

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



December 2010

Vol.4, No.2

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Newsletter

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

www.bachcantatachoir.org

Sebastian Knüpfer (1633-1676)

By Dorothea Gauer Lail* – Soprano

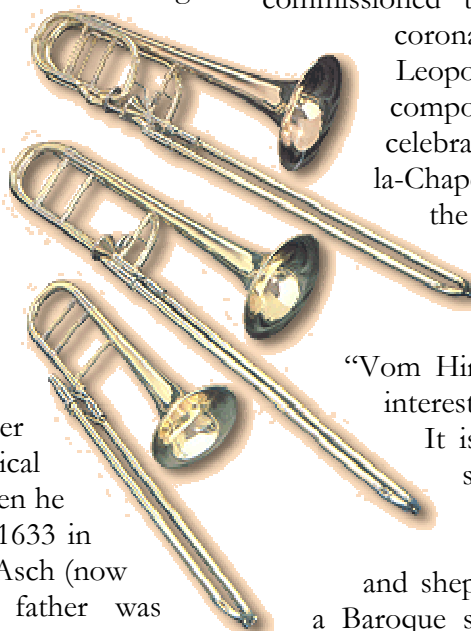
In the obituary of Bach's pre-pre-predecessor in Leipzig, it was said in October 1676 that "choosing Knüpfer [as Thomaskantor] brought honor to the musical scene of Leipzig and was a blessing for St. Thomas." Besides being a reputable teacher of old languages and history (something Bach never really excelled in), Sebastian Knüpfer was also the founder of a circle of distinguished musicians. It was this group that helped make Leipzig an important center of music.

A musical career seemed somewhat logical for the boy Sebastian when he was born in September 1633 in the Bohemian village of Asch (now Czech Republic). His father was cantor and organist, and he taught his the son the beginnings of these crafts. Sebastian was such a good student that he was playing the organ in church by the age of 10. Three years later, he was sent to school in Regensburg where he received the usual preparation for university in subjects like theology, philosophy, history, music, Latin, Greek and math. It was actually his interest in philosophy that

brought him to Leipzig where he attended the university.

When the Thomaskantor Tobias Michael died in 1657, Knüpfer applied for the position, and was chosen with the support of some influential Leipzig citizens. During his 19-year tenure he wrote motets, sacral concerts, cantatas and masses. However, only a collection of madrigals was ever printed during his lifetime in 1663. His reputation was known far beyond Leipzig, so he was commissioned to write music for the coronation of Emperor Leopold I in 1658. He also composed music for the celebration of the Peace of Aix-la-Chapelle in 1668, which ended the war between France and Spain over the Spanish Netherlands.

Knüpfer's work "Vom Himmel hoch" contains an interesting mixture of elements. It is a sort of a scenic play setting the Christmas gospel according to Luke with 6 soloists as angels and shepherds, 4-voice choir and a Baroque string orchestra enforced by a large brass section with 3 trumpets and 3 trombones. The basso continuo group also contains a harp or a lute. As in a motet, each new idea in the text corresponds to a new musical theme. The piece begins with the angel announcing the birth of Christ by using the famous Luther song "Vom Himmel hoch" and the Luke gospel. The first part ends with



the “Glory to God” set as an intricate canon for 3 soprano voices. The reaction of the shepherds is described in the second part. The trombones illustrate them running to the stable. Here Knüpfer inserts some non-biblical texts in which the shepherds, as representatives of all Christians, welcome Christ and acknowledge him as Lord and Saviour. The piece ends with a praise to God of the full ensemble, again combining text from German and Gregorian Christmas hymns. ♪

*Dorothea Gauer Lail is a soprano with the Bach Cantata Choir. She has a long history of choral and church music performance; see BachBeat Vol. 1 No. 1. All past and present issues are available at www.bachcantatachoir.org.



Upcoming Concerts

Friday, December 10, 2010 at 7:30 p.m.

Sebastian Knüpfer (1633-1676): “Von Himmel Hoch”

Michael Praetorius: (1571-1621): “Psallite,” “Es ist ein Ros,” “Von Himmel Hoch”

J. S. Bach: “Christmas Oratorio” parts 1-3

Sunday, February 6, 2011 at 2:00 p.m.

“SuperBach” Sunday

J.S. Bach: Brandenburg Concerto #2 BWV 1047

J.S. Bach: Cantata #191: “Gloria in excelsis Deo”

G. F. Handel (1685-1759): Dettingen Anthem



BACH CANTATA CHOIR
3570 NE MATHISON PLACE
PORTLAND OR 97212

Get your tickets now

for the Christmas
Oratorio concert!

Friday, December 10 at 7:30 pm

Call 800-494-TIXS or visit
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Bach's Polytheistic German: Gott!

By Bill Fisher* - Bass

At Christmastide we sing about the God who becomes a Child. An odd grammatical similarity between the two German words, *Gott* and *Kind*, shines a linguistic light into the beliefs of Bach's pre-Christian ancestors.

Both words form their plural with “-er”: *Kinder*, *Götter*. So do other biblical, manger, and barnyard words, especially the terms for the young of animals: *Lamm* (plural *Lämmer*); *Kalb* (*Kälber*). Some other ancient monosyllabic words, for example *Buch* (*Bücher*, “book”), and *Brett* (*Bretter*, “board”) do likewise.

These nouns are *neuter* in gender – except *Gott*, which is masculine. But the ancestors of *Gott* and English *God* were indeed neuter in gender, both grammatically and in the physiological gender – in earlier, more innocent times we used to call this the “sex” that the pagans ascribed to some of their gods. (The famous Venus of Willendorf, that much-earlier representation of divinity found on what is presently German-speaking territory, was amply feminine.)

Between the third and tenth centuries the meaning of the Germanic word *guda-* was transferred to the Christian Deity. Initially the word remained neuter; the shift to masculine gender happened in West Germanic areas between the early sixth and late eighth centuries.

Bach's ancestors were converted to Christianity probably even later than the tenth century. But by his time no ordinary person would have given a second thought to what the plural of *Gott* says about its earlier gender and meaning.

*Bill Fischer, of the bass persuasion, is Professor of German at Portland State University. His “Bach's German” essays, some with corrections, expansions, sources, and recommended reading, are available at:
<http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw/personal/html/bachsGerman.html>