

Bach, the Latin Teacher

When he was appointed cantor at St. Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1723,¹ one of the duties assigned to Johann Sebastian Bach was to teach Latin. This part of his job apparently elicited from him far less enthusiasm and attention than his musical tasks, and Bach soon delegated his pedagogical responsibilities to a certain “Magister Petzold,” a negligence which strict classicists may find regrettable but for which music lovers will be forever grateful.² In this paper, I suggest that while Bach may not have been all that eager to teach Latin, his music, nonetheless, owes a considerable debt to his training and expertise in the venerable language.

As a boy Bach attended *Lateinschule* in Eisenach and later went to the Lyceum in Ohrdruf, where the popular textbook of Johann Amos Comenius, *Latinitatis vestibulum sive primi ad Latinam linguam aditus*, was used. And while German was certainly his first language, it is clear that Bach remembered the Latin he learned in school and continued to use it throughout his life. He began many of his compositions with the initials J.J., standing for the Latin phrase *Jesu, juva*, and signed the conclusion of many others with S.D.G., an abbreviation of *Soli Deo Gloria*.³ Bach was also familiar with the classics in general: several of his secular cantatas are devoted to classical subjects: the contest between Pan and Apollo (*BWV 201*), the propitiation of Aeolus (*BWV 205*), and Hercules at the crossroads (*BWV 213*).

It is in Bach’s sacred music that Latin plays the most prominent role. Although the Latin language was virtually abandoned in the worship of many Protestant denominations in favor of the vernacular in the 16th and 17th centuries, in cities like Bach’s Leipzig, where there were Latin schools, some Lutheran services (e.g., Matins and Vespers) continued to be conducted largely in

¹ Stiller, 1970, 174.

² Stiller, 1970, 191.

³ Leaver, 1982, 10.

Latin well into the 18th century.⁴ It should come as no surprise then, that a number of Bach's sacred compositions are musical settings of Latin texts from the Vulgate, such as the *Magnificat*, or the traditional liturgy, such as his "Mass in B Minor."

If Latin helped to connect Bach's music with the linguistic world of the Roman Catholic Church, its function as the standard language of rhetoric at the time represented a vital association with the intellectual world of Cicero, Quintilian, and the traditional liberal arts. Like many other early reformers, Martin Luther valued ancient rhetoric highly. Philipp Melancthon, Johann Sturm, and other Lutheran educators made rhetorical education (in Latin, of course) central to the curriculum of the new schools and universities founded in Germany and elsewhere in northern Europe. To go to *Lateinschule* as Bach did as a boy at the end of the 17th century, or to teach there, as he was supposed to do towards the end of his life, was not only to read Latin (grammar) but also to speak and to write it (rhetoric).

Of the traditional arts of the *trivium*, furthermore, rhetoric was considered the most important prerequisite for the study of music (one of the advanced arts of the *quadrivium*) in the Baroque period. From contemporary musicological treatises, it is clear that musical composition actively embraced the use of classical rhetorical strategies such as *inventio* and *dispositio* as well as the application of traditional rhetorical figures such as *aposiopesis*, *repetitio*, *parrhesia*, etc. to musical expression.⁵ Lutheran sermons from this period frequently followed the traditional elements of a speech as established by the classical rhetoricians, a familiar oratorical pattern which Robin Leaver and others have detected in Bach's sacred music, especially his Passions.⁶

⁴ Stiller, 1970, 112. Even in Calvin's Geneva it was not uncommon for the *Paternoster* and the *Credo* to be recited in Latin by those called before the consistory to prove their faith (Waquet, 2001, 78).

⁵ See, in general, Bartel, 1997.

⁶ See Leaver, 1982, 21.

Several short examples, serving to illustrate how important the Latin language and the application of traditional rhetorical figures are to musical effects in Bach's "Mass in B Minor," will conclude the presentation.

Works Cited

- D. Bartel, *Musica Poetica: Musical-Rhetorical Figures in German Baroque Music* (Lincoln, 1997).
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- G. Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach and Liturgical Life in Leipzig* (St. Louis, 1970).
- F. Waquet, *Latin or the Empire of a Sign* (London and New York, 2001).