



Book Review

“Bach’s Famous Choir” The Saint Thomas School in Leipzig, 1212-1804 by Michael Maul, translated by Richard Howe. The Boydell Press (2018) ISBN 978 1 78327 169 6 Price £55

This is a book that was just aching to be written. Originally in German, at last we have the long-awaited English edition of it that sheds considerable light on a great institution which, by its existence, had been a catalyst for and source of musical creativity that had acquired a significant standing throughout Germany long before Bach arrived on the scene in 1723.

This book is a closely documented and brilliantly compiled history of ‘*Bach’s Famous Choir*’, the Thomanerchor and the Thomasschule (St Thomas School) from foundation in 1212 to the year 1804, 54 years after Bach’s death. The author is Bach-Archive researcher and Leipzig Bachfest Artistic Director Professor Michael Maul (*pictured*), whose instincts and knowledge of his subject combined with a seemingly boundless enthusiasm, perspicacity and energy makes him one of the best in his field in the Bach world today. It was Michael who discovered the Aria “*Alles mit Gott...*”¹, in the Anna Amalia Library at Weimar in 2005, the first Bach work to be found for 70 years².

An essential on your Bach bookshelf, this 394pp very readable volume takes us on a journey through the musical, political and parochial ups and downs of life at the School over a period of 600 years. It tells how St Thomas’ School began, became a Music School, dealt with crises and coped with the seemingly endless divergence of opinion down the ages as to how it should exist, *School for scholars* or ‘*Conservatory of Music?*’³ The chapters that focus upon Bach’s tenure will interest most readers, especially those new to the subject matter. However, don’t be tempted to side-step the chapters that precede and succeed them either, for they each provide fascinating accounts that are of their time and place, enabling the reader to share in the development of the School over the centuries, get to know the personalities involved – for example composers & Cantors Seth Calvisius and Johann Herrmann Schein – and how music helped the population to survive the infamous Thirty Years War⁴, the contribution and tenure of Bach’s predecessor

¹ BWV 1127, 2005

² LBS presented the UK ‘live’ première of the Aria at Bachfest in November 2005

³ A similar divergence of opinion also surfaced at Leipzig after the Fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990 – parish choir or on the international stage?

⁴ 1618-1648

Johann Kuhnau⁵, the sources and financing of the choir members, the various welcome, or at times very unwelcome, interventions by the city fathers and the post-Bach journey into the 19th century. It is all this that naturally gets lost as our often idealistic vision of Bach's life and work as Cantor from 1723-1750 towers over. Nonetheless the chapters are not only very relevant but also individual stories in themselves and, as a whole, in which Bach was a part and not the *raison d'être*.

When studying the history of Bach's tenure at Leipzig⁶ reference is most often made to his post as being "Cantor of St Thomas' Church", when it should be "Cantor to the Thomasschule", an appointment made by the city not by the church⁷. Even though he thought his resources inadequate and said so, Bach still inherited a rich, musical legacy in a working environment that often had to deal with divided opinion between the church, academics and city fathers; the church and himself. The position of Leipzig Cantor was one with which to reckon in Germany....but sometimes... so was the incumbent! Those who saw the school and its choir as less subordinate and more a centre of excellence to be admired beyond the city's boundaries were at odds with those who saw it more as an academic, parochial institution.

The school's activities, the issues that arose during Bach's Leipzig tenure are described in Chapters IV and V. The parochial concerns regarding the role of the School, and therefore its choir, rolled on after he died amidst the changes in fashion, taste and style that emerged decidedly during the last half of the 18th century and into the early years of the 19th⁸ where this volume ends. Equally engaging are the various sections in Chapter V that raise the profile of Bach's successors, the first being former Capellmeister at the Imperial Court of Heinrich von Brühl in Dresden, Gottlob Harrer, who was appointed in 1750 in preference to CPE Bach and Johann Ludwig Krebs, and supported by Mayor Stieglitz who wanted a teacher, not just a musician and made it very clear. I quote from the chapter...

"Mr Bach was a great musician, it is true, but not a great teacher, so that a person must be sought to fill his place as cantor of the St Thomas School who would be skilful in both capacities; he believed that both could be found in Mr Harrer"

Harrer was succeeded by Johann Friedrich Doles, Johann Adam Hiller and August Eberhard Müller, each having to work with sitting Lord Mayors and Councillors, the city fathers. Hiller in particular was a key figure in Leipzig during the late 18th century; a pioneer of subscription concerts, first Director of the Leipzig Gewandhaus from 1781-85 and Leipzig Cantor from 1789-1801⁹

The five meticulously compiled chapters that trace the development of the School are backed up by a substantial introductory section that includes the Author's note on the English Edition and the Translator's note – American English reflected throughout. The verb to 'relativize'¹⁰ is new to me and Thesaurus couldn't help either! The verb to 'justify' might serve better? At the end of the book Appendices that document the Cantors and Rectors of the St Thomas School from the Reformation to 1810, Cantors of the School from 1810 to the present day, plus the Income and Expenses of the School and other relevant historical information, complement the central chapters. The precise and voluminous End Notes will keep the reader engaged for life following up all the sources, plus the German Bibliography and 20-page Index of Persons.

This book is altogether a piece of work to praise unreservedly. Let's hope that Volume 2 will follow to bring the remarkable story of the Thomaner and Thomasschule into the present, including the documentation of life and survival under Nazi and Communist rule in the last century.

Margaret Steinitz – Artistic Director, London Bach Society

⁵ 1660-1722

⁶ From 1723

⁷ The post remains a city appointment today made on the recommendation of a special Commission

⁸ Mendelssohn experienced the same when reviving the St Matthew Passion in the Berlin of 1829.

⁹ Many streets in Leipzig are named after their famous citizens. The present Thomanerchor live at the Alumnat in Hillerstrasse.

¹⁰ Author's Note page xvi