

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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Altnickol... Another Johann Christoph in the Bach Family

By Lorin Wilkerson—Bass

Johann Christoph Altnickol (1720-1759), the son-in-law and some-time copyist of Johann Sebastian Bach, is a man to whom some contemporaries and history have not often been kind. His music is not much performed these days; in fact very little has survived. Listening to the remaining fragments and examining his relationship with the Leipzig master, however, yields a more nuanced picture of this supposedly mediocre composer.

Born in 1720 in Berna Bei Seidenburg (now in extreme southwestern Poland but then part of the Electorate of Saxony), his too-short life was nonetheless marked by being eyewitness to some important moments in music history. He had received training in theology, but his association with J.S. Bach began in 1745 when he joined the master's choir at St. Thomas as a bass. He was proficient in composition and a number of musical instruments (as any professional musician worth his salt in those days was.) In addition to being a fine bass he also played violin and cello and served as an assistant director to J.S. Bach. In a letter of recommendation in the lengthy, verbose style of the day, he said of Altnickol: "...not only did the said Mr. Altnickol act...as assistant for our *Chorus Musicus* but he also has shown, in addition to his vocal performance, such out-

standing work on various instruments as one could desire from an accomplished musician. A number of fine church compositions of his have found no less ample approval in our town."¹ As he grew closer to Bach, he grew in the old man's confidence, and it wasn't long before he was employed as a copyist in some of the master's most important projects, including the *Art of the Fugue* and the *Well Tempered Clavier*.

He was one of J.S. Bach's favorite pupils in the last years of his life, and they grew quite close personally as well; in 1748 Bach granted Altnickol the hand of his daughter Elisabeth Juliana Friderica in marriage; they were wed in 1749 in the only wedding ever to take place in Bach's house. J.S. Bach's first grandchild, his namesake, was born to these two, but unfortunately the lad died in infancy.

Altnickol was with Bach in the very last days of the master's life; indeed Altnickol may have even been by his bedside as J.S. Bach passed. Nikolaus Forkel (1749-1818), the first Bach biographer of note, stated that one of the final chorale preludes the master composed was dedicated to Altnickol, though the autograph manuscript did not survive and this hasn't been definitively proven.

A quick analysis of his motet *Nun danket alle Gott*² shows that quite apart from being mediocre he was indeed an able composer with some imagination. This work shows both the complex imitative counterpoint of the high baroque coupled with a more straightforward and less dense harmonic structure that was then begin-

ning to come into vogue; a taste of the galante that formed a transition toward the high classicism of the late 18th century. Altnickol was a 39 when he died, though it is not clear exactly what claimed his life at such a young age.

¹ Christoph Wolff *The New Bach Reader: A Life of J.S. Bach in Letters and Documents*. (©1998 Ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel. W.W. Norton & Co) p 231.

² To be sung by the Bach Cantata Choir on May 20, 2012.

Looking back on 2011-12

Photography: Ric Getter



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3570 NE MATHISON PLACE
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Final Concert of the Season!

Sunday, May 20, 2012 at 2:00 p.m.
Rose City Park Presbyterian Church

With works by William Byrd (1540-1623),
Henry Purcell (1659-1695), J.C. Altnickol
(1720-1759), and of course J.S. Bach.

Holy Ghost – Holy Smoke!

By Bill Fischer* - Bass

Altnickol's chorale about the Trinity, *Lob, Ehr' und Preis sei Gott* (May 20, 2012 concert), inspires reflections about German theological vocabulary. "Inspires," indeed. The original Greek term for "spirit", *pneuma*, was rendered into Latin as *spiritus*. Modern English "respiration" reminds us that the word has something to do with breath and breathing.

English, with "ghost" as the spirit of a dead human being and "Ghost" as a term for the divine spirit, has a ghastly problem here (and, yes, "ghost" and "ghastly" are linguistic kin, by common descent from Old English *gāst(līc)*). "Holy Spirit" appears to be gaining ground (or air) over "Holy Ghost" in English, except for core expressions like "Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost".

No such shift occurs in German. As so often, the language maintains a vocabulary of Germanic terms, even for quite abstract entities. But *Geist* is the more modern of two equally Germanic terms. Its competitor in earlier Biblical translation was *Atem* (older form, *Odem*), which does mean "breath", quite physically. The term can be traced all the way back, past Greek *atmos* ("vapor"), as in "atmosphere", to a proto-Indo-European root *ētm-*, meaning "breathing".

A similar linguistic competition occurred between two Germanic words for "holy". In expressions for "Holy Spirit," *Heilig* won out over *Weih* (from *weih[en]*, "holy" / "consecrate[d]"). But *weihen* lives on, of course, in the German word for Christmas, *Weihnachten* ("Holy Night"), and also in *Weihrauch*, "incense" (literally "holy smoke").

For an expanded form of this article, texts of my previous articles, and lists of sources, see my website: <http://web.pdx.edu/~fischerw/personal/html/bachsGerman.html>

* Bill Fischer is a Professor of German at Portland State University and a long-time choral performer; he sings bass with the BCC.