

Interview with Joshua Rifkin

Uri Golomb

In the ‘early music’ world, supposedly filled with scholars-performers, Joshua Rifkin is one of the few musicians who can boast equal accomplishments in both fields. His repertoire as a conductor, harpsichordist and pianist extends from Renaissance vocal music through Bach and Handel to Joplin, Stravinsky and Revueltas (among others); he produces performances of startling clarity and musical refinement, attentive to details yet possessing remarkable fluency – letting the music speak naturally and eloquently. As a musicologist, his often ground-breaking research combines a willingness to challenge and overturn common assumptions with a carefully considered approach to the historical evidence, separating between established fact, reasonable deductions and unproven hypotheses.

Yet in the minds of many, Rifkin remains a one-subject musician – the first scholar to claim that Bach’s choral music was mostly written for a consort of solo voices, and the first conductor to perform it accordingly. The controversy he sparked in the early 1980s is very much alive – though, in recent years, Rifkin’s findings are increasingly gaining acceptance among scholars and performers alike. For him, the continued controversy is something of a nuisance. “20 years on”, he says, “too much is made of this thing. It should have been dead and buried long ago, leaving us to pursue more interesting issues that grow out of it musically. For me, and I think for people like Parrott, McCreesh and Kuijken, this is almost not worth talking about. It’s almost like saying, ‘Well, Mr. Galileo, what do you think of those people who still argue that the sun revolves around the Earth?’ Give me a break! Making music is about a lot of other things as well”.

This interview – based in part on conversations I held with Rifkin as part of my research for a dissertation on recordings of Bach’s B-minor Mass (http://snipurl.com/ugphd_abs) – still focuses on Bach’s music and its performing forces; the subject remains pertinent, all the more so as Rifkin has recently published a new edition of the B-minor Mass. I did attempt, however, to place this subject in the context of some of Rifkin’s wider achievements, interests and philosophy.

There are those (e.g., Nikolaus Harnoncourt, Richard Taruskin, Robert Morgan) who view the ‘authentic’ performance of historical music as a consequence of the crisis in modern music – the apparent absence of a living musical culture shared by composers, performers and audiences. What is your take on this?

Well, for myself, I have always been active in early music and the avant-garde alike: indeed, it was in Darmstadt, while a seventeen-year-old kid in Stockhausen’s composition seminar, that I took out my subscription to the Neue Bach-Ausgabe. For more than a few of us, there was no contradiction between very new music and old music – quite the contrary. The Kuijkens and Robert Kohnen, for example, were new-music specialists early on – I’d love to have heard the Boulez *Sonatine* with Bart and Kohnen. Members of my own Bach Ensemble have been – and some of them still are – leading performers of very new music; and my repertory continues to include contemporary music. Someone once remarked that what binds the two areas together is that both demand a conscious choice from a young musician embarking on them – to depart from the standard path of mainstream repertory and mainstream music-making, to do something different.

That said, the enormous *popularity* of early music can certainly be seen as symptomatic of a greater malaise. But what can I, what can we, do? The music is still marvellous, and we all love to perform it. Should I abandon Bach because the audiences, presenters and record companies on which I rely for my living don’t love the Second Viennese School or its followers the way I do?

As a performer of contemporary music, you presumably had experiences of working directly with composers – instances where the composer was present in rehearsals, and could give you immediate feedback. Did this affect your attitude to working on music in the composer’s absence?

My chief involvement with the avant-garde movement wasn’t as a performer, but I did do my share of pieces, both conducting and playing, with the composer present throughout all phases of preparation and performance. Most composers are grateful for the performance itself, all the more so when they sense a conscientious effort on the part of the performer. I can’t remember any composer telling me I was getting it wrong – perhaps inevitably, I only remember the praise for getting it right. But back then it never really occurred to me that I *could* get it wrong: I knew the language from the inside out, I could conduct and play pretty well, I knew what I was after.

In a way, it didn’t really differ from performing older music: I certainly had the conviction – rightly or wrongly – that I knew how Bach, or whoever, wanted the mu-

sic to sound. My work with new music only strengthened that conviction: if living composers tell you that you really understand their message, why should dead composers be any different? This seemed all the more natural in those days, when I was still a composer myself. But you don't lose the sense that you have the key to the music ... otherwise, you'd give up.

Several writers – most notably Richard Taruskin – claim that so-called 'historical performance' actually reflects 20th- (and, by now, 21st-) century aesthetics. Would you accept this?

Well, I think it a truism and, at best, praise – though Taruskin's original formulation opened the way to many possible misunderstandings. But I like to think we've put most of that behind us. The fundamental problem in all serious musical performance remains the same: how do we maintain a scrupulous contact with the work, and do what we can to learn about its intended or probable performance – and at the same time produce music that we find vivid, expressive, moving and satisfying? Ideally, I see no conflict – quite the opposite: if we have some talent and do our job right, all the "historical" stuff (which is in principle no different from than, say, trying to get the quintuplets and tempo relationships right in an Elliot Carter string quartet) doesn't hamper – indeed, it positively helps. I can't resist quoting something that Carter wrote about a recording of his first two string quartets. The musicians, in his words, "play their parts as if they meant what they were doing, as if it were very important, in order to reveal what both pieces are about, to play them accurately and musically. What more could a composer want of performers?" What indeed?

Does the fact that you don't share Bach's religious convictions make any difference to you as an interpreter of his sacred music? Do you believe that knowledge of Bach's theology is important for a performer of this music, and why?

Obviously, if I regarded sharing Bach's religious convictions as a prerequisite for performing his sacred music I should have to change my life very drastically: either become, to the best of my abilities, an 18th-century German Lutheran – a real bit of "historical performance practice"! – or give up doing Bach. Of course, it doesn't hurt to know something about Bach's religion – just as it doesn't hurt to know German (probably more important, in fact), or, to shift field somewhat, to understand *Risorgimento* politics if you're conducting *Nabucco*. And in fact, I have absorbed more than a little of 18th-century Lutheranism: I know the hymns, I know the Bible better in German than in English and so forth. But what you are being called upon to under-

stand in music is a language that lies within the notes – indeed, it’s this language within the notes, not the religion, that draws virtually everyone to Bach in the first place.

Admittedly, what lies within the notes can be more readily accessible to those from certain cultural backgrounds than to others: Viennese still grow up with the waltz around them and can more intuitively “swing” its rhythm than the rest of us can. But these differences are by no means insuperable, and making a principle of them can only lead you into the realm of pernicious identity politics. I mean, can only Austro-Bohemian Jews perform Mahler? Can only African-Americans play jazz? Can only German anti-Semites perform Wagner?

Besides, what would “sharing Bach’s religious convictions” actually mean? Belief in God? In Jesus? In Luther’s theology as filtered through the 18th century? I know no one who will stipulate the latter as a prerequisite for performing Bach’s music; so where do we draw the line? Any musician has *ipso facto* a certain sense of spirituality; let’s leave it at that.

You are an accomplished keyboard player, as well as a conductor; and you perform Bach’s music with a small ensemble, which can arguably manage without a conductor. Yet you still take to the podium. How do you respond to those who claim that the very presence of a conductor is an anachronism in this repertoire?

I think the claim is, at best, an oversimplification. The modern orchestral conductor – with the attendant notions of all-controlling mastery and interpretive authority – did not exist in the 18th century. But conducting per se did exist, and so did interpretive authority: how could it not when a strong-willed composer, like Bach, directed his own music? In any event, historical performance is not concerned, primarily, with performance conditions – we’re not trying to get back into the unheated Thomaskirche on early winter mornings, although that, too, could probably give us some useful insights! Our main interest is in matters of sound and style.

Of course different repertoires call for different approaches: Stravinsky’s *Sacre du Printemps* requires a lot more time-beating than anything by Bach; Mahler’s music seems to presuppose strong direction in a way that some earlier music might not; Beethoven’s Ninth or Wagner’s *Die Walküre* will not simply arise from a collective unconscious. For the record, moreover, I don’t actually conduct the smaller-scale pieces we do. But no matter what the forces, many of the underlying issues – above all, just

how controlling a director should be, the precise relationship between giving orders and encouraging collaboration – remain fundamental across the board.

This is related to the issue of interpretation. In an interview in Bernard Sherman's *Inside Early Music*, you say that modern audiences, hearing a work by Mozart or Haydn for the hundredth time, require interpretation, whereas 18th-century audiences, hearing the same works for the first time, could settle for "a competent run-through". What is the difference, for you, between an "interpretation" and a "run-through"?

It's not a simple, clear-cut distinction. At the very least, I think "interpretation" implies a greater scrupulousness in the shaping of balances, phrasing, rhythmic projection, and so forth – I know I spend a great deal of time on just such matters. Seen from this vantage-point, you can have an interpretation that does not differ superficially from many a run-through – in other words, does not engage in very noticeable modifications of tempo, does not go to extremes of accent or inflection, and so forth.

In the *Inside Early Music* interview, you also cited Nicholas Kenyon's observation that 18th century music-making was more inclined towards "reading" than "interpretation". Of course, many critics – myself included – speak of A's interpretation of a Bach cantata, or B's reading of a Handel Oratorio, as if the terms were interchangeable. Yet there is, arguably, a difference between an interventionist, 'ultra-personal' interpretation, boldly highlighting every point that the interpreter wishes to make – and an attentive, scrupulous reading, gently underlining the points and allowing them to emerge more naturally from the text.

Yes, I still believe this to be a useful distinction; and, in that sense, you could say that I am aiming for an idealised "reading" of Bach's music, rather than what some might call an "imaginative interpretation". In other words, I accept that Bach probably conceived of, or at least expected, something reasonably "straight", but I seek to realize this on a high level of execution and thoughtfulness. It's a sort of tight-rope act: I want the music to feel natural, almost improvised, creating itself, so to speak.

Does this pursuit of an idealized reading apply to *all* repertoires? Are there any works – particularly in your own repertoire – where you feel a more 'activist' interpretation is required?

I think that pretty much all ensemble music calls for such an idealised reading. After all, even when you do Mahler, you're essentially following the markings... Of course, you can follow them better or follow them worse – by which I *don't* mean "more literally" or "more freely" as people generally construe these things, but rather how well you understand and project the impetus behind them.

So it always comes back to the text and to the composer's message recorded in it. Do you ever recall knowingly doing something that contradicted a composer's wishes and/or practices? Conversely, have you ever felt that, by realising the composer's intentions, you are producing something that you find aesthetically unconvincing?

I think I've always gone along with what I thought the composer wanted – not out of any piety towards the composer, but because I tend to find what Bach and other good composers do convincing in the first place. Then, too, I think of Bach as a pretty good musician who has earned some respect from those of us who engage with his music. In performing works by certain lesser composers I have sometimes felt that realizing the author's intentions produces something unconvincing; but performing the music differently didn't improve matters materially – only composing it differently could have done that! With older music, if I find the result unconvincing, I just shouldn't perform the piece (unless I really need the money).

Some criticise you, and indeed most one-per-part practitioners, for not going far enough – that is, for “sticking” to sopranos and counter-tenors, instead of employing boys as Bach did.

First of all, this criticism assumes that the decision to perform “one-per-part” is a fundamentally archaeological one, motivated more by a desire to recreate the past than by any possible musical considerations. What nonsense! That said, I suppose that I would have used boy sopranos if we had anything like the best of what Bach could have had. But what with changes in training, not to mention voices breaking at earlier ages, I consider the eighteenth-century boy soprano an instrument that no longer exists – much like that other well-known variety of eighteenth-century male soprano; and I don't think boy *altos* played a significant role in the performance of concerted music anyway.

In any case, the evidence strongly indicates that Bach and everyone else used boys for institutional, not musical reasons, and just as happily used any other kind of soprano that did the job. For Bach, the difference between a boy soprano, a castrato, and a falsettist was probably about as significant as the difference between an oboe by Pörschmann, an oboe by Eichentopf, and an oboe by Denner.

In any case, you don't seem to pursue historical authenticity (however defined) in all your performances. To take an extreme example – you have once done the St. Matthew Passion in English, with full choral forces, at the Three Choirs Festival in England – here perhaps is one case where you did consciously flout the composer's intention. What was the impetus behind that performance?

The Three Choirs Festival invited me to do the St. Matthew Passion [SMP] two years after I performed an “historical” version with the Bach Ensemble at the BBC Proms. Obviously, they wanted to achieve a more Baroque-style performance; but I felt that, rather than try to do an “enlightened”, “Baroque” performance with forces that were not suited to that, it would be more interesting to engage oneself with the Festival’s long, noble and fascinating tradition. Ivor Atkins and Edward Elgar had prepared an English version of the SMP for the Festival, which has since established itself as the standard English SMP in Britain. Novello now offers a modernised edition of the Elgar/Atkins version; I tried to trace that version back to its source. The people at the Cathedral archives gave me access to all the material they had: old programs, detailed and informative press reviews, notes made by a young choir member who spent the summer studying the Passion with Atkins before the Festival and wrote everything they talked about. Novello obtained an old set of parts for us. The choirs I conducted were perhaps not quite large enough; but we had piano continuo, we retained the original cuts, we sang in English, we took what information we could on their tempos and so forth. Once we obtained this information, we were obviously on our own. I was not trying to reconstruct the old performances; but, as in historical performance, I tried to “plug in” at a certain past point, bypassing a lot of what has happened in between.

It was a wonderful experience. I adored it. Obviously, the result was a post-Modernist, post-historicist performance. Bach interpretation in the 20th century, and in much of the 19th century, was based on a quest to fulfil Bach’s alleged wishes; even the arguments in favour of playing the keyboard works on piano rather than harpsichord were framed in terms of what Bach “really” would have wanted. In a way we’re liberated from that now: it is the very success of properly “historical” performance that has freed us to do everything else as well – as long as we’re not deceiving ourselves about it.

In *Bach’s Choral Ideal*, you write that “considerations of choral size and disposition lead us to far more than questions of realization; they strike at the very heart of Bach’s musical conception”. In other words, this affects not ‘merely’ the sound of the music, but also its meaning. Can you elaborate on that?

When we performed Bach’s works with the so-called “conventional”, “choral” forces, we didn’t know, in many ways, what these pieces were about. We are now finding that out. I know that can sound like a pretentious statement, but I’ll stand by

it: through the original scoring, we gain access to things that were obscured since Bach's lifetime.

For me, and for the musicians I work with, the transition to a one-per-part vocal ensemble triggered a process that led us to re-examine all aspects of musical performance: you can't reduce the number of singers, without changing anything else, and come up with anything viable. We had to modify our delivery of the vocal parts: the shaping of the lines, the projection of the text, the balances of sonorities. The change also affected tempos, vocal/instrumental balance, instrumental phrasing and articulation etc. We then had to reintegrate all these details into a coherent, cohesive whole; and in the end, the very identity of these pieces changed for us.

Now, I can't quantify that in every way, but I can offer an illustration. Take the opening movement of the St. Matthew Passion, which is mostly written for two distinct vocal groups, each consisting of four singers. Initially, the two groups engage in dialogue, but they do not sing together. Then, in bars 73–75, they merge to form a single chorus: the sonority suddenly changes from one-per-part to doubled voices, creating a wonderfully dramatic climax. When each chorus already consists of doubled voices, the difference between the two choirs singing separately and two choirs singing together is not really noticeable at all – the dramatic effect is lost.

Of course, this is just one example of the sort of flexibility you gain by using the scoring that Bach had in mind. Instead of either/or – a soloist or a full-blown chorus – you obtain a tremendous scale of possibilities, resulting in a richer palette of sonorities, weights and expressive gestures. To me, the music becomes impoverished in the older manner of performance.

Before you did your research on Bach's vocal forces, you performed his works with a standard choir. Did you feel, at the time, that anything was amiss?

I certainly encountered some problems. Like all conductors, I had to decide how to divide the music between soloists and choir. Most conductors assumed, almost axiomatically, that movements for one or two voices were written for soloists, whereas movements for the full vocal complement – usually four or five voices, or eight voices in works for double chorus – were written for a choir. But there were still many instances (solo chorales, trios, quartet sections) where there wasn't a consensus on whether to use solo voices or full choral sections.

At the same time, I found myself attracted by a theory, initially suggested by Arnold Schering in the 1920s, which stated that even the choral movements contained some soloistic passages. In retrospect, we know that this theory was poorly founded. Schering, and those who followed his lead, thought that the starting-point was a choir with several voices per part, reduced occasionally to a consort of soloists. We now know that the opposite was true: the starting point was a consort of soloists (concertists), augmented sometimes by optional ripienists.

Whatever: In the 1960s, Schering's theory inspired a number of recordings by Wilhelm Ehmann in Germany and Robert Shaw in the USA. They both used a standard choir, but allocated some choral passages to soloists. I heard those recordings in my early teens, and the lightly-scored sections immediately impressed me as being much more beautiful; and when I started to perform this music, I experimented with this kind of solo-tutti alternation myself. I knew Schering's and Ehmann's theses could not quite be defended, but I also felt there was a kernel of truth there, and – no less important – that the music sounded better that way. In that sense, I suppose I was being primed for coming up with the findings I eventually reached.

Of course, such “priming” made it psychologically easier for you to accept the implications of your historical findings, since you also like the musical results.

Well, yes – otherwise I would not have done the music this way. I'd do something else. Maybe I'd stop conducting Bach. But I certainly wouldn't conduct Bach this way if I didn't think it was much more beautiful. And I know that other performers feel the same. Not everyone gets hooked; but, interestingly enough, many singers, having experienced taking part in a one-per-part performance, can't really go back to the chamber-choir arrangement. Apart from everything else, they find it easier to sing their recitatives, arias and duets numbers in the same sequence as the choruses and chorales, rather than falling silent during the choral pieces.

For all this, the old-new sonorities still come as something of a shock to many listeners. It has been said generally, about historical performance, that it would make little sense to return to the historical performing conditions because “our ears have changed”: what sounded natural in Bach's day would sound strange today. One retort I've heard is that performers can teach audiences to change ingrained listening habits. Is this something you're trying to do?

I would never think it through that way: our aim is simply to give the best performances we can. As for audiences – I can only hope that we'll be good enough and they'll like what they hear. In my experience, the people who are most receptive to

our Bach performances are audiences who are not early-music freaks – and, interestingly, conductors of old-fashioned choirs. The people who are least receptive are early-music specialists and audiences. Perhaps this research came along about 20-30 years too late. If the idea that a ‘choir’ could – and usually did – comprise a consort of soloists had been established as a research and performance paradigm in the 1950s and 1960s, it would have been taken as one of the many differences between “historical” and “modern” performance – along with gut strings, different pitch standards, unequal temperaments and the like. Instead, we established the combination of a modern chamber choir and an orchestra of old instruments as a kind of paradigm, giving it the aura of enlightenment and authenticity. It therefore felt particularly uncomfortable when one major component of that paradigm – the chamber choir – was undermined by new research. I think that is one reason why there has been such a resistance.

There are performers who concede the historical solidity of your arguments yet maintain their right to do the music in the way they find effective. Do you have a problem when supposedly ‘historical’ performers adopt this attitude – even if they admit that this particular aspect might not be historical?

First of all, as I already said, “this particular aspect” is not incidental; it ultimately affects the music’s identity. Secondly: even when performers issue this disclaimer, their performances still carry this penumbra of historical rectitude. Musicians say, “we’re not really historians, we’re artists” – but their performances still trade on this aura of historical validity.

As long as that happens, going before the public imposes a certain responsibility on us to try to address these issues seriously and grapple with them; and as much as possible not to get stuck in ruts. Much of what happens with Bach performance these days reveals a profound disregard for these considerations. If musicians can speak of their careful historical research and their fanaticism for getting everything right, and at the same time revert to standard operating procedures for a work like the St. Matthew Passion (without even *trying* to adopt Bach’s original forces), this might say something about the place of Bach in our society, in conductors’ minds and so forth.

I sometimes say that, if Early Music has any meaning, then its meaning is perpetual revolution. Now, in this post-modern era, we’re tired of perpetual revolution; the last century gave us enough examples of where revolution gets you. Nevertheless,

when push comes to shove, this is one of the things that really has to be the motor of the exercise if the exercise is to have any meaning, at least as far as I'm concerned.

Is there not, however, the opposite danger – of innovation for its own sake?

Is there ever – and it is very widespread. Early Music nowadays might not be in a state of perpetual revolution, but it is more than ever a creature of fashion, always on the lookout for this year's sensation.

You once said that you expect the chamber-choir/period instrument combination to go the way of the Bach bow – an innovation paraded as a historical reconstruction, which almost disappeared once it was exposed as historically groundless. Do you really believe – or wish – that choirs will stop singing Bach?

I love choirs; they are wonderful institutions, and they can produce wonderful music. Where would be without the Brahms *Requiem*, without Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*? (And by the way, how can one of my colleagues make snide comments about "my" small chorus in Bach and then do the Brahms *Requiem* with just 40 singers? One size fits all – 40 for Bach, 40 for Brahms? That's nonsense – Brahms *needs* 150 singers: I'd never have the *chutzpah* to do Brahms that way.)

It's true that choirs are accustomed to thinking of a broad span of music history – from the 14th century onwards – as their domain. Most of this repertory was not written for them; but if they want to perform it – that's fine. It's just a matter of not deceiving ourselves. The old battle between the piano and the harpsichord isn't a battle any more: few pianists, if any, would seriously claim that they are realising Bach's intentions by playing his music on their instrument. But once that battle was over, people were free to say, "but we can see the whole thing differently" – which, in a way, is what I did with the St. Matthew Passion at the Three Choirs' Festival, or what I do when, these days, I play Bach on the modern piano.

It could be a much healthier situation if choirs and their supporters were able to say, "look, we understand that what we're doing is something that Bach never could have dreamed of and probably would have hated. But that doesn't matter, because *we* like it. We are alive today, we have these traditions and activities, this means something to *us*". But most of us still want to be able to say, "what Bach really wanted is what I do and love". It's hard to say, "I don't give a damn about Bach in that way: I care very much about his music, but I don't care about his wishes". We're still not that far into post-modernism to be able to get away with that. But if people can face

that, then let a 100 flowers bloom, let a 100 schools of Bach performance bloom. Maybe in 40 years even the combination of modern choirs with old instruments will be sufficiently historical that it will grow interesting – you know, anything's possible.

Discography

Bach Cantatas

Cantatas Nos. 147, 80, 8, 140, 51, 78

The Bach Ensemble/ Joshua Rifkin

2 CDs; Decca 455 706-2; recorded 1985-1988

136'29

Rating: five stars

Rifkin's discography offers a small yet wide-ranging sample of his varied repertoire. Among his recordings not listed here, I would especially recommend Mozart's *Posthorn* serenade with Cappella Coloniensis on Capriccio, which reveals a dramatic vigour less characteristic of his Bach recordings.

Bach occupies a central position in Rifkin's discography, but even here there are significant gaps (there are, for example, no recordings of the Passions or the orchestral music). Most of his Bach cantata recordings are still available from Decca and Dorian; his B-minor Mass is available from Warner's Ultima label. Both Warner and Decca have regrettably omitted Rifkin's original liner-notes from their re-issues.

This Double Decca album offers an especially colourful selection of Bach cantatas, demonstrating Rifkin's musicianship at its best. Under his direction, the singers and players of the Bach Ensemble subtly and effectively communicate Bach's varied styles and moods – from the stately elegance of Cantata 140's opening chorus and the brightness and intimacy of its love duets to the sombre, elegiac atmosphere of Cantata 78's opening chorus. Occasionally (for instance, in Cantata 51), I would have welcomed a more extroverted, energetic approach; the opening chorus of Cantata 147, however, is conveyed with infectious brightness and eagerness.

Rifkin's vocal soloists merge convincingly into four-part consorts in the choruses. They reveal the unique beauty, the textural transparency and the close rapport between the voices and instruments that can emerge from Bach's one-per-part vocal textures. In choruses and arias alike, Rifkin's understated lyricism and unforced eloquence are richly rewarding.

The Beatles Baroque Album

Baroque Ensemble of the Merseyside Kammermusikgesellschaft/ Joshua Rifkin
Collectors' Choice Music CCM-684; recorded 1966

35'

Rating: 4 stars

This unusual album consists of a “Handelian” orchestral suite, a “Bachian” cantata, harpsichord variations and a trio sonata – all based on several of John Lennon’s and Paul McCartney’s songs for the Beatles. These works, composed and performed by Rifkin in 1966, reveal an impressive combination of compositional skill, humour, and a firm grasp of the Baroque idiom. According to the notes to the CD re-issue (available online on <http://www.richieunterberger.com/rifkin.html>), the project was conceived and complete within five weeks; yet Rifkin secured stylish playing from a group of hand-picked musicians, who performed the music with an engaging combination of idiomatically-baroque idiom (described, at the time, as being among “the most enlightened examples of baroque practice”), enthusiasm and wry humour. To Rifkin, the experience was reminiscent of how baroque musicians operated, and he learned from it “what it was like for Bach, Handel, or people like that to turn out music at the incredible pace at which they worked, also with a team of copyists waiting on their every move”.

Rifkin’s Beatles-based compositions emulate baroque music so thoroughly that one feels that they would have sounded even better on period instruments; Rifkin confirms that he sometimes resurrects them (and additional pieces written for an abandoned sequel) with his own Bach Ensemble, even doing the Bach-style cantata one-per-part. It would be nice to have these pieces re-recorded, with the extra items, by Rifkin’s present-day Ensemble; until then, this album remains uniquely amusing and enjoyable (especially for those familiar with the original Beatles songs).

Bach’s Choral Ideal

Dortmunder Bach-Forschungen (ed. Martin Geck), vol. 5. Dortmund: Klangfarben Musikverlag, 2002. Available from the publisher:

<http://www.klangfarben-musikverlag.de>

In the past, record purchasers could gain some idea on Rifkin's scholarly style through the liner notes of his Bach recordings. Unfortunately, most of these (with the exception of the Weimar cantatas on Dorian) are now available in re-issues which omit the original essays.

Rifkin's writings are primarily available through scholarly journals; his earliest article on Bach's choir is reprinted in Andrew Parrott's *The Essential Bach Choir*. Bernard Sherman's website (www.bsherman.org) includes a fascinating interview with Rifkin (extracted from Sherman's *Inside Early Music*), as well as a short article by Rifkin, "Schering's pesky idea". The webpage dedicated to Rifkin's Breitkopf & Härtel edition of the B minor Mass (<http://tinyurl.com/yuv9l6>) includes links to his introduction to the edition, and also to an interview in which he explains his editorial principles.

But perhaps the best introduction to Rifkin's musicology is his short book *Bach's Choral Ideal* – one of the most lucid and systematic pieces on the subject. For those seeking clear-cut conclusions, it makes for uncomfortable reading: Rifkin demonstrates that we cannot force the surviving documents to tell us, unequivocally, whether Bach even had a single, unalterable choral "ideal". Yet, to my mind, this willingness to acknowledge ambiguities in the historical record is one of Rifkin's strengths.

Bach's Choral Ideal is a carefully-presented, tautly-constructed argument, keenly attentive to details and meticulously separating fact from speculation. All this is presented in fluent, stylish and accessible prose. This is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand the issues behind the Bach Choir controversy.

© Uri Golomb, 2008

Published in *Goldberg Early Music Magazine* 51 (June 2008): 56-67.