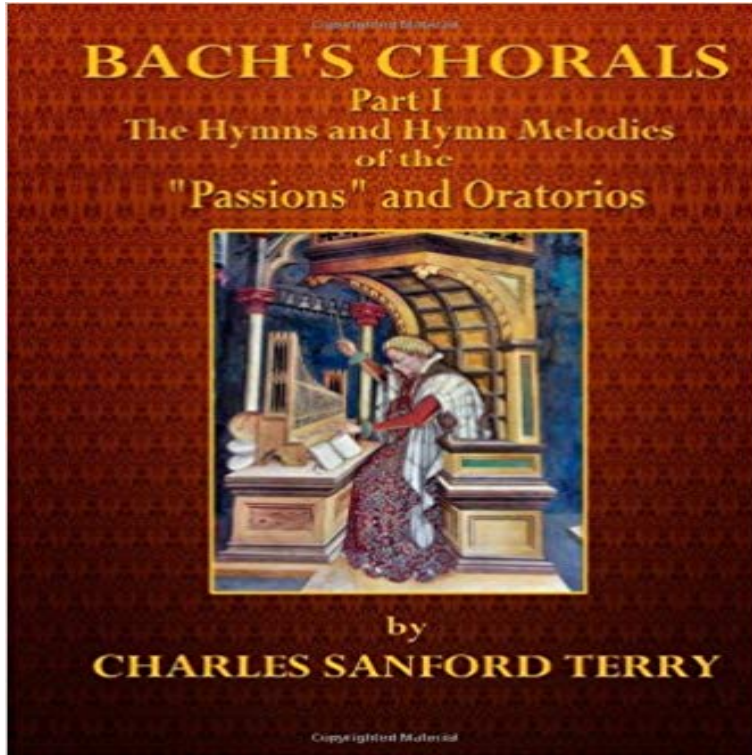


Bachs Chorals Part I: The Hymns and Hymn Melodies of the Passions and Oratorios



An excerpt from the Preface: Since we rarely know the history of a melody before it became attached to a hymn, the name of which it henceforth bears, it is difficult to decide which melodies were adopted and which composed by the musicians of the Reformation.... On the whole the number of musicians who wrote melodies for the Church was not large, not because at that time there were no musicians capable of the work, but rather because their services were not called for. For a new melody to become a true folk-melody, of the kind that would gain immediate acceptance everywhere, was a difficult process, requiring a long period of time. It was much more natural to impress existing melodies into the service of the Church, sacred melodies at first, and then, when these did not suffice, secular ones. The Reformed Church made the most abundant use of this latter source.... For the Reformation it was a question of much more than acquiring serviceable melodies. While it brought the folk-song into religion, it wished to elevate secular art in general. That the object was conversion rather than simple borrowing is shown by the title of a collection that appeared at Frankfort in 1571: Street songs, cavalier songs, mountain songs, transformed into Christian and moral songs, for the abolishing in course of time of the bad and vexatious practice of singing idle and shameful songs in the streets, in fields, and at home, by substituting for them good, sacred, honest words.... Any foreign melody that had charm and beauty was stopped at the frontier and pressed into the service of the [Church].... When the treasures of melody to be drawn upon were at last exhausted, there came the epoch of the composer. The copious spiritual poetry of the seventeenth century called them to the work.... The spirit, however, which dominated music about the beginning of the eighteenth century made it incapable of

developing the true church-tune any further. German music got out of touch with German song, and fell further and further under the influence of the more artistic Italian melody. It could no longer achieve that naivete which, ever since the Middle Ages, had endowed it with those splendid, unique tunes.... When Bach came on the scene, the great epoch of Choral creation was at an end, like that of the sacred poem. Sacred melodies indeed were still written; but they were songs of the Aria type, not true congregational hymns; an indefinable air of subjectivity pervaded them. Bachs Oratorios and Passions contain forty-three Chorals: fifteen in the St Matthew Passion, twelve in the St John Passion, fourteen in the Christmas Oratorio, and two in the Ascension Oratorio. Of that number the majority (33) are in simple hymn form suitable for congregational use. The remaining ten fall into four categories : (1) Nos. 9, 23, 42, 64 of the Christmas Oratorio may be termed Extended Chorals, the lines of the hymn being separated by orchestral interludes. (2) In No. 1 of the St Matthew Passion the Choral melody is woven into, independent of, and surges above the doubled chorus and orchestra below. (3) No. 25 of the St Matthew Passion, No. 32 of the St John Passion, and No. 7 of the Christmas Oratorio are alike in this: the hymn (set to a unison melody in the last of them) is part of a dialogue, either commenting upon the narrative of a solo voice, or, as in the Christmas Oratorio, No. 7, providing the solo voice with the subject of its reflexions. (4) No. 35 of the St Matthew Passion and No. 11 of the Ascension Oratorio are Choral Fantasias, the Choral melody being woven into a complicated musical scheme. In the following pages the form and orchestration of every Choral are stated.

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