s'y attendre lorsqu'on considère les objectifs annoncés pour la série dont il fait partie.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Spronks Kommentar bietet eine detaillierte literarische Analyse des Nahumbuches. Der Verfasser argumentiert, dass das Nahumbuch um 660 v. Chr. von einem königlichen Schreiber unter einem Pseudonym verfasst wurde. Er weist sowohl auf literarische Beziehungen zu biblischen und ausserbiblischen Texten hin als auch auf den sorgfältigen Aufbau des Buches. Der Kommentar leistet damit einen wichtigen Beitrag zur Erforschung des Nahumbuches. Wer vom Nahumbuch predigen will, wird jedoch enttäuscht sein, dass nicht mehr theologische Diskussion angeboten wird.

This commentary is one of the first in a new series edited by C. Houtman (Kampen), W. S.