

VIII. THE POSITIONING OF THE MUSICIANS IN BOTH CHURCHES

One of the tasks of a conductor was to ensure that the musicians were well positioned. Bach must have sought optimal arrangements in both of Leipzig's main churches. On the basis of eighteenth-century German treatises, the spatial construction of the *Musikchoren*, as described in chapters II and III and the number of musicians per part as described in chapters V and VI, an attempt will be made to reconstruct Bach's arrangement of his musicians in the two main churches in Leipzig.

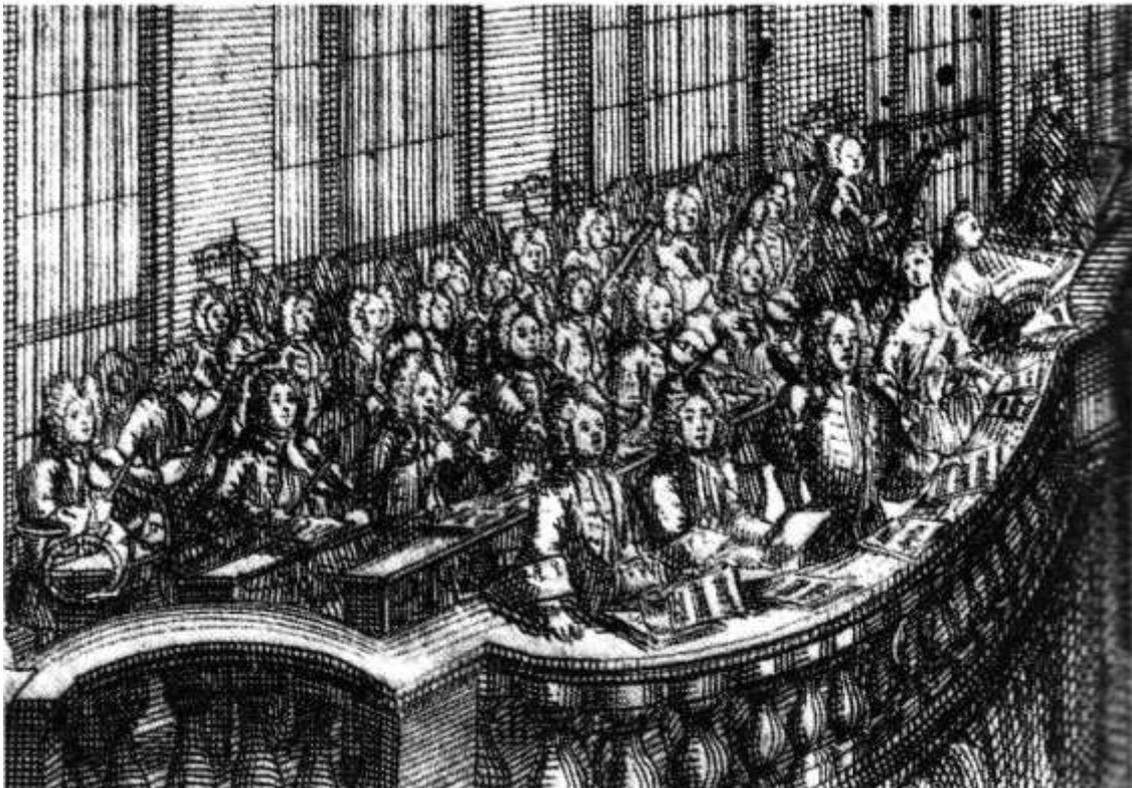


Fig. 1. Christian Fritsch, *Jubelmahl der Hamburger Bürgerkapitäne* (Hamburg 1719), engraving, detail. Four concertists and conductor in front, no ripienists.

1. What was the positioning of the musicians in 18th century German churches?

Few treatises discuss the positioning of instrumentalists in more detail. Johann Mattheson wrote in 1739 that the arrangement was important, but it depended on the place of performance. Similar instruments had to be placed together. ^A A year later Johann Adolph Scheibe provided more extensive information. ^B The bass instruments had to be placed near the harpsichord (if present). The instruments should not make the singing unintelligible and should therefore be placed behind the singers. Trumpets and timpani should if possible be hidden behind other instruments, as far away from the singers as possible, as they could confuse them. Soft wind instruments (flutes), viols and lutes had to be placed carefully just like the

voices. Scheibe considered the singers as the most important. They had to stand, especially in church, facing the audience, in front, close to the harpsichord.

Although the *Große Concert-Gesellschaft* in Leipzig probably did not perform church music and, as far as is known, had no connection with Bach, the plan of the positioning, surviving from 1746-1748, is illuminating (fig. 2). It shows that, seen from the *Director*, the wind players were together on the right, the strings together on the left, the harpsichord in the middle and the other continuo players behind it. The singers were on the far right front and the conductor on the left front. There were long desks, each for up to six instrumentalists. The singers should stand in the front in any case, Mattheson confirmed. Less than six singers had to stand next to each other, six or more singers could be split into two groups, each standing at one side. The strongest singing voices, such as basses, had to stand on the outside (see endnote ^A and figs. 1 and 2). Ripienists were always optional; if they participated, they probably formed a group set apart.

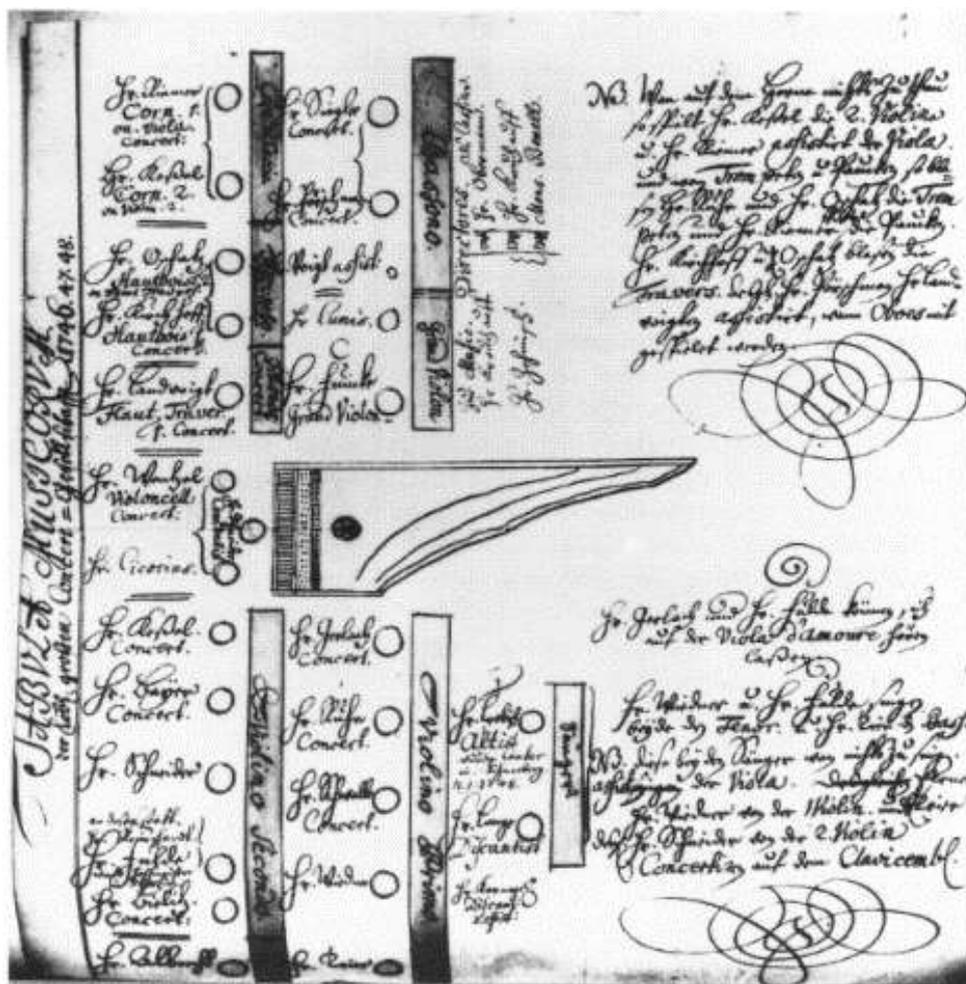


Fig. 2. Tabula Musicorum der löbl. großen Concert-Gesellschaft, Leipzig, 1746-1748. Riemer-Chronik, Stadtarchiv Leipzig.

From the limited number of treatises in which the positioning is dealt with it appears that, seen from the audience, the singers were in front, with the continuo group behind them. The strings were placed on the left, the woodwinds on the right, and the trumpets at the back.

2. What was the positioning of Bach's musicians in the *Thomaskirche*?

Chapter II describes the construction of the *Musikchor* of the *Thomaskirche*. In the sectional drawings of both floors of the *Musikchor* shown in Fig. 3 a possible arrangement of the musicians is laid out, based on the following data and considerations:

- the description of the *Musikchor* given in Chapter II.2;
- the treatises by Mattheson and Scheibe and the map of the arrangement of the *Große Concert-Gesellschaft* described above;
- the number of musicians per part as discussed in § V.2 and VI.3;
- The presence of all drawn elements is certain, except for the benches for the instrumentalists; it is plausible that these will have been there. Their positions, however, are mostly unknown;
- There were desks on or along the balustrade; steps were provided for the singers;
- The two benches for the teachers stood behind each other on the north wall of the *Schülerchor*;
- The organ was placed close to the western rear wall on pillars; the side galleries on both sides probably also stood on pillars, whether the side galleries and the organ platform were at the same height and connected smoothly is not certain; this has been assumed here; the location of the *Stühle 5* and *6* is also uncertain (see § II.2); the most logical place is next to the teachers.

Sizes are mostly estimated, but the following measurements could be determined by on-site survey:

- the diameter of the columns was 109 cm;
- The distance between two columns along the north-south line, i.e. the width of the *Schülerchor* (between the columns, so not centre to centre) was 830 cm;
- the distance from the back wall to the two first columns was 393 cm;
- the distance between the first and second pair of columns (west-east) was 413 cm;
- the balustrade was sandwiched between two columns and was 38 cm deep, but at the height of the risalites (see Glossary in Chapter I) 62 cm; the three risalites were 82 cm wide;
- the balustrade was 94 cm high on the *Schülerchor*,
- The depth of the *Schülerchor* from the back wall to the balustrade was therefore a total of $393 + 109 + 413 + \frac{1}{2} \times 109 \text{ cm} - \frac{1}{2} \times 38 \text{ cm} = 950 \text{ cm}$.

Apart from the position of the organist, nothing is entirely certain, but the logic helps to arrive at a probable arrangement. The four vocal concertists stood on the stone gallery on a step behind the desks at the balustrade. Probably, when no ripienists sang along, they stood together in the middle or at one side. When four ripienists were involved, the concertists probably stood at one side and the ripienists at the other.

More than four ripienists were probably not feasible numerically when performing cantatas and other concerted church music, as discussed in § VI.3. ¹

¹ Until 1739, two lecterns were attached to the balustrade, each about 2.3 m long (see Chapter II). Behind these, a maximum of eight singers could find a place. When more singers were desired, as when

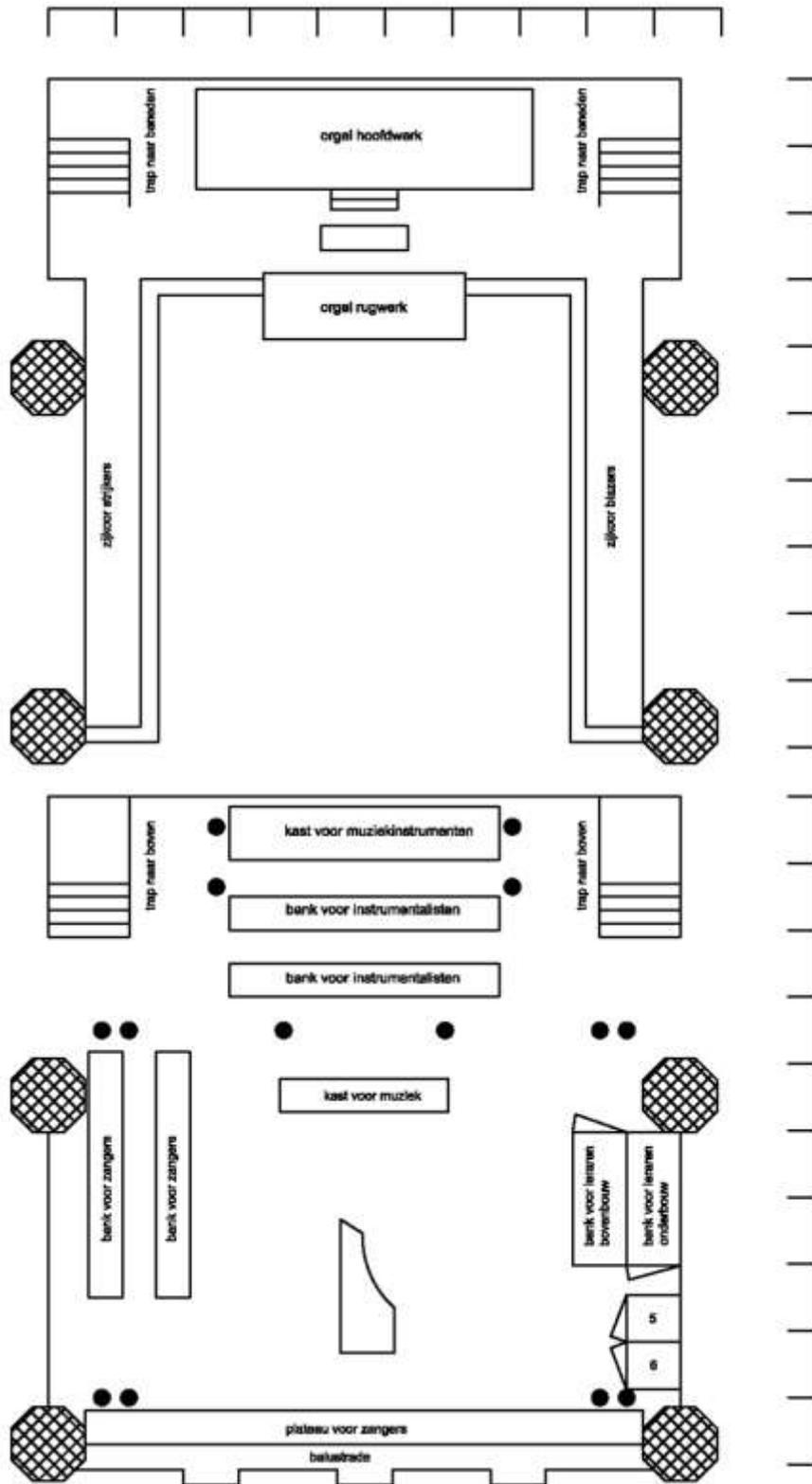


Fig. 3a/b. Schematic view of a possible arrangement of the *Musikchor*.
 Above: organ gallery with side choirs; below: *Schülerchor*.
 Design: Rens Bijma, realisation: Margreet Bijma-Bosch.

singing liturgical church music, including the Bodenschatz motets, they must have stood behind the other singers, reading along from the music on the lecterns.

The harpsichord, of course, was also located downstairs; the harpsichordist (usually *Music-Director* Bach himself; see § XIX.3) would probably be facing the organ, offering him a full view on all instrumentalists. He had no eye contact with the singers, no matter how the harpsichord was placed. The other continuo instruments, i.e. the cellos, violone and bassoon(s), must also be assumed at the stone gallery, around the harpsichord; this corresponds to Scheibe's descriptions as discussed above and the arrangement of the *Große Concert-Gesellschaft* (fig. 2). The organist obviously had his place on the organ bench at the organ gallery, some 2 metres above the stone gallery; his accompaniment took place mostly on the *Rückpositiv* (see § XVIII.3).

The string and wind players were seated in their side galleries. Next to the *Schülerchor*, 'at its left hand' (*neben demselben linker Hand*), wrote sexton Gottlob Friedrich Rothe, the four upper school teachers (including the rector and cantor) were seated, and behind them, against the northern wall of the *Schülerchor* ('*an der Wand gegen Mitternacht*'), the four lower school teachers (see chapter II). It is obvious that the teachers sat facing the pupils. It follows that the left side was appointed by Rothe facing the church. Johann Kuhnau requested a shelf for the instrumentalists 'on their small gallery at the right side' (*auff ihrem Chörge[n] zur rechten Hand*), on which they could hang up their string instruments. ^c As the strings were apparently seated at the right side, their position - again assuming with the face to the church - was on the south side, and that of the wind players on the north side (and not the other way around, as Arnold Schering and Armin Schneiderheinze believed). ² This corresponds to the arrangement at the *Große Concert-Gesellschaft* discussed above. If trumpets and timpani were being played, the timpanist could have been standing next to the organ bench on the organ platform, with the three trumpeters right next to him in the northern side gallery, which was after all intended for the wind players (fig. 3a). The *Musikchor* is shown schematically as a 3D model in Fig. 4.

In this study the arrangement will always be considered from the point of view of the church and from the position of the conductor. There was ample room for a large ensemble. In case of a cantata with a large ensemble the following arrangement can be assumed. The three trumpeters stood in the right hand side gallery next to the timpanist on the organ platform. A maximum of seven places in the right hand side gallery were then available for three oboists and two flautists. In the left hand side gallery there were six violinists and two violaplayers; here also two places remained vacant. Downstairs two cellists, the violinist and two bassoonists stood behind two desks around the harpsichord.

² Arnold Schering, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik*, Leipzig 1936, p. 154; Armin Schneiderheinze, "Bachs Figuralchor und die Chorempore in der Thomaskirche", *Beiträge zur Bachforschung*, Heft 1, Leipzig 1982, p. 44.

Also according to Christoph Wolff, "Die historische Orgeln der Thomaskirche", *Die Orgeln der Thomaskirche*, hrsg. v. Christian Wolff, Leipzig 2005, p. 15.

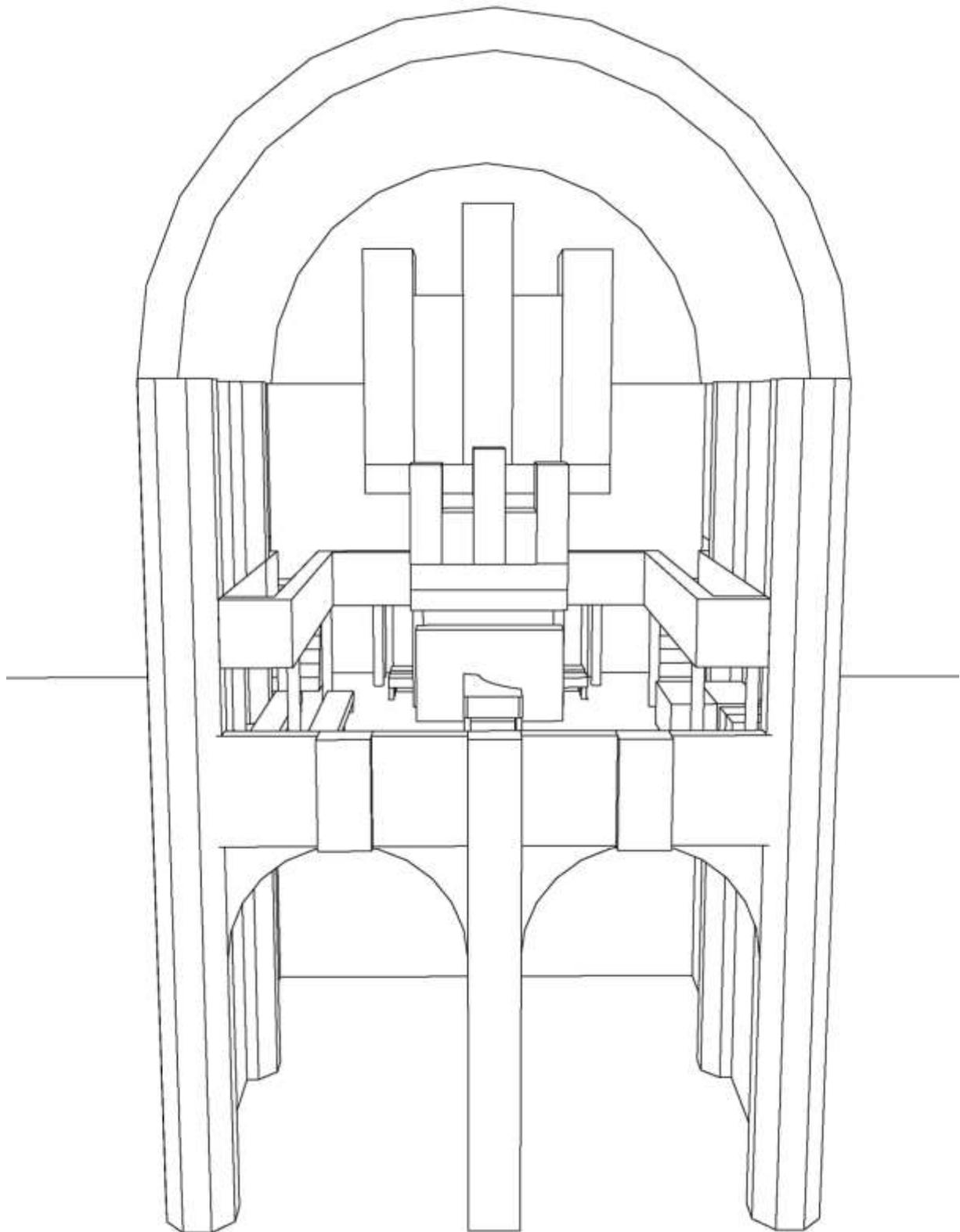


Fig. 4. Schematic view of the arrangement of the musicians in the *Musikchor* of the *Thomaskirche*, based on *fig. 3*.

Design: Rens Bijma; 3D model: Bartosz Animucki.

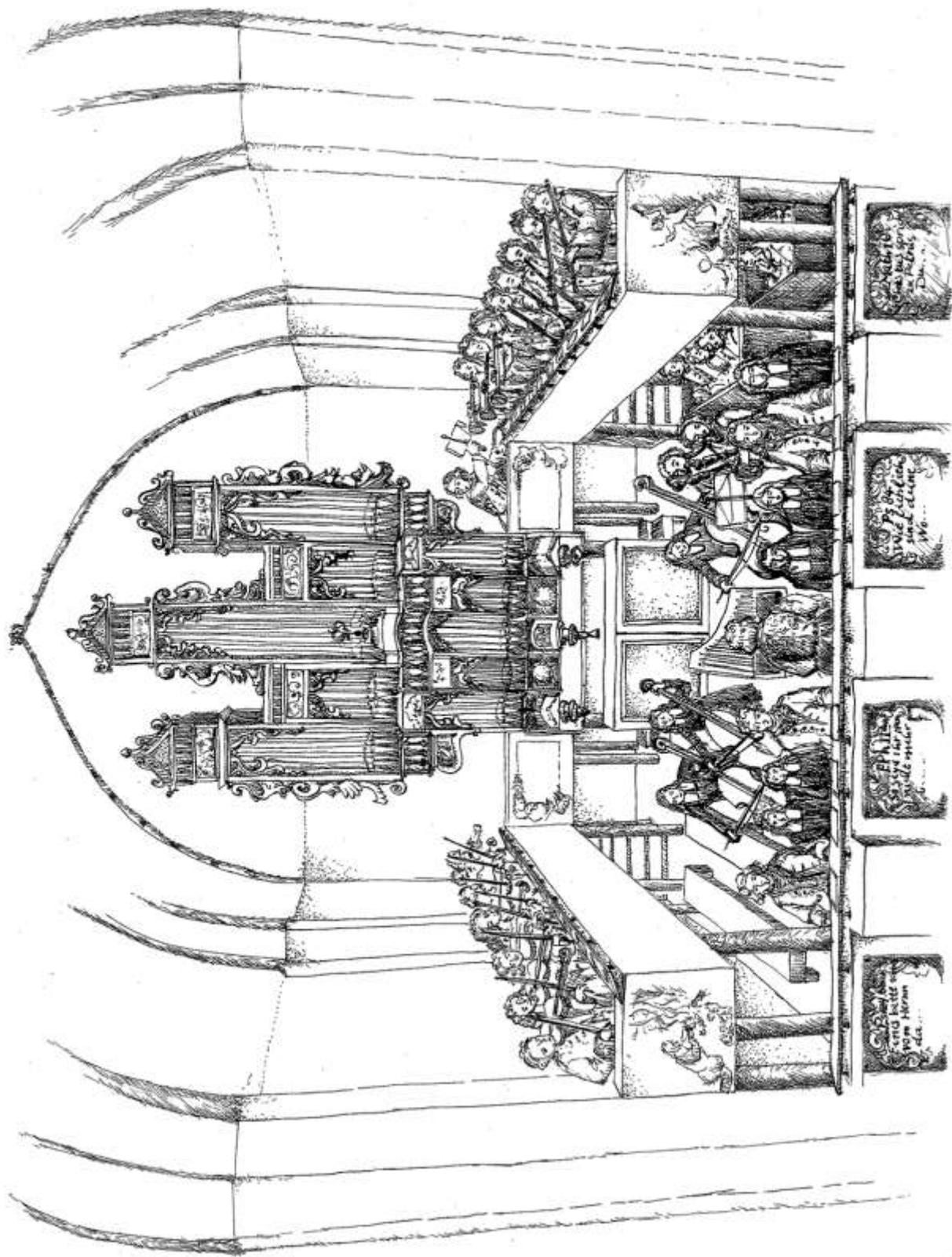


Fig. 5. Impression of the arrangement of the musicians in the *Thomaskirche*, based on Fig. 4. Design: Rens Bijma; artistic design: Cobi Brak.

At the harpsichord, Bach had direct contact with all instrumentalists except the organist.³ Whenever Bach left the harpsichord accompaniment to a private student, he needed one of the two available untransposed continuo parts from which other continuo players could read. Perhaps the harpsichord was then turned a half turn; Bach could then possibly remain in his old position as conductor. Four singers each stood at the balustrade on the left and right, facing the church. Direct contact was therefore more difficult, but the singers were in close proximity to Bach. As noted, one must hope that Gesner's description refers to a rehearsal (see Chapter VII). Even then it is understandable why Bach gave directions to instrumentalists by hand, but to singers by indicating the tone: the latter could not see Bach properly, but they could hear him.

Not everything can be said with certainty, but the described arrangement seems to be in accordance with the data that can be derived from the sources on the basis of deduction. An impression of this arrangement is shown in Fig. 5. **The number of lecterns for the singers was two before 1739 and then four (Chapter II); they are omitted in the drawing.**

A probable arrangement in the Thomaskirche looked like this: Bach was usually seated in the front centre as conductor at the harpsichord on the Schülerchor. The other continuo instruments were placed around him, in front of the organ's Rückpositiv. The singers stood in the middle or on one side of the desks near the balustrade, facing the church; when ripienists sang along, the singers stood to the left and right. Upstairs, seen from the church, the strings were on the left and the wind players on the right in their side galleries. There was room for timpani on the organ plateau, near the trumpeters.

3. What was the arrangement of Bach's musicians in the Nikolaikirche ?

The *Musikchor* of the *Nikolaikirche* has been discussed in § III.2. As with the *Thomaskirche*, almost nothing is known with certainty about the arrangement in the *Nikolaikirche*, but on the basis of the drawings (see figs. 4 and 5 in chapter III) and the above suggested positioning in the *Thomaskirche*, reasonable assumptions can be made. Because singers stood in front with a view to intended intelligibility, they must have stood at the balustrade. The oblique sides were about 1.6 and 1.9 m long, the middle section 1.9 m. Eight singers could find a place there. A disadvantage of this arrangement with ripienists seems to be that the singers on the left blocked the eye contact between Bach and the organist. However, Schering's remark that a new stand was built for the harpsichord in 1739/40 suggests that a plateau may have been added under the harpsichord much earlier, so that Bach, despite his seated position, had better contact with the organist, and other instrumentalists. For the instrumentalists, **platforms**

³ Whether a *Direttore del Organo maggiore* provided this contact, as suggested by Johann Mattheson (see Chapter VII), is unknown. For the harpsichord platform see *Dokumente GLT VIII/C 23*, p. 52, *Ibid.* 78 en 79, p. 93f.

and desks were present from 1669 onwards.⁴ The harpsichord would probably have been about 2 m long, stood partly on the balcony and partly in the vaulted section of the *Schülerchor*. As the wind players were placed on the steps,⁵ which Johann Gottfried Döring drew at the back of the *Schülerchor* (Fig. 5 in Chapter III), a set-up with the strings on the left and the wind instruments on the right, as in the *Thomaskirche*, was not possible. At the back of the *Schülerchor* it must have been dark, especially in winter. The instrumentalists had to make do with candle light.

Bach composed a number of pieces for large ensembles specifically for the *Nikolaikirche*, such as the Council change Cantatas BWV 29, 69.2, 119, 120 and 193.2. The relatively large-scale *St John Passion* was also performed here for the first time. To find out how large ensembles could be accommodated here, we will again assume a line-up of eight singers, six violins, two violas, three trumpets, timpani, three oboes, two flutes, two cellos, violone, two bassoons, harpsichord and organ: 32 people in total. A possible arrangement would then be as follows: the organist sat at the organ, Bach sat with his harpsichord in the middle. Eight singers stood at the balustrade, divided into a group of four concertists and a group of four ripienists. In the front of the vaulted room the other continuo players probably sat or stood at one side of the harpsichord; at the other side of the harpsichord and directly behind it the violinists and violists.^{6, D} At the back of this space, on the (front) steps, were the oboists and next to them the flautists. Behind them, on the high passage from one tower to the other, the trumpeters and the timpanists could find ample space. Fig. 6 gives an impression of this arrangement.

The drawing is a simplified representation of a part of Döring's floor plan, with a scale in metres.⁷ The derived measurements are:

- the depth of the *Schülerchor* from the balustrade to the first step was about 5.2 m;
- the usable width was approx. 4.5 m;
- the steps were about 34 cm deep; enough for people to stand on;
- The passage at the back of the *Schülerchor* from one tower to the other was about 1.2 m wide;
- The balustrade had a depth of ca. 28 cm. The drawing by Carl Benjamin Schwartz (fig. 4 in chapter III) does not show desks for the singers, but they were probably present in Bach's time.

⁴ Schering 1936, p. 149; Andreas Glöckner, '„zu besser Bequemlichkeit der Music“, Über einige neue Quellen zur Leipziger Kirchenmusik', *BJ* 99, 2013, p. 335-348, p. 339f.; *Dokumente GTL* VIII/C 80, p. 95.

⁵ Schering 1936, p. 148.

⁶ An arrangement with all the continuo instruments to the left and right of the harpsichord and all the strings behind it is not practically possible. Moreover, the contact with the leading violinists is better guaranteed in the way as drawn in Fig. 6, as was recommended by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach (see endnote ^D).

⁷ An earlier attempt by Arnold Schering seems too much simplified; see Schering 1936, p. 148.

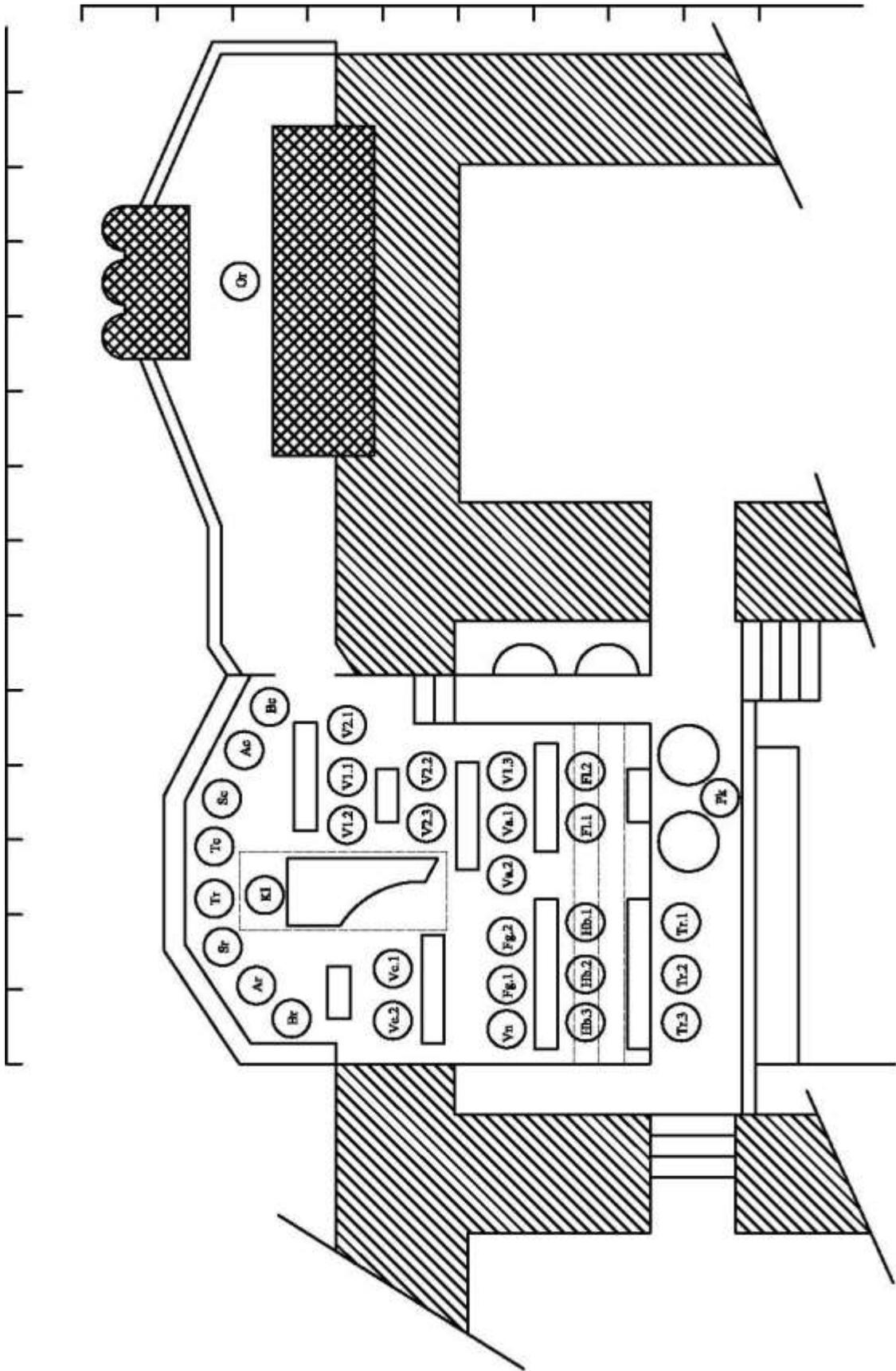


Fig. 6. Impression of a possible positioning in the *Nikolaikirche* based on fig. I.16.
 Design Rens Bijma; realisation Margreet Bijma-Bosch.

The musicians entered are indicated by the following codes:

Sc	soprano, concertist (<i>alumnus</i>);
Ac	alto, concertist (<i>alumnus</i>)
Tc	tenor, concertist (<i>student</i>);
Bc	bass, concertist (<i>student</i>)
Sr	soprano, ripienist (<i>alumnus</i>)
Ar	alto, ripienist (<i>alumnus</i>)
Tr	tenor, ripienist (<i>alumnus</i>)
Br	bass, ripienist (<i>alumnus</i>)
Kl	conductor / harpsichordist (<i>Bach</i>)
Or	organist (<i>church organist of the Nikolaikirche</i>)
V1.1,2	first violinists (<i>Kunstgeiger</i>)
V1.3	first violinist (<i>student?</i>)
V2.1	second violinist (<i>Kunstgeiger</i>)
V2.2,3	Second violinists (<i>students or alumni</i>)
Va.1,2	violists (<i>alumni</i>)
Vc.1,2	cellists (<i>alumni</i>)
Vn	violone player (<i>alumnus</i>)
Fg.1,2	bassoon players (<i>Gesellen?</i>)
Hb.1,2,3	oboists (<i>Stadtppfeiffer and Geselle?</i>)
Fl.1,2	flute players (<i>students</i>)
Tr.1-3	trumpeters (<i>Stadtppfeiffer and Geselle?</i>)
Pk	timpanist (<i>Geselle?</i>)

The following should be noted with the arrangement presented:

- Following *Figs. 1 and 2*, longer desks have been chosen where possible, taking into account what was said in § V.2 about the instrumental scoring and the number of available parts in a complete surviving set. The depth of the desks is 30 cm; the desks on the balustrade were left out. The musicians are indicated by circles with a diameter of 55 cm; their instruments have been left out. Space has therefore been left free in the drawing for the cellists and the violinist.
- The three *Kunstgeiger* were placed in front, next to each other at one desk, on which two parts could be placed. In this way others did not have to read their parts. As in the *Thomaskirche*, the string players are positioned on the left. As a result the continuo instruments got a place on the right side.
- Scheibe's recommendation to place the trumpets and timpani at the very back was followed. Whether that had the intended effect, however, is uncertain: the instruments inside the vaulted space benefited acoustically from that overhang. Scheibe's recommendation to place the flutists more in front was not followed, partly for the same reason.
- From the drawing it becomes clear that the musicians stood close together: there were probably no seats (except for the harpsichordist). This situation is comparable to the one depicted in *fig. 1 and 2*. A 'choir' with more than eight singers was practically impossible in this church; even a single voiced group of ripienists led to space problems. Lack of space was mentioned as a problem in the first performance of the *Johannes-Passion* in 1724 (§ III.2). Bach heard at a late stage that the performance was to be held

in the *Nikolaikirche*. He complained, among other things, about the lack of space, since he needed ripienists for the singers (aria 'Mein teurer Heiland') and possibly wanted to use a larger number of instrumentalists than usual; for the 1749 performance Bach wrote extra doublets for violin and viola.

- Even more than in the *Thomaskirche*, it was necessary to turn the harpsichord half a turn when a student played harpsichord. Otherwise there would be no room for the continuo players who were reading along.
- The positions drawn remain suggestions. Alternatives are conceivable, but the proposals presented in this chapter seem to do the most justice to all the facts and considerations raised.

The arrangement for a large ensemble in the Nikolaikirche was probably as follows: the singers stood at the balustrade of the Schülerchor. Directly behind them Bach sat as conductor at the harpsichord, probably on a raised platform. Together with the singers he occupied the balcony. To the left and behind the harpsichord were the strings; to the right of the harpsichord were the other continuo instruments. At the very back, on one of the steps, stood the oboists and flautists. The trumpeters and the timpanist may have stood on the high passage at the back of the Schülerchor. The organist played the large organ, which was a few metres away from the Schülerchor. In this church a larger number of singers than eight during the performance of the Music was practically impossible.

Rens Bijma, version 8 November 2022

With thanks to Albert Clement and Jos van Veldhoven

^A Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, Hamburg 1739, p. 484.

§. 28. Die Stellung und Anordnung der Personen ist auch kein geringes Stück einer guten musikalischen Regierung; iedoch muß man sich hierin offtmals nach der Gelegenheit des Ortes viel richten. Im Gottes-Hause ist die Eintheilung anders zu machen, als in der Kammer. [...] Hat man nur eine schwache Besetzung der Grundstimmen, so müssen diese in der Mitte seyn; sind sie aber starck, und wenigstens mit 6 Personen bestellet, so mögen sie sich wohl theilen und gleichsam zu Seiten-Flügeln machen lassen. [...]

§. 30. Die Sänger müssen allenthalben voran stehen; ausser in Opern [...]

§. 31. Ubrigens stelle man die besten Sänger, so viel möglich, allemahl in die Mitte, absonderlich die zartesten Stimmen; nicht aber, nach dem alten herkommen, zur rechten Hand. Die Bässe und starcken Stimmen können sich ehender theilen, und so lincks als rechts auf beiden Seiten schicken.

^B Johann Adolph Scheibe, *Critischer Musikus*, ed. Leipzig 1745. Das 78. Stück, 1740, p. 712f.

Man soll bey Vocalmusiken darauf insonderheit sehen, daß sich die Singestimmen am besten und deutlichsten hören lassen, und daß sie nicht durch die Instrumente unvernehmlich gemacht werden. Zu dem Ende wird es am besten seyn, wenn er die singende Personen ganz frey stellet, daß sie das Gesichte gegen die Zuhörer kehren, die Instrumentalisten aber entweder seitwärts, oder, welches am besten ist, hinter den Sängern stehen. Wenn etwa Trompeten und Pauken bey der Musik sind: so soll man sie, so viel möglich, verstecken, und hinter alle übrige Instrumente stellen, wenn man nicht durch ihr prasselndes Geräusche so wohl Harmonie und Melodie, als Sänger und Instrumente, unvernehmlich machen will; insonderheit aber soll man sie von den Singestimmen allemal entfernen, weil sie diesen am schädlichsten sind. Mit schwachen blasenden Instrumenten, imgleichen mit Kniegeigen und mit Lauten hat man gleiche Behutsamkeit, als mit den Singestimmen zu beobachten. Die Bässe, vornehmlich aber das Clavcymbel, wenn es vorhanden ist, soll man den Sängern zum besten so stellen, daß sie ganz nahe bey ihnen stehen: weil sonst die Sänger, insonderheit, wenn es in der Kirche, oder auf einem weiten Platze ist, sehr leicht können irre gemacht werden, zumal wenn die übrigen Instrumente stille schweigen. Was man etwa sonst noch anführen könnte, ist am besten aus der Enge, oder Weite, des Ortes zu schliessen; imgleichen auch aus dem Zuge der Luft, aus dem Widerschalle und aus der übrigen Beschaffenheit des Platzes, wo sich die Zuhörer befinden.

^C Johann Kuhnau, *An E. Hoch Edlen und Hochweisen Rath zu Leipzigunterdienstliches Memoraiäl. Erinnerung des Cantoris die Schul und Kirchen Music betreffend*, 1709, published in Spitta II, p. 856ff.

5. Brauchten die *Instrumentisten* auff ihrem *Chörge*n zur rechten Hand hinter ihnen ein angenageltes Bret, die Geigen auffzuhängen, damit sie solche nicht mehr auff den Fußboden legen, und Schaden dabei besorgen dürfften.

^D Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*, [Erster Theil], Berlin 1753, footnote, p. 7f.

Steht der erste Violinist folgender, wie es sich gehört, nahe am Flügel; so kan nicht leicht eine Unordnung einreissen. Bey Singe-Arien, worinnen das Zeit-Maas sich schleunig verändert, oder worinnen alle Stimmen gleich lärmern, und die Singe-Stimme allein lange Noten oder Triolen hat, welche wegen der Eintheilung einen deutlichen Tact-Schlag erfordern, haben die Sänger auf diese Art eine grosse Erleichterung. Dem Basse wird es ohnedem am leichtesten, die Gleichheit des Tactes zu erhalten, je weniger er gemeiniglich mit schweren und bunten Passagien beschäftigt ist, und je öfter dieser Umstand oft Gelegenheit giebt, daß man ein Stück feuriger anfängt als beschliesset. Will jemand anfangen zu eylem oder zu schleppen, so kan er durchs Clavier am deutlichsten zu rechte gebracht werden, indem die andern wegen vieler Passagien oder Rückungen mit sich selbst genug beschäftigt sind; besonders haben die Stimmen, welche *Tempo rubato* haben, hierdurch den nöthigen nachdrücklichen Vorschlag des Tacts. Endlich kan auf diese Art, weil man durch das zu viele Geräusche des Flügels an der genauesten Wahrnehmung nicht verhindert wird, sehr leicht das Zeit-Maas, wie es oft nöthig ist, um etwas wenigens geändert werden, und die hinter, oder neben dem Flügel sich befindenden Musici haben einen in beyden Händen gleichen, durchdringenden und folglich den merklichsten Schlag des Tacts vor Augen.