

BachBeat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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www.bachcantatachoir.org

Johann Schelle

By Dorothea Gauer Lail – Soprano*

Johann Who? I've never heard of him.

Never fear; you aren't the only one. Johann Schelle suffered the same fate as J.S. Bach did when his style of music went out of fashion. For one, the scores for Schelle's music got thrown out of the choral archives of St. Thomas in Leipzig in order to make room for music that was more up to date. This could happen rather quickly. Schelle's direct successor, his cousin Johann Kuhnau, wrote in Schelle's obituary that the former rarely "brought forth a church composition or any other piece" which was not appreciated by the audience, and therefore his works would "be kept for a long time as documents [...] of his wonderful gifts in the understanding of composition." Only about 25 years later, J.S. Bach thought differently: "[.] the present *status musicus* is very different than that of former days"; "art has risen considerably"; "the gusto has changed astonishingly" and thus "the former kind of music will not please our ears anymore". Who knows--perhaps the archive space of St. Thomas was running low at that time...

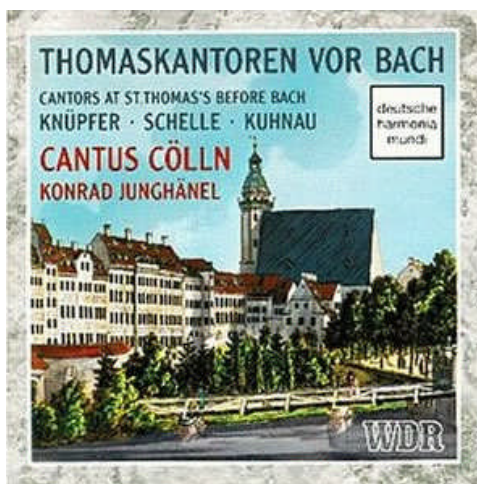
Fortunately for both Schelle and Bach, their compositions were known further abroad than Leipzig, and the old scores were not just thrown away everywhere. While Bach was rediscovered by

Mendelssohn in the 1820s, Schelle had to wait for musicologists in the late 20th century before his music was revived. About 60 of his cantatas are documented today; these prove that Kuhnau wasn't just talking nicely about a late relative when he praised Schelle's music.

Johann Schelle was born in September 1648 in Geising (Erzgebirge), 30 miles south of Dresden. His father Jonas, a Kantor himself, recognized Johann's extraordinary

musical gifts early on. At the age of seven Johann became a soprano soloist with the music ensemble of the Electoral Saxon Court at Dresden. The director at that time was Heinrich Schütz (see *BachBeat* Vol. 2 No. 1*), who noticed the boy's talent and became his teacher and mentor. Two years later in 1657, Schütz

recommended his student to the Chapel of the Elector in Wolfenbüttel (near Brunswick) where Johann stayed until he turned 16. Again with Schütz's recommendation young Schelle became a student of the St. Thomas School in Leipzig, entering Leipzig University in 1667. His main interest remained in music, and he studied with the Thomaskantor at that time, Sebastian Knüpfer. Schelle's growing reputation and Knüpfer's recommendation earned him a position as Kantor in nearby Eilenburg in 1670, at the age of 22. Seven years later, when Knüpfer died, Schelle applied for the prestigious post of the Thomaskantor. Besting numerous skilled



competitors, he convinced the Leipzig town council and succeeded his teacher as Kantor of St. Thomas.

In the following 24 years until his death on March 10, 1701, Schelle's cantata performances drew a growing number of music lovers to Leipzig. According to a contemporary witness, people "flew in like bees" drawn by the "sweet honey" of Schelle's music. He got the attention of laymen as well as experts by offering a new style: turning away from strict polyphony, he combined the lighter Italian music style with carefully chosen biblical texts and new theological poetry, thus becoming one of the inventors of the choral cantata in which J.S. Bach would come to excel. The result was a delightful, melodic sound with easily comprehensible structures, perfect for a large-scale composition as imposing as his 25-part setting of *Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele*. We don't know what occasion Schelle composed it for, but the glory of the music indicates a major event, perhaps a thanksgiving in honor of the defeat of the Turkish army by Polish, German and Austrian forces at the siege of Vienna in September of 1683. Here the advance of the armies of the Ottoman Empire into central Europe had been stopped for good (a momentous event that had become proverbial in Bach's day, as referenced in the third movement of his Cantata No. 18).

The Schelle cantata features two five-part choirs, a nine-part brass section, bassoon, timpani, strings and basso continuo. The alternating tutti and solo sections tie in with the Venetian psalm tradition like the Monteverdi hymn featured in this concert. The changing meter, alternating between even beats and groups of 3, goes back to an even older tradition represented by Ockeghem. This style of music did not use bars so there is no 4/4 or 3/4 measure. Instead there are two kinds of meter. The triple meter, based on groups of 3, is called *tempus perfectum* (perfect beat). Passages written in *tempus perfectum* usually show a reference to God (the Trinity). A duple meter based on groups of 2 or 4 is called *tempus imperfectum*; it usually refers to Man and earthly matters. Over time composers followed the rule less and less, but even Bach sometimes went back to this tradition to make a theological point. ♪

*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 <http://bachcantatachoir.weebly.com>.



BACH CANTATA CHOIR
3570 NE MATHISON PLACE
PORTLAND OR 97212

Super Bach Sunday!

Sunday, February 7 at 2 pm

Featuring works by Bach,
Ockeghem, Monteverdi, the U.S
premier of a cantata by
Johann Schelle and more!

BCC Online

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