

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



April 2008

Vol.1, No.5

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Newsletter

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The *BachBeat* newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

www.bachcantatachoir.org

The Mysterious Motets of J.S. Bach

By Lorin Wilkerson - Bass

On a Sunday morning in 1789, the boys' choir at St. Thomas in Leipzig had just begun a performance of *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* (*Sing unto the Lord a New Song*, BWV 225), one of the few motets left behind by J.S. Bach. He was the old master of counterpoint who had once been cantor there, and had passed on long before any of these boys were born. To them he was a dusty painting of a dour old man hanging in one of the classrooms, a name attached to some of the most dreadfully difficult (and very old-fashioned) music that they were required to learn. Shortly after they began singing, a young man stood bolt upright from his seat in the pews, completely captivated by the glorious music he heard. He had the temerity to yell out "What is that?!" which drew shocked glances from the churchgoers around him. The current cantor, Herr Doles, was a good friend and mentor to the young intruder, and therefore kindly let the rudeness pass. So Mozart reluctantly re-seated himself, and waited until the service was over to demand of Doles permission to look at the score. As there was no complete score at that time, Mozart was given all the individual parts. He got on the floor

on his hands and knees and spread all the parts around him, on the floor and on the pews, and spent many hours contentedly studying this motet and all the others that were brought before him. Upon finishing his assessment of these works, Mozart declared "That is indeed something from which we can learn!" He begged and was granted permission to copy the score of the motet he had heard, and it remained a treasured item for the rest of his days.¹

What was this music of Bach's, these motets, that so moved a man who shook the earth as did Wolfgang Mozart? In Bach's time, musical terminology was not concretized the way it is now, and many terms were interchangeable. For instance, he is known to have labeled several of his cantatas as 'concerti,' even though to us these terms refer to separate and distinct musical idioms.

However, then as now, the term 'motet' could be used as a catchall for any choral work that could not easily be categorized otherwise. It had evolved out of the Roman Catholic plainchant of the Middle-Ages, and was typically sung in Latin, although Bach's motets were in German. (Philipp Spitta cites evidence that Bach may have also composed some Latin motets, but no trace of these has ever been found.)² The motet as it was known to Bach had, like so much church music, made its way to Germany from Italy. The Italian motet's most notable German envoy was Heinrich



W.A. Mozart, student of Bach's motets

Member Spotlight



Diana de Tar – Alto

"In my family, as far back as I can remember, we sang fun songs from my parents' and grandparents' eras: nursery rhymes, folk songs... I listened to my uncle's Irish tenor renderings of them all, and danced whenever we had the chance. I think I was probably in school choirs starting with 2nd grade, and performed my first solo in the Christmas Show as the "cow with the crooked horn" in "The Friendly Beasts." After that, for the ensuing 52 years of my life there have only been two years when I wasn't in at least one school, church, or other choir or ensemble, running the gamut from chant through madrigal, art song, classical, high school musical, light opera, jazz, gospel, the master works, to cutting edge contemporary music. I hold a Masters of Arts degree in vocal music from California Institute of the Arts, among a plethora of other non-music degrees which underwrite the occupations in which I have engaged to keep music alive and well in my life.

After high school, I sang in Gil Seeley's first choir at UC Santa Cruz (1967-1970), which was also UCSC's first-ever vocal group; in California Institute of the Arts' large and chamber choirs (1971-1973) – also with Gil, as it turned out; with Ye Magicke Goat (2 years), the Santa Cruz Local Vocal Ensemble (2 years, with Swingle Singers influences), Santa Cruz Chorale (12 years), San Francisco Choral Society (1 year), Nashville Symphony Choir (5 years), Christ Church Nashville Choir (5 years), New Beginnings and New Hope Choirs (4 years), Westminster Presbyterian Choir (2 years), Oregon Repertory Summer Choir (2002), Portland Symphonic Choir (since arrival in Portland in 2001), and Bach Cantata Choir (since its beginning in 2006).

As for Bach and his contemporaries, I love the twists and turns of line in the midst of the predictable patterns, the text settings, the interaction with instruments, and the interplay of the ensemble as we interweave our lines, supporting and enhancing and urging each other on to achieve the glorious sound that Bach intended. The folks in the Choir are all seasoned professional or semi-professional singers seeking to present accomplished living art to our audiences, and Ralph is a reservoir of enthusiasm and knowledge bringing to our attention all the methods Bach used to create the aural magic that we sing."

Schütz, who was born exactly 100 years before Bach and had studied motet writing in Venice with both Giovanni Gabrielli and the great Claudio Monteverdi in the early years of the seventeenth century.

The place of the motet in the Lutheran service of Bach's day was usually after the organ prelude at the beginning. However, by and large Bach considered motets rather unimportant. This is seen by the fact that he usually tasked his less-talented singers with these assignments, holding his better voices in reserve for the *Hauptmusik*, or the chief musical piece, which came later in the service and for which he usually composed a cantata. Another way he showed his relative disinterest in the motet is that he composed so few of them, and usually used motets written by other composers. Many a motet written by his uncles and elder cousins graced the services at Leipzig while J.S. Bach was cantor.³

Why then should the few that remain of his own composition be regarded as some of his most emotive works? The answer is that when he did see fit to write a motet, it was only for very special occasions, possibly for the funerals or weddings of Leipzig dignitaries. Perhaps the solemn (or conversely, happy) nature of the occasions, and the rarity of his composition of them (we are left with only seven or possibly eight)⁴ lent special weight when he did turn his hand to this genre.

The motets are often organized into two groups, the jubilant and the funerary. One needs simply listen to the music to know to which category a particular motet belongs, but the texts provide further clues: *Jesu Meine Freude (Jesus My Joy, BWV 227)*, in which the soul passionately expresses complete and firm faith upon its passing to the next world, was obviously written for a funeral, where as *Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden (Praise the Lord, All Ye Nations, BWV 230)* is a song of exultation, and would have been composed for a joyous occasion.

Controversy surrounds some aspects of the performance of Bach's motets, as it does much of his music. Latin motets in Bach's day were sung *a cappella*, whereas German motets were often accompanied. The existence of instrumental parts which double the voices, as well as some figured bass scored in Bach's own hand obviously show that at some point instruments were expected. Some scholars think that Bach may have regarded accompaniment as a tool for practice, but there is no definitive proof of this. It could be that the motets were to be sung unaccompanied during a funeral procession, but during performance in church or at the home of the deceased, instrumental accompaniment was expected. Some have even posited that instruments added weight to a dignified occasion, and

speculated that a full orchestra was used.⁵ As a result, an 'accurate' performance of Bach's motets may involve anything from *a cappella* singing to *colla parte* and continuo to full orchestration, although when used, scaled-down instrumentation is the norm.

They remain among the more difficult pieces to sing by a composer notorious for difficult works. The complete independence of voices, the relentless wandering in and out of many keys, and the sheer length of time in which the choir is engaged in non-stop singing all add to the challenges posed by these pieces. The erudite arguments as to the exact nature of a performance ensemble appropriate for Bach's motets only serve to enhance interest in them, and like all timeless music they have never lost their power to move the human spirit, not in Mozart's day and not now. ♪

¹ Friederich Rochlitz (an eyewitness) in *Für Freunde der Tonkunst*, cited in Albert Schweitzer's *J.S. Bach* (Dover Publications Inc, 1966 Eng. Trans. ©1911 Ernest Newman Breitkopf & Härtel), Vol 1 p232.

² Philipp Spitta, *J.S. Bach: His Work and Influence on the Music of Germany*. (Dover Publications, Ltd. ©1951. Eng. Trans. Clara Bell and J.A. Fuller Maitland), Vol 2 p 599.

³ W. Murray Young, *The Sacred Dramas of J.S. Bach: A Reference and Textual Interpretation* (McFarland and Co. Inc.© 1994), pp 111-113.

⁴ The authorship of at least two of them, BWVs 230-231, has been questioned by some musicologists, but absent any indisputable evidence to the contrary, they remain firmly entrenched as part of Bach's oeuvre.

⁵ Ibid (3).



Artistic Director Ralph Nelson at the February 3 concert

BachGround: Tidbits

- J. S. Bach received his elementary education in Eisenach, attending the very same Latin school that Martin Luther had gone to some 200 years before.
- His oldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, despite being a well-respected composer and organist in his younger years, was given to drinking heavily and died in Berlin a penniless vagabond.
- Much of the biographical information we have about J.S. Bach was recounted in the late 17th century by W.F. Bach to Nikolaus Forkel, who published the first Bach biography in 1802.
- His youngest son, Joh. Christian Bach (aka the 'London Bach'), had the opportunity to live and travel throughout Europe that his father never had. J.C. Bach was named organist at a Milanese cathedral in 1760 after his conversion to Catholicism, and later he was Master Musician to Queen Charlotte of England after she fell in love with his operas. While in London he met and performed with a young Mozart, who remained fond of J.C. Bach and arranged several of his works. At the time of his death in 1782 he was the most famous musician in England, but was deeply in debt and is listed on his tombstone as 'John Cristian Back.'¹
- The first person listed by Bach on his own family tree, his great-great-grandfather Veit Bach was an early Protestant who had fled persecution in Hungary. He was a baker and known to be handy on the zither, which it is said he played to the rhythm of his millwheel's turning.²
- In 1720, J.S. Bach performed on the organ before an elite audience including Joh. Adam Reinken, the ancient master of the organ who was just shy of his 100th birthday. After hearing Bach play "By the water of Babylon,:" he declared, "I thought this art had perished, but I see that it lives on in you."³

¹ http://www.karadar.com/Dictionary/bach_christian.html

² Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work* (Rowholt Verlag GmbH, 2000. Eng. Trans. C. 2006, John Hargraves) p. 35.

³ Schweizer, Vol 1. pp 109-110.



Final Concerts of the 2007-2008 Season

Following our performance this coming Sunday, April 27, join the Bach Cantata Choir on Sunday, June 1 for *Café Bach*, our final event of the year.

The fellowship hall at Rose City Park Presbyterian Church will be transformed into the famous Zimmerman's Coffee House in Leipzig, where Bach premiered his *Coffee Cantata* in 1732. Although officially a cantata, this work is really more of a comic oratorio focusing on the addiction to coffee, which was seen as a pressing social problem in the Leipzig of Bach's day.

The BCC will perform Bach's *Coffee Cantata* as well as *The Schoolmaster*, by Bach's famous contemporary Georg Philip Telemann. Have some fresh-brewed coffee and home-baked coffee

cakes, made from authentic German recipes translated by our own Doro Gauer Lail.



Tickets are only \$20, and you can get them through our website at www.bachcantatachoir.org. They are also available by calling Tickets West at 224-TIXX, and will be on sale at our April 27 concert. Come see the BCC as you've never seen us before...

All Bach Cantata Choir concerts are held at the Rose City Park Presbyterian Church, located in the Hollywood district at 1907 NE 45th Avenue, Portland, Oregon (corner of NE Sandy Boulevard and NE 45th Avenue). Concerts are free (free-will offering accepted) unless advertised otherwise.

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www.bachcantatachoir.org

Don't miss our
next concert
featuring Bach's
motet *Lobet den
Herrn alle Heiden*

Sunday, April 27 at 2p.m.