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“Friedrich Smend, Friedrich Blume, and the Myth of Mendelssohn’s *Matthew*”

Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy’s famous 1829 Berlin performance of Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* is one of music history’s most legendary events, often cited as the “Bach revival’s” origin. For example, in 1929, Bach scholar Friedrich Smend described the concert as the beginning of a “new epoch,” brought forth “in a single stroke by the boy-genius Mendelssohn.”<sup>1</sup> The historical record makes it unequivocally clear, though, that Mendelssohn did not single-handedly rediscover Bach and his concert was not the first, even in Berlin, to feature Bach’s sacred vocal music. Nevertheless, some version of Smend’s narrative persists, detectable in nearly every program note and pre-concert talk devoted to the *St. Matthew Passion*.

In 1962, Friedrich Blume called out Smend and his other Neue Bachgesellschaft colleagues for their habitual perpetuation of “traditional and beloved romantic illusions,” among which we might count the story of Mendelssohn’s concert. Blume demanded instead more inclusive and responsible scholarship that would result in a “new picture of Bach”—one who was “more human, more tied to his own period.”<sup>2</sup> This paper will take up Blume’s charge to re-examine the sources in search of a more nuanced view of Bach in Mendelssohn’s Berlin. In addition, it will argue that Smend’s rhetoric has endured in spite of the facts because it trades in the vocabulary of myth as the term is defined by the eminent theologian John Dominic Crossan.<sup>3</sup> Crossan argues that cultural myths function to bridge irreconcilables: they allows beliefs and facts that cannot simultaneously be true to somehow coexist, all in the service of a larger master narrative. Belief that Mendelssohn’s 1829 concert was a sudden and miraculous rediscovery cannot stand up to the facts, but the traditional story better serves the master narrative of German cultural hegemony wherein Bach’s role is essential.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Smend, “Zelter oder Mendelssohn” in *Monatsschrift für Gottesdienst und kirchliche Kunst* (July 1929): 207-09.

<sup>2</sup> Blume, “Outlines of a New Picture of Bach,” trans. by Stanley Godman, *Music & Letters*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (July 1963): 214-227. The lecture was originally given in Mainz in 1962, before the International Bach Society.

<sup>3</sup> Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Polebridge Press, 1988).