

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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And Then There Were Four...

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

It is common knowledge to those familiar with Bach lore that he was not the first choice among candidates for the post of cantor at St. Thomas in Leipzig, where he would spend the last quarter-century of his life. What is less known are the reasons why the town council and the church consistory, whose dual responsibility it was to choose the proper candidate for this opening, did not consider Bach among the first tier of applicants. Today Bach is generally considered the greatest master of the Baroque, a man whose corpus represents the flowering of the best this era had to offer. How is it, then, that he was so readily overlooked? It is easy, in hindsight, to assume some sort of blindness or ignorance on the part of those charged with making this selection. If one looks at the duties of the cantor, the prestige of the post, and the quality of the contenders though, the selection process was not only defensible but also logical. The group of men who were tasked with filling the post vacated by the death of master Johann Kuhnau in 1722 had a difficult decision to make.



St. Thomas, Leipzig

The cantor at St. Thomas Kirche held a position of enormous responsibility. Not only was he required to serve as director musices at both St. Thomas and St. Nicholas churches, but he also provided instruction in music and Latin to the boys at the Thomasschule, a prestigious institution whose roots reached back to the 13th century. Additionally the music director composed cantatas and other works for Sunday services, feast days, funerals and the like. Kuhnau had been very famous and well respected, but for reasons largely outside his control, the musical institutions of the Thomasschule under his cantorship had suffered a rapid and precipitous decline.

Italian opera fever was sweeping Europe, and a number of small opera houses and student musical organizations (called Collegium Musicum) had opened in and around Leipzig at the turn of the 18th century. The mania

for this music tended to cause the most gifted young singers to abscond from the Leipzig church choirs to join opera troupes, leaving the venerable cantor with an ever-shrinking pool of skilled singers from which to draw. In addition, the operatic style with which we are so familiar through the works of Bach (of which style Kuhnau was a fervent opponent) crept irrevocably into the church cantata. In fact, in order to

Member Spotlight



Paul Pitkin - Oboe

Those of you loyal audience members who have attended a number of our concerts over the past three years may have noticed the glorious singing of the oboe in the orchestra. This is no accident; oboist Paul Pitkin, like most of the singers and players in the BCC, has been a musician since childhood. Paul was born in Los Angeles, but his family moved to Portland while he was a teenager. After high school he attended the New England Conservatory of Music, studying with Laurence Thorstenberg, English hornist of the Boston Symphony. While in Boston, Paul says that he "grew up musically" with Emmanuel Music, a group that among other accomplishments has twice now performed all of the Bach cantatas in the liturgical cycle for which they were written.

Although he majored in oboe performance and played professionally in Boston for some years, Paul decided to pursue different interests professionally. Among other professions, he has worked as a graphic artist, printing press operator, organic farmer and stockbroker.

Ever since his exposure to them through Emmanuel Music, the Bach cantatas have held a special place in his heart. "They are full of amazing musical gems, many of which are rarely heard," says Paul. "Plus, J.S. Bach was inordinately kind to oboists when he composed these pieces ... there are countless intimate conversations between oboe and singer interspersed throughout this unparalleled set of works. Since the pieces are by and large the most introspective of his oeuvre, I love the peeks we get at Bach's heart and soul." He also says "I've often told friends that if I had to give up all music except for one thing, I'd choose the Bach cantatas."

Paul has played as principal oboist in the Portland Chamber Orchestra and the Columbia Symphony Orchestra. On the East Coast, he performed with the Boston Philharmonic and the Boston Symphony orchestras among many other groups. Besides baroque music, Paul also enjoys playing Brahms and Richard Strauss, "two other composers who really knew how to let the oboe sing. Aside from playing oboe, my other musical pleasure is singing baritone in the Chamber Choir at First Unitarian Church in Portland. There's nothing quite like choral singing, and I don't have to make reeds to participate!"

Note: Please see page 4 for Paul's discussion on the oboe d'amore.

compete with Telemann's wildly popular services at the University Church at St. Paul, Herr Kuhnau was forced to compose in this new style that demanded more advanced singers, which were in short supply at St. Thomas.¹

It is interesting to note then, that Georg Philipp Telemann (1681-1767) was the first choice of the council/consistory. Ironically, his success at St. Paul's had contributed to the sorry state of musical affairs at the Thomasschule, and yet he was the most viable candidate! Upon closer inspection it is not hard to see why: Telemann was the most popular composer in Germany. He had attended the university in Leipzig and therefore offered no mystery to the council. At that time however, Telemann was cantor and director of town music in Hamburg, and by applying for the post in Leipzig he secured for himself a hefty raise, so he declined the offer. The other applicants of note included two alumni of both the Thomasschule and the university in Leipzig: Joh. Friedrich Fasch (1688-1758), who was then only a few months into his position as Kapellmeister at Anhalt-Zerbst, and Joh. Christoph Graupner (1683-1760), who during his nine years at St. Thomas had been Kuhnau's prize pupil.* (The records are unclear as to whether Bach was chosen ahead of Fasch or vice-versa, with Fasch being unable to accept the position for some reason.) Another factor the council undoubtedly considered is that while Bach had received a good education in the lyceum at St. Michael's Cloister in Lüneburg, he did not hold a university degree. Instead he had pursued what Martin Geck refers to as the "craftsman's approach" to his career as a musician, which method was handed down from generation to generation among Bach's family.²

Graupner in particular was an interesting candidate. A gifted clavier player, he joined the Hamburg Opera after finishing his education in Leipzig in 1707 and played harpsichord alongside a young violinist named George Handel. At that post he replaced Joh. Christian Schiefferdecker, who had left to take over as organist in Lübeck after Buxtehude died that same year. While with the opera in Hamburg Graupner had composed five very successful operas, but at the time he applied for the cantorship in Leipzig he was court Hofkapellmeister in the nearby principality of Hesse-Darmstadt. Graupner had not been paid in months, so he applied for the opening at his alma mater. However, the Landgrave of Hesse-Darmstadt would not release him for the Leipzig post, but instead promptly paid the arrearage in his salary. Graupner was forced to decline the position, and he remained in Darmstadt until his death in 1760.³

A friend and mutual admirer of men the likes of Telemann, Fasch, and Joh. Mathesson, Graupner was familiar with Bach and had met him on a number of occasions. The letter he wrote declining the position in Leipzig is intriguing. In it he endorses Bach's candidacy and gives a glowing report of him as a musician. This is unusual because "a musician was considered to be a servant, or rather a subordinate. The recommendation of one musician by another did not have a place in the society of the day."⁴

All things considered, it becomes clear why Bach was not chosen first outright. While all the others were well known, Bach was something of a mystery at the time. He was certainly a fantastic musician, but it was also his job to be a teacher, and unlike the other applicants he did not hold a university degree. One can only be grateful for the whims of fate that allowed Bach to advance to this position, and embark upon the ferocious period of creativity that began when he became Director Musices at St. Thomas Kirche. ♪

¹ See Philipp Spitta, Joann Sebastian Bach (Dover Publications Ltd., © 1951), Vol. 2 pp 205-214, and Albert Schweitzer, J.S. Bach (Dover Publications Ltd., © 1966), Vol. 1 pp 117-120.

* Whereas Bach in his lifetime would perfect the main genres of the high Baroque, these three men not only composed in the baroque idiom but also contributed to the transitional style between the Baroque and Classical eras, often called the 'rococo' or 'style galante'

² Martin Geck. Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work. (Rowholt Verlag GmbH, 2000. Eng. Translation © 2006, John Hargraves), p 47.

³ <http://www.classical-composers.org/comp/graupner>.

⁴ <http://www.ideesheureuses.ca/en/graupner.htm>. © 2006 Genevieve Soly.

BachGround

Leipzig 1729. In his personal affairs Bach was known for generosity and warm-heartedness, but when it came to music-making he had little tolerance for incompetence, and when coupled with arrogance it was more than the cantor could bear. According to Schweitzer, "Once, at the rehearsal of a cantata, [Bach] flew into such a passion with the organist [Gottlieb Görner], who was always going wrong...that he tore off his wig and threw it at the man's head, telling him that he would have done better to [be a] cobbler."¹

Before judging Bach too harshly for this display of temper however, it would be well to consider his contemporaries' views of Görner. Joh. Adolf Scheibe, another Leipzig musician of the day, said of Görner: "[Musical] rules are things he must daily dispense with, since he knows them not. He can never set a pure line (of music,) and the grossest blunders grace—or disgrace—every bar."² Apparently Scheibe thought no more of the man's character: "He is so...possessed by conceit and rudeness that...he does not know himself, and [at once] asserts his pre-eminence among a large number of equals."³ Spitta views Görner's appointment as organist as another example of the squalid state of musical affairs at St. Thomas when Bach took over. Still, by the time Bach died in 1750 he had named Görner godfather to his children, so they must have reconciled at some point during their long careers together.⁴

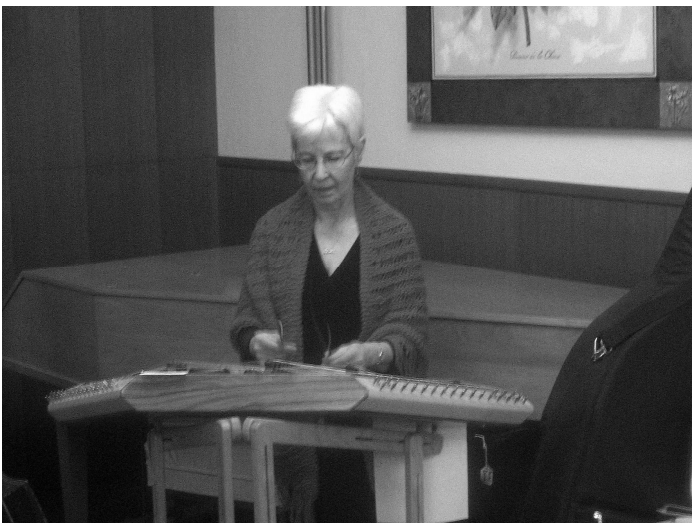
¹ Schweitzer, Vol. 1 p 122.

² Spitta, Vol. 2 pp 211-212.

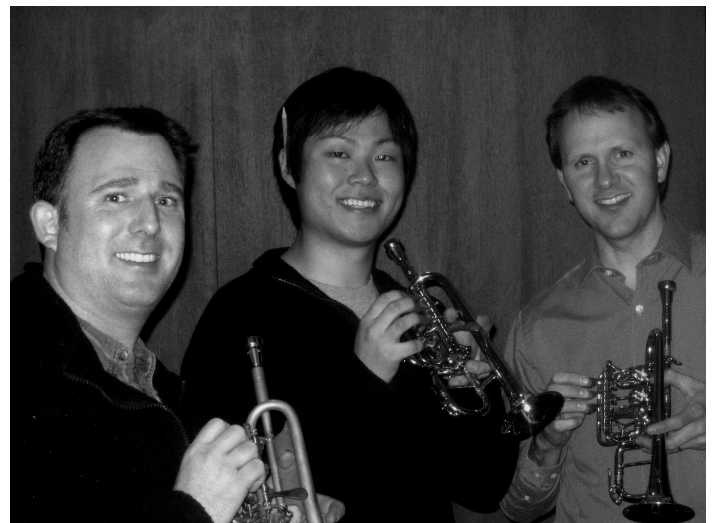
³ Ibid.

⁴ Schweitzer p 123.

Photo Gallery



Nancie Downie treats BCC concertgoers to the hammered dulcimer.



Bruce Dunn, John Kim and Scott Winks, our trumpeters three.

Oboe d'Amore

By Paul Pitkin – Oboe

The oboe d'amore is the alto instrument of the oboe family. Starting from the top and working down there's the oboe, then the oboe d'amore, which is pitched a third lower than the oboe. Next is the English horn, pitched a fifth lower than the oboe and called either the *taille* or the *oboe da caccia* during Bach's time. At the lowest range of this group is the bass oboe, or heckelphone, which plays a full octave below the oboe. Despite their different registers, all of these instruments are fingered the same.

The oboe d'amore was invented in the 18th century, and the Bach cantatas showcase the instrument at the apex of its popularity. Interestingly enough, the first composer to write specifically for the instrument was Christoph Graupner, whose Concerto for Oboe d'Amore will be heard in

the BCC's next concert. In terms of performance, the oboe d'amore is probably the most difficult instrument to play in a family of difficult instruments. This is due in large part to the fact that it has an unstable pitch and a scale that is very out of tune with itself, requiring a great ear and extreme flexibility of embouchure (use of facial muscles and lip placement) on the part of the performer.

Its darker, warmer tone is used to great effect in the cantatas, and you'll most often find it paired with solo alto; the lush sound of both alto and oboe d'amore work beautifully together. This instrument gradually fell out of favor with the advent of the clarinet, which has a larger range and is much easier to play. Very little music has been composed for the oboe d'amore since the end of the Baroque. The most notable examples are to be found in Ravel's *Bolero*, Richard Strauss' *Sinfonia Domestica* and Mahler's *Ruckert-Lieder*.



Upcoming Concerts

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.

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SuperBach Sunday
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