

Post Scriptum

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Re: Bach's cantatas for the 2nd and 3rd Feast Days of Christmas

Some corrections and further comments regarding the observance of feast days at the main churches in Leipzig during Bach's tenure:

1. During odd-numbered years the propers were primarily devoted to readings and sermons relating the actual Christmas story while in even-numbered years the emphasis was upon the Feast Days of St. Stephen (December 26) and St. John (December 27). The sources describing this tradition of alternating the propers from one year to the next are based on two descriptions of the agendas from 1694 and 1710. While these sources treat only what occurs on St. John's Day (Dec. 27), it can be assumed by analogy that St. Stephen's Day was treated similarly. Indeed, the listings of the biblical sermon texts given by Martin Petzoldt [*Bach Kommentar* 2006] fully support the tradition of alternating texts devoted to specific texts which reflect these changes from one year to the next, changes that had to be respected by the pastors or deacons who delivered sermons on those days.

2. The readings required for St. John's Day do not clearly reflect the alternation of texts as those for St. Stephen's Day. This is due to the Johannine readings focusing more generally on Christ's coming into this world, a topic which is simultaneously about Christ's birth without describing the details as given in the Gospels of St. Luke and St. Matthew. The events surrounding the martyrdom of St. Stephen are quite salient and distinctive and do provide a striking contrast to the descriptive accounts of Christ's birth (with the exception perhaps of the Slaughter of the Innocents). Unfortunately, the Bach cantata BWV 57, which could clearly establish the continuance of the alternating tradition during Bach's tenure in Leipzig, fails to hold up under closer scrutiny: The Bach experts disagree on the first performance of this 'Stephanuskantate' with some stipulating 1725 [Dürr – 1976 & Glöckner – 2000] and another [Petzoldt – 2006] claiming that it was on December 26, 1726. [Is the latter due to a typo, or has research turned up new evidence to refute the results of investigation by Alfred Dürr and Andreas Glöckner as reported by the NBA KB I/3.1?]

3. Fortunately Martin Petzoldt [*Bach Kommentar* 2006] has noted all the propers [Gospel, Epistle and Sermon readings] for all the performances of Bach's cantatas. From these it is quite clear that the alternating scheme for celebrating these Christmas and other Saints' feast days continued to alternate regularly as late as 1734 when Bach performed Parts II and III of his *Christmas Oratorio*. With a note of surprise, Petzoldt points out the fact that the pastors and deacons used and abided by the propers for December 26 and 27, 1734, which called for the observance of the Saints' Feast Days and not the Christmas Feast Days [with Luke 2 readings] while Bach performed during the same services parts of his *Christmas Oratorio* which relate only to Christmas and not to either one of the saints. One might speculate that after Bach's inability to obtain any sort of satisfaction from his request for more financial support [the *Entwurf* - 1730] to achieve his goal of a 'well-ordered' [*wohlbestallten/wohlbestellten*] presentation of sacred music [*Kirchen Music*] in the main Leipzig churches, he no longer felt that he always had to abide by the strict regulations established by the church authorities. This was best expressed in his reaction to the Leipzig City Council's admonition delivered to him verbally on March 17, 1739 by a scribe, Mr. Bienengräber [literally: a 'bee-digger'] who informs Bach that the Passion he wanted to perform in ten days will not be allowed without special permission being granted, whereupon Bach responded: "It had always been done this way [without any problems], but I really don't give a damn about it because I certainly don't get anything out of this. It's just an unnecessary burden [as far as I

am concerned]. Tell the superintendent that the performance of the Passion is off because I have been forbidden to perform it. And if perhaps there is a problem with the text of the Passion, tell him it had already been performed a few times before [without any questions being raised about it].” [BD II, item 439, pp. 338-9]

4. Regarding Bach’s personal addition of the biblical citations “1. Joan: 3 Vs. 8” to J. A. Kuhnau’s cover title for the parts to BWV 40 and “1. Joan. 3. v. 1” to J. A. Kuhnau’s cover title for the parts to BWV 64, it should be pointed out that Bach was still making his way through his first Advent and Christmas season in Leipzig. Just a few weeks earlier, Bach had made notes to himself on the back of the autograph title page for BWV 61, a Weimar cantata from 1714 which he had selected for a repeat performance on November 28, 1723 (1st Sunday in Advent)[BD I, item 178, p. 248]. These notes consisted of the order of church services to be followed on that Sunday.

5. The title designations for all extant cantatas for either December 26 or 27 never mention any of the Saints’ Days involved. Whether for covers for the autograph scores and/or parts [written either by Bach or J. A. Kuhnau], the designation remains constant apart from variations in the abbreviations. The full designation remains:

Feria 2 or 3 Nativitatis Xristi or Christi

6. Another interesting point is that all the cantatas or Part II of the *Christmas Oratorio* were performed twice on the same day December 26 in the early morning service at the *Thomaskirche* and at Vespers at the *Nikolaikirche*, but on December 27 there was only a single performance of the cantatas or Part III of the *Christmas Oratorio* at the early morning service at the *Nikolaikirche*.