

# BACH NOTES

The Journal of the London Bach Society  
Bachfest 21st Special Edition Autumn 2011

## “Joh. Seb. Bach: The Composer’s Art”

Ask any composer, but there is nothing like a commission to get the creative juices flowing. The creation of new music, in new styles, with imaginative groupings or choice of instruments, even a single soloist, and often set to powerful texts, not only focuses the eye and the ear, but also gives us deeper experiences, a fresh new sound world. Today, say what you like about Tavener or Maxwell Davies, Thomas Adès or the latest sensation Nico Muhly (*pictured*), but their music is unlikely to prompt an indifferent response. Tavener’s “Introit for St. John Damascene”, which we commissioned and premièred in 1968 and which draws its inspiration from the opening bars of the *Kyrie* from Bach’s *Mass in B minor*, prompted The Times music critic to headline the review “Bach Society strikes gold”.



Nico Muhly

(Photo credit  
Samantha West)



Rodolfo Richter 4/10 Nov.

Bach’s composing environment was different - or was it so different? He did not have to rely on commissions from orchestras, festivals or opera houses for his living. Composing new works was part of the job at whichever court or city he was employed, for which he received a modest salary boosted by the odd casket of wine, seasonal bundle of wood and pat on the back. Any works he composed with individuals in mind were sometimes *offerings* made in *humble duty*, for example to the Elector in Dresden to solicit a Court Title,<sup>1</sup> or to Mitzler<sup>2</sup> to gain entry to his Learned Society, or perhaps for a gifted musician. It was an age of deference too, but town musicians like Bach were part of the scene; the music produced, the degree of lavishness and its modernity, was often a reflection of the mood and prosperity of the employing ducal Court and provided for special occasions<sup>3</sup> or, by contrast, appropriate to the loss of a beloved royal patron<sup>4</sup>. Bach’s weekly duties to the church were clear and fuelled by a deep personal commitment to provide what he called a *well-regulated church music*, a significant factor in him applying for the Leipzig post.

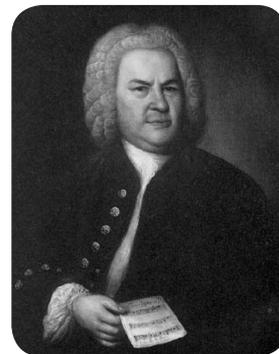
## “Contemporary” composer about town

As the Leipzig Cantor, an appointment made by the city and not by the church Bach, the humble musician, would have been an easily recognisable figure moving about the town and expected to prosper good manners - in other words, like composers today, to have good PR. Yet strange as it may be for us to think of him like this, in his day Bach

was, what we would call now, a *contemporary* composer; his music was premièred to a wary audience, made up of anyone from court and civic personages, church council members, rectors, lawyers and academics to students and the general townsfolk. He had his critics too, from the spiteful Scheibe to the confused congregation jibbing at the complexities of the chorale harmonies! The lion’s share of Bach’s composing was probably done in a bustling household or at his post in the Thomasschule - Oh for some peace and quiet! He had deadlines to meet, choral and orchestral parts to prepare<sup>5</sup>, rehearsals to take and, what we should refer to today, a *world première* to direct most weeks at Sunday services. He would undoubtedly have known all the downsides too. Sickness in the choir, the sudden indisposition of a soloist or orchestral player will not have escaped Bach’s attention nor would that faulty pipe on the church organ. At the end of the day, would he have been satisfied with the musical result? More acceptance than wild ecstasy, I imagine. “*There’s always next Sunday and I’ll have Herr Altus back to sing then,*” muttered under his breath perhaps as he descends the steep staircase from the musicians’ gallery.

Over the past two decades we have explored many aspects of Bach’s life and work together. For our 21st Bachfest, I am inviting you to listen to his music with Bach the *working* composer in mind, and therefore to hear it anew, see it in a fresh light. We continue to be bowled over by his genius don’t we, the glorious harmonies, moving melodies, brilliant orchestral colour, texture and the varying degrees of mood - from great joy to great pathos. However, that is to hear the music in isolation and separate from its composition and the working conditions prevailing. Everything Bach produced had a purpose too, whether it was for the church and the town, for publication, to enhance his social status or in the case of the *Mass in B minor* compiled as an example of his absolute best. Like composers are today, Bach must have been aware of changing musical styles and influences as he got older, even becoming sensitive to his own style being regarded as ‘*a little out of date now*’? His family ties will have been diverting given the problems of some of the children, not to mention the frustrations encountered in dealing with his bosses on occasion<sup>6</sup>. By all this I am merely suggesting that his day to day experiences would have been real and therefore enable us all to draw closer to Bach. They neither detract from nor diminish his musical importance or his genius one jot.

**Margaret Steinitz**



Joh. Seb. Bach (1746)



<sup>1</sup> Kyrie and Gloria, Mass in b BWV 232

<sup>2</sup> 1747 Canonic Variations on “Vom Himmel hoch” BWV 769

<sup>3</sup> Cantatas for the Royal House of Saxony

<sup>4</sup> Cantata BWV 198 for Electress Christiane Eberhardine

<sup>5</sup> With the help of copyists: Anna Magdalena and others

<sup>6</sup> Further reading: The New Bach Reader/rev & ed C.Wolff

## Who's who and what's what this Bachfest 2-10 November 2011

It is 1741. Alaska was discovered, Handel completed 'Messiah', Vivaldi died, Walpole was Prime Minister... meanwhile Bach visited Berlin, and his Clavier-Übung IV<sup>7</sup> was published in the autumn. On the title page it refers to this 'Aria with Divers Variations for the harpsichord' as "Composed for Music Lovers, to refresh their Spirits, by Johann Sebastian Bach", but, rightly or wrongly, we know them better as The Goldberg Variations. The story surrounding their origin has been questioned since Forkel<sup>8</sup>. It is delightful to think the variations were provided by Bach for a gifted, yet very young, harpsichordist to play in order to soothe a distinguished Count's insomnia. However Christoph Wolff<sup>9</sup> gives compelling reasons that cast doubt on this. Let's just accept Bach's own sentiments and enjoy the set for what it is, for we have one of today's most gifted harpsichordists **Steven Devine** (pictured) to play them for us to open our 21st Festival (2 Nov).



Steven Devine

(Photo Credit John Buckman - Magnatune)

Given in the intimate Salon of Wax Chandlers Hall in the City of London, thanks to the kindness of the Master and Members of the Worshipful Company of Wax Chandlers<sup>10</sup>, the performance comes soon after the release of Steven's highly acclaimed recording of the Goldbergs for Chandos.

## Bach Days at the Foundling Museum

This is the third year we have been able to present some events in this wonderful museum<sup>11</sup> in the heart of London. With its Handel connections and elegant rooms, it provides a congenial setting especially for chamber music. I always hoped we would be able to emulate recitals given at the Bach Museum at Leipzig and promote some recitals or lectures in one of our own and, while Handel never met Bach, they will come together at Bachfest! We have two 'Bach Days' (4/5 Nov) at the Museum offering the complete **Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord**<sup>12</sup> in two recitals given by the brilliant **Rodolfo Richter** (pictured on page 1), **The Bachfest Lecture** delivered by **Professor John Butt** and **The Bach Club**. John's lecture will preface **Tim Brown's Bach Singing Day on Bach's Mass in B minor**. Compiled in 1748/49, here Bach has expanded his more familiar short setting of the Mass<sup>13</sup> to include the full five sections of the Latin Ordinary, containing much material re-worked from earlier cantatas as an example of the 'best he could provide in this form of composition'. As far as we know, the Mass was not performed in its entirety during his lifetime (NB: I avoid the word 'never'), yet 263 years and numerous editions later, the work sparks more comment than might be sensible. Tim Brown writes "This is music for everyone, for performers, listeners and scholars alike. What we perform, hear or read, is for each one to interpret anew. Each of us must decide for ourselves the significance of theology, philosophy and numerology in the B minor Mass. For our performance to

do justice to Bach's intentions, it must be a starting point, not an end in itself. Like a small bulb in a vast room, no performance of this complex work can illuminate every corner. All we can do is reveal something of its immense colour and glimpse its core, for a brief moment illuminating the music, and in that moment to see it in a new light." As this is a Singing Day, there will be lots of singing...book your place and come and join us. It will be fun I can assure you...

## At St. John's, Smith Square on Luther's birthday

The climax of our 21st Festival is an all-Bach concert (10 Nov) featuring **Steinitz Bach Players**, directed by **Anthony Robson** (pictured) in the period setting of St. John's, Smith Square. This has its own significance because three hundred years ago in 1711, the Commission to Build Fifty New Churches was set up by Act of Parliament in response to the expanding geographical spread of London. The Commission did not achieve its target, but did build a number of churches, known as Queen Anne Churches. St. John's, Smith Square is one, completed in 1728.



Anthony Robson



St. John's Smith Square 18th Century Engraving

Designed by Thomas Archer, St. John's was in the process of being planned and built when Bach was composing the two exquisite church cantatas to be featured in the programme. Cantatas BWV 95 and BWV 8 are both for the 16th Sunday after Trinity and were performed at Leipzig on 12 September 1723 and 24 September 1724 respectively. Given the economy of texture and orchestration - flute, oboes, strings and basso continuo in all - our soloists will also sing the choruses and chorales in consort. We are joined by **Charlotte Mobbs, Robin Blaze, Nicholas Mulroy** and **Giles Underwood**, all of whom have distinguished themselves with their Bach performances. To complement these and the solo violin concerto that Rodolfo will play we have chosen one of the five Lutheran Masses, the G major BWV 236<sup>14</sup>. As in the others, Bach turned to earlier cantatas for the material and for the Mass in G we have re-workings of movements from Cantatas BWV 179, 79, 138 and 17<sup>15</sup>. This and the remaining ones in the collection of Lutheran Masses all date from the 1730s - the composer's Art and Bach's 'ongoing and unstoppable compositional urge'.

**Margaret Steinitz**

**Follow us on Facebook and Twitter**  
**www.bachlive.co.uk has full Festival details too**

<sup>7</sup> meaning Keyboard Practice

<sup>8</sup> Bach's Biographer; see p. 464 New Bach Reader

<sup>9</sup> Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician, pp373-381

<sup>10</sup> Ancient Livery Company for the Wax Industry

<sup>11</sup> Central London's first ever public art gallery

<sup>12</sup> BWV 1014-1019

<sup>13</sup> The Lutheran Missae - Kyrie & Gloria BWV 232-236

<sup>14</sup> 1738/39

<sup>15</sup> Leipzig, 1723-1726

## THE 18-30 BACH CLUB

By Ruth Mariner

**H**ow should we promote Bach to people ages 18-30? What should London Bach Society's BACH CLUB be, and do, to communicate Bach's music to this audience? How can we help those already persuaded by Bach's music to take their interest to new heights, whilst also providing an introduction to those unfamiliar with or undecided about his work?

Whilst electronic composition classical composers such as Glass, Reich (pictured), Eno, Xenakis and Feldman receive a natural social platform in current society, Bach is a figure more isolated to contemporary life. Many young people come to minimalism through an experience of film scores, which provide an emotionally evocative platform for music similar to what they are listening to already in its tonality, chord progressions and repeated idioms. Others turn to electronic composers and the neo-modernists in an extension of their interest in experimental *popular* forms and concept albums. Bach possesses less of these observable 'lead-ins' to his music to contemporary culture. Often, he is spoken of as being a 'cerebral' composer. The intricate part writing in his fugues are said to *play themselves out* with almost mathematical precision, the passion of his cantatas is ignored, and instead they are praised for their *architecture, structure and form*. Yet words such as *form* and *structure* are misleading, mathematical terms, they can give the impression that Bach is to be *understood* in the same manner you would understand the workings of an engine. They are, understandably, an unattractive and pressurised way to promote *music*, whose allure lies in the emotional reaction to sound as much as the sound itself.



So, for newcomers to Bach, it is important to realise that, it is possible to appreciate him just by listening, not thinking: the same way you would appreciate any other music. By moving, mentally and emotionally with each arching melody, each expected and unexpected chord change, each vigorous upbeat and poignant cadence you can open yourself to, and experience Bach. You may find your emotions amplified at specific points in the composition or you may decide Bach has nothing for you, BUT the only way for this realisation to occur, is through experiencing it directly.

Thus: in November 2009, London Bach Society launched BACH CLUB, for those aged 18-30. All BACH CLUB events are free for students and a modest cost for others. From November onwards BACH CLUB meetings will happen twice a year, but, as we see the BACH CLUB grow members and develop interest, we hope to increase this to more.

The meetings are modelled on the weekly events Bach himself headed, in the city of Leipzig. At the forefront of artistic life, Bach and his students would use the time to discuss and *perform* new music, new ideas and new meanings. Likewise, BACH CLUB wants to push music into new areas. The meetings will not in future just favour seasoned performers but will introduce new interpretations of Bach's work by new performers and première works by new composers influenced by Bach. Over drinks it will also give artists a chance to talk about their work, offer audience members opportunity to ask questions, share thoughts and make useful contacts for future performances, concerts and careers. Whilst this will provide a cultural 'lead-in' for those who have had little experience of Bach (and this is where YOU come in to invite as many curious friends as you have BACH CLUB events) the social space the meetings create will allow everyone to pursue Bach to their own level.

Please seek us out on Facebook, Twitter, and on the London Bach Society website, and we hope to see you in November! **Ed: Ruth Mariner gained a First Class degree in music from Goldsmiths' College and goes up to Cambridge in October to begin her Ph.D. She attended the very first Bach Club meeting on 13 November 2009, got interested and for the past few months, in between studies, has been our voluntary Intern working on the future marketing of the Club and its long term development.**



Picture gallery at Foundling Museum

### Bach's Collegium

Bach was appointed Director of the Leipzig Collegium Musicum (students musical society) in 1729 and held this prominent position in the city until c.1741. By all accounts, Bach set about the task with a will; a fresh opportunity to create and make music with gifted musicians, of their time and to perform it to the general townsfolk; the mood would not be that of a church service, but more secular. The '*Ordinaire Concerten*' were presented at Zimmermann's stylish Coffeehouse on fashionable Katharinenstrasse, just a few minutes' walk from the Bach family's lodgings at the Thomasschule. Zimmermann was obviously no fool and not closed to the opportunity to create more business, so he put a large room at the disposal of the students for their weekly gatherings during winter and his garden during summer - selling copious amounts of his coffee at the same time no doubt! Recent welcome surveys have widened the repertoire the composer probably included in the concert programmes; the suites, harpsichord concertos and keyboard works all come into the reckoning... and the set of six Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord, three of which will be performed at our November Bach Club meeting...this and more news when we meet.

**THE BACH CLUB, FRIDAY 4 NOVEMBER, 7.45pm, THE FOUNDLING MUSEUM WC1**

## LBS Members Circle

The LBS Members' Circle helps to make things happen and new members are welcome at any time. The Society works all year round, promotes an annual Bachfest now in its 21st year, a new 18-30 Bach Club, a Journal, issues regular emails, maintains a Library for public use and a full-time office. We reach a global following via our website, Facebook and Twitter. Future plans include a spring programme from 2012 onwards and a move to a new London home... more anon. Why not come and join us at Bachfest 2011, the perfect entry to the Society

## Gift Aid Subscription

Entry to the LBS Members' Circle is by annual subscription, to which Gift Aid may be applied. There are five categories, each with a Bach association.

**The Friends £25 Goldberg Friends £50**

**The Eisenach Circle £100**

**The Weimar Circle £250 The Cöthen Circle £500**

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To subscribe just call **01883 717372** (9.30-5.00 Mon-Fri) and have your credit card ready. An oral Gift Aid Declaration can be made at the time.

## Bach Network 5th Dialogue Meeting

The fifth J S Bach Dialogue Meeting of Bach Network UK (BNUK) took place in Edinburgh from 12-14 August. The various sessions included papers concerning the future shape of Bach studies, a keynote speech by Sir Nicholas Kenyon on *Bach in the 21st Century* and Sir John Eliot Gardiner delivered the after-dinner speech. Among those giving papers were Dr. Peter Wollny and Dr. Michael Maul from the Bach-Archiv at Leipzig, Dr. Reinhardt Strohm, Dr. Donald Burrows and Dr Yo Tomita. The 6th Dialogue meeting will take place in Warsaw in 2013. For the full programme and report visit [www.bachnetwork.co.uk](http://www.bachnetwork.co.uk)

## A New Recording of the Mass in B minor

Signum Records have recently released the recording of **Bach's Mass in B minor** (SIGCD265) conducted by Peter Seymour and performed by Yorkshire Bach Choir and Yorkshire Baroque Soloists. Around 65% of the 84 performers are former students of York University, prompting The Times to comment 'warm-toned, well sustained choral singing; meticulously articulated instrumental work, a fine testament to Seymour's splendid Baroque performances over almost 40 years.' (See advert for special offer top right)

## More Bach from Yorkshire

In August 2010 Signum Records also released Yorkshire Baroque Soloists' recording of **Bach's St John Passion** (SIGCD209), conducted by Peter Seymour.

## ★★★★ Special Offer ★★★★★

Copies of both of the two-CD sets - Mass in B minor/St John Passion (special offer price @ £15 each) are available from:

Peter Seymour

Email [peter.seymour@york.ac.uk](mailto:peter.seymour@york.ac.uk)

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The *New Bach Edition* (NBA), now completed and available in 104 music volumes and 101 critical commentaries, is regarded as a work of musical scholarship of the first rank. However, new sources have been discovered, new knowledge has been acquired and further editorial experience amassed. The Bach Archive Leipzig and Bärenreiter will therefore publish approx. 15 volumes or works in revised editions.

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