Belated Thoughts on Bach’s

The choir loft and ceiling of the Thomaskirche, Leipzig
“To Marcus Fabius Quintilianus: [If], returning from the underworld, you could see Bach (to mention him particularly, since he was not long ago my colleague at the Leipzig St. Thomas School)... watching over everything and bringing back to the rhythm and the beat, out of thirty or even forty musicians [symphoniaci], the one with a nod, another by tapping with his foot, the third with a warning finger...”

Thus wrote Johann Matthias Gesner (1691-1761) in a footnote to his 1738 edition of the Roman orator Quintilian’s famous treatise on rhetoric, the Institutio Oratoria. Gesner was the first professor of classical philology at the University of Göttingen. Previously – specifically, for the four years from 1730 to 1734 – he was the rector of the Thomasschule in Leipzig; that is, he was Johann Sebastian Bach’s boss, and, as this passage makes clear, he was an enthusiastic eyewitness to Bach’s performances as a conductor.

If Gesner can be believed, Bach directed an ensemble of “thirty or even forty musicians.” Can we believe him? Does it matter?

The question of the original size of Bach’s orchestra and chorus has been a matter of heated debate for more than a quarter-century now, ever since Joshua Rifkin presented a revolutionary paper entitled “Bach’s Chorus” at the 1981 annual meeting of the American Musicological Society. Rifkin argued that Bach’s chorus normally consisted of a single singer on each part, literally a solo quartet: one soprano, one alto, one tenor, and one bass. It fell to me on that occasion to serve as a respondent to the bold thesis. I disagreed with my good friend Rifkin, but the discussion by no means ended on that November day in Boston. According to a bibliographical checklist devoted to the controversy in Bach: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute, no fewer than 54 articles appeared by the end of 1997.

The AMS session was reviewed soon after the event in The New Yorker; Rifkin and I published an exchange of views in High Fidelity magazine and another in The Musical Times a year or so later. Thereafter, having already done severe damage to a valued friendship, I vowed never again to discuss this issue in public, either in print or on a lecture podium. And until March of 2001, when I was prevailed upon by George Stauffer (another good friend) to present an earlier version of the present paper at a symposium at the Morgan Library in New York, I remained true to that vow. Upon the urging of yet another good friend, Mark Kroll (I have been blessed with good friends), I am offering the essay for publication at this time – when the controversy seems to have lost much of its heat – rather than leave it for eventual discovery among my posthumous papers.

The dispute over the size of Bach’s chorus has not been confined to scholarly debates and publications. Historically minded musicians have lined up on both sides, performing (and recording) the concerted vocal music of Johann Sebastian either in accordance with Rifkin’s one-on-a-part thesis or according to the scholarly understanding that had previously prevailed. Positions between the two camps eventually hardened, and the controversy has led to a bitter schism in the ranks of the early music community that has occasionally attracted the attention of the general media and the music-loving public.

Theological debate

I have chosen the word “schism” deliberately, for the debate about the number of musicians who sang in Bach’s chorus and played in his orchestra has often had a theological quality. In particular, the ingenious parsing of historical — dare I say, sacred — documents has played a central role among true believers, who earnestly subscribe to an ethos of “authenticity” and call, among other things, for the scrupulous observance of the original performance traditions including, not least, the size and constitution of vocal and instrumental groups. For these musicians — and their sympathetic audiences — such things matter, indeed.

To return to our eyewitness: How can we corroborate, or refute, the truth of Gesner’s claim that his colleague Johann Sebastian Bach directed ensembles of “thirty or even forty musicians?” It is made, after all, in the context of a
fanciful communication with a long-dead shade from antiquity (and even alludes at one point to the mythological Orpheus as though he had existed).

The crucial piece of evidence, invariably exhibit A in any discussion of Bach's performing forces, is a memorandum in his own hand, dated August 23, 1730, and addressed to the City Council of Leipzig, the overseers to whom Bach, as the city's music director, was responsible. Bach's heading for the memorandum reads in English as “Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music with Certain Modest Reflections on the Decline of the Same.” It is arguably the most analyzed, most disagreed-about document ever penned by a composer, with the possible exception of Beethoven's letter to the Immortal Beloved. We must briefly rehearse its contents yet again.

Ironically, Bach's intention in writing the draft was to provide clarification: he was explaining to his superiors, as simply and as unambiguously as he could, exactly what resources were necessary to meet the musical needs of the city's four principal churches. His ultimate objective was to demonstrate that he did not have those resources. But he begins his appeal by describing the facts of musical life in terms that might well have struck the councilors as insultingly rudimentary. The opening of the document reads as follows:

“A well-appointed church music requires vocalists and instrumentalists. The vocalists are in this place made up of the pupils of the Thomasschule, being of four kinds, namely, sopranos [Discantisten], altos, tenors, and basses.

“In order that the choruses of church pieces may be performed as is fitting, the vocalists must in turn be divided into 2 sorts, namely, concertists [i.e., soloists] and ripienists [i.e., those who fill in].

“The concertists are ordinarily 4 in number; sometimes also 5, 6, 7, even 8; that is, if one wishes to perform music for two choirs [per choro].

“The ripienists, too, must be at least 8, namely, two for each part.”

He later adds:

“Every musical choir should contain at least 3 sopranos, 3 altos, 3 tenors, and as many basses, so that even if one happens to fall ill . . . at least a double-chorus motet may be sung. (N.B. Though it would be still better if the classes [of the Thomasschule] were such that one could have 4 singers on each part and thus could provide every chorus with 16 persons.)”

Schering's study

Let us pause at this point. In 1936, some 45 years before Rifkin presented his theory to the American Musicological Society, the Bach scholar Arnold Schering published a study of Bach's Leipzig church music in which he presented, together with a mass of further evidence, what was to be the conventional understanding of the “Short but Most Necessary Draft,” namely, that Bach's chorus – at least during his years as Thomaskantor in Leipzig (1723-1750) – normally consisted of 12 singers: three sopranos, three altos, three tenors, and three basses. One of the three in each voice category was a soloist (or concertist). His duty was to sing the solo numbers – the recitatives and arias –as well as to be one of the voices in the choral numbers and chorales, in which the remaining two singers in each voice category, the ripienists, joined in. Bach's comments also allow us to conclude that, unlike the concerted pieces, a cappella motets for four, five, six, seven, or eight voices were performed by the concertists, the soloists, alone. (I suspect, by the way, that the motets Bach had in mind here were those by earlier masters, composers extending back to Palestrina and Lassus, whose motets were regularly performed in the Leipzig church service of Bach's time.)

Returning to the draft: Bach reports that “the instrumentalists are also divided into various kinds, namely, string players [violisten], oboists, flutists, trumpeters, and drummers. N.B. The violisten
include also [i.e., in addition to the violinists] those who play the violas, the violoncellos, and the bass viols.”

He tabulates the instrumentalists: “2 or even 3 for the Violino 1; 2 or even 3 for the Violino 2; 2 for the Viola 1; 2 for the Viola 2; 2 for the Violoncello; 1 for the Violin [Bass viol]; 2, or, if the piece requires, 3 for the Hautbois; 1, or even 2, for the Bassoon; 3 for the Trumpets; 1 for the Kettledrums. [Summa] 18 persons at least for the instrumental music [i.e., the instrumental ensemble, or the orchestral].”

He adds: “N.B. If it happens that the church piece is composed with flutes also, ...as very often happens for variety’s sake, at least 2 more persons are needed. Making altogether 20 instrumentalists.”

Now, if one adds to Bach’s explicitly stated minimal cantata chorus of 12, his explicitly stated minimal orchestra of 18, one has 30 musicians, exactly the size of the ensemble Rector Gesner described to Quintilian. And, of course, Bach’s preferred chorus of 16, together with the augmented 20-piece orchestra with flutes he describes, would call for a total of 36 musicians. But Gesner tells us that sometimes “even 40 musicians” participated. Perhaps even more: if Gesner had attended a performance of the St. Matthew Passion with its double chorus (i.e., some 24 singers) and double orchestra (without trumpets and drums, but with additional flutes, i.e., twice 16, or 32 players) he would have witnessed Bach trying to keep in order well over 50 musicians.

Moreover, as it turns out, we know of other eyewitness accounts. George Stauffer has discovered several contemporary descriptions of Bach and his predecessors conducting the Leipzig collegium musicum—a group of students and professional musicians who gave regular public concerts consisting of performances of instrumental music, along with secular cantatas. The ensembles were said to number some 40 musicians—and even more. One description mentioned “50 to 60 persons.” Case closed.

Well, not entirely. In all fairness, I should at the least offer a summary of the counterarguments of those who subscribe to the one-on-a-part theory. But I won’t—call it “disinclination”—except to mention that they largely rest on the following pillars: first, the fact that among the original performing materials for a Bach vocal composition, typically only one written part exists for each choral voice; second, the practice elsewhere in the Baroque era; third, a dazzling display of semantic and syntactical exegesis of the draft that must be read in its unabridged form to be fully appreciated. Again, I cite the bibliographical checklist mentioned earlier.

Genres and venues

I prefer instead to suggest that in one respect both camps—the minimalists and the traditionalists—are guilty of the same offense: namely, one for which I am tempted to use the term “totalism” and to define it as a dogmatic inclination to impose a single solution, or explanation, on all situations. The minimalists maintain that essentially all of Bach’s vocal music was (and therefore should be) performed by a chamber group: a chorus and instrumental ensemble of soloists. The traditionalists, for their part largely resting their case on Bach’s memorandum of 1730, maintain that essentially all of Bach’s vocal music was (and therefore should be) performed by a chorus of 12, preferably 16, and an orchestra of about 20 players. My suspicion is that the size of Bach’s ensemble was far less fixed than either camp has been willing to acknowledge but varied substantially according to circumstances. By “circumstances” I am referring not only to external, practical conditions but also to considerations of stylistic and aesthetic propriety. I certainly agree fundamentally with the traditionalists that during Bach’s Leipzig years, and thus for most of his church music—the performing forces normally consisted of a 12-voice chorus and an 18- or 20-piece orchestra. But we cannot assume that this was always the case. There is every reason to believe that the performing forces available to Bach in Weimar, for example, were different—specifically, smaller—than they were in Leipzig. Personnel lists in Weimar mention a total of 14 or 15 musicians altogether: six or seven singers, six instrumentalists, and two directors. The numbers were presumably different yet again—perhaps even smaller still—when Bach was employed in the small towns of Arnstadt, Mühlhausen, and Köthen. In some of these situations, the “soloist presumption” (if I may call it that) becomes quite plausible.

But I am willing to go further still and argue that even in Leipzig the “traditionalist presumption” (if I may call it that) did not always prevail. Bach’s vocal music, after all, belongs to a variety of categories and was written for a variety of occasions. We can readily discern several subgenres of cantata: at the one extreme we find extravagantly scored cantatas such as were performed at Christmas, Easter, and other festive occasions. We can readily discern several subgenres of cantata: at the one extreme we find extravagantly scored cantatas such as were performed at Christmas, Easter, and other festive occasions. Bach clearly delighted in the coloristic variety and the capacity for “big sound” at his disposal on such occasions. One need only recall the beginning of the Christmas Oratorio, with its audacious opening timpani solo and the ensuing rousing buildup as flutes, then oboes, trumpet fanfares, and swirling strings join in. That all this...
should introduce a feeble “chorus” of less than a handful of singers is, for me, simply unimaginable—especially since this chorus, like most of the others in the oratorio, is little more than simple retexting of a movement from a secular cantata that was previously performed by Bach and the collegium musicum under the lavish circumstances described above.

At the other extreme, however, we have Bach’s “solo” cantatas: compositions that usually consist of a series of arias and recitatives for a single soloist throughout. A fine example is Cantata 55, *Ich armer Mensch, ich Sündenknecht*, for tenor, flute, oboe d’amore, and strings. Cantata 55 contains no choral movement at all, except for the concluding simple four-part chorale, which in such a case may well not have called upon the complete 12-voice chorus.

(It may be significant that on the folder that contained the original parts, Bach describes the cantata as follows: “à 4 Voci. | ò vero Tenore solo è 3 | Ripleni.” In fact, the unavailability of a complete chorus—as this description of the vocal parts suggests—might help explain why Bach chose to compose a solo cantata that particular week in November of 1726.)

But we must keep in mind that genius, as Stravinsky once remarked, thrives on constraints. Regarding constraints of size, consider the strikingly individual, and unorthodox, scorings of Bach’s funeral compositions. They often suggest intimate performances held in a mourner’s home or at a gravesite rather than at a church service. On these occasions Bach compensated for the lack of numbers with the imaginative use of instrumental color. The evocative and deliberately archaic scoring of Cantata 106, the *Actus tragicus*, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit*, for example, an early masterpiece most likely composed in 1707 or 1708, consists only of two recorders and two violas da gamba.

Some 30 years later Bach wrote the funeral composition *O Jesu Christ, mein’s Lebens Licht*, BWV 118. It is scored for four-part chorus and, like the *Actus tragicus*, calls for an archaic instrumental ensemble, consisting this time of two obbligato “litui” (which were presumably horns or trumpets of some kind) and either a brass or string group reinforcing the singers. Both funeral compositions, the *Actus tragicus* and *O Jesu Christ*, it is true, have “choruses”—choruses, I would maintain (following Rifkin here) consisting of solo voices.

But, as aesthetically satisfying, and historically probable, as solo scoring is in the genre of the funeral cantata and for the concluding four-part chorales of solo cantatas, it hardly represents Bach’s normal usage. On the contrary, such compositions should be understood as occupying one end of something resembling a continuum of ensemble combinations extending from intimate, essentially private, chamber groups to the “normal,” that is, the usual Leipzig Sunday cantata ensemble described in Bach’s memorandum of 1730—and beyond. They clearly represent the antipode to the elaborately scored festival cantatas for the major feasts—not to mention the even more lavish secular cantatas Bach composed to celebrate the birthdays and other great deeds of the Royal Saxon family. Bach and his collegium musicum often performed these compositions, no doubt, with as many singers and players as he could round up—50, 60. One suspects that the (open) sky was the limit.

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