

# Performing Bach: One or Many?<sup>1</sup>

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The one-to-a-part debate with regard to Bach's vocal works has rumbled on for more than a quarter of a century, in consequence of Joshua Rifkin's paper given at the American Musicological Society meeting, Boston, November 1981, in which he made what was received as the controversial suggestion that the practice was Bach's norm. As the bibliography appended to this article makes clear, the controversy created a flood of reactions, mostly negative to begin with, but as time has passed the tendency has been at least to consider the possibility. The debate continues, especially among choral directors whose *raison d'être* appears to be challenged by both the concept and the practice: if Bach wrote only for solo voices then there can be no such thing as his "choral" music, or so it is often perceived. Thus for many the suggestion is unthinkable and therefore needs no further investigation.

Some of the articles in popular journals have, perhaps inadvertently, over-simplified the debate. For example, the summaries of the two sides of the issue by Andrew Parrott and Helmut Rilling give the impression that the issue is a practical one of deciding on how many singers one should use: Parrott's answer is four, sometimes eight; Rilling's answer is twenty-four—or more.<sup>2</sup> There is, however, more to the issue than meets the ear.

<sup>1</sup> The current article is an expansion of a presentation given at the American Choral Directors Association annual convention held in San Antonio, Texas, in March 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Alex von Koettlitz, "How Many Singers Does

Although the focus of this article is on the vocal works of Bach—the storm-center of the controversy—the issue is a much broader one that also involves the music of Bach's contemporaries. For example, the evidence from the preserved parts of the cantatas of Telemann in Frankfurt and Graupner in Darmstadt indicate that the general custom of these composers was to have each part sung by a single singer. The parts of Telemann's cantatas show that he called for solo voices—*concertisten*—and only used additional voices—*ripienisten*—not to double the *concertisten* parts but only in such case where a single voice was set against a four-part vocal texture, such as a bass aria with chorale. In this case, Telemann supplied a *ripieno* chorale bass part for the additional singer who would join the three upper *concertisten* voices, while the *concertist* bass sang the aria.<sup>3</sup> In

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it Take to Perform a Cantata by J.S. Bach? Two leading Bach Conductors Argue their Cases," *BBC Music Magazine* 8/5 (January 2000): 38–39.

<sup>3</sup> Don L. Smithers (in "Emperors' New Clothes Reappraised; or Bach's Musical Resources Re-

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Darmstadt, one of Graupner's singers was the Italian alto castrato Antonio Guelandi, known as "Campioli" (fl. 1703–1738). For cantatas performed in the court chapel, the Italian needed help with German pronunciation, and therefore the text in the ms. parts from which he sang (and only his parts) was spelled phonetically, a fact that would seem to imply the practice of one singer to a part.<sup>4</sup>

The issue, although centered on Bach's vocal works, not only has broader significance with regard to his contemporaries, but also involves our perceptions of the vocal/choral practices of the seventeenth century, as both Joshua Rifkin and Andrew Parrott have significantly argued. But the beginnings of the modern debate can be traced much earlier than Rifkin's catalytic paper of 1981.

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vealed," Bach. *The Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 28 (1997): 1–81) had argued, on the basis of entries in the ms. catalogue of Telemann's Frankfurt cantatas that the composer customarily employed *ripieno* singers, therefore using more than one-to-a-part. But Jeanne Swack has countered Smithers' conclusion by asserting that while the ms. catalogue does record both *concertisten* and *ripienisten* parts, an examination of the actual vocal parts of the cantatas reveals that the extra parts were not in all voices (SATB), but only an occasional voice-part, such as when an aria was juxtaposed with a chorale. This evidence was presented by Dr. Swack in a paper given at the Bach Colloquium, Harvard University, April 1999: "Vocal and Instrumental Forces in the Frankfurt Cantatas of Georg Philipp Telemann." A modified form was given, with the altered title, "Telemann's Chorus: Vocal Forces in Telemann's Frankfurt Cantatas and the Implications for the 'One on a Part' Controversy," at the American Musicological Society meeting in Kansas later the same year. The material will be included in Dr. Swack's forthcoming book on Telemann.

<sup>4</sup> See Guido Erdmann, "Eghiptens jamer' — Über den beschwerlichen Einsatz italienischer Sänger in Graupners Kirchenmusik," *Mitteilungen der Christoph-Graupner-Gesellschaft* 2 (2005): 3–31; available on-line: <http://www.christoph-graupner-gesellschaft.de/> <accessed 31 December 2007>.

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While it will be argued that in a sense the twentieth century debate begins not with Rifkin but with Arnold Schering, we must begin with the observation that the main features of the issue were anticipated by the Boston music critic and professor of music William Foster Apthorp (1848–1913).<sup>5</sup> In a lecture on Bach he gave in the series sponsored by the Lowell Institute during the winter of 1886–87, Apthorp made the following observations:

[In Leipzig] Bach wrote for his little church choir. A cantata was written for one Sunday's service, was sung to the ordinary congregation, and then laid aside, only to be followed by a fresh cantata next Sunday...his choir was small, and his orchestra, as a rule, miserably inadequate...Think of the masses of voices and instruments that Handel commanded, and then reflect upon the fact that no duplicate chorus-parts to a Bach cantata have ever been discovered. Bach's choir could not have numbered more than twelve or sixteen voices, for it is hardly possible for more than three or four singers to read at once from the same sheet. His solo-singers sang also in the choruses...<sup>6</sup>

At a time when Theodore Thomas in New York and elsewhere and Philipp Wolfrum in Heidelberg were performing Bach's vocal works with grossly inflated choral and instrumental

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<sup>5</sup> Apthorp studied at Harvard with John Knowles Paine; later taught at the New England Conservatory; music critic for such newspapers and journals as the *Boston Evening Transcript*, *Boston Sunday Courier*, and *Atlantic Monthly*; program annotator for the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

<sup>6</sup> William Foster Apthorp, "Johann Sebastian Bach," *The Contemporary Review*, 60 (September 1891), 422. The lecture was reprinted without alteration in Apthorp's *Musicians and Music-Lovers and Other Essays* (New York: Scribner, 1894), 57–96; here 65–66; it reached a 5<sup>th</sup> edition by 1908, with two reprints in the twentieth century (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries, 1972, and Winchester, MA: Longwood, 1979).

resources, Apthorp's comments prove to be particularly historically well-informed.

During the twentieth century, there was a clearly definable trend of performing the choral works of Johann Sebastian Bach with ever-smaller ensembles. The Bach Choir of Bethlehem, founded in 1898 and our country's oldest Bach choir, celebrated its quarter century in 1923. The total choir then numbered 275 singers: 109 sopranos, 76 altos, 40 tenors, and 50 basses. Then each voice was divided into two sections, so that if some works were performed by the first sections of each voice there would be a total of 142 singers. Today the Bach Choir of Bethlehem is still somewhat large but is considerably smaller than its earlier manifestation, now totalling around 110 singers: 34 sopranos, 34 altos, 16 tenors, and 26 basses, and if only the first sections of each voice-part are used then the number of singers is around 60.

H. L. Mencken, the journalist of the *Baltimore Sun* with an acerbic wit, made his first visit to the Bethlehem Bach Festival in 1923, the quarter-century-year of the Choir. In a letter to the publisher Alfred A. Knopf he wrote about his experience: "The Bach jaunt turned out to be very pleasant. We found excellent beer on draught at ten cents a glass. The choruses were superb, but the solo voices singed my kidneys."<sup>7</sup> It is from Mencken's accounts of the Bethlehem Bach Festival that appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* over the next few years that we learn some interesting details concerning performance practice. He reveals that in the B-minor Mass all the solo parts were sung not by solo voices but by the appropriate sections of the Bethlehem choir. Similarly Mencken observes that the 1929 performance of the St. Matthew Passion in Bethlehem was similar:

This year the Matthew Passion was done—not badly, to be sure, but still without any distinction. A hired tenor struggled bravely with the long recitatives, but they

are essentially unsingable[!], and so his efforts were more painful than exhilarating. The words of Jesus were sung by the basses in unison—a series of long rumbles, seldom rising to music...In the mass all the solo parts are sung by the appropriate sections of the choir.<sup>8</sup>

In the 1920s there was the exact opposite of what is usually heard today. Then the solo vocal music of Bach was rendered as choral music: now the choral music is frequently rendered as solo vocal music. One example is the performance of the St. Matthew Passion, conducted by Kenneth Slowik, as part of the biennial meeting of the American Bach Society in Washington D. C. in the year 2000. It was given by the Smithsonian Chamber Players with just eight voices of the Santa Fe Pro Musica, who formed the two four-part "choruses" and sang all the recitatives and arias—with the tenor and bass of Chorus I being the Evangelist and Jesus respectively. Actually to be strictly accurate, there were nine voices—an extra soprano was needed for the *ripieno* chorale in the opening movement. In 2003 Paul McCreesh with the Gabrieli Players issued their remarkable recording of the St. Matthew Passion using solo singers. Thus the performance practice of one singer to a part, pioneered by Joshua Rifkin's recording of the B-minor Mass with The Bach Ensemble (1982), can be increasingly heard in recordings by such groups as the Taverner Consort and Players conducted by Andrew Parrott, the Cantus Cölln directed by Konrad Junghänel, and The Purcell Quartet (without a conductor), among others. This contrasts with the 16 singers (4-to-a-part) of Masaaki Suzuki's Bach Collegium Japan and Philippe Herreweghe's La Chapelle Royale, the 18 singers (5-4-5-4) of Ton Koopman's Amsterdam Baroque Choir, or the 20 singers (generally 5 to a part) of John Eliot Gardiner's Monteverdi Choir.

At the end of the twentieth century there was a clearly-defined reduction of vocal forces

<sup>7</sup> H. L. Mencken on Music: A Selection of His writings on Music..., ed. Louis Cheslock (New York: Knopf, 1961), 19 n.1.

<sup>8</sup> *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 30 May 1923; Mencken on Music, 24.

in the performance of Bach's vocal works, when compared with the general practice encountered early in the century. It was a trend that significantly pre-dates Rifkin's 1981 AMS paper.<sup>9</sup>

In an article in the *Bach-Jahrbuch* of 1920, and later in his book, *Johann Sebastian Bachs Leipziger Kirchenmusik* (1936), Arnold Schering—building on the work of Spitta and Bernhard Richter, who in a 1907 *Bach-Jahrbuch* article identified the musicians and Thomasschule students available to Bach during his Kantorate in Leipzig<sup>10</sup>—Schering concluded that Bach's first choir, that sang the cantatas week by week, normally comprised twelve singers—that is, three singers to a part—considerably fewer than was normal in Bach performances during those early decades of the twentieth century. For Schering, this arrangement was confirmed by Bach's audition reports of 1729,<sup>11</sup> and the *Entwurf*, the "Draft of a Properly Constituted Church Musical Establishment," that Bach drew up the following year, in 1730.<sup>12</sup> Further, there was the evidence of the original parts from which the singers sang. Most cantatas have just four vocal parts—one sheet of paper for each voice. Thus, taking a conjectural example for the sake of illustration, the soprano part would comprise the

opening chorus, the following recitative and aria would be given as headings but each one with "Tacet" marked alongside. Then the following recitative and aria would be given, fully notated for the soprano voice, and at the end would come the chorale melody for the soprano to sing. The equivalent sheet with the tenor voice part would comprise the tenor line of the opening chorus, followed by the fully notated recitative and aria which the tenor would sing—movements that would be marked "Tacet" in the other three voice parts. Then the next recitative and aria on the sheet of the tenor part would be marked "Tacet"—as would the alto and bass parts—because these would be sung by the soprano. Then the tenor part would conclude with the tenor line of the concluding chorale. The alto and bass parts would conform to the same pattern.

Schering was much more interested in the two different types of singers rather than in the total number of singers per part. On the one hand there were the *concertisten*, the solo voices that sang the choruses and chorales as well as the recitatives and arias, and the *ripienisten*, those who only sang the choruses (and sometimes only part of the choruses) and chorales. According to Schering the three-to-a-part model implies that each of the *concertisten* held the respective part in their hands—since they would be singing the solo recitatives and arias—and the two *ripienisten* for each part would stand either side of their respective *concertist*, reading over their shoulders—one to the left and the other to the right—in the choruses and chorales. Thus the choral/vocal resources were grouped in threes according to their voice-parts, rather like the voice sections of present-day choirs, though on a smaller scale.

For Schering, the principle of *concertisten* and *ripienisten* was most important. *Concertisten* were soloists who sang the recitatives and arias, as well as the choruses and chorales. *Ripienisten* joined the *concertisten* in singing *tutti* sections of choruses and the chorales. It was Schering's opinion that Bach was forced by circumstances

<sup>9</sup> Details of the literature discussed in the following paragraphs will be found in the appended bibliography. Rifkin included some information in the liner notes to the recording that followed the 1981 AMS performance, released by Nonesuch in 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard Friedrich Richter, "Stadtpeifer und Alumnien der Thomasschule in Leipzig zu Bachs Zeit," *Bach Jahrbuch*, 4 (1907): 32–78.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents*, ed. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, revised and expanded by Christoph Wolff (New York: Norton, 1998), 140–142 (Nos. 142–145); Appendix 2, Andrew Parrott, *The Essential Bach Choir* (Rochester, NY: Boydell, 2000), 159–162.

<sup>12</sup> *The New Bach Reader*, 145–151 (No. 151); compare the alternative translation in Appendix 3, *The Essential Bach Choir*, 167–170.

to use the limited resources of three singers to a part and that, if given the chance, would have used more than two *ripienisten* for each part. Schering encouraged the use of larger choral forces—perhaps as many as forty or fifty voices—which nevertheless was considerably fewer than was the custom in the early twentieth century.

One of the pioneers of Bach's vocal works being performed by small groups of singers and players was Charles Kennedy Scott who, with the Bach Cantata Club, performed 65 cantatas, as well as other Bach vocal works, between 1929 and 1939, usually in St. Margaret's Church, Westminster, or the Royal College of Music, London, with just thirty-six singers. Almost certainly the reduced resources can be traced to the views of Schering, mediated to Kennedy by Charles Sanford Terry.<sup>13</sup>

From the late 1950s, Wilhelm Ehmann explored Schering's understanding of the use of *concertisten* and *ripienisten* with his Westphalische Kantorei of around thirty-six singers, that is nine to a part. In America around the same time Robert Shaw, in collaboration with Bach scholar Gerhard Herz, came to terms with the implications of Schering's revelations. In 1960 Shaw toured the country giving performances of the B-minor Mass (using Smend's 1954 Bärenreiter edition) with much smaller resources than was customary at the time. These performances were heralded as spectacularly ground-breaking. For example, reporting on the New York performance in March 1960, Harold C. Schonberg reported that

It [was] very likely the best-rehearsed B minor Mass of the generation...As usually heard, Bach's B minor Mass is sung by a chorus numbering hundreds, with an orchestra to suit. But on this occasion the work received what amounted to a chamber

<sup>13</sup> See Stainton de B. Taylor, "Charles Kennedy Scott," *The Musical Times* 92 (1951): 492–496; see also the brief obituary, *The Musical Times* 106 (1965): 623.

presentation. The chorus of just thirty-six singers was just about the size of the orchestra...[I]n the interests of clarity, [Shaw] often has the vocal quartet singing instead of the chorus...It can be said that the emphasis was on clarity above everything. And clarity was always maintained...In matters of pitch, balance, enunciation and general accuracy this was an unusually tight-knit and near flawless presentation.<sup>14</sup>

In the liner notes of the recording made later in New York, Shaw explains the reasons behind his pared-down resources:

Perhaps the greatest logistic danger to the performance of Bach's choral works is the usual grandiose size of both choral and instrumental forces. This may provide a great experience for the participants, but it is a questionable service to the listener, for Bach's light, airy and intricate texture is overwhelmed by great and glutinous sound. We have tried to scale our forces in the direction of Bach's own resources.<sup>15</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, Ehmann published a number of articles explaining his approach in using *concertisten* and *ripienisten*; some of these articles were translated into English and appeared in such journals as the *American Choral Review* and the *Choral Journal*. Ehmann also demonstrated his approach in numerous recordings, including Bach's six motets with the Westminster Choir, first issued in 1978, a recording that is still available—pioneering in its day, though it now sounds somewhat dated.

By this time, performances and recordings with period instruments and boys (rather

<sup>14</sup> Harold C. Schonberg, "Bach Work is Led by Robert Shaw," *New York Times*, March 14, 1960, 24.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Shaw, "Tradition versus artistic judgment," liner notes, J.S. Bach. Mass in B Minor, *RCA Red Seal* (1960). The recording, with almost the same vocal and instrumental performers as the public New York performance (among the soloists there was a substitute soprano and an alternate bass), was made in the Manhattan Center, New York City, and released in June 1960.

than women) and a half-step below modern pitch, had been growing in number, notably the Teldec series of *Das Alte Werk* complete cantatas of Bach, directed by Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt. The less powerful sound of period string and wind instruments began to raise questions concerning the appropriate choral resources needed to balance them. Then Joshua Rifkin caused quite a stir with his paper, “Bach’s Chorus,” at the Boston meeting of the American Musicological Society in November 1981.<sup>16</sup> On the basis of a meticulous study of the available original parts of Bach’s vocal works and a new look at the evidence of Bach’s memorandum to the Leipzig Town Council, the *Entwurf* of 1730, Rifkin concluded that Bach’s normal resources for cantatas week by week was one singer to a vocal part. In brief, his position is that: 1) we have been guilty of making assumptions based on later choral practice; 2) the earlier practice—that Bach and his contemporaries inherited from the seventeenth century—especially as evidenced in the works of Praetorius and Schütz—was essentially one singer to a vocal part; and 3) in the *Entwurf* of 1730 Bach’s use of the term “choir” meant not what we mean by the term but rather a “team of available voices” from which could be drawn the singers required for the weekly performance of cantatas. On this last point, Bach himself points out in the *Entwurf* that these numbers were necessary in order to cover for illnesses and other absences; thus implying that not all twelve singers of the first choir would be available to sing every week.

To begin with, few accepted the Rifkin position, but as time has passed more and more conductors and musicologists have moved in his direction. Even among those who are not convinced by the Rifkin position, there are those who nevertheless employ reduced choral

resources, approximating Schering’s concept of three singers to a part. Thus, instead of choirs numbering thirty or forty singers, which were common in the 1960s and 1970s, from the 1980s conductors such as Suzuki, Herreweghe, Koopman, Gardiner, among others, have employed between twelve and twenty singers. And even some of these conductors use one singer to a vocal part for certain movements. One example is John Eliot Gardiner’s 1985 recording of the B-minor Mass in which the “Crucifixus” is sung by solo singers.

The implications of Rifkin’s position have been fully researched and logically presented in Andrew Parrott’s book, *The Essential Bach Choir*. Both Rifkin and Parrott stress that while four singers was the norm, there were, of course, occasions when Bach did add *ripieno* singers. But these singers were not grouped in threes—two *ripienisten* on either side of each *concertist*—but rather they were grouped in SATB quartets, with the *ripienisten* quartet spatially separated from the *concertisten* quartet. If more *ripienisten* were used, then another SATB quartet was added. Even Schering noted that this practice was to be seen depicted in contemporary engravings, but he did not draw out the significance. When there was more than one singer to a part, the additional *ripienisten* were not grouped in vocal sections as is our contemporary practice, but in additional SATB quartets. This is something that is often used today as a rehearsal technique for choirs, to get the singers to sing their own part while listening to the other voices, but in Bach’s time, this was a performance rather than a rehearsal practice. The object of the additional singers was not to increase loudness so much as to add to the texture of the sound—similar to the way a North-German Baroque organist would pull extra stops to enrich the totality of the sound. To hear how this works out in practice, I would draw attention to the two cantatas performed by the Gabrieli Consort and Players, conducted by Paul McCreesh, issued by the Archiv label under the title *Bach Epiphany Mass*, a recording

<sup>16</sup> Part of the reason for much of the following debate was hampered by the fact the full text of the paper was not immediately published; it finally appeared as an Appendix 6 in Parrott, *The Essential Bach Choir*, 189–208.

that presents the music in a liturgical sequence that approximates the usage during Bach's time in Leipzig. Here Cantata 180 is sung by just four voices, one singer per part; Cantata 65 is sung by groups of *concertisten* and *ripienisten*.

For performances such as these, much research is necessary. It is disappointing that often when the subject of the size of Bach's vocal ensemble is under review, it is clear that many of the antagonists and protagonists, while strong in their opinions, are weak in their awareness of what has been written on the subject. When research is undertaken there is still the common tendency to begin with contemporary practical questions for which historical answers are drawn. But our contemporary questions may not address all the historical issues. It is the historical evidence that should be the first concern, following all the leads wherever they go and then drawing conclusions concerning contemporary performance practice in light of these findings.

The appended bibliography charts the primary literature of the ongoing debate in the hope that light as well as heat can be generated in subsequent discussions. There is much to be gained from coming to terms with this literature. One of the fruits of the controversy is that the vocal music of Bach is now considered more in the nature of chamber music rather than symphonic music, with every contrapuntal line heard with clarity, delicacy and balance—whether we perform each vocal line with one, few or more voices.

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*Appendix:*  
*Bibliography of Primary Literature*  
*on the One-to-a-Vocal-Part Issue*

The following listing is not exhaustive but includes the primary protagonists on both sides of the debate. The sources are generally arranged chronologically, with the exception of related articles in successive issues of a journal that are responses and additions to specific articles; the connected contributions to the continuing debate are thus kept together here. There is a bias towards contributions in English. Excluded from this listing are reviews of "minimalist" performances, either in concert or on CD. Such reviews can be found in Smithers (1997) below.

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