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Investigating the past — interpreting sources

Sources, evidence and interpretation

Sources do not speak for themselves. Historians have to ‘read between the lines’ and:

- understand what sources appear to be telling us
- detect information that is not obvious just by looking
- know whether a source is complete or is part of something else
- make judgements about how they might be able to use sources.

Historians compare sources to see if a number of them are saying the same thing about a particular issue — that is, providing supporting

evidence. When sources disagree about a particular issue, this is called contradictory evidence.

In doing this, historians develop an interpretation of the past and put together the evidence that supports their interpretation. This does not mean that they ignore evidence that does not support their ideas. It means that the sources and evidence available provide more support for their interpretation than for any other interpretation.

Historians then record the interpretation that has the most support from the available evidence. They often argue about different interpretations of the same event or personality. This helps historians to test their ideas and to change them when someone else’s interpretation seems more acceptable.

Source 1 An extract from a *Sun-Herald* article about Bach’s music scores

The missus was the maestro

BY LIZ PORTER

ALMOST 260 years after his death, German composer Johann Sebastian Bach is facing the music over just how many of the scores attributed to him were truly his creations.

Using forensic techniques, academic, part-time sleuth and Darwin Symphony Orchestra conductor Martin Jarvis believes he can prove that several of Bach’s 1127 manuscripts were written by his second wife Anna Magdalena.

During the past seven years, Dr Jarvis has used forensic analysis to examine various Bach scores, bar by bar, focusing on the musical structure and language, handwriting and the musical calligraphy.

He concluded that Anna Magdalena — known as the copyist of her husband’s 18th-century manuscripts — was the real author of numerous J. S. Bach compositions.

Dr Jarvis’s investigation is so successful that he has been invited to discuss his findings at this week’s International Symposium

on the Forensic Sciences in Melbourne.

His fascination with the authenticity of Bach’s work started in 1971 as a 19-year-old viola student at London’s Royal Academy of Music. While playing the first of Bach’s cello suites — transposed up an octave — the young Jarvis was struck by how little this new music sounded like Bach.



He wanted to investigate the score, but was told that no original manuscript had survived and there was only a copy, made in 1727 by Bach’s second wife Anna Magdalena Bach.

During the next 30 years, other musicians echoed Dr Jarvis’s suspicions about the origins of the cello suites. Finally, in 2001, he decided to investigate the

music’s authorship. By then an associate professor at the Northern Territory’s Charles Darwin University, he obtained a copy of the original 1727 manuscript and began a painstaking examination. Its structure and use of musical language did not fit with any of Bach’s other work. The handwriting was also inconsistent.

‘I kept seeing the name J. S. Bach written in different ways. Yet I had been told that Bach’s and Anna Magdalena’s handwriting was so similar that you couldn’t tell them apart,’ he said.

He noted the inscription ‘ecrite par Madame Bachen’ on the manuscript’s cover — in the handwriting of a musician friend of Bach’s.

‘The words meant “written by” not “copied by”,’ he said.

Dr Jarvis’s observations about the handwriting differences had huge implications for other ‘Bach’ manuscripts found in four separate notebooks containing both Bach’s and Anna’s writing.

‘The handwriting gives a context [to contradict] the lowly position that Anna Magdalena has been given in the history books,’ Dr Jarvis said. ‘Our understanding of her role has been mistaken.’

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Hypothesis

Method

Conclusion

Sources

Evidence

Sources

Conclusion