

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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The Long Road to Lübeck

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

When examining the work of a singular genius such as Johann Sebastian Bach, a natural question that must arise is: what were his influences? One may or may not accept the assertion by renowned organist and Bach biographer Albert Schweitzer that “Bach belongs to the order of objective artists. These [artists] are wholly of their own time, and work only with the forms and ideas that their time proffers them.”¹ Scholars have debated the thesis that Bach belongs exclusively to this category of artist since Schweitzer first published it in 1905. Still, Bach’s talent did not arise in a vacuum, so Schweitzer’s theory is useful in that it must necessarily posit the question we have asked regarding who and what helped shape the Leipzig master’s musicality.

What were the ‘forms and ideas’ upon which Bach drew? At various times he looked to the French and Italian schools; he made numerous copies of Couperin’s clavier works and undertook keyboard transcriptions of Vivaldi’s concerti, to cite two of many examples. However, for his entire life he was completely infatuated with the sonic potential possessed only by the organ, and

as a young man he studied with one of the very few in history who can stand being mentioned in the same breath with Bach the organist, and that was the great north German master Dietrich (Diderik) Buxtehude.

By the time Bach studied with him in 1705, Buxtehude was a very old man for those times; he would die in 1707 at the age of 70. Musicologists still dispute Buxtehude’s exact birthplace: the cities of



Dietrich Buxtehude

Hälsingborg in Sweden, Helsingör, Denmark, and Oldesloe in Germany have all claimed him as their native son. However, the general agreement is that it was most likely Hälsingborg. While now a part of Sweden, in 1637 Hälsingborg belonged to Denmark, and for that reason Buxtehude is sometimes known to music lovers as the ‘Great Dane,’ in homage to his status as

one of the most important composers of the middle Baroque. While Buxtehude always claimed Denmark as his homeland, he was to spend the bulk of his life, and his most fruitful years, as organist at the Marien-Kirche in Lübeck, and is therefore usually considered a German composer.²

One of the musical traditions at the Marien-Kirche was a weekly gathering on Sunday evenings between Martinmass (Nov. 11) and Christmas known as the *Abendmusiken*, or ‘Evening Music.’ Buxtehude continued this tradition, and although he was never elected cantor, he

Member Spotlight



Photo: Ann Van Bever

Mary Rowell - Concertmaster

One of the great pleasures of listening to the Bach cantatas is the rich texture to be found not only in the vocal scoring but in the orchestra as well. Whether it's an intimate dialog between the violin and oboe in a tenor aria, the soaring tutti of an opening sinfonia, or a saucy continuo grumbling underneath an alto recit, having skilled instrumentalists who are up to the difficult tasks demanded of a baroque orchestra is an indispensable part of the BCC experience. And binding these incredibly talented players together is our accomplished concertmaster, Mary Rowell.

Mary brings a wealth of experience in baroque performance and studies to her position with the BCC orchestra. As a student of Carol Sindell, she received her M.A. in violin performance from Portland State University. In 1997 she helped found the Rose City Chamber Orchestra, which is a player-run ensemble. This summer Mary studied at the Oberlin Baroque Performance Institute, and she makes her living as a freelance violinist and violist in the Portland area, where she also teaches both instruments. She is currently a student of Carla Moore, who is concertmaster of the Portland Baroque Orchestra, and Mary herself plays for this amazing group under the bow of world-renowned violinist Monica Huggett. She has also performed with the Oregon Symphony, the Eugene Symphony, the Spokane Symphony, and a number of other ensembles in the Pacific Northwest. She will be a clinician for the Pendleton Youth Symphony at their baroque string retreat.

Mary isn't limited to playing only baroque music however. She has studied a rich and varied repertoire, including tango, jazz, and flamenco violin. She has performed with the likes of Al Stewart, Andy Stein, and even the Moody Blues. She has also toured Europe with the PSU orchestra, playing in Austria, Germany and Switzerland.

When asked what it is she loves about Bach, Mary had this to say: "Besides being able to just say that I'm jazzed about Bach, I do the desert island test: if I could only bring one piece of music with me, it would be Bach's B-minor Mass." Playing with the BCC orchestra fulfills a desire that she has had for some time: "I really wanted to put together a Bach Cantata group because I love his cantatas so much. I'm glad Ralph [Nelson] put this together!"

composed many cantatas and instrumental works for these winter celebrations. In fact, it was at Buxtehude's behest that the church finally constructed a choir loft in 1670. [The Christmas cantata *In Dulci Jubilo* (BuxWV 52), to be performed by the BCC in this concert cycle, was likely debuted at an *Abendmusik* concert.] However well-respected he was as a composer, it was his virtuosic displays on the organ that remained the highlight of the *Abendmusiken* during his years at Lübeck. It is undoubtedly for the express purpose of hearing the famous Buxtehude play these concerts that Bach took a four-week furlough at the end of October, 1705, and set off on foot for the more-than-200 mile journey from Arnstadt to Lübeck.

Bach was still a young man and not terribly important at this point in his career, so the fact that he was granted paid leave to, in the words of his superiors, "understand various things in his art,"³ shows the degree of latitude he was given even then. Bach must have known of Buxtehude for most of his life; the organist position at Lübeck was regarded as one of the most desirable (and best-paying) posts in all of Europe, and the *Abendmusiken* were renowned throughout the continent. In fact, two years prior, the 18-year-old Handel and his friend Johann Mattheson had set out to hear Buxtehude and play the spectacular organ at the Marien-Kirche.

Philipp Spitta contrasts Handel's journey to Lübeck with Bach's: "Handel arrives from Hamburg in the bright midsummer days, in the gay society of Mattheson...he enjoys an affable welcome and festivities in his honour. Bach comes on foot in the dull autumn weather from remote Thuringia, following his own instinct, and perhaps not knowing one single soul that might look for his coming. But his talent was his best letter of introduction."⁴

Bach exceeds the length of his furlough by a factor of two or three. That he learned much from his extended visit with Buxtehude cannot be doubted: Schweitzer speaks of a typical Buxtehude chorale prelude this way: "[He] tears the melody in pieces, throws the fragments into the flood of a brilliant, animated fantasia, and sends them scudding along...Bach's chorale prelude on *Ein Feste Burg* is wholly conceived in the spirit of this virtuosic style...of Buxtehude."⁵ Clearly, the young master has not wasted his stay with the venerable old man of the organ.

However, there is still the matter of explaining to the city council in provincial Arnstadt how his four-week furlough turned into three months. Bach is in for a thorough grilling when he returns, a fact of which he

is undoubtedly all-too-aware. Still, he is unapologetic, implying to the city council that as long as his deputy organist has been playing the organ suitably while he was away, there should be no problem with his longer-than-expected absence.⁶ Although Bach was still a young man, and undoubtedly full of prospects (as his trip to Lübeck must have made him keenly aware), that he was willing to risk his post shows the importance that he placed on his studies with the ‘Great Dane,’ and Buxtehude must surely rank high on the list of composers who influenced the work of J.S. Bach. ♪

¹ Albert Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach* (Dover Publications Inc, 1966. Eng. Trans. C. 1911, Ernest Newman, Breitkopf & Hartel) Vol. 1, p 1.

² Freda Pastor Berkowitz, *On Lutes, Recorders, and Harpsichords* (McClelland & Stewart, Ltd., 1967) p.123

³ Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work* (Rowholt Verlag GmbH, 2000. Eng. Trans. C. 2006, John Hargraves) p. 49.

⁴ Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach: His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany, 1685-1750* (Dover Publications Inc., 1951. Eng. Trans. Clara Bell & J.A. Fuller Maitland.) Vol. 1, p. 262.

⁵ Schweitzer, Vol. 1 p. 46.

⁶ Geck, p. 50

BachGround

1703 to 1705 - Bach and Handel, born (along with Domenico Scarlatti) in that portentous year 1685, both made pilgrimages to Lübeck to study with maestro Buxtehude; Handel in 1703 with his friend the talented young organist Johann Matheson, and Bach in 1705. However, Handel's very different, worldly path afforded him the luxury of traveling by coach and being well received. Either he or Matheson could have been next in line to Buxtehude had they accepted the condition, as was traditional of the Marien-Kirche organist's post, of marrying the previous master's eldest daughter. (Buxtehude's own wife, Anna Margaretha, was daughter of the former organist, the renowned Franz Tunder.) However, with Buxtehude's daughter being 12 years older than Mattheson and 16 years older than Handel, apparently even the plum Marien-Kirche position was not sufficient enticement. Presumably Bach, a better organist than either of them, was offered the same position two years later, but he was in love with his cousin (and soon-to-be-wife) Barbara, and he too declined. Upon the master's death in 1707 he was succeeded by another well-known organist, Johann Christian Schieferdecker, who continued the tradition and married Buxtehude's daughter.

Photo Gallery



BCC dress rehearsal before the November 4, 2007 performance.



Soprano Mel Zupan sings an aria from Cantata #80 "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" (A Mighty Fortress).



The audience joins in for the chorale of "A Mighty Fortress."

Auction a Resounding Success!



The BCC would like to extend warm thanks for the generosity and creativity of all those who donated their unique goods and services as auction items, as well as all who bid to help the choir raise over \$3400 at our Silent Auction on November 4! The fund-raising poker party hosted by tenor Barbara Lance (and won by bass Wayne Carlon) raised an additional \$260. This is of great importance to our performance of Bach's magnificent Christmas Oratorio and Buxtehude's Christmas cantata *In Dulci Jubilo*. Whether it was an airplane ride to the coast, hand-made ceramics by one of the artists in the choir, or a meal at a wonderful local restaurant, our auction participants were well-rewarded for their support. It is this kind of spirit, displayed by the choir, orchestra, audience and the community at large that makes concerts of this timeless music possible. The BCC would also like to extend a special thanks to Auction Chair Barbara Reader for the great job on this event!



Upcoming Concerts

Friday, December 21, 2007, 7:30pm

J.S. Bach: Christmas Oratorio, parts 4-6
Buxtehude: *In Dulci Jubilo*

Tickets required. Call 503-224-TIXX or visit website to order online.

Sunday, February 3, 2008, 2pm

"SuperBach" Sunday

Christoph Graupner: *Oboe d'amore Concerto*
J.S. Bach: Cantatas 19 and 41

Sunday, March 2, 2008, 2pm

Lenten Concert

Antonio Lotti: *Crucifixus*

J.S. Bach: Cantata 56

J.S. Bach: Selected Chorales from the *St. Matthew Passion*

J.S. Bach: *Crucifixus* from the *Mass in B Minor*

Sunday, April 27, 2008, 2pm

J.S. Bach: Motet, *Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden*

J.S. Bach: Cantatas 6 and 66

Sunday, June 1, 2008 2pm

"Cafe Bach"

J.S. Bach: *Coffee Cantata*

Telemann: *The Schoolmaster*

Tickets required. Call 503-224-TIXX or visit website to order online.

BACH CANTATA CHOIR
3570 NE MATHISON PLACE
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Get your tickets now
for the Christmas
Oratorio concert!

Friday, December 21 at 7:30 pm
Call 503-224-TIXX or
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