

The many and the few

Just how many singers gave the first performance of Mozart's Requiem, and what can that tell us about our attitude to the works of other periods? In a unique *Choir & Organ* symposium, *Malcolm Bruno* brings together top musical minds at New College, Oxford, to discuss a matter of choral authenticity

Earlier this year, just before the Mozart anniversary, I found myself in conversation with the Bach scholar, Joshua Rifkin. The subject quite inevitably turned from Baroque Leipzig to Vienna: Rifkin had identified with some certainty the church near Vienna for which, in early 1791, Count Walsegg Stuppach had commissioned a requiem mass from Mozart in memory of his recently deceased wife. The interesting fact emerging from our discussion was that the church – like the Hofkapelle or Augustinerkirche in the heart of Vienna where the masses of Haydn, Mozart or Schubert are still heard with orchestra every Sunday – was small.

But we don't today think of the Mozart Requiem as an intimate liturgical work, in the tradition of the Viennese masters, but rather in the grandeur of a late-19th-century concert oratorio, in the style

of the Verdi Requiem. Yet the orchestration of Mozart's Requiem lands it firmly in the remit of earlier liturgical performance, its three trombones – light-weight sackbuts in Mozart's day – doubling the vocal parts in the *colla parte* style of the 16th century, along with a slim wind section of only two basset horns (the deeper, darker cousins of clarinets) and two bassoons, again often *colla parte*. The space for a 'choir', as the footprint of the Count's church shows, was small by later standards, allowing for only a few singers, more along the lines of the soloists' choir Rossini envisaged for his *Petite messe*. If indeed Mozart's Requiem does belong in concept and design to this 18th-century Viennese liturgical tradition and not to the grand concert stage of the following century, how, why and when did such drastic changes occur in choral performance that would reposition it (and all its companion earlier works) for posterity?

above 'Let us break their bonds asunder' from Handel's conducting copy of Messiah. It is now in the Bodleian Library (MSS Tenbury 346-7)



the 'monster' choir at the 1784 performance in Westminster Abbey of Messiah soon caught on



Scrolling back a half-century earlier from Mozart, we find ourselves in Leipzig, in the church of St Thomas or St Nicholas, in the presence of that city's greatest cantor, J.S. Bach. In 2000 Rifkin's colleague Andrew Parrott published *The Essential Bach Choir*, a seminal work on the subject exploring the evidence in detail that depicts a soloistic tradition in Bach's Leipzig akin to the world of Monteverdi's Venice. The norm in both cities (as in many others) was a group of *concertisti* (highly trained solo singers) backed up by a group of secondary (and of equal training) 'filling in' singers, or *ripienisti*, quite often in number simply doubling the size of the *concertisti*: in other words providing an additional four or five singers.



Leaving the fascinating detail of Parrott's analysis to a closer examination of his work, when we address, for example, a first performance of a work as late as Mozart's Requiem, we are still drawn back to earlier tradition, to Leipzig especially and to the norm of Bach's choir at his death. How could 'choral' performance have altered so dramatically



(a Mendelssohn scholar and music librarian of the Bodleian Library), Stephen Rose of Royal Holloway, University of London (who is currently preparing a chapter on Lutheran church music in the 18th century for the forthcoming *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Music*), Martin Hall (Dr Higginbottom's research fellow), Matthew Power (editor of *Choir & Organ*) and myself. Though a day's symposium could only scratch the surface of many interweaving themes, it would give a clear outline of the forces that in the brief span of two generations had clearly transformed our experience of choral music: not only in the creation of new works for new 19th-century institutions, but in the reappraisal of a rich choral heritage stretching back to the Renaissance and earlier.

To begin, there was the development of music in the Protestant tradition as a whole. Before the Reformation, music for liturgy had remained the all-but-exclusive activity of select (trained) musicians. After Luther the extended role of music in worship would involve the whole community; and this was early-on expressed in Luther's promotion of the chorale for communal singing. Beyond the normal liturgy, devotional events like the Abendmusik concerts in Lübeck had, a generation before Bach, evolved into large-scale, commercial events and the perfect setting for a wide participation of singers. And this trend was not limited to German Protestant states. The non-conformist tradition in England had also, since the mid-17th century, fostered wide and enthusiastic devotional singing and similar societies and concert organisations, like the Academy of Ancient Music (founded in London in 1726) or the Three Choirs Festival c.1713, that were soon to dominate the growing bourgeois music scene of which Handel would be 'king' upon his arrival in London.



from the elite consort of Bach's Thomaner in 1750 to the kind of performances Mendelssohn – another Leipzig composer/performer – would mount only a few generations later in the 1820s? And why in Mendelssohn's much celebrated revival of the *St Matthew Passion* in 1829 (in its first performance since Bach's death) was there the need, as the young Romantic felt necessary, for quite drastic alteration both in orchestration and vocal deployment?

As a key player in our study, Handel perhaps more than any other 18th-century composer would, unwittingly, come to create the definitive 'choral' works launching the large-scale amateur choir. Having abandoned the rigorously Protestant world of Hamburg, he had arrived in Rome aged barely 20. It was from there that his music in the brilliant Italian soloistic style (of which his many operas and Carmelite Vespers are splendid examples) would emanate. On his arrival in Anglican London only six years later, his compositional prowess would find ways to straddle Italian and English traditions, with small groups of soloists in his operas to the larger choirs in his oratorios. The growing numbers attracted to choral festivities,



Suspecting that Mendelssohn might be an important bridge from the aristocratic '*concertisti-ripienisti*' forces of the 18th century (and earlier) to the great symphonic choirs of the 19th and 20th, I was delighted when Edward Higginbottom, Director of Music at New College, agreed to host a symposium this past May to consider my question. It included Andrew Parrott, Peter Ward Jones

along with a rise in general musical literacy, catered meanwhile to the gathering of massive choral forces on special occasions, beginning with the well-documented 1784 performance in Westminster Abbey of *Messiah*, whose performers were calculable by the hundred. Though the 'monster' choir of this event was a freak, the appeal of its size caught on immediately. Not to be left far behind, Berlin's amateur singers mounted, two years later, a *Messiah* boasting some 300 participants. Soon after, the choral society or *Singakademie* model in Germany became the blueprint for the 19th-century choir (Berlin's *Singakademie* would be first in 1790, followed by those in Leipzig and Dresden both in 1807, Hamburg and Vienna both in 1814 and Danzig in 1818.) And so, as the 18th century neared its end, the desire for the exceptionally large choir was no longer 'exceptional'. Even during Bach's lifetime, the younger generation – and then C.P.E. Bach (1714–88) onward to Mendelssohn (1809–47) – were actively broadening the base of choral music inherited from the Church's elite, pre-Reformation past.

Looking back to Leipzig, Bach's successors, Johann Friedrich Doles (1715–97) and Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804), had a wholly different perspective for liturgical music-making from their illustrious forebear, as a remark of Hiller's from the *Wöchentliche Nachrichten* of 23 October 1769 would suggest:

... in most places cantatas do little or nothing to awaken devotion, nor to ornament the service, but arouse disagreeable emotions of boredom and disgust, if not utter annoyance.

Twenty-one years later, in 1790, Doles wrote in the preface to his own cantata, *Ich komme vor dein Angesicht*, that the purpose of church music is 'the stirring of the heart', best achieved by:

... a lovely, flowing and restful melody, a clear and comprehensible harmony that supports the melody, and simple and intelligible rhythms. Hence it is clear that church music that contains solely artful fugues, or is fugal and devised anxiously [*ängstlich*] following the rules of double counterpoint, does not belong in church.

Like Hiller he emphasised the need to compose strophic choral songs, and intended to create a collection from the *Thomaskantorate* himself, though he never did:

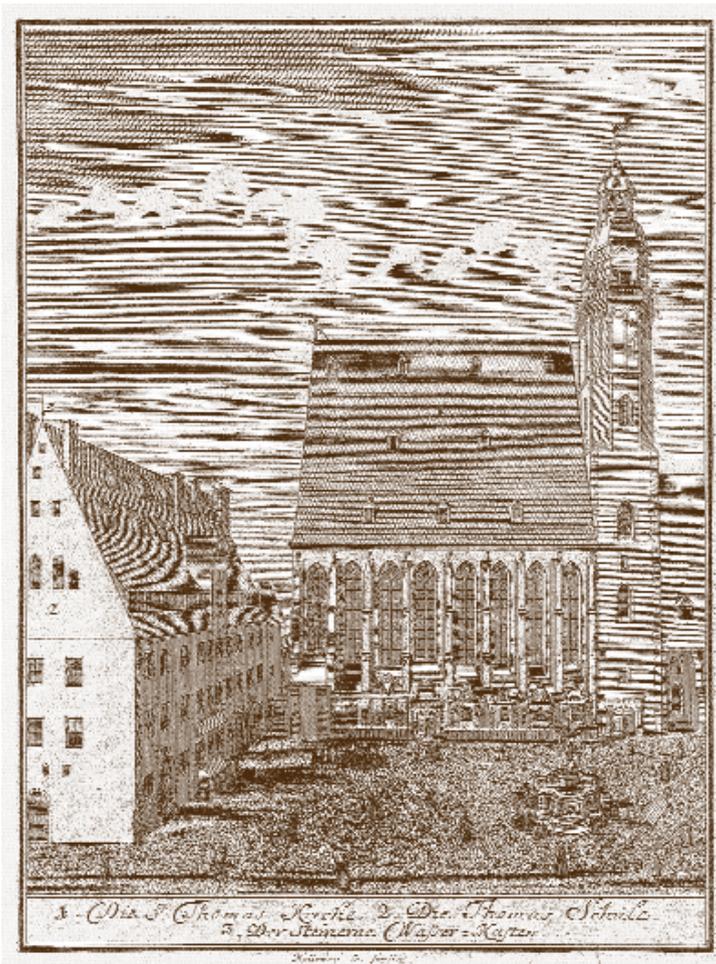
... in the usual town choirs one always laments the lack of good motets and choral arias that stir and edify more than the principal connoisseurs



and that can easily and correctly be performed by school choristers. I have observed that motets that incorporate good and appropriate chorales are received with unusual approval.

Doles was cantor of St Thomas's in 1756–89 and Hiller in 1789–1800, and during their half-century governance, not only music at the Thomaskirche but society and its musical expectations altered radically. Hiller, before becoming cantor, had already been a leader of such reform: he had founded a songschool in Leipzig for the training of both boys and girls that expanded into a school for amateur musicians as well, and in 1775 his *Musikübende Gesellschaft* ('music-practising society') began giving major public concerts in Leipzig. By 1778 the thriving *Grosse Concert-*

far left from top Andrew Parrott, Edward Higginbottom, Peter Ward Jones, Malcolm Bruno, Matthew Power, Stephen Rose, left Leipzig Gesangbuch (songbook) from around 1753, above interior of the Thomaskirche before the neogothic alterations: watercolour by Hubert Kratz, 1885 Both images from *St Thomas zu Leipzig* (Martin Petzoldt, editor), reproduced by permission, courtesy of the Thomaskirche



above engraving by J.G. Krüger
 from the front of the Thomas
 School Rules of 1723
 All images from *St Thomas zu Leipzig*
 (Martin Petzoldt, editor), reproduced by
 permission, courtesy of the Thomaskirche

Choir & Organ would like to
 express thanks to the academics
 who took part in this symposium,
 especially Martin Hall for
 transcribing the debate,
 to Dr Edward Higginbottom for
 arranging hospitality, and to
 the Warden and Fellows of
 New College, Oxford.

Gesellschaft, founded in 1743 and of which he was also director, had become the Gewandhaus choir and orchestra. Hiller's contemporary, Carl Friedrich Fasch (1736–1800), founder of the Berlin *Singakademie* that had become a model for its successors in Germany and beyond, was perhaps the most prominent figure in the movement to make music accessible to the fast-growing urban populations. And though such newly founded choral societies remained decidedly amateur, professional musicians like Fasch sought to raise their standard to the highest possible level, even if sacrificing the musical complexity of previous generations in the process (the only works of Bach he would or could perform were his simpler motets, beginning in 1794 with *Komm Jesu, komm*).

When Fasch died in 1800 he was succeeded by his assistant, Carl Friedrich Zelter (1758–1832). Zelter expanded the new movement of broad-based music education by founding institutes for the teaching of school and church music in important Prussian cities like Königsberg (1814), Breslau (1815) and Berlin (1822). Zelter's most gifted student at the opening of his Berlin school was the 13-year-old Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy. A child-genius of Mozartean stature, he composed an Italianate Magnificat that same year – the first of many works

of the 1820s – whose stylistic prowess competed admirably with Vivaldi or Pergolesi, or, indeed, quite consciously with Bach, from whose Magnificat inspiration had been drawn. But Mendelssohn soon found himself in the middle of a very different era: and writing for voices assuming the virtuosity of his soon-to-follow string Octet would rapidly cease to be an option. His thoroughly homophonic *Hora est* motet of 1827, written for the Berlin *Singakademie* and dedicated to his sister, rather became a precursor of his future (large-scale) motet-like psalms, anthems and oratorios of the 1830s and 40s, that would in turn become the template for amateur choral music throughout England, North America and the German-speaking world for the next century.

Significantly, as Mendelssohn completed his *Tu es Petrus* in 1829 (remarkably in the style of a grand motet by Praetorius) he persuaded Zelter, a century after its supposed premiere, to revive the St Matthew Passion for the Berlin *Singakademie*. Not attempted since the composer's death, it posed an insurmountable challenge to amateur vocal forces, forcing Mendelssohn to make revisions for a 'reduced' choir from the *Singakademie's* mammoth 300-strong membership. And so like Mozart's recasting of Handel's oratorios some 40-odd years before, Mendelssohn accommodated Bach's orchestration for the contemporary (Beethovenian) forces at hand. But even more radical would be the necessary imposition of a 150-voiced amateur choir, plus soli, on to Bach's original eight-part single-voiced texture. In performance terms it was a mountain that Mendelssohn himself never chose to scale again.

The latter part of the 18th century was an era of great change, of the American and then French Revolutions, of the *Sturm und Drang*. A time of Enlightenment, of new ideas, of a total recasting of society, its quintessential musical expression was the *stil galant* or the *empfindsamer Stil*, whose anthem-like motet would replace the brocade of the soloistic cantata. Bach's *concertisti* were quite swiftly transformed into front-line 'divas' while his *ripienisti* were swept away into an immense 'Greek' chorus resting in the shadow of its new-found heroes – all of which would contrast sharply with the aristocratic delivery of the singers of Bach's world and before. The 1790s was perhaps a focal point with the founding of the German *Singakademie*, during which time a first performance of Mozart's Requiem in Leipzig in 1794 could muster only two dozen choristers from St Thomas's. Yet just six years later, in a commemorative concert after the death of Fasch, more than a hundred voices for the same Requiem was not thought inappropriate. Times and tastes were clearly on the move! ■