

# Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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

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## The Christmas Story in Baroque Times

By John Chilgren—Bass

The Christmas Oratorio (BWV 248) of J.S. Bach, nearly three hours in duration, was prepared for performance in Leipzig over the Christmas and New Year period of 1734-35. In its entirety this work tells the Christmas story as it is given in the New Testament chapters of Matthew and Luke. Rather than being composed as a whole and at one time, the Christmas Oratorio is in fact a collection of six reworked cantatas (Parts I-VI) written at different times and never intended to be heard in a single setting. Such reworking of parts of existing compositions, also known as parodying or paraphrasing, was common in Bach's day. For example, Parts I to IV contain reworked arias and choruses originally written for two birthday occasions, the 11<sup>th</sup> birthday of Frederick Christian, the Electoral Prince of Saxony, and the 34<sup>th</sup> birthday of Maria Josepha, Queen of Poland and Electress of Saxony. Part V contains a chorus from the lost Passion setting of St. Mark and much of the music from Part VI is derived from lost church cantatas.

Parts II and IV will be presented at our Baroque Holiday Concert on December 19<sup>th</sup>. Part II begins with a tender and tranquil Sinfonia, unlike the beginning of the other five parts which each begin with a celebratory chorus. This iconic Sinfonia, scored for flutes, oboes, and strings, reflects two realms: heavenly angels (expressed by the strings) and shepherds (represented by the winds). These two realms

eventually join forces, striking at the heart of the Christmas story: Divine glory entering the realm of humankind and becoming part of it. The end of Part II concludes with the chorale ("With All Thy Hosts, oh Lord, we Sing") and contains echoes of the opening Sinfonia. Part IV includes two beautiful ariosos for soprano and bass as well as the popular "echo" aria for two sopranos and double reeds.

Born **Michael Schultze** in Creutzberg in mid-February 1571, more than a century before the birth of J.S. Bach, **Michael Praetorius** studied divinity and philosophy at the University of Frankfurt. (It was customary for educated people with the names Schultze, Schulte, Schultheiss, Schulz or Schulteiss to "Latinize" their name to Praetorius). Not much is known about his early training, but by the age of 16 he became organist at Marienkirche in Frankfurt. He was later employed by the Duke of Brunswick, first as organist, and then later as Kapellmeister in Wolfenbüttel. By 1605, his compositions established him as serious and famous composer of church music. In the early 17<sup>th</sup>



Michael Praetorius

century he composed a nine-volume work, *Musae Sioniae*, consisting of more than 1,200 motets, chorales, and song arrangements for the Lutheran church. In 1612 he produced *Terpsichore*, a collection of some 312 dance tunes. Among the compositions in the *Musae Sioniae* are the carols "Es ist ein Ros entsprungen," "In dulci jubilo," and "Puer natus in Bethlehem," the latter which will be sung at the Baroque Holiday Concert.

In 1613, Praetorius secured temporary employment at the Dresden court at the request of the Elector of Saxony. He composed and worked with the famous organist and

composer Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672). During the course of the early 1600's, he worked at various times for other courts (Magdeburg, Halle, Sonderhausen, Kassel, Leipzig, Nuremberg and Bayreuth) and became one of the most famous musicians in Germany. He stayed on as Kapellmeister at the Wolfenbüttel court, and died there on his 50<sup>th</sup> birthday on February 15, 1621. He is buried in a vault beneath the organ at Marienkirche.

During the Baroque era, France also produced prodigious musical talent, notably the Parisian-born **Marc-Antoine Charpentier** and his rival, the Florentine-born Jean-Baptiste Lully, often considered the inventor of French opera. The two competed against each other more than once but due to Lully's monopoly on Parisian music, Charpentier's works were largely forgotten. After all, Lully wrote and danced for King Louis XIV. Born to well-connected parents in either 1634 or 1643 (the two years most commonly cited), Charpentier received a Jesuit education and began law school at age 18. He left soon after to study music in Rome with Giacomo

Carissimi, the priest turned composer and first significant developer of the oratorio. After returning to France in about 1670, he began to work for the wealthy heiress, Mademoiselle de Guise, the patron on whose estate he lived for 18 years and during which he produced a number of sacred works influenced by his knowledge of Italian music. During this period Charpentier collaborated with the French dramatist Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, better known by his stage name Molière. Molière had a falling out with Lully after their 10-year collaboration, allowing Charpentier to succeed Lully as composer for Molière's theater company, Comédie-Françaises. With Molière he continued to write popular comedy-ballets, overtures, incidental music and operas.

At the end of his employ with Mlle de Guise, Charpentier was appointed as maître de musique at the recently constructed Church of St Paul-St Louis in Paris and in his tenure there became one of the best known Catholic composers in Europe. He was further honored by an appointment as Children's Music Master at the Church of Sainte-Chapelle. Char-

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pentier continued to work there until his untimely death on February 24, 1704.

Charpentier was a versatile and prolific composer but few of his works were published during his lifetime. This caused him to lament, "I was a musician, considered good by the good ones, scorned as ignorant by the ignorant. And since those who scorned me were much more numerous than those who lauded me, music became to me a small honor and a heavy burden. And just as at my birth I brought nothing into this world, I took nothing from it at my death." (H. Wiley Hitchcock, Oxford Music online.) After 250 years, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century revival has begun and continues to the present day and Charpentier has now regained a preeminent position in the history of French music.

The *Messe de minuit pour Noël* (Midnight mass for Christmas) is a delightful setting of the "Ordinary" of the

Catholic Mass, written by Charpentier in the early 1690's when Charpentier was maître de musique at the Church of St Paul-St Louis. Although Christmas carols figured prominently in church music at the time, it was Charpentier's novel idea to fashion a mass based on French Noël's, and this gives the mass its joyous character. Except for the Noël or carol "Joseph est bien marié," which is the first of the carols heard in the mass, the other ten carols are not well known in America. Charpentier uses themes from three carols in the Kyrie, two in the Gloria, three in the Credo and one each in the Offertory, Sanctus, and Agnus Dei. This work is another example of the use of parody in music – namely the parody Mass – and uses non-sacred melodies and skillfully weaves them with sacred texts. Instrumentation is kept simple to preserve the integrity of the Noël melodies, which in themselves provide a unifying language that was intended to unite nobility and the common man during high feast days such as Christmas.