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Bach And The Riddle Of The Number Alphabet



Synopsis

In 1947 the theologian and musicologist Friedrich Smend published a study which claimed that J. S. Bach regularly employed the natural-order number alphabet (A=1 to Z=24) in his works. Smend provided historical evidence and music examples to support his theory which demonstrated that by this means Bach incorporated significant words into his music, and provided himself with a symbolic compositional scheme. Since then many people have taken up Smend's theory, interpreting numbers of bars and notes in Bach scores according to the natural-order alphabet. By presenting a thorough survey of different number alphabets and their uses in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, Dr Tatlow investigates the plausibility of Smend's claims. Her new evidence fundamentally challenges Smend's conclusions and the book sounds a note of caution to all who continue to use his number-alphabet theory. Dr Tatlow's painstaking research will fascinate all those with an interest in the music of J. S. Bach and German Baroque culture, and will be of particular importance for music historians and analysts.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"A miracle has come to pass: a book concerning Bach and number symbolism which is sensible, perceptive and scholarly." John Butt, *Music and Letters*"Ruth Tatlow's book is not only one of the very few scientifically serious investigations into this overexploited subject area, but also the first ever critical analysis of Smend's number symbolical works and their premises." Christoph Wolff, *Bach-Jahrbuch*"Tatlow shows with devastating clarity that from Luther's time to Bach's, the use of

such numerical interpretation for Christian theological purposes was considered misguided at best, and heretical at worst." Daniel Melamed, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*"... it is refreshing to see a scholar who is ready to remove Bach from the vacuum in which he is too often studied." Jeanne Swack, *Notes*"Thanks to Dr Tatlow's researches, we now have a solid basis of fact for speculations as to the role of numerology, and in particular the number alphabet, in the music of Bach and his contemporaries." Malcolm Boyd, *The Times Literary Supplement*

In 1947 Friedrich Smend published a study claiming that J. S. Bach used a natural-order alphabet (A = 1 to Z = 24) in his works. He demonstrated that Bach incorporated significant words into his music, and provided himself with a symbolic compositional theme. Here, Dr Tatlow investigates the plausibility of Smend's claims with new evidence, challenging Smend's conclusions.

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