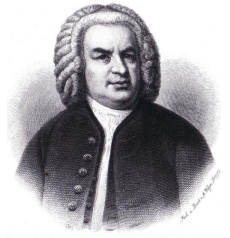


# Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



May 2019

[www.bachcantatachoir.org](http://www.bachcantatachoir.org)

Vol. 12, No. 6

## ***2018-19 Season Finale*** ***Sunday, May 19, 2019 at 2:00 pm***

***Dixit Dominus by George Frideric Handel***

***BWV 176 Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding by Johann Sebastian Bach***

Catherine van der Salm, Soprano

Laura Beckel Thoreson, Alto

All Bach Cantata Choir concerts are held at the Rose City Park Presbyterian Church at the corner of NE 44th & Sandy (office address 1907 NE 45th Ave) in Portland, Oregon ([map](#)).  
*Admission is free. Free-will offerings gratefully accepted.*

## **Music for Trinity Sunday**

Contributors:

Dr. William Fischer, Ralph Nelson, and James Bash

### **J. S. Bach (1685-1750)**

Cantata 176, *Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding*, was written for Trinity Sunday in 1725, Bach's second year in Leipzig. In the following article, William Fischer, Ph.D., a scholar of literature and language, gives us his view on the text for this cantata.

### **Defiance and Despondence, Nicodemus as Everyone, and Bach's Remarkable Librettist**

The first line of BWV 176, to be sung at our May concert, is *Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding um aller Menschen Herze*: "There is something defiant and despondent about all people's hearts."

Is not "defiant and despondent" an odd pairing? The line is a slightly altered version of Luther's annotations on Jeremiah 17:9. It and all but the final chorale of BWV 176 are written by the Leipzig-based Christiane Marianne von Ziegler (1695-1760), who provided the main texts for eight other of Bach's cantatas. She is difficult to place in a larger poetic and intellectual context. The German Wikipedia article hedges about this: she is termed a poet "of the time of the Enlightenment," which is not at all the same thing as "a poet of the Enlightenment." Well, her acquaintance Bach was also in no wise a follower of the Enlightenment. And indeed, Ziegler's texts resemble far more those of the baroque poets of the seventeenth century, like Paul Fleming (1609-1640) and Paul Gerhardt (1607-1676), who gave German Protestantism some of its greatest hymns, and thus Bach some of his chorale texts.

In another cantata, BWV 175, Ziegler clearly views rationalism as a weak support: "die verblendete Vernunft" ("blinded reason", 5). More viscerally, her verse is full of devotional worship of the crucified Jesus, and of

admonitions to cling to Christ in a world of doubt and suffering. No doubt that had something to do with Ziegler's personal life. Her father, who became mayor of Leipzig in 1701 and was also on the board of the Nikolaikirche, was accused of financial dishonesty and died after forty-one (!) years in jail, though an actual judgment was never concluded (holy habeas corpus!). Ziegler lost six siblings early in this family disaster. Marrying at age sixteen, she lost that husband a year later; she married again within three years and buried that husband and her two daughters from that marriage. Nevertheless, if personal misfortunes contributed to Ziegler's religious attitudes, those attitudes took sustenance from the religious convictions and emotions around her.

Ziegler uses *trotzig* and *verzagt* to frame her narration of Nicodemus who, fearful of being found out in his attraction to Jesus, comes to him by night to ask what it means to "be born again" (John 3:3). I think she may be telling us about Nicodemus in a Baroque and thus non-Enlightenment way. The faith of those most congenial to Bach was not a matter of espousing a reasonable, reasoned and rational argument for the existence of God and for the logical necessity of Jesus as the Christ, which is actually not an act of faith. Rather, that faith, drawing psychological and also intellectual support from scripture, was a conviction that directly generated emotions, emotions which could range from fear of a just divine wrath to an intensely felt certainty of the love of God. In some believers – St. Augustine is the paradigm – faith comes from a feeling of impossibility. Nicodemus is described – describes himself, actually – as believing precisely because of the miracles he has seen (BWV 176:3).

Ziegler sees Nicodemus going to Jesus at night because he is afraid to be seen doing so. But that he is going to Jesus at all, she explains, is because he is in a state of emotional crisis brought about by what he has seen Jesus do (BWV 176:3). That is not surprising, since Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and thus had a major stake in the conventional Judaism of his time. The deeds and preaching of Jesus had made him despondent – but also intrigued and perhaps even hopeful. But why was Nicodemus "trotzig"? One clue may lie in Ziegler's paraphrase of Luther's paraphrase of Jeremiah: it is not just Nicodemus' heart, but the "hearts of all" ("aller Menschen Herze") that are both despondent and defiant. The teachings and miracles of Jesus were addressed to everyone, since everyone had need of them. And yet so many refused to accept them.

If I may offer a teacher's observation: students who are panicky or despondent about their failure to learn will look desperately for resources that might save them. They are also *trotzig*; the last place they will look for their salvation is the first place they should have looked: the materials and learning techniques their teacher has placed in front of them. Bach was a music teacher often vexed by his pupils.

Nicodemus has more than a slight resemblance to St. Paul. Both are Jewish traditionalists, and both later come to Christ. When we next encounter Nicodemus, also in the Gospel of John (7:50-51), he urges the Jewish authorities to treat Jesus with patience and fairness. The third time (John 19:39-42) he is helping to remove Jesus' body from the cross and prepare it for entombment. It may be that Ziegler is underscoring the similarity by emphasizing how Nicodemus, made powerless by the light of day, is surrounded by dark as he visits Jesus. In effect, he, like Saul / Paul, must first become blind in order to see. That is amazing grace.

- *Dr. William B. Fischer is Professor of German, Emeritus, Department of World Languages & Literatures, Portland State University. He sings bass in the Bach Cantata Choir.*

### **G. F. Handel (1685-1759)**

This concert features one of George Frideric Handel's most interesting and also most difficult works for chorus and orchestra – "Dixit Dominus" – a choral setting of Psalm 110. The work is also one of the most curious and perhaps "un-Handel-like" works in the repertoire. Let me explain:

In 1707, the immensely-talented Handel (only 22 years old) traveled to Italy from his native Germany, probably with the hope that he would make his fortune by composing operas. He settled in Rome and lived there for three years before returning to Germany. In addition to composing operas, he also found that, despite being Lutheran by birth, he received a number of commissions from the Catholic Church. "Dixit Dominus" was one of those commissions.

"Dixit Dominus" is a setting of Psalm 110, "The Lord said to My Lord." This is one of the Psalms that is often said/sung during a vesper (evening) service. Some scholars believe that Handel may have written this setting for a coronation or perhaps even for a special ordination service. While modern readers may see the text as "war-like" and "dark" – the Church at this time viewed the text as a prophecy of Christ's victory over the devil – and hence the text was sung in an almost cheerful mood. This is perhaps why so many of the movements are

written to be performed at a very fast tempo.

In any event, we know that in Rome, Handel would have had some of the finest musicians in Italy as the performers. Thus, the work is a real "tour de force" for choir, soloists, and string orchestra. The first movement is rather dramatic, with the chorus repeating "Dixit" many times. Movements 2 (alto aria) and 3 (soprano aria) are beautifully-written solos. Two our favorite BCC soloists – alto Laura Beckel Thoreson and soprano Catherine van der Salm will be singing these arias. The work concludes with movement 9, which is a very fast and difficult "Gloria Patri" for the chorus – with the 1st sopranos singing many high B-flats.

One last thing to listen for: in a number of movements in "Dixit Dominus," Handel has the sopranos ascend "step by step" and then hold long notes while the other parts sing faster passages under them. This is the exact same technique that he will use 34 years later in the famous "Hallelujah" Chorus from *Messiah*. Many scholars have noted that Handel loved to "rob" from himself – and I suspect that, when he found a good technique that he liked, he figured that he'd use it more than once!

"Dixit Dominus" will be the final work on our 2018-2019 season. We hope you will enjoy it. We are so appreciative of the wonderful audience support that we have received for the last 14 years, and we look forward to seeing you again in November when we start our 15th season. It is such a joy to present this amazing music to such a wonderful audience! Vielen Dank!

- *Ralph Nelson is the Artistic Director of the Bach Cantata Choir.*

**Meet the Choir!** The Bach Cantata Choir consists of many volunteers who love music. We plan to introduce many of them here. In this issue we introduce Kathryn Work.

One of the most versatile musicians in the Bach Cantata Choir is Kathryn Work, a trusty alto who often accompanies sectional rehearsals on the piano with her fantastic sight-reading skills. Kathryn became interested in music quite early. She grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and went with her parents to a Presbyterian church where she sang in the children's choir.

"I began taking piano lessons when I was six and accompanied the little worship service for the kids which took place at the beginning of Sunday School," she said. The adults gave her the hymn numbers in advance so that she could practice them, and after a while they didn't have to give her the numbers at all.

"Reading hymns is good practice in basic harmony and voice leading," said Kathryn. "I credit that with my becoming a good sight reader."

Later she sang in the adult choir and in the choir at school and accompanied it also. She continued with choir and accompanying at Earlham College where she majored in music.

"At Earlham, I had a piano teacher who did a great service for me," recalled Kathryn. "For my junior recital I had to play the Schubert B flat trio with the faculty violinist and cellist, who were experienced in chamber music. I just got the way that communication happens in an ensemble. I love solo piano but playing chamber music with others is wonderful fun."

She graduated with a BA in Music. Then she went to Cleveland, Ohio to study piano with Arthur Loesser (the half-brother, btw, of Broadway composer Frank Loesser). Loesser was a child prodigy and author of a *Men, Women, and Pianos: A Social History*. "He was erudite and witty and all that," remarked Kathryn. "But he wasn't good at teaching." Consequently, Kathryn withdrew from playing the piano.

She decided that she would teach music and was accepted by Yale University's School of Music where she studied music theory. She started with cello as her instrument, but married a fellow student after the first year and quit school to work while he finished his degree.

Kathryn gradually returned to playing piano and loved playing with chamber ensembles. She also became a piano tuner and technician, and loves her Stieff grand piano. She moved from Massachusetts to Portland in 2005 to be near one of her two children. She has been a member of the Bach Cantata Choir for the past three years. Kathryn also is the accompanist for a new community choir called Cantata Pacifica, which has just given its first concert. Music, and

especially Bach's music, is an integral part of her life!

- *James Bash is a prolific writer in Portland and beyond. His articles have appeared in a number of magazines and newspapers. He sings tenor in the Bach Cantata Choir.*

*Note from the Artistic Director:*

*This issue of the BachBeat is written by a trio of choir members. John Chilgren, our long-time BachBeat writer, is unable to continue due to illness. John has researched and written tirelessly over the past five seasons, and we greatly appreciate all his contributions and historical insights that he has provided our audiences. On a personal note – I have always read his articles with great fascination, and have learned tremendously from his research. I know that he greatly misses writing these articles, and we will miss reading them. Thank you, John!*

## **Thank you!**

We appreciate the generosity of all who support the Bach Cantata Choir.

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## **Bach Cantata Choir**

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## **Recommended Reading**

Dr. William B. Fischer is the author of *When God Sang German: Etymological Essays about the Language of Bach's Sacred Music*. Dr. Fischer is graciously donating the proceeds from each book to the Bach Cantata Choir. His books are generally available at each concert and are also available from Amazon.

## **Concert Notes**

### **Admission:**

- Tickets are not required at this concert. A free-will offering will be taken.

### **Parking:**

- The church's parking lot is very small and fills up quickly. Please allow time to find on-street parking.
- Do not park in the Grocery Outlet lot!

### **Accessibility:**

- The church has an elevator accessible from its parking lot, facing Sandy Blvd.

The Bach Cantata Choir's mission is to sing the entire set of cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 30 years.

The Bach Cantata Choir is a legally organized non-profit corporation under Oregon law, and is a registered 501(c)(3) corporation with the IRS. Donations to the choir are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law and regulation.

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

Emily Rampton, Editor

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