

## IX. THE ORGANISATION OF THE MUSIC AND THE CONDITIONS DURING CHURCH SERVICES

This chapter deals with the place of Bach's cantatas in the liturgy of the Leipzig church services and the circumstances during the performances. Its influence on the quality of the performances will also be discussed.

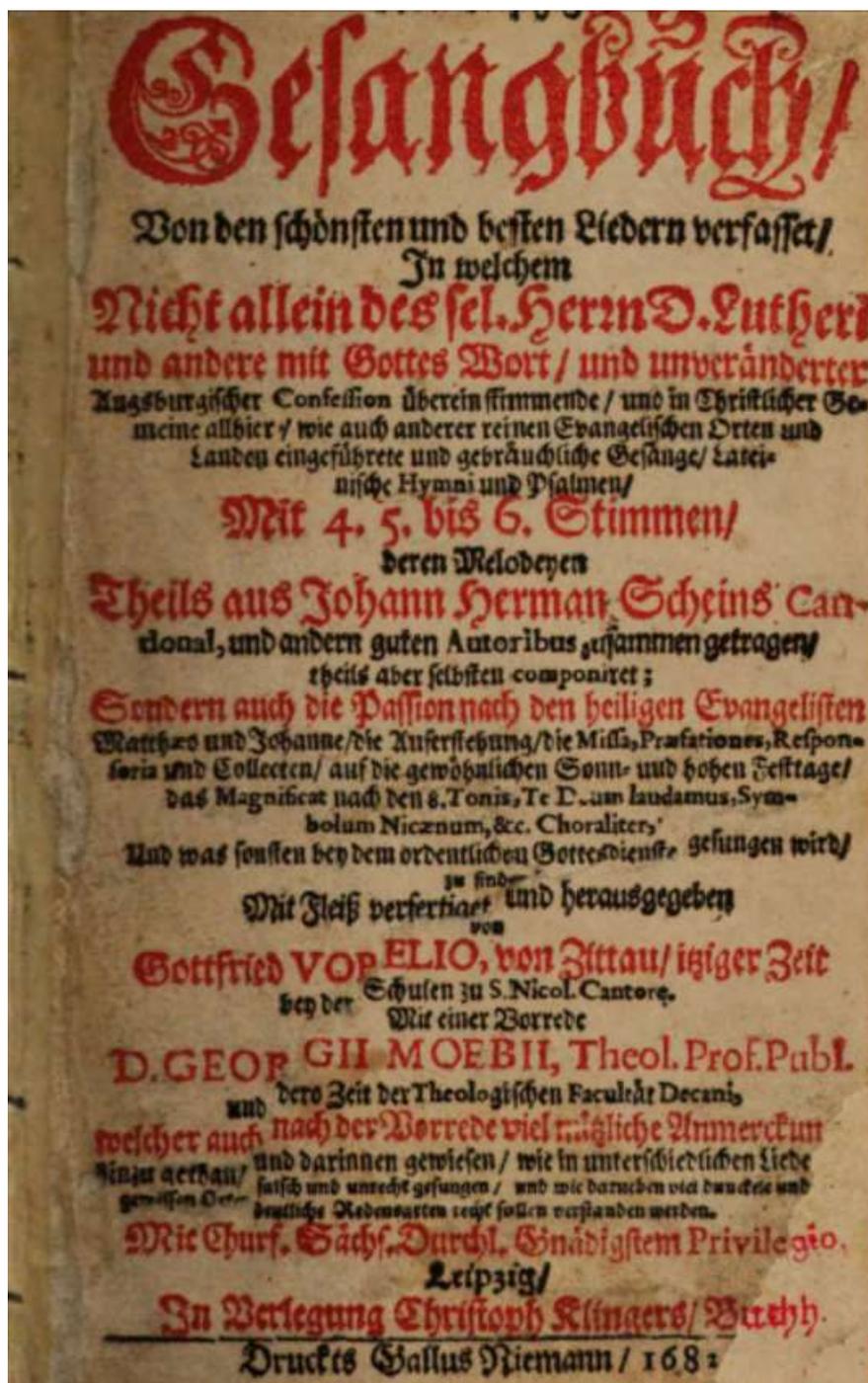


Fig. 1. Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch by Gottfried Vopelius, 1682, Title page.

# 1. How was the organization of the *Music* in both main churches in Leipzig?

## The liturgy of the Sunday morning service in Leipzig

In Leipzig there was an intensification of Orthodox-Lutheran church life against historic odds around 1700. <sup>1</sup> A pietistic way of believing, which advocated a simplification of church services, was gaining popularity all over Germany, but in the orthodox churches of Leipzig traditional complex liturgies with a rich and varied musical implementation were being maintained. The importance of church life in Leipzig at this time is shown by the fact that other churches were opened or re-opened in addition to the two main churches. Additional services were introduced both on Sundays and on weekdays; on Sundays and holidays fourteen sermons could be heard in Leipzig. By 1730, the richness of liturgy and church life was called even greater than those in Dresden. Although pietists were represented in the Council, the pietistic call for greater simplicity in Leipzig churches did not gain ground until after 1780. The liturgy was different on Sundays and weekdays, different on feast days and ordinary Sundays, different during the time of Lent and Advent on the one hand and the rest of the year on the other, different during morning services and vespers and so on.

The most important service was the so-called *Früh-Predigt* (early sermon) on Sundays, during which the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Such services were held simultaneously in the *Thomaskirche* and the *Nikolaikirche*. The service began at 7:00, and lasted, depending on the number of communicants, from three to over four hours. In addition to lessons, prayers, announcements, and the sermon, the liturgy of the *Früh-Predigt* featured a great deal of music, which can be divided into the following four categories:

1. The hymns, sang by the congregation, were started by the *precentor* (often the prefect) and sung along by the boys' choir. The organist took care of an introductory prelude and, e.g. during communion, interludes. The much used *Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch* (New Leipzig Hymn-book) by Gottfried Vopelius (*fig. 1*), first published in 1682, contained 415 four- to six-part chants by authors such as Johann Hermann Schein and Vopelius himself. However, it is unlikely that the choir sang the chants from this volume in a multi-voiced way, because the chants in this volume had the old rhythmic form, while the congregation sang these chorales isorhythmically (see Glossary in Chapter I; Chapter XVII) everywhere in Germany. <sup>2</sup> That this also happened in Leipzig is all the more likely, since Bach almost always notated these chorales isorhythmically in his cantatas. According to Schering and Stiller the organist would not have accompanied the congregational singing. <sup>3</sup> It is not clear, however, on which sources Schering bases this statement; Stiller seems to rely on Schering. The fact that the precentor and boys' choir intoned the hymns according to the *Schulordnung*, <sup>A</sup> however,

---

<sup>1</sup> This rich liturgical life is described in detail in Günther Stiller's classic book: Günther Stiller, *Johann Sebastian Bach und das Leipziger gottesdienstliche Leben seiner Zeit*, Kassel 1970, p. 29-83.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Blindow, *Die Choralbegleitung des 18. Jahrhunderts in der evangelischen Kirche Deutschlands*, (Kölner Beiträge zur Musikforschung 13), Regensburg 1957, p. 13-18; Friedrich Blume, *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirchenmusik*, Kassel <sup>2</sup>1965, pp. 171f.; Joseph Herl, *Worship Wars in Early Lutheranism: Choir, Congregation, and Three Centuries of Conflict*, New York 2004, p. 167-172; *Dokumente GLT VIII/C* 35, p. 57.

<sup>3</sup> Arnold Schering, *Musikgeschichte Leipzigs*, Bd. III, Leipzig 1941, p. 59; Stiller 1970, p. 80.

does not exclude organ accompaniment. Congregational singing without organ accompaniment was common during weekday services and at services of the Hours.<sup>B</sup> If no choir was present, a student or the sexton would act as precentor.<sup>C</sup> Also on Sundays during a national mourning period, on days of penance and in Lent before Easter the organ remained silent (except for e.g. Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday).<sup>4</sup> This is confirmed by the complaint of Superintendent Salomon Deyling to the Council in 1737: in the *Nikolaikirche* the precentor had started the communion hymn much too low, so the congregation could not sing along. The date 10 April 1737 fell on a Sunday in Lent.<sup>D</sup> It does not seem right to conclude from the above that the organ did not accompany the other main services, possibly, according to Philipp Spitta, with the exception of the pulpit song on other Sundays and feast days.<sup>5</sup> Bach's pupil Johann Gottfried Ziegler remarked that he had learned from Bach to play the hymns according to the affect of the words.<sup>E</sup> Apparently he was talking about the art of accompanying congregational singing. This suggests that such accompaniment was indeed happening.

2. Versicles sung by the pastor were met with responses by the choir.
3. The choir sang a motet from Erhard Bodenschatz's anthology *Florilegium Portense*, which contained a motet by a German or Italian composer for each Sunday and feast day of the year. *Florilegium Portense* appeared in two volumes in 1603 (rev. 1618) and 1621, and was in use throughout Bach's cantorate. It was not until 1790 that cantor Johann Adam Hiller abolished the custom.<sup>6</sup> The volume was published in 8 part books plus a continuo part. The motets were in four to eight voices, and often in Latin. As far as they were accompanied, this probably happened with the organ only. During communion another motet could be sung.
4. Finally, concerted music was performed during the service: the cantata. On public holidays it was repeated in the other main church during the *Vesper-Predigt* (Vesper sermon, starting at 13:15).

Bach himself wrote the liturgy for the first Sundays of Advent in 1724 and 1736 on the score of his two cantatas *Nun komm der Heiden Heiland* BWV 61 and 62 (fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> From the second Sunday of Advent onwards and during Lent (with the exception of Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday) it was *tempus clausum*: no cantata was performed, and the organ was completely silent. But the first Sunday of Advent was considered a holiday; therefore, a cantata (Hauptmusic) was still performed.<sup>8</sup>

---

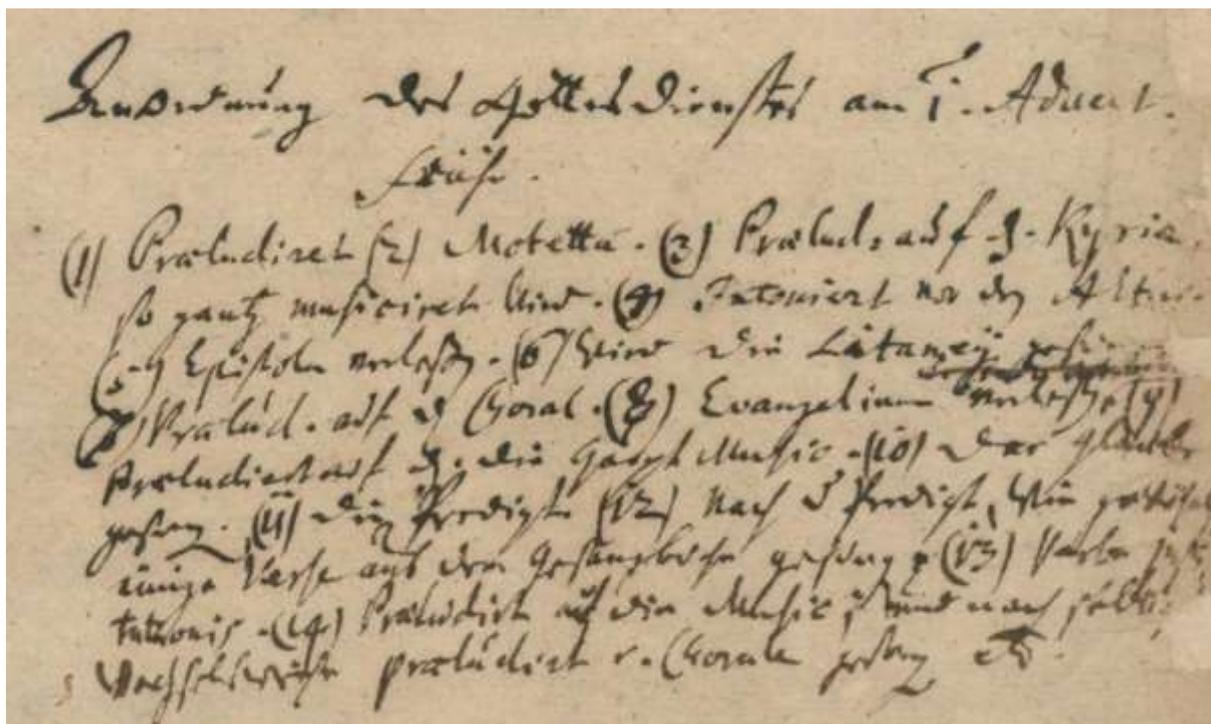
<sup>4</sup> Johann Christoph Rost (sexton of the *Thomaskirche*), quoted in Martin Petzoldt, "Passionspredigt und Passionsmusik der Bachzeit", *Johann Sebastian Bach, Matthäus Passion, BWV 244: Vorträge, der Sommerakademie J.S. Bach 1985*, hrsg. v. Ulrich Prinz, Kassel 1990, p. 19f.

<sup>5</sup> Philipp Spitta, *Johann Sebastian Bach, Zweiter Band*, Leipzig 1916, p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> *Dokumente GLT VIII/C 55*, p. 74. Bodenschatz's volume of four-part Latin and German hymns *Florilegium selectissimorum Hymnorum* of 1606 was also in use; *Ibid.* C 71, p. 88 and 75, p. 91. A volume containing copies of responsoria and motets was bound in 1732: *Ibid.* C 65, p. 85.; Hiller's decision to abolish *Florilegium Portense* is described in *Ibid.* XI/C 9, p. 545.

<sup>7</sup> *Anordnung des Gottesdienstes in Leipzig am 1 Advent-Sontag frühe*, *BD I*, no. 178, p. 248 and *BD I*, no. 181, p. 251.

<sup>8</sup> The explanations are based on data from Stiller 1970, p. 95ff. and Martin Petzoldt, "Liturgy and Music in the Main Churches of Leipzig," *The World of Bach Cantatas 3*, ed. Ton Koopman / Christoph Wolff, Abcoude 1998, p. 69-93, p. 84ff.



**Afb. 2.** BWV 62, score, order of the Divine Service in Leipzig on the first Advent-Sunday early (1736).  
(Anordnung des Gottesdienstes in Leipzig am 1 Advent-Sonntag früh)

The two liturgies noted by Bach are almost identical, and looked as follows:

On holidays, the service started with a choral hymn.

1. *Praeludieret*

(Improvised) organ prelude to the motet.

2. *Motetta*

Introitus. A motet, sung by the choir, from the volume *Florilegium Portense* by Erhard Bodenschatz. During the *tempus clausum* this motet was replaced by the Gregorian recited Benedictus (the hymn of Zachariah).

3. *Praeludieret auf das Kyrie, so gantz musiciret wird*

That is, after an organ prelude, on this feast day the Kyrie was sung in Latin by the choir as figural (multi-part contrapuntal) music. On ordinary Sundays the congregation sang *Kyrie Gott Vater*, a German Kyrie trope at a Gregorian melody. This was followed by the *Gloria*, which was intoned by the priest in Latin, after which the congregation sang the song *Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr*. On feast days, however, the *Gloria* was sung by the choir in Latin as figural music, and in Lent as Gregorian chant.

4. *Intoniret vor dem Altar*

The priest sang *Dominus vobiscum* as a greeting, the choir answered with the response *Et cum spiritu tuo*; the priest recited a Collecta prayer in Latin.

5. *Epistola verlesen*

The epistle reading was recited.

6. *Wird die Litaney gesungen*

Only in Advent and Lent: the litany, sung alternating between choir and congregation.

7. *Praelud: auf den Choral*

After an organ recital, the congregation sang the *Hauptlied* (Sunday hymn).

8. *Evangelium verlesen*

The gospel was also sung in a reciting tone, by the priest. After this, except on feast days, the Credo was intoned by the priest. This item was crossed out by Bach in 1723, probably because 1st Advent was counted as a feast day.

9. *Praelud. Auf die HauptMusic*

During the organ prelude to the concerted music (usually a cantata) the performers could take their places, while the instrumentalists could tune their instruments, according to Michael Praetorius in Wolfenbüttel and Friderich Erhard Niedt in Hamburg.<sup>f</sup> It is not certain whether this was customary in Leipzig in Bach's time, but in 1852 it was indeed observed in Leipzig, as Lowell Mason's account of a church service in the *Nikolaikirche* shows.<sup>9</sup>

After the prelude (the first part of) the cantata was performed. During Lent no *Music* sounded, but the Latin Credo was sung in Gregorian chant.

10. *Der Glaube gesungen*

The congregation sang the three verses of *Wir glauben all an einen Gott*.

11. *The Sermon*

After a greeting and call to prayer, a seasonal congregational song, a repetition of the gospel text and a silently prayed *Vater unser*, the sermon itself followed, lasting about 1 hour. The sermon concluded with extended prayers (*Großes Kirchengebet*) and announcements, again a silently prayed 'Our Father' and the peace greeting.

12. *Nach der Predigt, wie gewöhnlich einige Verse aus einem Liede (1736: aus dem Gesangbuche) gesungen*

The congregation sang a hymn, appropriate to the gospel. But according to the *Leipzig Kirchenstaat* (fig. 3) there was also room for music, especially on feast days. Bach noted above the second half of a number of cantatas 'nach der Predigt', and not 'unter der Communion'. But 'during communion' is of course also 'after the sermon'. Bach makes it clear that - at least on the first Sunday of Advent - a hymn was sung at this part, and not figural music.

13. *Verba Institutionis*

The sacramental prayer, on feast days with Latin Prefatie and figuratively sung *Sanctus*. On other days a paraphrase of the *Vater unser* and a supper form were spoken.

During the words of dedication that followed, the bells were rung in the church.

14. *Praelud. auf die Music. Und nach selbiger wechselweise praeludirt v. Choräle gesungen, bis die Communion zu Ende ist & sic porrò.*

So on feast days concerted music with an organ prelude was again played during communion. This could be a second part of a cantata, or a second cantata, or one or more separate parts from a cantata or a cantata by another composer. Stiller remarks that many cantatas end with texts which refer to the Lord's Supper.<sup>10</sup> The fact that an *Agnus Dei* could be sung on feast days was apparently not practised in Leipzig. In Bach's music library Kirsten Beißwenger found many (8 to 20) settings of the fixed chants Kyrie, Gloria and Sanctus, but not one of the *Agnus Dei*.<sup>11</sup> The *Leipziger*

---

<sup>9</sup> Lowell Mason, *NBR* No. 412, p. 523.

<sup>10</sup> Stiller 1970, p. 72f.

<sup>11</sup> Kirsten Beißwenger, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Notenbibliothek*, Kassel 1992, p. 226-400.

*Kirchen Andachten* gives the possibility of singing a motet again.<sup>12</sup> This may have been used on ordinary Sundays, because Bach and the city musicians had already left the church after the sermon, leaving the performance of the music during communion to the prefect, the singers and the organist.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 3. *Leipziger Kirchenstaat*, 1710, Frontispice and Title page.

<sup>12</sup> Stiller 1970, p. 67.

<sup>13</sup> Johann Kuhnau 1710, in Spitta II, p. 860; Arnold Schering, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik*, Leipzig 1936, p. 10; Gerhard Kappner, *Sakrament und Musik*, Gütersloh 1952, p. 71; Andreas Glöckner, "... daß ohne Hülffe derer Herren Studiosorum der Herr Cantor keine vollstimmende Music würde bestellen können...", *Bemerkungen zur Leipziger Kirchenmusik vor 1723 und nach 1750*, *BJ* 87, 2001, p. 136. This may explain why Bach refrained from composing many two-part cantatas soon after his arrival in Leipzig.

According to Johann Kuhnau a number of instrumentalists were probably involved in the services in the Neue Kirche. <sup>14</sup> If communion had not yet been finished when the *Music* had ended, verses of a chorale were sung, alternated with variations on the organ. After a versicle sung by the priest with choral response, a final collecta-prayer and spoken blessing, the congregation sang its final hymn, usually *Gott sei uns gnädig*. On feast days the service was then concluded with a hymn by the choir.

### **The performance of concerted music during the liturgy**

The Bodenschatz motet sung by the choir at the beginning of the main service is not to be counted among the concerted church music. The choir was not led by Bach during this motet, but by the prefect of the first choir. <sup>15</sup> The cantata (*HauptMusic*) had its regular place in the liturgy: between the Gospel reading and the sermon. Besides that - at least on feast days - there was room for concerted music during communion. But on the same feast days the performers of the cantata were expected to leave the church quickly after the cantata, and to hurry to the *Paulinerkirche* (the university church), where they would perform the cantata again an hour later. <sup>16</sup> As concerted music with instruments was also performed in the other main church on high feast days, Bach could only call upon the city musicians and instrumentalists from his first choir for the performance of the *Music*. <sup>17</sup> As described above, on other Sundays concerted music was generally not performed during communion. Congregational singing and organ music could also serve as *musica sub communionem*, perhaps sometimes preceded by a motet. <sup>18</sup>

*The long Sunday morning services were liturgically rich and well attended. However, members of the congregation often came especially for the one-hour sermon. Before and after that, also during the cantata, people came and went. This was one of the causes of restlessness in the church. The motet, accompanied only by organ, was sung at the beginning of the service. It was led by the prefect. After the reading of the gospel, the cantata was performed by Bach. After the sermon and during the supper concerted music could be performed again, for instance the second part of a cantata.*

---

<sup>14</sup> Johann Kuhnau 1704, in Spitta II, p. 854.

<sup>15</sup> *BD I*, no. 35, p. 90 and *BD I*, no. 39, p. 95.

<sup>16</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Die Kantaten Johann Sebastian Bachs, J.S. Bach, Sämtliche Kantaten, Motetten, Choräle und Geistliche Lieder* 18 [NBA small format], Kassel 2007, p. 15.

<sup>17</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach, *Kurtzer, iedoch höchstnöthiger Entwurff einer wohlbestallten Kirchen Music; nebst einigem unvorgreiflichen Bedencken von dem Verfall derselben*. Letter to the Leipzig Council, 23. August 1730, *BD I*, no. 22, p. 60ff., r. 76-93. The complete text is included in endnote <sup>A</sup> to Chapter VI.

<sup>18</sup> Kappner 1952, p. 69f.; Albert Clement, "Die lutherische Tradition der *Musica sub Communionem* und J.S. Bachs Choralpartitenschaffen," *Musik und Gottesdienst* 45, 1991, p. 61-70, on p. 63f.

## 2. Under what conditions did the performances of cantatas and passions take place?

### The churchgoers and the circumstances

As described in chapters II and III, the two main churches provided seating for 2,000 to 2,500 churchgoers in the form of *Stände* (rented pews), *Bänklein* (folding pews) and *Capellen* (private lodges). In addition, there were hundreds of standing places. The *Stände* were mainly rented by the elite and the well-to-do citizens. There was always a demand for good seats. Women sat at the bottom of the nave, most men sat on and under the galleries; a few sat at the back of the church. For wealthy families there were the *Capellen*, enclosed rooms, with four to twelve seats. Others rented, sometimes in several churches at once, a whole dozen of seats.

For most churchgoers, the sermon was the main event: many people came during the first hour and left after the sermon. Therefore the collection was held during the sermon. This was apparently a universal phenomenon in Germany, which led Johann Mattheson in Hamburg to advise the organists not to accompany too strongly at first. During the service they could then add more stops, but as the congregation left the church again, the volume had to be lowered.<sup>19</sup> Before and after the sermon, thus also during the cantata, there was often a lot of commotion: coming and going of the congregation, talking, walking and noisy youngsters and collection bags with bells, etc. According to a description from Merseburg by Julius Bernhard von Rohr people slept and chatted during the services and read letters and newspapers. But the standards were different from those of today: silence was not expected in church, nor at concerts or operas.<sup>19</sup>

Cantatas were performed from the *Musikchor*. From behind the balustrade the sound of the singers in both churches could be directed well, so the cantatas could be followed well in spite of the usually small number of singers. Despite the constant background noise (see above) many members of the congregation listened well.<sup>20</sup> They could follow the text with libretto books, and the chorales from hymnals. Bach mainly used old Lutheran hymns, which the congregation mostly knew by heart. The female congregation seated in the nave of the church facing east could not see the performers, while the male worshippers seated under the galleries could see even less. Those who followed the service from a private chapel could see and hear very little. Only men and students in the north and south galleries had some view of the musicians.

Of the six northern windows in the *Thomaskirche*, five were almost completely covered on the outside by the external *Vorbau* (Chapter II): light could almost only enter through the southern windows. Especially in winter it was dark in the church; light had to come mainly from candles. In 1615, two large brass chandeliers were purchased, each for six candles, one in the altar choir and one near the baptismal font. In 1638 eleven brass chandeliers were mounted on the pillars of the galleries, in 1723 twelve iron chandeliers in the *Schülerchor* and in 1724 an iron chandelier on the organ. Thus, according to Herbert Stiehl, the entire

---

<sup>19</sup> Tanya Kevorkian, "The Reception of the Cantata during Leipzig Church Services, 1700-1750," *Early Music* 30/1, 2002, p. 31f.; reprinted in Tanya Kevorkian, *Baroque Piety, Religion, Society, and Music in Leipzig, 1560-1750*, Ashgate 2007, pp. 33, 40f.

<sup>20</sup> Kevorkian 2002, p. 34f.

church had to be illuminated with a total of 37 candles.<sup>21</sup> Apparently he assumed that the chandeliers carried one candle each; however, this is not likely. That candles were used at the *Schülerchor* is shown by special accounts for candles in both churches over all the years of Bach's cantorate.<sup>22</sup> Complaints are known about the darkness in the church. In 1745, for example, someone complained that despite the candles burning he could not read anything in the books under the galleries.<sup>H</sup>

Moreover, in winter it was cold.<sup>23</sup> In the unheated churches churchgoers could use foot stoves with hot coals to keep their feet warm. Behind the *Schülerchor* of the *Nikolaikirche* there was a heated room for the pupils, where they could warm themselves when they did not have to sing (Chapter III); in the *Thomaskirche* this possibility was lacking. The choristers in their black choir dress were not allowed to cover their heads unless the cold was unbearable. If necessary, a sermon in the *Thomasschule* or *Nikolaischule* was allowed to be read to the alumni during the sermon.<sup>I</sup> The *Director Musices* was expected not to make his *Kirchenmusiken* too long in winter.<sup>J</sup> The temperature difference between winter and summer must have influenced the pitch of the organ: warm air makes the tone rise. But because the temperature was fairly constant due to the lack of heating, the effect during church services was minimal. This also applied to other instruments, such as the harpsichord.

In the *Nikolaikirche* there was a lack of space. The musicians stood close together, and this could cause problems, especially with a high number of musicians, as in the case of Council change cantatas. Bach initially did not want to perform his *Johannes-Passion* in this church in 1724, partly because there was not enough room. The Council replied that he would have to create extra space at the Council's expense, in consultation with the *Obervoigt* of *Nikolaikirche* (Chapter III). Another problem in the *Nikolaikirche* was the location of the organ: it was located a few meters next to the *Schülerchor*. In both respects, conditions in the *Thomaskirche* were better.

## The quality of the performers

It's just a pity that he rarely had the luck to find such performers of his work, who would have spared him these annoying remarks.

[...] Nur Schade, daß er selten das Glück gehabt, lauter solche Ausführer seiner Arbeit zu finden, die ihm diese verdrießlichen Bemerkungen erspart hätten. [...]

These are words of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Lorenz Christoph Mizler and Johann Friedrich Agricola in the *Necrolog* (1750/1754).<sup>24</sup> It is obvious that they were not referring to the professionals with whom Bach worked in Weimar and Köthen, but to the performers of his church works in Leipzig. As described in Chapter IV, Bach was dissatisfied in his Memorandum (*Entwurf*) with the capacities of most school pupils. For this reason he wanted to be able to request the assistance of university students - paid for by the Council. From 1724-1729 usually only two students were paid; probably a tenor or violinist and in any case a bass.

---

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Stiehl, "Das Innere der Thomaskirche zur Amtszeit Johann Sebastian Bachs", *Beiträge zur Bachforschung*, Heft 3, Leipzig 1984, p. 37f.; *Dokumente GLT VIII/C 5*, p. 40f.; *BD II*, nr. 171, 172, p. 134.

<sup>22</sup> *BD II*, nos. 171 and 172, p. 134.

<sup>23</sup> Letter from Lowell Mason, 1852, reproduced in the *New Bach Reader*, no. 412, p. 522.

<sup>24</sup> Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, Johann Friedrich Agricola, Lorenz Christoph Mizler, "Necrolog", *Musikalische Bibliothek, Des vierten Bandes Erster Theil*, Leipzig 1754, *BD III*, no. 666, p. 87.

When in 1730 the funds for this were transferred to the *Neue Kirche*, this was one of the reasons for Bach to sound the alarm with his Memorandum.

He had never used ripienists in his previous appointments, but in Leipzig their use was apparently expected. However, after the first four performances of his cantatas Bach abandoned the idea; he then restricted using ripienists to a few large scale cantatas only (Chapter VI). It is obvious that the use of ripienists meant more work in the short time available, but above all that the quality suffered: there was a lack of capable singing *Thomasschüler*. School pupils were initially too young and inexperienced as singers, then their voices broke and they were out of service for nine months, after which they had to develop their tenor or bass voice, and when they were finally usable as such, left school again (see Chapter IV).

But Bach (like Kuhnau) was also dissatisfied with the city musicians. In the Memorandum of 1730 he wrote that modesty forbade him to mention the truth about the qualities and theoretical knowledge among the gentlemen. Partly they were old and partly they lacked skills (see Chapter IV).<sup>25</sup> According to Beverly Jerold, the status of professional musicians was low, but secure. They were often illiterate, but could play many instruments. Because they did not specialize in one instrument, they were usually not particularly virtuosic on their instruments. They were mainly practically oriented, not theoretically trained. Outside the church they played tower music and dance music. Their usual way of playing may have been reflected in the church services. Moreover, their wind instruments seem to have been badly intoned.<sup>26</sup> In the preface to the 1745 reissue of his *Critische Musicus* Johann Adolph Scheibe wrote about the poor quality of city musicians in general.<sup>K</sup>

Even with the help of all seven city musicians, Bach was clearly short of instrumentalists (see Chapter V). In the past he was able to enlist the services of students, but he had to rely mainly on alumni.<sup>27</sup> In other words, Bach had to work with a limited number of reasonable singers, some of them students, the others alumni, with predominantly mediocre city musicians and with pupils as violin-ripienists and viola, cello and violone players. He complained about this, among other things, in his Memorandum. And this is probably what the authors of the *Necrolog* mean with the above quote. According to Martin Geck<sup>28</sup> it remains to be seen whether Christoph Wolff is right when he states that from 1723 on Bach trained his *Thomaner* to be competent singers, which resulted in high quality performances.<sup>29</sup>

### Comments from contemporaries

There were many complaints about Bach by the Leipzig City Council, but these were usually about his teaching at the Thomasschule, and never about the quality of the performances of his cantatas. Others even expressed their admiration for Bach's ability as a director. In a letter from Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach to Johann Nikolaus Forkel, the second son recalls about his

---

<sup>25</sup> J.S. Bach 1730, r. 48-53. Endnote <sup>A</sup> to Chapter VI, § 6

<sup>26</sup> Beverly Jerold, "Bach's Lament about Leipzig's Professional Instrumentalists," *Bach, The Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 36/1, 2005, pp. 67-96; *ibid.*, 'Performance conditions, standards and Bach's chorus', *The Musical Times*, Winter 2017, p. 55-70, op p. 57. Jerold even believes that the city musicians and their instruments were so poor in quality, while the singers, arranged in large choirs, were mostly shouting, that the performances were incomparably worse than those of today. However, her arguments contain errors; moreover, they are often based on post-1750 quotations.

<sup>27</sup> J.S. Bach 1730, r. 54-86. Endnote <sup>A</sup> to Chapter VI, § 6, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach, The learned musician*, New York / Oxford 2000, pp. 250, 260.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Geck, 'Bach's art of church music and his Leipzig performance forces: contradictions in the system', *Early Music* 31/4, 2003, p. 559f

father: 'he heard the slightest wrong note with the largest number of musicians'.<sup>30</sup> This statement is confirmed in the well-known account of Rector Johann Matthias Gesner from 1738. Part of this apparently concerns a performance or rehearsal in which Bach leads a cantata with many performers from behind the harpsichord:<sup>31</sup> Bach gets lofty praise, but at the same time this episode reveals something about notes that need to be indicated, false notes, wobbles and hiccups. One can only hope that this is about a rehearsal in the *Thomaskirche* or *Nikolaikirche* and not a performance. The location will probably not have been the *Thomasschule*: as far as we know, there was no harpsichord there.

The fact that the performances were not optimal is also evident from the disputes between Johann Adolph Scheibe and Magister Johann Abraham Birnbaum.<sup>32</sup> Scheibe, son of the organ builder Johann Scheibe, studied at Leipzig University, and in 1731 received a positive attestation as a pupil of Bach.<sup>33</sup> He probably co-operated as a harpsichordist or violinist in Bach's cantata performances. Scheibe began publishing *Der Critische Musicus in Hamburg* in 1736. In 1737 he wrote anonymously about twelve musicians who were not mentioned by name; the names of these musicians are now known. Only the modern composers Carl Heinrich Graun and Johann Adolf Hasse were perfect in Scheibe's eyes. A number of musicians were severely criticized by Scheibe. He praised Bach highly, especially as a harpsichordist and organist, but he called Bach's vocal style *schwülstig* und *verworren*. In other words, the equality of all the voices made the music unintelligible, and no main melody could be distinguished; the result, in his eyes, was a mishmash of sound. In this Scheibe was a child of his time, and au fond this was a matter of fashion and taste. A salient detail: it can be deduced from the context that Telemann probably agreed with Scheibe.<sup>l</sup> In 1745 Scheibe finally apologised for his attack on Bach, but without withdrawing his criticism.<sup>34</sup>

Another aspect of Scheibe's criticism was that Bach's vocal music was difficult to perform, and not written with the performers in mind. In his rebuttal in defense of Bach, Magister Birnbaum noted that the quality of music should never be measured by the quality of its performance. He defended Bach's thesis that every performer should strive for optimal quality.<sup>m</sup> Scheibe, however, believed that music should be written with the level of the performers in mind, not with an unattainable ideal level. It seems that Bach's performances, at least in the years after 1737, did not reach the high level that writers like Wolff assume.

### **The reliability of the parts**

There are more indications of the mediocre quality of Bach's performances of cantatas and passions: the surviving scores and especially parts. In the first place the parts were usually written in a hurry and not very refined, often with quite a few corrections, which made their readability less than optimal. Furthermore, scores and especially parts contained numerous errors. Alfred Dürr described this phenomenon in 1974, using as an example the *Matthäus-*

---

<sup>30</sup> *BD* III.801, p. 285.

<sup>31</sup> Johann Matthias Gesner, (rector Thomasschule), Footnote to Gesner's 1738 translation of Quintilian, *BD* II.432, p. 331f.; translation by the sexton of the *Thomaskirche* Gottlob Friedrich Rothe, 1792, *BD* V. C978b, p. 257f.

<sup>32</sup> George J. Buelow, 'In Defence of J. A. Scheibe against J. S. Bach', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 101, 1974/1975, pp. 85-100; Beverly Jerold, 'The Bach-Scheibe Controversy: New documentation', *Bach, The Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* XLII.1, 2011, pp. 1-45.

<sup>33</sup> *BD* I.68, p. 136f.

<sup>34</sup> *BD* II.530, p. 415.

*Passion*, of which he edited the *NBA* edition.<sup>35</sup> Although the parts and score were more readable than in most cantatas, Dürr mentions the following shortcomings:

- wrong notes and note values (differences between the parts of choir 1 and choir 2 or between the original part and the doublet)
- wrong (different) sharps, flats and natural symbols (sometimes even in the margin)
- differences in articulation (between parts of both choirs and between the original-parts and their doublets)
- missing measures (e.g. in the doublet of the part for the second violin of the aria 'Können Thränen meiner Wangen' are missing two bars from m. 5 (figs. 4 and 5), and five bars from m. 58).

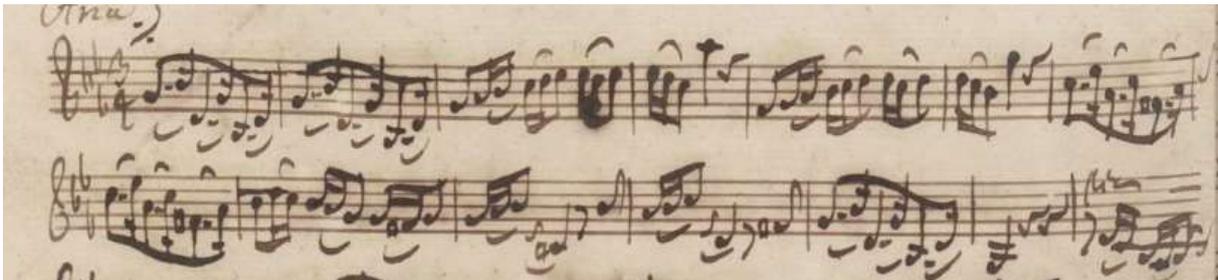


Fig. 4. BWV 244.2/52, beginning, part for 2<sup>nd</sup> violin (original autograph part).



Fig. 5. BWV 244.2/52, beginning, part for 2<sup>nd</sup> violin (doublet).  
Bars 5 and 6 are missing; last bar wrong note values.

The most striking thing, however, is that these errors were not corrected after the first performance in 1737. The same defects therefore occurred at the next performance, probably in 1743. Dürr concludes that the listeners in Bach's time were less accustomed to perfect performances than listeners in our time. This raises the question of whether Gesner's account, quoted above, does not describe a performance after all. Dürr assumes that there was little rehearsal before a performance, otherwise the errors would have come to light and been corrected. However, this is questionable. In the first place it may be noted that rehearsals did take place; for Sunday cantatas this happened on Saturday afternoon and on Sunday before

<sup>35</sup> Alfred Dürr, "De vita cum imperfectis" [1974], *Im Mittelpunkt Bach*, hrsg. v. Kirsten Beißwenger, Kassel 1988, pp. 158-166.

the service.<sup>36</sup> For feast days the school lessons were cancelled for a whole day in order to allow extra rehearsals, at least in the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

Of course, the performers did not have a feather and an inkwell at hand during rehearsals; pencils might have been available. But apparently corrections were never made by the performers themselves. Perhaps they were expected to commit errors to memory, after they had been noted and the right notes had been practiced improvisationally. It may have been Bach's task to correct those errors later, but that was apparently not a priority. Instructions Bach gave during a rehearsal were never written down by the performers. According to Dürr, part of the improvisational ability of the performers was apparently the independent application of articulation true to style. Therefore an accurate notation of this was less important. It may be added that the parts lacked such things as cue notes and bar numbers. Even the movements of a cantata or passion were not numbered. And, as mentioned in Chapters XVIII and XIX, often figures in organ and harpsichord parts were absent or only very briefly noted.<sup>37</sup>

***Most of the congregation sat with their backs to the performers. Despite a lot of commotion in the church, people listened well.***

***Especially in winter it could be very dark in the churches. The musicians had to make do with a limited number of candles. The cold was also a problem: the churches were unheated.***

***The Schülerchor in the Nikolaikirche was smaller than in the Thomaskirche, and the organ's location was less convenient.***

***From Bach's own complaints, from comments by his contemporaries, and from the inadequacy of the parts, it is clear that the quality of Bach's performances of his church works in Leipzig was generally not very high.***

---

Rens Bijma, version 8 November 2022

With thanks to Albert Clement, Jos van Veldhoven and Ton Koopman (endnote <sup>F</sup>)

---

<sup>A</sup> E. E. Hochw. *Raths der Stadt Leipzig Ordnung Der Schule zu S. THOMÆ*, Leipzig 1723 , p. 32ff. , Caput XIII.III.

Wann die Orgel geschlagen wird, nicht so gleich auf die Bäncke sich niedersetzen, sondern bey den Pulten stehen bleiben, damit sie bereit seyen, das Kirchen-Lied anzufangen, und mit zu singen.

---

<sup>36</sup> Schulvorsteher Winckler, 1774, Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Stift. VIII.10, fol. 5-7, 9-14, quoted in Michel Maul, "welche ieder Zeit aus den 8 besten Subjectis bestehen muß. Die erste "Cantorey" der Thomaschule - Organisation, Aufgaben, Fragen", *BJ* 99, Leipzig 2013, p. 48, n. 123; [English translation by Traute M. Marshall, BACH: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute, 52/2, 2021, p. 212-225.](#)

<sup>37</sup> See Chapters XVIII and XIX; Alfred Dürr, *Die Kantaten von Johann Sebastian Bach*, 2 Bde., Kassel 1971, p. 65-68.

---

<sup>B</sup> Johann Jacob Vogel, *Leipzigerisches Geschicht-Buch oder Annales*, Leipzig 1714, p. 733.

[Anno 1667]

Dem 20. Septemb. ward von E.E. Rath allhier die Anordnung gemacht daß ins künfftige in der Kirchen zu S. Nicolai einer von denen Choralisten so wohl vor als nach denen Predigten in der Wochen die Lieder anfangen und die Diaconi bey besagter Kirchen / so hiebevorn solches gethan / ins künfftige hiermit solten verschonet werden.

<sup>C</sup> Anton Weiz, *Verbessertes Leipzig*, Leipzig 1728, p. 8.

Die *Figural-* und *Choral-Music* wird von dem *Cantore* und Schülern zu *St. Thomae*, nebst denen Stadt-Pfeiffern und Kunstgeigern bestellt. Die *Horae Canonicae* aber zu *St. Nicolai* von dem *Cantore* zu *St. Nicolai*, als *Directore*, und einigen *Studiosis* verrichtet. In denen Betstunden singet der *Baccalaureus Funerum* von *St. Thomae* ab, und in denen Mittags-Predigten, wie auch bey halben Braut-Messen, fängt die teutschen Lieder, ein *Studiosis* oder der Küster an.

<sup>D</sup> Complaint Superintendent Deyling to the town council, Sunday, 10-04-1737, *BD II*, no. 399, p. 285.

Ließ der Superintendentens Herr D. Salomon Deyling [...] vermelden, welchergestaltt heute nach der in gedachter Kirche [= Nikolaikirche] gehaltenen Predigt, unter der *Communion*, der *Prae-Centor* auf dem Chor, das Lied: Jesu Leiden Pein und todt, dergestaltt tief angefangen, dass die Gemeinde gar nicht mitsingen können, [...]

<sup>E</sup> Johann Gotthilf Ziegler, in a letter of application to become organist in Halle, 1746, *BD II*, no. 542, p. 423.

Was das *Choral* Spielen betrifft, so bin von meinem annoch lebenden Lehrmeister dem Herren *Capellmeister* Bach so unterrichtet worden: dass ich die Lieder nicht nur so oben hin, sondern nach dem *Affect* der Wortte | spiele.

<sup>F</sup> Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum III*, Wolfenbüttel 1619, p. 151)

Zum beschluß aber muß ich alhier den Organisten Freundlich zu verstehen geben / wenn ein *Concert* mit etlichen *Choren* in der Kirchen oder auch vor der Taffel angestellet wird / daß / [...] sie im anfang mit ihren *Praeludijs* die Zuhörer und gantzes *Consort der Musicanten* gleichsam *Convociren* und zusammen locken sollen / als bald ihre *Partes* auff zu suchen und die *Instrumenta* rein und ohne Falsch ein zu Stimmen und zu *intoniren*, und sich also zum anfang einer guten und wol klingenden *Music* zu *praepariren*.

Friderich Erhard Niedt, *Musicalische Handleitung*, Anderer Theil, Hamburg 1706, edition Hamburg 1721 (edition Johann Mattheson), p. 102.

§. 29. *Praeludium*, [...]

Musicalisch zu verstehen ist es ein **Anfang**, ehe ein recht-gesetztes musicalisches Stück **angefangen** wird / (m) da der Organiste alleine spielt / damit die Sängern den Ton fassen / und die Instrumentisten rein stimmen mögen / ohne den Zuhörern dadurch einen Verdruß zu erwecken. Solches Präludium kann ein Organiste so lange machen / als er will / (n) oder bis die Instrumentisten rein gestimmt haben / und ihm ein Zeichen zum Auffhalten gegeben wird. Es geschieht aber dieses Praeludiren mit dem vollem Wercke / oder sonst starcken Registern. Da hergegen zum General-Baß / oder zur Music mehr nicht / als ein achtfüßiges Gedact; oder wenn ein Chor von vielen Sängern und Instrumentisten zugegen / ein achtfüßiges Principal, im Pedal aber ein **Unter-Satz**, oder Sub-Baß von 16 Fuß genommen wird [...]

[Comment Mattheson:]

(n) Ich hätte es lieber so kurz / als immer möglich; insonderheit / wenn der Meister nicht zu Hause ist.

<sup>G</sup> Johann Mattheson, *Der Vollkommene Capellmeister*, Hamburg 1739, p. 471.

§. 13. Soll die Orgel mit der Gemeine eingespielt werden, so ist ein grosser Unterschied zu machen, ob diese letzte starck oder schwach, ob sie schon gantz, oder nur auf die Helffte, oder kaum ein Viertel davon versammelt ist. Denn, nachdem die Zuhörer sich nach gerade einfinden, muß auch die Orgel angezogen werden; und wie sie allgemach wieder davon gehen, sollen auch die Stimmen des Wercks sich vermindern.

<sup>H</sup> Letter from Obervoigt Johann Gottfried Schmiedlein, 5 January 1745; quoted from Stiehl 1984, p. 37.

---

Nachdem sich unterschiedene Personen, welche in der Thomas-Kirche unter den Empor-Kirchen Sitze haben, beschweret, daß sie Winterszeit, wenn gleich die Lichter und den Pfeilern angezündet wären, nicht das geringste in denen Büchern lesen noch sonst etwas erkennen könnten [...]

<sup>1</sup> E. E. Hochw. Raths der Stadt Leipzig Ordnung Der Schule zu S. THOMÆ, Leipzig 1723, p. 32ff. , Cap. XIII.

I. Alle bey dieser Schule sich befindende *Alumni* sollen um die Zeit, wann sie bey dem Gottes-Dienst aufzuwarten haben [...] IV. Allesamt frisch und deutlich, auch, woferne des Winters die Kälte nicht zu heftig, mit entblöseten Häuptern singen [...].

E.E. Hochweisen Raths der Stadt Leipzig Gesetze der Schule zu S. Thomae, Leipzig, 1733, p. 18. T. III, § 4.

Wenn sie vor der Gemeinde stehen, und ihr Amt verrichten, sollen sie niemahls das Haupt bedecken, es müßte denn ihnen die Kälte unerträglich seyn. Ubrigens sollen sie sich gewöhnen die Kälte zu ertragen, und durch dieselbe die Glieder ihres Leibes abzuhärten, welches zu der Gesundheit sehr viel beyträgt. Sollte aber die Kälte nach dem Urtheile des wöchentlichen *Inspectoris* vor die iungen Leute zu streng seyn, so soll einer unter ihnen in der *Thomas-* oder *Nicolai-Schule* ihnen eine Predigt vorlesen, welche sie andächtig anhören sollen.

<sup>1</sup> Lorenz Christoph Mizler, *Musikalische Bibliothek, Des vierten Bandes Erster Theil*, Leipzig 1754, p. 108f.

1. Eine Kirchenmusik, so bey den Protestanten, für der Predigt aufgeführt wird, muß nicht zu lange dauern, [...]. Im Winter sollen die Kirchenmusiken etwas kürzer seyn als im Sommer, sowohl der spielenden als der Zuhörer wegen, weil eine strenge Kälte, so länger anhält, als sie der Körper vertragen kann, mehr die Andacht und Aufmerksamkeit verhindert als befördert. Aus der Erfahrung kan man das Maaß bestimmen, nemlich eine Kirchenmusik aus 350 Tacten, verschiedener Mensur, wird ohngefehr 25 Minuten Zeit erfordern, solche aufzuführen, welches im Winter lange genug ist, im Sommer aber könnte man 8 biß 10 Minuten zugeben, und also eine Kirchencantate ohngefehr 400 [*should be: 460 à 490*] Takte in sich halten. Es ist dabey die Meinung nicht, daß ein Componist sich mehr an die Zeit, als die Musik, einen Satz gehörig und in schöner Ordnung vorzubringen, binden solle. Es kommt auf etliche Minuten nicht an.

<sup>κ</sup> Johann Adolph Scheibe, *Der Critische Musicus*, Preface to the Reissue, Leipzig 1745, p. [23]f.

[...] den so genannten Stadtpfeifern, Kunstpfeifern, oder zünftigen Musikanten [...] deren größter Theil den musikalischen Pöbel ausmachet. [...] ungeachtet oft die wenigsten unter ihnen kaum ihr Instrument zu stimmen vermögend sind [...]

Gewiß, diese Leute sind eben diejenigen, welche verhindern, dass die Tonkunst auch bey verschiedenen Leute von Verstande und Ansehen nicht in Hochachtung kommen kann. Sie machen die Musik niederträchtig, weil sie selbst niederträchtig sind. [...]

Ich weiß auch, daß man selbst unter den Stadtmusikanten einige Männer findet, die dasjenige, was sie täglich sehen, verabscheuen [...]

<sup>l</sup> Johann Adolph Scheibe, 'Der Critische Musicus. Sechstes Stück', 1737; *BD II*, 400, p. 286.

Der Herr == ist endlich in == der Vornehmste unter den Musicanten. Er ist ein außerordentlicher Künstler auf dem Clavier und auf der Orgel; [...] Dieser grosse Mann würde die Bewunderung ganzer Nationen seyn, wenn er mehr Annehmlichkeit hätte, und wenn er nicht seinen Stücken durch ein schwülstiges und verworrenes Wesen das Natürliche entzöge, und ihre Schönheit durch allzugrosse Kunst verdunkelte. Weil er nach seinen Fingern urtheilt, so sind seine Stücke überaus schwer zu spielen; denn er verlangt, die Sänger und Instrumentalisten sollen durch ihre Kehle und Instrumente eben das machen, was er auf dem Claviere spielen kann. Dieses aber ist unmöglich. Alle Manieren, alle kleine Auszierungen, und alles, was man unter der Methode zu spielen versteht, drückt er mit eigentlichen Noten aus, und das entzieht seinen Stücken nicht nur die Schönheit der Harmonie, sondern es machet auch den Gesang durchaus unvernünftig. [Alle Stimmen sollen mit einander, und mit gleicher Schwierigkeit arbeiten, und man erkennt darunter keine Hauptstimme]. [...]

---

[The last sentence is missing from the *Neue, vermehrte und verbesserte Auflage*, Leipzig 1745].

<sup>M</sup> Johann Abraham Birnbaum, 'Unpartheyische Anmerckungen', Leipzig 1739/1745, *BD* II.441, p. 355ff.

[...] so muß gewiß das Gehör meines Gegners [Scheibe] nicht musikalisch gewesen seyn, da er bey einer richtigen Execution der Bachischen Stücke, ein fremdes, undeutliches, unvernehmliches und unbequemes Geräusche will vernommen haben. Hat es aber an einer tüchtigen Execution gefehlet, und hat deren Mangel zu einigen Unordnungen und Uebelklang derselben Anlaß gegeben: so muß [...] er [nicht] einen von den Musicirenden begangenen Fehler dem Herrn Hofcompositeur [zurechnen] [...] Allein urtheilt man von der Composition eines Stücks nicht am ersten und meisten nach dem, wie man es bey der Aufführung befindet. [...]

Die Erfahrung hat gelehret: daß das Unmöglichscheinende möglich worden, wenn Fleiß, Geschicklichkeit und Uebung alle Schwierigkeiten glücklich überwunden haben. [...] So kann es andern Instrumentalisten und Sängern auch möglich seyn, ihm hierinne nachzufolgen, und mit ihren Instrumenten und Stimmen etwas mehr, als man bisher zu hören gewohnt gewesen, zu leisten.