

Aufklärung at Leipzig

by Jerry James

“Next to the Word of God, the noble art of Music is the greatest treasure in the world.”

— Martin Luther



The Thomasschule and Thomaskirche in 1723

In 1722, some of the finest musicians in the German-speaking world—organists, composers, conductors—came to Leipzig to audition for the post of *Kantor* at the Lutheran Church of St. Thomas, the *Thomaskirche*, the leading *Kantorate* in Protestant Germany. Neither we, nor Itamar Moses would have the slightest interest in this had the man finally chosen for the post not been Johann Sebastian Bach, then 37. Bach would remain the *Thomaskantor* until his death in 1750, producing an unparalleled body of sacred music.

In this artful homage to Tom Stoppard, playwright Itamar Moses slyly alludes to the

number of men named Johann in Bach’s family (at least fifteen); the number of his children (twenty, with two wives); and the hidden meanings supposedly encoded in some of his works. Moses also delights in conversations on such topics as the Doctrine of Predestination; the physics and theology of the polymath Gottfried Leibniz; and rival interpretations of Holy Communion—but written as if the events inside the *Thomaskirche* had been scripted by the Marx Brothers.

Outside the *Thomaskirche*, the world was shifting. Bach and his competitors lived in a world in which an age of faith, the Baroque Era, was slowly being supplanted by an age of reason, the Enlightenment. The German term for the Enlightenment is *Aufklärung*, the Clarification. And one of the things about to be “clarified” was these men’s polyphonic music, which was already in the process of being displaced.

What was it like, the world outside the *Thomaskirche*, the world in which Bach and his contemporaries lived, and how had Germany reached this point?

The Holy Roman Empire

To begin with, in the year 1722 there was no such thing as “Germany,” nor would there be for another 150 years. This was the Holy Roman Empire, made up of some 300 or so principalities, dukedoms, electorates and etceteras, mixed in with the occasional Free Imperial City, which answered only to the weak emperor in Vienna.

Of these various royals, it was thought

best to be one of the electors who chose the emperor, even though this honor had (with one exception) gone to the Habsburg heir since 1440. Indeed, the Elector of Hanover became George I of England, founder of the dynasty that reigns to this day.

But the Holy Roman Empire was not only political. It was also religious, ruling under the *imprimatur* of the one true church, Roman Catholicism. It had been so ever since the Pope had crowned Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in 800, and it would remain at least halfway so until the last emperor, Francis II, abdicated on August 6, 1806, after being defeated by Napoleon.

Through the empire, the Pope held sway over all Europe and its dominions beyond the seas—until October 31, 1517, (almost exactly 500 years ago) when a disgruntled monk named Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg (supposedly).

Luther's Reformation



Martin Luther (1529)

Luther's protests over Holy Mother Church's sale of indulgences—payments to get one's ancestors out of Purgatory and into Heaven faster—would eventually explode into the Protestant Reformation. Its main quarrel with the Church of Rome was whether sinners could be saved by faith

alone, rather than by faith and good works. Much blood would be spilled over this question.

To avoid some of it being his own, Luther went into hiding, protected by the Elector of Saxony. His refuge was the Wartburg, a fortress perched high over Eisenach, the town where Bach would grow up 160 years later. Luther had sung in the choir of St. George's Latin school there. While at the Wartburg, Luther would revolutionize Christianity by translating the Greek New Testament into vernacular German, a practice soon followed in other languages.

But of equal importance, Luther also believed that not only the choir but also the congregation should sing. "Why should the Devil have all the good tunes?" remarked the writer of "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God."

Music would be a foundation stone of Lutheranism, and the *Kantor*, a term taken from the Hebrew, an important position. But first, converts had to be won. Some came because they believed. Some (especially princes) came for the opportunity to loot those properties owned by the Roman Catholic Church.

In 1618, the last great European religious war broke out. The Thirty Years War left Germany exhausted, with its population reduced by perhaps two-thirds and its princes as good as bankrupt. The Holy Roman Empire still existed, but its power was greatly reduced, split between a largely Lutheran North and a largely Catholic South.

To make matters worse, Germany had missed out on the scientific revolution that presaged the Enlightenment and now found itself a generation behind. The greatest German philosopher of the *Aufklärung*, Immanuel Kant, would not even be born until 1724. The men assembled at Leipzig had to make due with Leibniz, whose theology postulated that since God had made this world, it must therefore be the Best of All Possible Worlds. Voltaire would later "clarify" this idea by savaging Leibniz as Dr. Pangloss in *Candide*.

The Musician's Life

In the seventy years between the end of the Thirty Years War and Bach's becoming *Kantor* at Leipzig, musicians found three major employers: the Town, the Church and the Court. All of these acknowledged certain shortcuts to success. For instance, two years of an aspiring town musician's apprenticeship would be forgiven if he married the master's daughter.

Bach's father headed the town musicians of Erfurt, where each man was expected to play violin, oboe, viola, cello, flute, horn, and trumpet.

The town musicians might also be summoned to play in the church, but the head musician there was the *Kantor*. He, as Trinity Lutheran Church tells us, was "...responsible for the people's singing of the liturgy and hymns. The *Kantor* also directed the *Kantorei* (the choir) and deployed its vocal and instrumental forces as needed in church, school, and city. Additionally, the *Kantor* composed music." He was also expected to know how to play the organ, although that job was left to the organist.

Bach's father arranged for his son to attend St. Michael's Latin school in Lüneberg as a choirboy in hopes he would go on to university. But when the time came, there was no money. Bach then became an organist, his hopes of rising to *Kantor* seemingly dashed. As if that weren't enough, he lost jobs early in his career due to bribery, that most "clarifying" of shortcuts.

Still, a virtuoso organist like Bach was a valuable man, master of one of the most complicated—and largest—machines of its time. It was difficult to reach this level of artistry—using both hands and both feet on three keyboards and pedal—because one could usually practice the organ only in church, and that never alone, because someone had to pump the bellows.

The finest German musicians played in a *Kapelle*, a court orchestra, in any of 300 principalities that could afford one. (The literal meaning of *Kapelle* is "chapel," but the court orchestra's role had long since

expanded beyond that venue.) Bach's lack of a university education was no bar to his rising to the rank of *Kapellmeister* at Weimar and Cöthen.

If the town musician was subject to the whims of the town council, and the church musician subject both to them and to the church, the *Kapellmeister* might be envied for having to please only his prince. But should he fall out with him, as happened to Bach at Weimar, he might be thrown in jail for a month, just to show him who was boss. Although things were much better for Bach at the small court in Cöthen, he would leave that post for Leipzig because, like his father, he wanted his sons to go to university.

Bach at Leipzig



In 1722, Leipzig was a scrappy upstart of a city. A major commercial center, Leipzig held three trade fairs a year—the Leipzig Book Fair is still one of the world's most important—and Leipzig boasted a 300-year-old university.

The city council and church officials thoroughly examined Bach in Lutheran doctrine and set him in charge of the music at four churches. It was for these churches that he would write his cantatas: music for small choirs with boys from the St. Thomas School (*Thomasschule*) singing the treble parts. For

larger works, such as oratorios and passions, the *Thomaskantor* would call on the town musicians, harking back to his boyhood.

At the school, Bach instructed not only in vocal but also in instrumental music. He had his school course load lowered, but made up for it in private instruction and (especially) rehearsal time. The Rector of the *Thomasschule* was supposed to run the school and allow Bach to run the music, but this rarely worked out as hoped.

Bach's title in Latin was *Cantor et Director Musices*. In the years to come, he would focus more and more on being the Director of Music, to the irritation of some city councilors. Bach would annoy many others over his long tenure, lived out in the 800 square feet of the apartment he was allotted at the school, a space where a dozen people—family, students and assistants—somehow cohabited.

Bach had been hired with an attitude of “If we can't get the best, we'll have to settle for the mediocre,” and a few powerful people always saw him that way. Intemperate but often justified, Bach continually fought with forces both secular and religious over his workload, the quality of his performers and money. Bach's fixed salary in Leipzig was only a quarter of what he'd been paid in Cöthen, although he made up some of that on weddings and funerals. But his sons went to university.

When Bach died in 1750, he was buried in an unmarked grave. His widow lived out her days as an *Almosenfrau*, a woman supported by charity. Bach's music was considered outmoded. None of it would be published until fifty years after his death, and half of it was lost.

It would not be until 1829, when the 19-year-old Felix Mendelssohn organized a performance of the *Passion According to St. Matthew* for its supposed centennial, that Bach's place in German music would be

secured. The manuscript was supposedly found in a cheese shop, where it was being used to wrap butter.

By the 150th anniversary of Bach's death, opinion of him had achieved such a pinnacle that a casket said to be his was unearthed and entombed at the Church of St. John in Leipzig. It would be reburied in the *Thomaskirche* in 1950.

One last story: In 1789, Wolfgang Mozart visited the *Thomasschule*, and was surprised by the choir performing one of Bach's double motets. A contemporary account tells us Mozart knew Bach more by hearsay than by his music, and this piece was completely unknown to him. The choir had sung only a few measures when Mozart sat up, startled, and said, “What is this?”

“And now his whole soul seemed to be in his ears. When the singing was finished he cried out, full of joy, ‘Now there is something one can learn from!’”

S.D.G. (*Soli Deo Gloria*—All Glory to God), as Bach wrote at the end of his works...



Bach's grave in the *Thomaskirche*

Jerry James has been working in the theatre for over fifty years. For forty of those years, he lived in New York City, where he was an award-winning writer and director. Being possessed of an intense curiosity, he found writing this essay immensely satisfying.