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*The St. Thomas Aquinas of Music: Liszt's Catholic Image of Bach*

In a letter written in 1869, Franz Liszt figured the Lutheran composer J.S. Bach as a Catholic saint: “I have given myself, for a Christmas present...the Passions, Masses and Cantatas of Bach, whom one might designate as the St. Thomas Aquinas of music.” No mere rhetorical flourish, this metaphor points to Liszt's interest in reshaping the spiritual meanings of Bach's music in accordance with Catholic theology.

I argue that this impulse, stemming from Liszt's devout Catholic faith, animates his most sustained compositional response to Bach's music: the “Variations on Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen” (1862). Ostensibly based on Bach's cantata of the same name, Liszt's piano variations also include motivically related material from the Mass in B Minor--the only work in which Bach overtly engaged with Roman Catholic traditions. (Bach's encounter with this Catholic genre has prompted much scholarly speculation by Robin A. Leaver, John Butt, and others.) By bringing Bach's Catholic mass and Lutheran cantata into dialogue with each other, Liszt crafted a medley which I interpret as his way of showcasing Bach's intersection with Catholicism.

Liszt's variations conclude with a telling omission: he leaves out the final line of Bach's cantata text, “Drum lass ich ihn nur walten” (therefore I allow only Him to rule over me). This line expresses the Lutheran belief in God as the sole ruling force, a belief which (as Eric Chafe has demonstrated) finds expression in many of Bach's cantatas. I argue that Liszt's suppression of this material signals his disagreement with Lutheran doctrine. Catholic theology revolves around a host of intermediaries (including saints, the Pope, and the Virgin Mary) who channel and interpret God's guidance. Perhaps reflecting this Catholic emphasis on divine multiplicity, Liszt replaces the absent line of text with an apotheosis-like coda replete with thick textures and diverse contrapuntal lines.