

# BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



April 2009

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## Newsletter

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[www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org)

## Mendelssohn and the Bach Revival

By Katherine Lefever\*

After the death of J.S. Bach, as new musical tastes favored the gallant, tuneful Classical style, his compositions fell out of favor. By 1809, the year Felix Mendelssohn was born, the reputation of Bach's sons Carl Philipp Emanuel and Wilhelm Friedemann had overshadowed that of their father. The extent to which Bach's music was genuinely "re-discovered" in the nineteenth century has been a subject of much debate. Certainly his pedagogical method had not fallen out of favor and keyboard students were still assigned his preludes and fugues. Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn's music education can be traced directly back to the master—their teacher Carl Friedrich Zelter had studied composition with a man who had studied with C.P.E. Bach, second son of the elder Bach.<sup>1</sup> Zelter educated the young Mendelssohns in Bachian counterpoint and exposed them scores of several Bach cantatas, difficult to come by at that time.<sup>2</sup> To the romantics, J.S. Bach's music was not unknown, but obscure: "the object of esoteric rather than general interest."<sup>3</sup> Bach's choral music was among the least known of his compositional output and Mendelssohn's

historic performance of the *Matthäus Passion* (1727) was the first since the composer's death in 1750.

In post-revolutionary Europe, the arts patronage that had offered Bach, Haydn and Mozart such security was gone. Although Prussia remained a monarchy, aristocratic German families had less wealth and influence than ever before. The rise of the middle class created a new market for composers, allowing them to specialize in a medium of their choice (song for Schubert,

keyboard music for Chopin, for example), rather than compose at the will of their patron. Mass production meant that both sheet music and musical instruments were more widely available and amateur performance was on the rise, both in the home and in newly founded choral and orchestral organizations. The *Berlin Singakademie* that Mendelssohn conducted in the

*St. Matthew Passion* was one such organization. By 1829 Mendelssohn had completed his first symphony and his famous incidental music to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. While widely known as a musical prodigy, he had yet to establish a reputation as a conductor. Given both the place he was in his career and the predominant view of Bach's music as antiquated, choosing to promote the works of the long dead composer was "an odd choice for a young man embarking on a career as a composer."<sup>4</sup>



Felix Mendelssohn

## Member Spotlight



**Lorin Wilkerson – Bass**

Lorin Wilkerson has been a musician as long as he can remember; he began learning piano informally from his father at age 5, and sang in church from childhood through his early twenties. He graduated from Portland State with a degree in Russian Language and Literature, and studied music in college for years. In addition to piano and voice, he plays a number of instruments including early claviers, harmonica and mandolin, and was once timpanist/principal percussionist with the Central Oregon Symphony under Dr. Charles Heiden. He very recently began studying the viola da gamba with Douglas Laing, and is currently working on trying to not make the instrument moo like a cow.

Lorin joined the BCC in February 2007 and its board the following season. In addition to singing bass with the BCC, he sings baritone with the Portland Symphonic Choir and occasionally plays harpsichord for performances with those musical hooligans of Classical Revolution Portland (or CRPDXers, as they are more commonly known.)

Lorin also loves writing about his two main passions in life: music and craft beer. Lorin writes for and edits *BachBeat*, he is active as a critic with *Northwest Reverb*, a blog covering classical music in the Pacific Northwest, he maintains his own (unfortunately too-rarely updated) blog, *Musical Oozings*, and he writes about beer and music for *Primer* online magazine.

Lorin first began to truly love the music of J.S. Bach as a teenager; after being exposed to the *Well-Tempered Clavier* on the radio and hearing a brass rendition of the well-known chorale from *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*, he was sure that J.S. Bach must have been the greatest musician who ever lived, and nothing that has transpired in Lorin's life since has convinced him otherwise.

Yet Mendelssohn's revival came at an ideal time for securing Bach's position as a national treasure. Nationalist sentiment was on the rise and 1830 was the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Augsburg Confession and the founding of Lutheranism. There was an increased interest in preserving and celebrating great German works, of codifying a musical canon much like what Goethe and others had done for German literature in the early part of the nineteenth century. What is now seen as a major historical revival began as a small gathering of about sixteen reading through the *St. Matthew Passion* at the Mendelssohn home.<sup>5</sup> Felix and his friend, the actor Eduard Devrient began to talk seriously about a performance some time late in 1828. In his memoirs, Devrient writes about the morning he roused the composer and the two of them went to inform Zelter of their plan.<sup>6</sup>

The extent of Zelter's role in the revival has been a controversial issue for music historians. After Mendelssohn's death, there were some who argued that Zelter had more involvement behind the scenes than he had previously received credit for. After all, Mendelssohn would never have been exposed to Bach's choral music had it not been for his teacher, and the score Felix used had been prepared by Zelter from Bach's original performing parts.<sup>7</sup> But it was not Zelter who spear-headed the revival, despite his genuine enthusiasm for Bach—indeed, he seems to have been opposed to the idea of performing the *St. Matthew Passion*, perhaps believing that the piece would not be appreciated or understood, or that it was too long and too difficult for an amateur group like the *Singakademie* to pull off. Ultimately, rather than the master it was two indefatigable youngsters that restored Bach to prominence.

Once Zelter had given his consent, the hall was reserved and formal rehearsals commenced. Both the choir and orchestra were predominantly comprised of amateur musicians. Mendelssohn conducted from the piano and Devrient sang the role of Christ. Significant cuts were made to the work, removing ten arias and almost half of the choruses.<sup>8</sup> Various explanations have been offered for Mendelssohn's choices—some have argued he deliberately excluded texts that could be interpreted as anti-Semitic, others that the parts he omitted were musically redundant. It seems likely that many of these cuts were practical: the *St. Matthew Passion* clocks in at well over three hours when presented in its entirety.

In stark contrast to its premiere as part of a Good Friday church service, on March 11, 1829 the *St. Matthew Passion* was performed to a sold out hall. Many were turned away at the door. Among those in attendance were the poet Heine, the philosopher Hegel, and possibly Paganini. Fanny wrote that “the most solemn reverence

seized the gathering” and that the feeling in the concert hall was one of both devotion and awe that this glorious music could have come “from old Bach.”<sup>9</sup> With one performance at the tender age of twenty, Mendelssohn had established his reputation not only as a conductor, but as a leading figure in the historical revival movement.<sup>10</sup> The performance is still considered to be one of the most significant concerts in the history of German music. ♪

\*Katherine Lefever is a graduate of Reed College where she studied music history, vocal performance and foreign languages. While her area of interest is primarily the romantic and early modern periods, she has always loved performing and studying baroque music.

Katherine sings with the Portland Symphonic Choir and works in the Membership Department at All Classical FM.

<sup>1</sup> Mercer-Taylor, Peter. *The Life of Mendelssohn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, p 34. Fasch was the founder of the Berlin *Singakademie*.

<sup>2</sup> Applegate, Celia. *Bach in Berlin*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Applegate, p. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Applegate, p. 19.

<sup>5</sup> Todd, R. Larry. *Mendelssohn: A Life in Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 193.

<sup>6</sup> Todd, p. 194.

<sup>7</sup> Mercer-Taylor, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Todd, p. 196.

<sup>9</sup> Fanny Mendelssohn quoted in Applegate, pp. 34 and 41.

<sup>10</sup> Mercer-Taylor, p. 75.

## William Billings (1746-1800)

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

William Billings was a prototypical ‘do-it-yourself American original.’ He was a unique man both physically and from a personality standpoint: he was blind in one eye and had limited use of his arms and legs, and was well-known for his addiction to copious amounts of snuff. He was *not* known for his humility: Billings singlehandedly set out to re-make the landscape of American choral music without any formal musical training, and once said that there was nothing connected with the science of music that he had not mastered.

Initially a tanner by trade, he reportedly grew exasperated with the stodgy psalmody of the Boston Congregationalist churches he attended, and at an early age began composing and teaching singing. Entirely self-taught, he eschewed formal musical training (for himself) and learned what he knew through singing and studying works from various British and colonial schools of singing. He jotted down notes and rough sketches of his works on the walls and hides in the tannery where he worked.

He soon opened a music shop and turned full-time to composition and vocal pedagogy, and in 1770 he published *The New England Psalm Singer*, the first volume in history entirely devoted to songs by an American choral composer. Billings was known for patriotic sentiment: his good friend Paul Revere engraved the frontispiece for the *Psalm Singer*, and Samuel Adams sang for many years in one of Billings’ choirs. Billings would go on to publish several more seminal compilations of hymns, psalms and

‘fuguing tunes,’ (songs written in simplistic imitative polyphony) culminating in *The Continental Harmony* in 1794.

Billings’ go-it-alone attitude and the cultural isolation of the American colonies from European trends led to the development of a (sometimes intentionally) primitive style of composition: stark, open harmonies and sharp rhythmic punctuations were a hallmark of his work. His hymn ‘Chester’ (beginning: ‘Let tyrants shake their iron rod’) was beloved by Continental soldiers during the Revolutionary War. Although his songs were extremely well-known, the poor state of copyright law in the colonies and later in the young nation assured that despite the popularity of his work, Billings died a pauper, having earned hardly a penny from his voluminous compositional output.

His legacy has endured in many ways. Tunes from *The New England Psalm Singer* soon made their way south and west, and formed an important part of the rudiments of shape-note singing of the rural American south. Even though his style was outmoded soon after his death, Billings’ hymns also endured long in the churches of rural New England. The Old Stoughton Musical Society in Stoughton, MA, was founded by Billings in 1774, and has continued uninterrupted to this day. It is the oldest musical society and first singing school in American history. Billings was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1970. ♪



William Billings

Principal Sources: Wikipedia.org, answers.com, Songwriters Hall of Fame.

## Photo Gallery



Elise Groves (soprano), Elizabeth Farquhar (alto), Mark Woodward (tenor), and Uwe Haefker (bass) perform Cantata #131 *Aus der Tiefen rufe ich, Herr, su dir*



Paul Pitken, oboe soloist

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The \$1000 covers about 20% of the cost of a concert, with other costs covered by contributions from the choir members, audience free-will offerings at each concert and general fundraising.

If you'd like to learn more, please contact us through our website: [www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org).

### Thanks for a Great Season

Our final concert of the 2008-09 season will be Sunday, April 26, featuring works from Mendelssohn, Billings, and of course, our beloved J.S. Bach.

Announcements regarding our 2009-10 season will be mailed this summer and posted on our website: [www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org).

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.



**BACH CANTATA CHOIR**  
3570 NE MATHISON PLACE  
PORTLAND OR 97212

[www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org)

**Don't miss our  
final concert  
of the season!**

Sunday, April 26 at 2:00 pm