



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

How Many Musicians Did Bach Think Necessary to Perform His Church Music? (1730)

When J. S. Bach arrived in Leipzig as the new cantor of the St. Thomas Lutheran Church in the spring of 1723, he was thirty-eight years old, in full control of his creative faculties, and eager to work. Over the course of the next six years he created six cycles of sacred cantatas, approximately one for each of the Sundays and feast days of the church year, for a total of about 300 cantatas. On average, each of these works runs 25 to 30 minutes. Imagine generating 25 to 30 minutes of new music each week. The music would not only have to be composed but would also have to be copied (perhaps the most time-consuming part of the process) and rehearsed. To help in this labor-intensive process, Bach often enlisted the assistance of his wife Anna Magdalena; his children Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel, as well as various relatives and students living at the St. Thomas School. The quarters of the cantor within the school became, in effect, the factory headquarters of Bach Incorporated.

But the strain of such intense labor took its toll. Bach felt increasingly vexed by many things that seem trivial to us—squabbles with his superiors and subordinates over who was supposed to do what in the process of creating the religious music of the town and, more often, whose right it was to make the decisions regarding such religious and civic music. It is evident that by 1730, after six years of torrid composition, Bach was exhausted, bitter, and perhaps depressed. He had not received the proper sort of appreciation, support, and reward for his great labors. The extent of Bach's disillusionment can be seen in a remarkable document that he submitted to the Town Council of Leipzig in August 1730 requesting that the town support his endeavors more enthusiastically. Now generally called Bach's "Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music," it sets forth what Bach perceived to be the bare minimum of forces needed for the performance of his religious music.

Ultimately, this document has been made to serve as support for one side of an important musicological debate: exactly how many singers sang in Bach's chorus at the St. Thomas Church. In 1974 musicologist Joshua Rifkin roiled the musical world by postulating that most of Bach's religious choral music was sung with only one person on a part. (Support for this is to be found in annotations within the original scores.) In fact, it is likely that in Bach's day the number of singers in his choruses did often drop to soloist level. On the other hand, the "Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music" stipulates that Bach really wanted four singers assigned to each part. When performing this music today, conductors must resolve this dilemma: Which do you wish to re-create—the level of performance that Bach actually heard or the level that he envisaged when he created this music?

Short But Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music (along with a few modest thoughts regarding its decline)

Vocalists and instrumentalists are necessary to well-maintained church music. The vocalists in this place are formed by the pupils of St. Thomas, and indeed are of four sorts: sopranos [male discants], altos, tenors, and basses. So that the choral pieces of this

church be performed as is fitting, the vocalists should be further divided into two sorts: concertists [soloists] and ripienists [the chorus]. The soloists are usually 4 in number, although 5, 6, 7, or 8 are necessary when double choirs are required. The choruses should have at least eight, namely two for each voice. [Assuming the soloists sang in the choruses, which was customary in Bach's day, there would then be at least three voices per part in the choruses.]

The instrumentalists are also divided in different ways such as: violins, oboes, flutes, trumpets, and timpani. N.B. Included among the violins are those who play viola and cello as well as violinists.

The number of graduate singers (*alumni*) of the St. Thomas School is 55. These 55 will be divided into four choirs to provide music in the four churches of the city [St. Thomas, St. Nicolas, the New Church, and St. Peter's], that is: concerted music, motets, and chorales. In three of these churches, namely St. Thomas, St. Nicolas, and the New Church, the singers [*Schüler*] all must be skilled musicians. St. Peter's church receives the leftovers, specifically those who understand no music but *in extremis* can only just sing a chorale tune.

For every musical polyphonic choir there should be at least 3 sopranos, 3 altos, 3 tenors, and the same number of basses, so that if one of them gets sick (as often happens this time of year as the receipts of the school from the doctor at the apothecary surely will describe) at least it will be possible to sing a double-chorus motet. N.B. It would still be better if the group was constituted with four individuals on each part, and therefore each choir would consist of sixteen persons.

Therefore the number of knowledgeable musicians comes to 36 persons [3 choirs of 12].

The instrumental music consists of the following parts:

2 or 3 on first violin
 2 or 3 on second violin
 2 on viola 1
 2 on viola 2 [notice that Bach is still thinking here in terms of seventeenth-century five-part string writing]
 2 on the violoncello
 1 on the violon [double bass]
 2 or if necessary 3 on oboe
 1 or 2 on bassoon
 3 trumpets
 1 timpani

IN TOTAL: 18 persons are the minimum for instrumental music. N.B. Don't forget that for variety's sake, sacred music also is composed for flutes (whether recorders or transverse flutes) for which two people are required. Thus 20 instrumentalists altogether.

The number of personnel designated for church music is 8 people: 4 wind band players (*StadtPfeifern*), 3 violinists and an assistant. (It would be better for me not to comment on their capabilities and musical knowledge.) However, it should be recognized that some are retired and some are out of the level of practice that they should maintain. The existing roster, therefore is the following:

Herr Reiche on first trumpet
 Herr Genssmar on second trumpet
 vacant third trumpet
 Herr Rother first violin
 Herr Beyer second violin
 vacant viola
 vacant violoncello
 vacant violon
 Herr Gleditsch first oboe

Herr Kornagel second oboe
 vacant third oboe or English horn
 The assistant bassoon

And thus are lacking the following highly necessary players, some to be sonorous filler and some to play the indispensable parts, namely:

2 violinists on first violin
 2 violinists on second violin
 2 viola plays
 2 cellists
 1 violon player
 2 flutists

This demonstrable shortfall has hitherto been filled partly by university students [*Studiosi*], but mostly from students [at the St. Thomas School]. The university students have been willing to do this in the hope that at one time or another they will receive some emolument, and that something along the line of a *stipendio* or an *honorario* (as previously was the custom) might be graciously bestowed upon them. But because now this no longer happens, the paltry few benefices formerly granted to the music establishment having been gradually withdrawn, the university students have lost their incentive. For who wants to work for nothing? It should also be remembered that the second violin usually, and the viola, cello and violon always (given the complete lack of personnel) have been supplied by students in the St. Thomas School. It takes no imagination to realize how this has adversely affected the vocal establishment.

So far we have touched only upon the music for Sundays. I should, however, mention the feast days, for on these I must supply polyphonic music to both churches [St. Thomas and St. Nicolas], for here the lack of necessary personnel is even more obvious because I must transfer to the choir all those pupils who play one or another instrument and must get along completely without their help.

Next I cannot fail to mention the recent reception [at the school] of many unprepared boys and boys who have no aptitude for polyphony, a fact that has necessarily caused the performance of polyphonic music to decline. For it is obvious that a boy who knows nothing of polyphonic music, indeed cannot even sing the interval of a second, can have no natural musical ability, and consequently will never be of use in the performance of such music. And those few who do arrive at the school knowing a few musical precepts cannot be put to use immediately, as is required, because it takes years of teaching before they can be used. Yet, as soon as they are accepted they are assigned to a choir and must at least be able to keep the beat and sing in tune in order to be of any use in the divine service. If now in the course of the year a few of these who have learned something leave and their place is taken by others who either aren't ready to be of use or more often are of no ability whatsoever, it is easy to see that the quality of the chorus will decline. . . .

Since now, however, the state of music is entirely different from what it once was, and our art is practiced at a much higher level, and taste itself has changed to an astonishing degree, and an earlier style of music is no longer pleasing to our ears, it is all the more necessary to engage personnel, so that this musical taste can be engaged, the new musical style be mastered, and we be in a position to do justice to the composer and his work. On the contrary, the few stipends that should have been increased have been reduced, which has gutted the choral ensemble. It is indeed puzzling that one would expect that German musicians would be able to perform at an acceptable level at sight any sort of music, whether it comes from Italy, France, England, or Poland, just as may be done by a few virtuosos who have studied it long in advance, indeed almost know it by memory, who, it should be noted, get serious pay, so that their troubles and energies are richly rewarded. . . . For an example of this sort of situation, one need only go to

Dresden [about fifty miles east of Leipzig] to see how the musicians in his majesty's service are paid. . . . (pp. 60ff)

Leipzig, 23 August 1730

Joh. Seb. Bach, Director of Music

Two months later, Bach wrote a lengthy letter to a colleague in Danzig (then in Germany, now Poland) extolling his own virtues and accomplishments. Clearly, he was looking for another position, but none was forthcoming. In subsequent years Bach turned away from the daily grind of writing church cantatas and retreated into his study to compose more private, esoteric works, such as the Goldberg Variations and The Art of Fugue.

Source: From Johann Sebastian Bach, "Short but Most Necessary Draft for a Well-Appointed Church Music" (1730). Translated from *Bach-Dokumente*, Vol I (1963).