

“...the term ‘Thomaner’ suggests something like a philosophy of life... Growing up in the milieu of great music nourishes the conviction that exerting oneself and enduring sacrifices is worthwhile to be part of a performance that moves so many. Yet, for the boys the mysterious fact remains that music requires a certain measure of ‘audacity’ too..”

Thomaskantor

Professor Georg Christoph Biller (1992-)



Awarded the RAM/Kohn Foundation Bach Prize on 11 March 2012

Leipzig’s Thomanerchor celebrates its 800th 800 YEARS OF THOMANA – 1212-2012 – FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE Thomanerchor-Thomasschule-Thomaskirche

1212 was a Leap Year too (Julian Calendar). Here in medieval times, the House of Plantagenet ruled England under the infamous King John, succeeding older brother Richard the Lionheart in the era of Robin Hood. There were two Children’s Crusades to Jerusalem, one of them from Germany. Both failed incurring massive loss of life. Fire ravaged the City of London, razing most buildings to the ground. For the people life was tough; taxes high, with little opportunity to progress unless serving the church or the court. In Germany, Leipzig received its town and market charters “a monastery, a church and a school¹ named after St. Thomas were affiliated to Canons Regular

(Augustiner-Chorherrenstift) to instruct the boys particularly for the musical services that they took over from the secular Canons Regular”. Thus, the story of the Thomanerchor began; one that now spans eight centuries, bears witness to key historical events including the Reformation, and with a musical history without parallel - Johann Sebastian Bach was Cantor from 1723-1750. He lived in lodgings in the Thomasschule next door to the imposing Thomaskirche², and whose music is at the core of the choir’s repertoire. Bach’s remains rest in a simple grave bearing his name in the chancel of the Thomaskirche, having been buried there in 1950 during the bi-centenary year.



A Cantor for today

The formal 800th celebrations take place at Leipzig in the presence of the President of the Federal Republic of Germany around Bach’s birthday³ and have been planned with a clear eye to the future. There is also an opportunity to remind everyone of the provisions in the original charter - Thomanerchor, Thomasschule and Thomaskirche - and the strength in unity and creative inspiration these provide for modern times. It is an occasion for re-dedication in a new era. With the appointment in 1992 of the present Cantor, Professor Georg Christoph Biller (pictured), an active composer, Thomaskantor in the unified Germany⁴ and 16th after Bach, no time has been lost.

In this issue: Leipzig’s Thomanerchor, a continuing story – The Bach Club Gustav Leonhardt (1928-2012) – Pope Benedict receives a special gift – Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music – About the London Bach Society

¹The “Thomana”
²also founded in 1212

³21 March
⁴post-1989

Leipzig's Thomanerchor, a continuing story....

Having had such an illustrious a cantor as Bach in the employ, it would be easy to imagine that who served before or came after this towering figure pales into comparative insignificance: it might seem almost disrespectful to the great man to even mention them. However, when Bach became Cantor in 1723 the Thomanerchor had already been established for over 500 years. The choir's heritage and place in Leipzig's cultural order contributed to the attraction of this city appointment, a combination of civic as well as church, choir and school duties, the zenith for a member of the remarkable Bach dynasty in the heart of 18th century Lutheran Germany.

Bach had some hard acts to follow; a series of multi-talented musicians who not only prospered their art while in post, but also added dimensions beyond it. Cantor Calvisius⁵ was also a mathematician and astronomer, Johann Hermann Schein⁶ had studied the theory and philosophy of Law (Jurisprudence), the young Sebastian Knüpfer⁷ was a philologist and Bach's immediate predecessor Johann Kuhnau⁸ was a linguist, a poet, had studied law and theology. Bach was a multi-talented musician, through and through, very respectful of his predecessors, an admirer of the Dresden Court composer Heinrich Schütz⁹ who had composed for the Thomaner. JSB was not first choice for the Leipzig job either and his relationship with the choir not always harmonious. Judging by the difficulty of the music he provided for them however, Bach must have had some real talent among the limited number of singers at one time or another.

The Mendelssohn connection



The Thomaner with members of Leipzig's Gewandhaus orchestra today

Bach's music survived after his death in 1750 even though the style was considered dated and performances of it were limited. However it was not until the next century that his true genius was really extolled and the music's revival, led by the young Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy,¹⁰ gathered momentum. Leipzig became a 19th century cultural hub, vibrant, a magnet for the composers of the day. Its musicians were ubiquitous, industrious, passionate and prolific. When Mendelssohn directed the St. Matthew Passion in the Thomaskirche in 1841¹¹ it was the Thomanerchor, at the centre of that hub, who performed it - a defining moment for the choir and the birth of a tradition and partnership with the Gewandhaus Orchestra¹² still thriving. Mendelssohn had become the orchestra's music director in 1835 and its role eventually was to provide musicians for the opera, season's concerts and weekly services at the Thomaskirche that continues for this world-class orchestra today. Following on, further cantors continued the Bach revival. Moritz Hauptmann

was chairman of the Bach Gesellschaft founded in 1850 by Schumann and Liszt, Cantor Wilhelm Rust a prominent editor of the first complete Bach edition (the BG) published between 1850 and 1899. Yet, the political undercurrents that accompanied these productive years were to surface with full force in the century to come and a very different working environment emerged after WWI.

The 'political' years

In the first half of the 20th century, creativity moved away from the bourgeois and romantic. *Gebrauchsmusik*¹³ was hijacked by the political right wing in the 1920s and 30s, and Wagner's operas suited Hitler's perverted ideology. After 1945 the consequences of WWII meant that Leipzig found itself in the communist half of a divided Germany, the city a major political centre for the next forty years and its musicians an irresistible resource for the GDR state to export. The Thomaner survived remarkably throughout and even more remarkably, Bach remained at the centre of the repertoire. Günther Ramin, Kurt Thomas, Erhard Mauersberger¹⁴ and Hans-Joachim Rotzsch reigned as Cantors, the home concerts and recitals a mainstay for the people and major foreign tours, often with the Gewandhaus, regularly featured in the diary - albeit under the aegis of the State. However in 1989 life was set to change dramatically and politically again, a movement significantly driven from Leipzig, this 'revolutionary' city, and from the Nikolaikirche¹⁵ in particular. The communists crumbled and Germany unified. As the people got used to the new freedoms this brought - travel, a free press and TV among them - barriers were removed for the Thomaner too. They even agreed to meet a lady from London wanting to extend the hand of musical friendship with an invitation to come to Britain and work with the period instruments of Steinitz Bach Players!

The London Bach Society promoted the first ever visit to the UK by Professor Biller and the Thomanerchor in November 1994. It was truly memorable. They have been returning here ever since.

⁵Calvisius 1556-1615

⁶Schein 1586-1630

⁷Knüpfer 1633-1676

⁸Kuhnau 1660-1722

⁹Schütz 1585-1672, Dresden Kapellmeister

¹⁰Mendelssohn 1809-1847

¹¹1st Leipzig performance after Bach's time

¹²Founded 1781 by Johann Adam Hiller

¹³Music for Use - Hindemith, Kurt Weill, Carl Orff and others

¹⁴Brother Rudolf was Kreuzkantor in Dresden

¹⁵Venue for Bach's Johannes-Passion première 1724

"Once a Thomaner, always a Thomaner"

...with a surprising English connection



The Alumnat or "The Box"

The 9-18 year old boys live and rehearse in the Alumnat¹⁶ (pictured) a half-mile walk from the Thomaskirche. They attend the Thomasschule nearby and from here pursue their studies to University entrance level. After homework, vocal and instrumental tuition they each have their house duties, the communal upbringing proven over

It is Friday afternoon and the Thomaner is in town. From the Alumnat to the Thomaskirche meander groups of young boys in their familiar 'sailor suit' outfits, known today as the 'Kiel Blouse' after the city in which it is now manufactured... but it has a surprising English connection. The blouse originates from mid-19th century Victorian England, the dark blue suit with striped collar, standard attire for Sundays and holidays in bourgeois society. The boys are escorted en route to the church by a posse of older boys sporting smart suits and ties; some lost in headphones; some in animated talk, but all arriving in good time for the Motette¹⁷, climbing the back stairs into the gallery, music handed out, everyone in place. On Saturday afternoon it is the same, but this time for a Bach cantata with the Gewandhaus, repeated at 9.30am on Sunday for *Gottesdienst*. All this is a product of the daily rehearsals the demanding schedule requires, their natural obligations to the church and their worldwide following - *Soli Deo Gloria*. Whether at home or on tour there is the compulsory rest period before major concerts, followed by a vocal 'warm-up' on arrival at the church or concert hall. Thousands flock to hear their unique sound every year and buy their numerous recordings. Press, Radio and TV coverage is commonplace and invitations to tour are received almost weekly, with only time in the calendar for a limited number to be accepted each year. For their 800th the boys are proud to welcome the choirs from Regensburg, Dresden and King's College Cambridge to share their anniversary with them.

centuries that creates a 'home away from home'. There is regular contact with parents, who are invited to attend the weekly 'Hausmusik' where the boys present informal recital programmes of folk songs, lieder or instrumental pieces they have prepared. The older boys are responsible for the well being of the younger ones and on tour the prefects supervise the carting of luggage and room allocations as well. It is a signal honour to be a prefect. When voices break, the rest time is about six months and the boys concerned remain with the choir as non-participants until the Cantor thinks the voices have settled into their new range. Thomaner life goes on without interruption and they are all cared for by devoted teachers and house staff. The leaving age is 18 and the boys will have forged lifelong friendships. While most choose to pursue non-musical careers after University, many form vocal groups to sing for pleasure. There are also invitations to rejoin the choir for a special concert for example and to continue their support as a Friend or benefactor. The roll of honour also includes those who have entered the music profession in the widest sense. The German pop group *Die Prinzen* and vocal ensemble *amarcord* are all former Thomaner, as are CPE Bach, conductors Karl Richter and Jorg-Peter Weigle, the tenor Christoph Genz and today's cantor Georg Christoph Biller.



Wearing the 'Kiel Blouse' of Victorian England



Leipzig's refurbished Thomaskirche

Forum Thomanum-Foundation for the Future

Forum Thomanum is an international educational centre to adjoin the Thomasschule and the Alumnat, eventually to form a campus after building works are complete in 2013. Professor Biller is using the 800th anniversary of the choir, the church and the school to 'expand the tradition of collaboration and take it in new directions'. It is an innovative and imaginative development that reflects the spirit of the original charter well. The Thomanerchor strives to "increase the involvement of others in their own work, 'to infect, incite and excite' them with, to and for music, not merely to consume but rather actively create music". The opportunities springing from this will enable pupils to receive an inclusive, cohesive and enjoyable musical education as part of the curriculum, from Kindergarten to University entrance, fostering individual talent and interest in music. The Leipzig heritage all around them is a constant focus for projects, with the Lutherkirche nearby a venue for concerts and productions as well as church services. The way forward is clear; standards and aspirations are high...best summed up perhaps in the words of Bach's motet "*Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied*". Congratulations dear friends! **Margaret Steinitz**

For further information visit www.thomanerchor.de www.thomaskirche.org www.forum-thomanum.de

¹⁶Boarding House

¹⁷Service with anthems and motets

THE 18-30 BACH CLUB

Exploring Bach

Ruth Mariner reflects on the recent Bach Club meeting and catches up with violinist Rodolfo Richter...

2012 is the year baroque virtuoso Rodolfo Richter sets out to complete one of his life ambitions: to record all of Bach's output written for the violin. The audience of the third Bach Club meeting, held at the Foundling Museum during last November's Bachfest, were present for a preview of what is to come where we gathered to listen to Sonata's No 1, 2 and 4 for violin and harpsichord from Bach's complete collection (BWV 1014-1019)

Like myself, Richter is convinced that Bach should be for everyone, for the young and old; for those who have grown up with the tradition, and for those who have arrived at Bach from other pathways. I wanted to find why Bach fires Richter's ambition, and what his love of Bach can tell us about the ways in which we can experience the composer.

"What makes Bach's music so enjoyable for me is the fact that it is unbelievably rich at so many levels", Richter comments. It's true; we admire Bach for his tight technique, his astute balance of melody and counterpoint. For performers the complex inner workings of the composition provide an endlessly rich source for interpretation. But, as Richter implores "he's never academic, because even when he's obsessed with the complexity and rigidity of his own technical challenges; he knows when to break free." Indeed, each note is always present, but it is the art of choosing which colours, tones and shapes to accentuate; the way one might turn a diamond to let it glimmer in the light.

Richter's performance encapsulated the equilibrium of this ordered, yet entirely expressive art; especially in the *allegro* movement of the first sonata. The music was exquisite. His nimble bow soared over the strings, spinning silken melody lines, effortlessly interlocking with the accompanying harpsichord counterpoint. The relationship between the two was precise, alive; instinctual.

When I asked him why it is important to help young people engage with Bach today, Richter replied that *"it is important to help them open up a new path of discovery. A discovery of both Bach's music... and a self-discovery"*. It is specifically the emotional and technical richness of Bach's music that enables such a deep exploration. As Richter says, *"These different levels contain so many other layers, that one feels no one can get to the bottom of it all in a lifetime."*

This sense of exploration and growth created a depth throughout Richter's performance. The emotional shading was that of one who has taken a journey with Bach, returning to the same music to nourish the different stages of his life; finding new meanings there and refining his interpretation. Each movement achieved a subtle profundity through its nuanced colouring. The opening *siciliano largo* of the more well-known Sonata no. 4 was especially poignant with its slow, careful dignity and tender expression; giving melodic lines their full expressive potential whilst implying a hint of reservation; never rushing ahead into their familiarity.

In the concert I was struck by the memory of a phrase a playwright friend recently expressed to me: *"There's one story; you get that for free, but look again, and there's another, and if you give the time then you get something far bigger than the price you paid for admission."* Ultimately by offering tickets at reduced prices, the 18-30 Bach Club offers young people a way of coming to know Bach. Yet what they take away with them is their own decision.

It was wonderful to see the evening was brought to a close with wine, and an informal dispersal of people around the Foundling Museum, talking to one another about their experiences with Bach. A group of students set themselves up round the harpsichord to play and talk about certain passages and show off their keyboard skills. One of my friends listened with intrigue to one lady's description of a previous musical life she had led in Berlin. Others were admiring the extravagant architecture and curiously wandering to have a look at the paintings. For everyone involved, the evening acted as a mirror for their own lives; different chords, melodies and interactions resonating in different ways for different people.

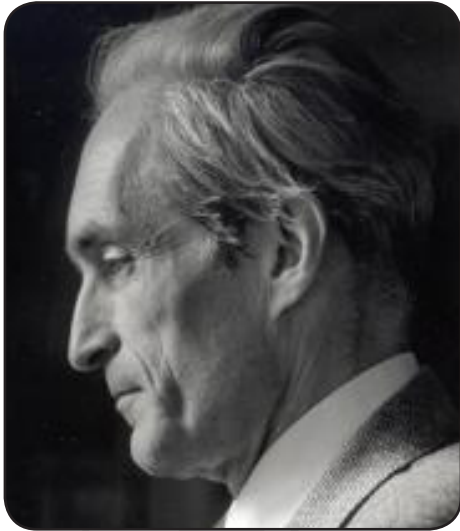
Rodolfo Richter was joined by the harpsichordist James Johnstone for the recitals that were given last November as part of the London Bach Society's 21st Bachfest. Ruth Mariner graduated from Goldsmiths' College with a First Class degree in Music. She is now studying for her M.Phil at Corpus Christie College Cambridge, while retaining Internships with the London Bach Society and Early Music



Shared experience in the Foundling Museum

The last 'true pioneer'

Gustav Leonhardt (1928-2012)



Gustav Leonhardt was born in s'Graveland, Hilversum, The Netherlands on 30 May 1928. He grew up surrounded by music in his home. Leonhardt's birth date could be construed as a portent of things to come as, on the corresponding date in 1723, 1724 and 1726, Bach's church cantatas BWV 75, BWV 184 and BWV 43 respectively were first performed at Leipzig! From an early age Leonhardt showed a particular interest in the harpsichord and organ, and studied both instruments with Eduard Müller at the Basle Schola Cantorum, making his concert debut in Vienna, followed by appointment as Professor at the Vienna State Academy of Music in 1952. Leonhardt made his first discs of Bach's solo harpsichord music in the early 1950s and these rapidly established his reputation as a very fine interpreter of the composer's keyboard works, a privilege countless people worldwide continued to enjoy throughout his long and active life. His death closes one of the most important chapters in the history of European Music over the last half century. Leonhardt was perhaps the last living 'true pioneer' of historically informed performances of Bach, daring to challenge accepted thinking from the 1950s that, along with others similarly curious, brought us 'Bach in its original form'. Nowhere is this more apparent

than in the historic set of complete cantata recordings he shared with Harnoncourt for Teldec. With his wonderful keyboard dexterity and musical insight, Leonhardt's pioneering spirit was the facet that permeated his performances he never lost - witness: his recital for Lufthansa Festival of Baroque Music in 2011. Outside music was the love of fine wine, antiques and...fast cars, the faster the better! His wife, the violinist Marie Amsler Leonhardt, survives him. **MS**

Visit www.bachlive.co.uk for a further tribute.

Pope Benedict receives a special gift

On his visit to Germany last year, Pope Benedict XVI met the head of the Evangelical Church in Germany (EKD) at the Augustinian Monastery in Erfurt on September 23, and following their talks, jointly celebrated an ecumenical Liturgy of the Word. In this, Pope Benedict XVI read a prayer for Christian unity and delivered the sermon. On the Pope's departure, the chair of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany, Präses Nikolaus Schneider, presented the head of the Catholic Church with a valuable facsimile from Bärenreiter-Verlag: the manuscript of Johann Sebastian Bach's Mass in B minor. The edition annotated by Prof. Dr. Dr. h. c. Christoph Wolff, was published with the help of the Leipzig Bach Archive. With this musical present, the EKD has built a bridge to the Catholic Church in the historic monastery at Erfurt where Martin Luther spent six years as a monk. www.bach-leipzig.de

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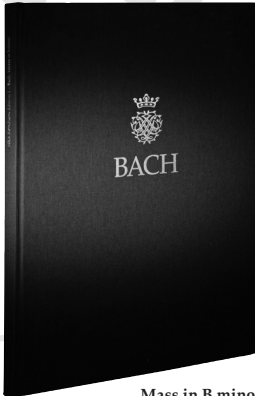
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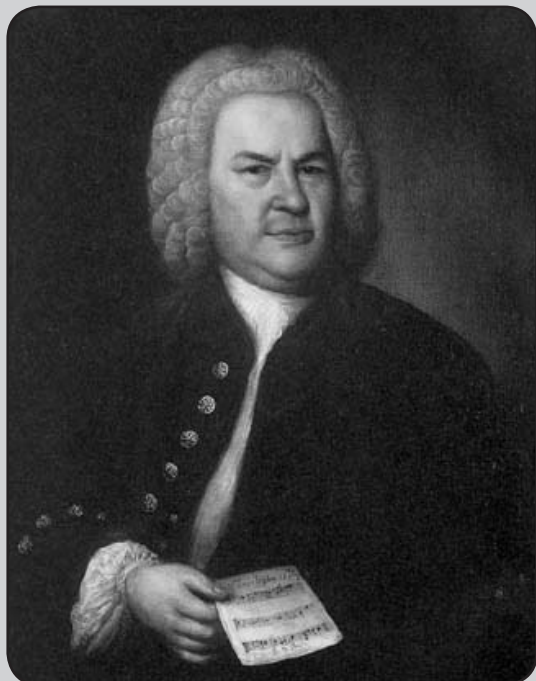
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¹⁸Boarding House

¹⁹Service with anthems and motets

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David Copperfield by Charles Dickens (200th 1812-2012)

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