

Johann Ernst Bach's Passion Oratorio (1764): A Case Study for Typological Analysis of the Passion Music Librettos in 1750~1800

Seo, Fumiko

In the history of the German protestant church music, the second half of the eighteenth century has been generally regarded as the time of “decline” and unfairly neglected, so to speak. One of its reasons could have been the lack of useful indexes, by which to judge the historical importance of each work. This study provides such an index by confirming the historical position of a work, analyzing its libretto from a typological perspective.

J. E. Bach wrote the Passion oratorio *O Seele, deren Sehnen* in 1764. Ernst, who was in all likelihood a pupil of J. S. Bach, deplored in his writings of 1758 that the church music was beginning to be corrupted and asserted they must follow the great predecessors, such as J. S. Bach and Telemann. On the other hand, he also adopted a new ideal of church music from a French music theory. It may be this dual orientation that made him compose his Passion oratorio in a very unique way.

The work is similar to Graun/Ramler's *Der Tod Jesu*, which created a prototype of the Passion music of the second half of the 18th century, in that they have lyric poetries and sensitive music. However, there is a significant difference between the two librettos. It has much to do with the matter of the “viewpoint”, about which J. G. Herder later sharply criticized Ramler's text. The audience of *Der Tod Jesu* experiences the events of the Passion only through the viewpoints of unidentified reporters. Ernst's work by contrast, contains two types of statements, one by subjective contemplators and the other by objective reporters. The latter share certain similarities with the evangelists in early Passion music. In this regard Ernst followed the traditions of J. S. Bach's Passions which were extremely epic and multi-leveled.