

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE STÜBEL THEORY

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Introduction

This paper proposes to trace the origin and rather quick demise of the Andreas Stübel Theory, a theory which purportedly attempted to designate a librettist who supplied Johann Sebastian Bach with texts and worked with him when the latter composed the greater portion of the 2nd ‘chorale-cantata’ cycle in Leipzig from 1724 to early 1725. It was Hans-Joachim Schulze who first proposed this theory in 1998 after which it encountered a mixed reception with Christoph Wolff lending it some support in his Bach biography² and in his notes for the Koopman Bach-Cantata recording series³, but with Martin Geck⁴ viewing it rather less enthusiastically as a theory that resembled a ball thrown onto the roulette wheel and having the same chance of winning a jackpot.

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² Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Norton, 2000), (first published as a paperback in 2001), p. 278.

³ Christoph Wolff, ‘The Leipzig church cantatas: the chorale cantata cycle (II:1724-1725)’ in *The Complete Cantatas* volumes 10 and 11 as recorded by Ton Koopman and published by Erato Disques (Paris, France, 2001).

⁴ Martin Geck, *Bach: Leben und Werk*, (Hamburg, 2000), p. 400.

Andreas Stübel

Andreas Stübel (also known as Stiefel = ‘boot’) was born as the son of an innkeeper in Dresden on December 15, 1653. In Dresden he first attended the Latin School located there. Then, in 1668, he attended the Prince’s School (“Fürstenschule”) in Meißen. He received a scholarship from the Elector to attend the University of Leipzig in 1673 and there he received his Bachelor’s Degree in 1674 and his Master’s Degree in Philosophy in 1676. For the next six years, Stübel was a private tutor teaching in homes located in Weißenfels, Meißen and Dresden. In 1682 he was accepted as a teacher of the third class (somewhat like a sophomore class of a high school in the USA) of St. Nicholas School in Leipzig. Two years later, in 1684, he became the Co-Rector of the St. Thomas School (“Thomasschule”), a position which he held for 13 years before being forced into retirement (“entlassen” = “expelled/dismissed”) in 1697 for his “wunderliche theologische Ansichten” (“strange theological views”) such as considering himself to be a prophet like one of the Old Testament prophets. Despite his dismissal, he nevertheless continued to receive financial support from the Thomasschule for his family (he had 7 children) until he died in Leipzig on January 31, 1725.

Stübel had published a number of treatises and books, most of these concerning the Latin language and its current use in Leipzig in the early 18th century. Among the most important of these were:

“Antipietismi larva detracta” (1698)

“Latinismus in nuce d.i. kurzgefasste lateinische Sprachkunst” Leipzig, 1703

„Novum Vocabularium Lipsiense: Neues Leipziger Wörterbuch“ Leipzig, 1703
(This work was also used in the schools of Leipzig.)

Stübel also was the editor for two editions (1710 and 1717) of Basilius Faber’s “Thesaurus eruditionis scholasticae”, to which Stübel added an important index to facilitate looking up information.

Origin of the Stübel Theory

Hans-Joachim Schulze first proposed this theory in 1998.⁵ Noticing that an interruption in the flow of chorale cantatas occurred around Easter of 1725 as the last of the chorale cantatas, BWV 1 “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern”, was performed on the Feast Day of Mary’s Annunciation on March 25th, Schulze decided to conduct a quasi criminal investigation to see if some external reason could explain the apparently sudden end of the chorale cantata cycle. Recognizing that Bach had cantata libretti published for parishioners who would hear his cantatas and that these cantata booklets contained a certain number of cantata texts which would cover a number of Sundays, Schulze was able to project theoretically when the booklet containing BWV 1 would have had to be presented to the printers so that the booklets could be published in time for the performance of the first cantata contained therein. This latest cut-off date for presenting the texts to the printer, according to Schulze’s calculations, would have been the Saturday before Septuagesimae, specifically, January 27, 1725.

In his research, Schulze consulted a book containing the annals of events in Leipzig from 1722-1725.⁶ His search concentrated upon finding someone who left Leipzig, became critically ill, or died shortly before or around the specified cut-off date. His search was rewarded when he found a short note concerning the death of Andreas Stübel including a comment that Stübel died on January 31, 1725 after a 3-day illness. This fact would place him within the necessary time frame for supplying the libretti for the cantatas up through BWV 1, the end of the steady stream of chorale cantatas Bach had been composing during the 2nd half of 1724 until March 25, 1725. Schulze shares with the reader that Stübel was educated in theology⁷ and had experience in writing poetry.⁸ In a footnote,⁹ Schulze also mentions that Stübel had been removed prematurely from his official position because of his sectarian views. According to Schulze, this is a valid objection that can be leveled against his Stübel Theory. Also, Stübel’s age, 71, would raise doubts about his flexibility in accommodating the changes that Bach would certainly have suggested for each of the libretti he wanted to set to music. Just prior to his proposal of the Stübel Theory, Schulze makes the following comment about possible candidates for the unknown librettists whom Bach used in Leipzig for obtaining musically workable texts:¹⁰

Wer die mehr oder weniger federgewandten Autoren waren, die dem Thomaskantor in dieser Zeit zur Seite standen, wissen wir wie gesagt nicht. Es kann sich um Angehörige der Geistlichkeit handeln, aber auch an Studenten oder sogar ältere Schüler der Thomana ist zu denken.

(As already stated previously, we do not know just who these authors were, authors who were more or less skilled in writing poetry and who stood by the side of the Thomaskantor during this time. These could have been clergy members, but it is also just as conceivable that they could have been university students or even some of the older students at the Thomasschule.)

⁵ Hans-Joachim Schulze, ‘Texte und Textdichter’ Chapter 6 of Volume 3 of *Die Welt der Bach-Kantaten* (Metzler/Bärenreiter, 1998/1999), Christoph Wolff, ed. and published in conjunction with Ton Koopman’s recordings of *The Complete Cantatas*, p. 116.

⁶ Christoph Ernst Sicul, *Annales Lipsienses III* (Leipzig, 1722-1725), pp. 852ff.

⁷ There is no evidence that Stübel earned a degree in theology; however, he may have had to prove his knowledge of Lutheran doctrine the same way that J. S. Bach did when he applied for a position in Leipzig.

⁸ Again, there is no evidence that Stübel had published any books using verse forms, but his general knowledge of Latin verse may have benefited him here just as many others who had studied Latin during his time would likewise have profited from experience in reading Latin literature.

⁹ Schulze, op. cit., p. 125.

¹⁰ Schulze, op. cit. p. 115.

Confirmation of the Stübel Theory

In the same book in which Schulze's article describing the Stübel Theory appeared, there is also an article by Martin Petzoldt in which the latter attempts to confirm and support Schulze's theory with more evidence.¹¹ Here Petzoldt claims that Stübel, who was the Co-Rector ("Konrektor") at St. Thomas School in Leipzig was forced into early retirement at age 44 because he had sympathized with the Pietists. Theologically, Petzoldt also claims, the chorale-cantata texts breathe the air of piousness found among the supporters of the old Protestant orthodoxy without being pietistic. The corresponding theological characteristics of someone wanting to express pietistic ambitions are lacking entirely.

...die Texte atmen die Frömmigkeit der späten altprotestantischen Orthodoxie, ohne pietistisch zu sein. Für pietistische Ambitionen fehlen entsprechende theologische Merkmale.

As far as Andreas Stübel is concerned, Petzoldt states that Schulze 'has brought Stübel into the ongoing conversation' regarding the identification of the unknown librettist of Bach's chorale-cantata cycle.

In his book on Bach, Martin Geck refers to Schulze's 'conjecture/guess' that Stübel might be the unidentified author of the chorale-cantata-cycle libretti. He expresses this in terms of a question: "Is this former Konrektor of the Thomasschule, one who was removed from his office because of chiliastic, that is to say, radical pietistical views, really Bach's text author?"¹² Geck describes Schulze as having 'brought this Stübel Theory into play' only because Stübel coincidentally happened to die after a short illness around the time when Bach would have had to send the next batch of cantata libretti to the printer's. This then would have been the decisive moment that caused Bach's chorale-cantata cycle to remain incomplete. Reading between the lines, Geck's description of the Stübel Theory is rather less than an enthusiastic appraisal of its merits.¹³

The strongest support of the Stübel Theory was expressed by Christoph Wolff in his Bach biography copyrighted and published in 2000 and 2001 and in his short statement about Bach's chorale cantata cycle that appeared in the notes accompanying Ton Koopman's recordings of Bach's cantatas.

In his Bach biography, Wolff begins by suggesting that the individual who collaborated with Bach in producing the libretti for the chorale cantata cycle must have been close at hand and actually resided in Leipzig at the time. Wolff admits that there are various hypotheses about who this anonymous librettist might have been, but that Stübel would be the most likely author since Andreas Stübel was "conrektor emeritus of the St. Thomas School, a man of solid theological background (if somewhat nonconformist views) and [had] ample poetic

¹¹ Martin Petzoldt, 'Theologische Aspekte der Leipziger Kantaten Bachs' Chapter 7 of Volume 3 of *Die Welt der Bach-Kantaten* (Metzler/Bärenreiter, 1998/1999), Christoph Wolff, ed. and published in conjunction with Ton Koopman's recordings of *The Complete Cantatas*, p. 130.

¹² Martin Geck, *Bach: Leben und Werk*, (Hamburg, 2000), p. 400.

¹³ *ibid.*, "Ist der vormalige, wegen chiliastischer, das heißt radikal pietistischer Ansichten seines Amtes enthobene Konrktor der Thomasschule, Andreas Stübel, sein Textautor? Hans-Joachim Schulze hat den gelehrten und dichtkundigen Mann unter anderem deshalb ins Spiel gebracht, weil Stübel am 31. Januar 1725 nach nur dreitägiger Krankheit verstorben ist – also just zu dem Zeitpunkt, an dem die letzten von Bach vertonten Libretti des Choralkantatenjahrgangs fällig waren. Sein Tod könnte, so lautet die Mutmaßung Schulzes, das ausschlaggebende Moment dafür gewesen sein, daß Bachs Jahrgang, wie bereits erwähnt, unvollendet blieb."

experience.”¹⁴ Wolff then reiterates the connection which Schulze had made between the timing of Stübel’s short illness and death and the last date on which the cantata texts for the period from Septuagesimae Sunday to the end of Lent would have to be printed. “This would explain the abrupt ending of the chorale cantata cycle with ‘Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern,’ BWV 1.” Later on p. 279, Wolff explains: “In the spring of 1725, when the delivery of chorale cantata texts came to a sudden halt, Bach had to come up with an emergency solution for the rest of the year.”

Wolff, at about the same time when he wrote his Bach biography,¹⁵ restates Schulze’s Stübel Theory in the ‘liner notes’ that accompany Ton Koopman’s recordings of the Bach cantatas issued by Erato.¹⁶ Here Wolff begins by claiming that Bach “turned to a local librettist who promised him a cycle of cantata texts that would be created according to a model which, though developed jointly, was principally of Bach’s design.” Before presenting the Stübel Theory directly, Wolff carefully points out: “We cannot identify with certainty the author of the texts, since he did not produce any completed work in print...he plainly delivered each text to Bach in manuscript as it was finished.” Here is the text pertaining to the theory itself:

The latest research, by Hans-Joachim Schulze in *Die Welt der Bach Kantaten*, Vol. 3, suggests that the writer was very likely to have been Andreas Stübel, the former Co-Rector of the Thomasschule. Stübel, theologically trained and an accomplished poet, died on 31 January 1725. In fact, the date of death provides convincing evidence for identifying Stübel as the probable author of the chorale cantata texts, since delivery of the texts stopped abruptly at the end of January. Consequently, Bach was unable to maintain the unified concept of a chorale cantata cycle and had to fill in the rest of the cycle – from Easter to the 1st Sunday after Trinity – with other texts.

Now we have in Stübel a ‘theologically trained’ (no evidence has been presented that Stübel received any specific training in theology other than that which anyone like Bach, who never attended a university, might have gained from a general school education) and ‘accomplished poet’ (the latter having not been documented despite the fact that numerous treatises and books written by Stübel exist). By sheer coincidence of date and location, Stübel has become “the probable author of the chorale cantata texts.”

¹⁴ Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (Norton, 2000), (first published as a paperback in 2001), p. 278. Wolff supplies a footnote reference to Schulze’s original publication of the Stübel Theory, but has now emphasized the important office which Stübel had held as well as emphasizing his theological background as being ‘solid’ and pointing to his poetic skills as ample.

¹⁵ Both of Wolff’s printed statements (in his Bach biography and for Koopman’s cantata recordings) were conceived and written either simultaneously or with not more than a year intervening the writing and publishing of both.

¹⁶ Christoph Wolff, ‘The Leipzig church cantatas: the chorale cantata cycle (II:1724-1725)’ in *The Complete Cantatas* volumes 10 and 11 as recorded by Ton Koopman and published by Erato Disques (Paris, France, 2001) p. 11.

Careless Support of the Stübel Theory

As might be expected, music reviews on the internet and entries into the Wikipedia are not necessarily based upon a careful, detailed study of a theory, and thus are swayed by short explanations as given by Wolff in the liner notes which are used as a definitive reference for claiming more than is actually there. The writers of these reviews soon come to accept a theory as actual fact and present it to the unwary reader as such. For those who can read Dutch, here is an example of this: “Bach kon daarbij rekenen op het dichtwerk van een uitstekende librettist uit Leipzig, een emiritus conrector van de Thomasschool, Andreas Stübel.” (“For his libretti Bach could depend upon an outstanding librettist from Leipzig, Andreas Stübel, a Co-Rector emeritus of the Thomasschule.”)

The Ultimate Demise of the Stübel Theory

It is the author of the Stübel Theory, Hans-Joachim Schulze, who sounded its death knell when he published his extensive book on the Bach cantatas in 2006.¹⁷ Nowhere on any of its 760 pages does Schulze ever mention Andreas Stübel or make any reference to the Stübel Theory. This is quite significant in that Schulze’s emphasis in his book is more directly focused on the text of each cantata and how it relates to the music. If there ever were an appropriate moment to mention the Stübel Theory, then the discussions of each cantata in the chorale-cantata cycle would have been the place for this to occur. What the reader finds instead are numerous references to an unknown, anonymous librettist. Here is what Schulze writes about BWV 1, “Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern”:

Unbekannt ist, wer die sieben Choralstrophen Nicolais in ein sechssätziges Kantatenlibretto umgewandelt hat.¹⁸

(It is unknown, who transformed Nicolai’s seven verses/stanzas into a six-movement cantata libretto.)

Even more significant is Schulze’s following explanation regarding the libretto of BWV 1:

Was ihn veranlaßt hat, das sicherlich auf einen vollständigen Jahrgang zielende Unternehmen vor dem letzten Viertel der zurückzulegenden Wegstrecke aufzugeben, hat sich bis heute nicht herausfinden lassen.¹⁹

Until today no one has been able to determine whatever it was that may have caused Bach prematurely to give up his plan, a project that probably would have still continued to make it a complete cycle, with only a final quarter of the course still needing to be completed.

¹⁷ Hans-Joachim Schulze, *Die Bach-Kantaten: Einführungen zu sämtlichen Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Leipzig/Stuttgart, 2006)

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 522

¹⁹ *ibid.*, p. 521.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above that a theory was advanced, albeit with cautionary remarks indicating its probable weaknesses. Within a relatively short period following its first publication, it received a mixed reception by Bach experts, some of them attempting to bolster the theory with further, but sometimes rather doubtful and unprovable suggestions, and others who once again mentioned its inherent weaknesses. Despite the care with which some of these Bach experts, including the author of the theory, approached this theory, it nevertheless began to assume 'an aura of truth' for those less careful reporters and reviewers who then proclaimed the theory as a fact. Fortunately, the author of the theory has subsequently revisited its viability and has, in essence, declared it dead with little chance of resurrection except on the part of those who refuse to surrender their unshakeable belief in it.