

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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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 fully deductible for income tax purposes.

Newsletter

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www.bachcantatachoir.org

Bach the Brawler?

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

It is a late summer's evening in 1705 in the town of Arnstadt, Thuringia, which is located in the central part of what we now know as Germany. A slender handsome man, perhaps twenty years old, strolls across the deserted market square, puffing a tobacco pipe on his way home after a late night out. Drinking at a local *brauhaus*, perhaps? Possibly. He is quite fond of beer, being a young man in Germany after all. Without warning, several shadows slip from the darkness of an alleyway between tall, narrow buildings. Hurrying across the square they accost the man, setting upon him with cudgels. In a flash the young man draws his sword; a row ensues. Fortunately for us no one is seriously injured, for the man who has been attacked is none other than the young Johann Sebastian Bach, fresh into his first professional appointment as organist at the New Church in Arnstadt.

It is perhaps no surprise that he should draw a weapon to defend himself. No, the curious part of this story is that his attackers are not highwaymen but music students, *his* music students, led by bassoonist Johann Geyersbach. Frustrated with the poor quality of the student musicians at the New Church and fed up with their rank amateurism, Bach had previously called Geyersbach a '*zippel Faggotist*,' which may be translated as 'rapsallion of a bassoonist.' Clever man

that he is however, Bach quite probably intends that the insulted wind player take the term as an onomatopoeic reference to a... wind-based bodily indiscretion.¹ In any case, it is not a flattering description of the man's bassoon playing to say the least. Naturally Geyersbach had to defend his honor, if one considers it 'honorable' to set upon Bach in the dark with six companions along as back-up. That he was able to fight his way free of such formidable odds testifies to the fact that there was more to Bach than just music.

Baroque music has been described as stiff and formal by its detractors. In fact, more than one wooden-eared critic has dismissed Bach as a 'mathematician.' What may be easy to forget is the very real, visceral, *human* nature of the man who created this music that we as Bach lovers esteem so highly. The above vignette is just one of many examples that help cast aside the common notion of Bach as a stodgy Lutheran churchman plodding through various ecclesiastical and court appointments in early 18th century Germany, cranking out masterpiece after masterpiece like some miraculous 'mathematician' indeed. Miles Hoffman, artistic director of the American Chamber Players, submits that this is our principal notion of the man "...because of one portrait. The only authenticated portrait of Bach shows him as an old man -- bewigged, bejeweled, stout and stolid. This is the portrait everybody knows, the portrait of the serious, solemn, even severe 'old master'."² There is no need to describe it further: it is reproduced in the title bar of this newsletter.

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Member Spotlight



Dorothea Gauer Lail - Soprano

One of the founding members of the BCC, Doro (as she is affectionately known to the choir) has a long history of singing. Born in Muhlheim, in the Ruhr area of Germany (about 50 miles north of Cologne), she is a member of the third generation in her family to sing in the same church choir. You might say it's in her blood: her father and mother first met during rehearsals for the church choir, and later her mother took great pride in the fact that she never missed a single rehearsal while carrying Doro. Her mother was back singing at the Easter Vigil two weeks after her daughter's birth, and that was Doro's first choir concert, where according to her she got "infected with the choir virus." She holds a PhD in physics and works as an engineer, but also has a degree in church music and plays piano, recorder, and pipe organ. She has sung in many choirs over the past 27 years, and is also currently a member of the Portland Symphonic Choir.

Along with Uwe Haefker, Doro is one of two native German speakers in the BCC who coach us in German diction. She believes the biggest difficulty with German is "the fact that there are different ways of pronouncing the 'e.' There are a bunch of rules about it but only a linguist can tell you why it's pronounced that way sometimes and not this way. When I'm listening to recordings of non-German choirs singing Bach...it's the vowel pronunciation that betrays the non-native speaker."

When asked what it is about Bach's music that she finds so appealing, Doro had this to say: "I have gone through the complete history of Occidental music from Gregorian Chant to contemporary world premieres. What fascinates me about Bach is his diligence down to the last detail. If you start taking a closer look at his works you find layer by layer of astonishing detail which shows that Bach was a theologian and would probably have been a very good architect as well... Another fact I find amazing is that despite the huge amount of music Bach wrote, he always managed to find new and unexpected twists... as a musician you always have to be on your toes to keep up with Bach."

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But we don't gather together as an audience, as choristers and instrumentalists, to hear and perform the outworkings of a 'bejeweled' master contapuntist. We don't strive so diligently to reproduce his work as majestically as we can because we are in awe of his abilities as a 'stolid' theorist. We feel Bach's music so keenly, so profoundly and lovingly because just like us he was *human*. He knew joy, loss, rapture, disappointment, elation and mortality as do we. We revere his work because his voice, like a very few others in the long march of history, is completely transcendental. We hear it today; no mere ghostly echo, but a spirit as alive and vibrant as it was when he scuffled with his bassoon player in the market square 300 years ago. It speaks in a language beyond time, beyond place and history. It is with that spirit in mind that the Bach Cantata Choir wholeheartedly invites you to join us as we perform all of his sacred cantatas over the next 20 years or so. Let's take this journey together. What a ride it will be! ♪

¹Martin Geck, *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work* (Rowholt Verlag GmbH, 2000. Eng. Translation C. 2006, John Hargraves), p 53.

²Miles Hoffman, "Johann Sebastian Bach was Handsome Once" (www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2002/mar/Bach/)

About the Choir

The mission of the Bach Cantata Choir is to sing the entire set of sacred cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach over a period of 20 years. The choir anticipates performing at least four cantata concerts per year—two or three cantatas per concert—and performing the Christmas Oratorio over a two-year cycle. Cantatas are chosen to closely match the liturgical time of the year for which Bach wrote them. Concerts are Sunday afternoons at 2:00 p.m.

Singers come from many different choirs in the Portland area. The common denominator is a love for Bach and prior experience singing Bach in German with another choir. Singers interested in joining the choir should contact the Artistic Director at info@bachcantatachoir.org for an audition. Rehearsals are on Sunday afternoons from 1:00 to 2:30 p.m.

All rehearsals and concerts are at Rose City Park Presbyterian Church, located in the Hollywood district of Portland, Oregon at NE Sandy Boulevard and NE 45th Avenue. The street address of the church is 1907 NE 45th Avenue.



The Bach Cantata Choir at one of its first performances. (Photo: Ric Getter.)

BCC Silent Auction

On Sunday, November 4, the Bach Cantata Choir will hold its Second Annual Silent Auction in conjunction with the first concert of the 2007-08 season. Auction chair Barbara Reader said "This is the main fundraiser for the choir and we hope to underwrite much of the expense of the orchestra for the Christmas Oratorio performance in December." Based on last year's experience, the selection of items will be wide and varied, ranging from a romantic airplane ride and beach picnic to a sailboat excursion on the Columbia River. The many wonderful things to eat are always popular too. There will be a number of restaurant gift certificates available, as well as a variety of goods and services. The auction will take place in the half-hour just before the concert, and will conclude thirty minutes after the concert is over.

Donations for the auction can be made by any friend of the Choir; contact Barbara Reader at preader@pacifier.com by October 28.

The doors open at 1:30 p.m. on November 4, so plan to come early and bid generously!

BachGround

Late 1717 - Since 1713 Bach has been serving as the "court organist and chamber musician" for Duke Wilhelm Ernst of Weimar, co-regent with his nephew Ernst August. The Dukes do not get along well at all, and in fact the elder Wilhelm has forbidden Ernst August to use Bach for his private concerts. In August of 1717 Bach visits the nearby principality of Anhalt-Cöthen where he meets young Prince Leopold, himself a talented musician. Impressed by Bach's abilities, Leopold immediately hires him to be *Kapellmeister* of the royal court in Cöthen. The trouble is, Duke Wilhelm has not yet released him from his service at Weimar, and he has no intention of doing so. By December the situation reaches a crisis point, and at Wilhelm's behest Bach is imprisoned by the County Magistrate "for obstinate behavior and forcing the question of his dismissal."¹ Bach is treated well, however, and given quill and paper, whereupon he spends the next several weeks fleshing out the first draft of Vol. 1 of *The Well-Tempered Clavier*. Talk about time well spent... Bach is soon released from the Duke's service (with his extreme displeasure) and sent on his way to the court in Cöthen.

¹ Geck, pp 95-96. From *Bach-Dokumente*. Bach-Archiv Leipzig Vol 2. 1963-72.



2007/2008 Season Schedule

Sunday, November 4, 2007, 2pm

J.S. Bach: Cantatas 26 and 80
Mendelssohn: Motet, *Heilig*
Silent Auction follows concert.

Friday, December 21, 2007, 7:30pm

J.S. Bach: Christmas Oratorio, parts 4-6
Buxtehude: *In Dulci Jubilo*
Tickets required. Call 503-224-TIXX or visit website to order online.

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.

BACH CANTATA CHOIR
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PORTLAND OR 97212

www.bachcantatachoir.org

**Don't miss our
upcoming concert!**

Bach's well-known
festive Cantata #80
Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott
(A Mighty Fortress)

Sunday, November 4 at 2 pm!