

J. S. Bach's Use of Trombones

Utilization and Chronology

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J. S. Bach used trombones almost exclusively for cantatas scheduled to be performed on specific Sundays and feast days of the liturgical year beginning with his Estomihi Leipzig audition cantata, BWV 23, performed on February 7, 1723 and ending with BWV 28 for the Sunday after Christmas on December 30, 1725. There are only a few unusual, rather late exceptions to Bach's usage of trombones, beginning with 1.) a copy (made 1727-1731) of the Kyrie from F. Durante's *Mass in C minor* with an indication for 3 trombones (no record of any performance exists); 2.) a transcription of the Kyrie and Gloria of Palestrina's *Missa sine nomine* scored for 4 trombones and dated c. 1742 (no record of any performance exists); and including finally 3. a *Trauermusik* = BWV 118, a single-movement funeral motet composed in 1736/37, originally scored for 2 litui, 1 cornetto, and 3 trombones, but revised later in 1746/47 for a repeat performance but without the trombones, etc. The evidence from the following chronological list of extant cantata materials suggests that there was a limited time-frame of almost three years during which Bach actively utilized trombones for performances of his 'well-ordered church music'.¹ The list includes some well-known cantatas from the pre-Leipzig period, cantatas which originally were not scored for trombones but subsequently were added for performances in Leipzig during this three-year period. The dates listed are for the documented instances when these cantatas using trombones were performed in Leipzig. Some cantatas were originally composed for those dates, but a few had originated with a different scoring not using trombones in the pre-Leipzig period as, for instance, with BWV 4, BWV 21 or even BWV 23 (possibly composed in Köthen, but not scored for trombones until Bach arrived in Leipzig prior to his Leipzig audition).

¹ from Bach-Dokumente, Vol. 1, item 22, pp. 60ff., *Entwurf*, Leipzig, August 23, 1730, where Bach refers to his document as a 'short, but most necessary plan for a properly appointed (well-appointed, well-instituted, well-employed) church music'. This appears to imply that more official, salaried positions employing musicians (singers and instrumentalists) are needed to perform church music properly. It should be noted that Bach mentions specifically which instrumentalists he already has and which positions still need to be filled. The list includes those who do or will play the following instruments: violin, viola, violoncello, violone, oboe, bassoon, flute (recorder and transverse), trumpet, timpani. Trombone, cornetto and horn are not mentioned.

Chronological List of Documented Performances of Cantatas Scored for Trombones

1723

February 7, 1723, BWV 23, mvt. 4 only, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, Estomihi

June 13, 1723, BWV 21, mvt. 11 only, 4 trombones, 3rd S. after Trinity

August 29, 1723, BWV 25, mvts. 1 & 6, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, 14th S. after Trinity

December 27, 1723, BWV 64, mvts. 1,2,4,8, 1 cornettino & 3 trombones, 3rd Day of Christmas

1724

June 18, 1724, BWV 2, mvts. 1 & 6, 4 trombones, 2nd S. after Trinity

June 25, 1724, BWV 135, mvt. 1(?) 1 trombone (score copied 1803), 3rd S. after Trinity

August 13, 1724, BWV 101, mvts. 1 & 7, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, 10th S. after Trinity

October 18, 1724, BWV 96, mvt. 1, 1 cornetto (later trombone?), 18th S. after Trinity

October 29, 1724, BWV 38, mvts. 1 & 6, 4 trombones, 21st S. after Trinity

December 26, 1724, BWV 121, mvts. 1 & 6, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, 2nd Day of Christmas

1725

January 14, 1725, BWV 3, mvt. 1, 1 trombone, 2nd S. after Epiphany

April 1, 1725, BWV 4, mvts. 2, 3,8, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, Easter Sunday

May 21, 1725, BWV 68, mvt. 5, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, 2nd Day of Pentecost

December 30, 1725, BWV 28, mvts. 2, 6, 1 cornetto & 3 trombones, Sunday after Christmas

Occasion

Sunday after Trinity: BWV 2, BWV 21, BWV 135 (?), BWV 25, BWV 101, BWV 96, BWV 38

Christmas: BWV 64, BWV 121, BWV 28; Sunday after Epiphany: BWV 3

Easter: BWV 4; Pentecost: BWV 68; Estomihi: BWV 23