

Lessons from Leipzig



St. Thomas' Church and School
Leipzig, 1724

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Introduction



Johann Sebastian Bach stands out as one of the greatest musicians throughout history. His compositions changed the way the world thinks about music and the arts. His reputation as a virtuosic performer was well-known to his contemporaries. And his role as a Lutheran church musician makes all his effort meaningful to us. Church musicians look back on Bach and stand in awe of his God-given gifts. We marvel in the great accomplishments of the famous cantor of St. Thomas in Leipzig. And we tend to feel a bit overwhelmed. We are likely to admit, “There’s absolutely no way I could ever do anything even close to the things Bach did!” That conclusion is in many ways true. The genius and skill of Johann Sebastian Bach are unique to the man. The musical resources available to him were unique to the culture and context of 18th century protestant Germany.

Still, we would be mistaken to put too much distance between our world and his. Church musicians in the 21st century have much to learn from Leipzig’s cantor. How might we apply his legacy in our daily lives of Lutheran worship?

That was a question that motivated the planners of the 2014 WELS National Worship Conference to offer a Thursday evening service entitled “Choral-Organ Vespers.” It’s also a question that has motivated the authors of this presentation to dig a little deeper. Below, we offer observations about Bach’s approach to his work, and we see that Bach has much to teach the present-day church musician. The simple fact is, even the great Johann Sebastian Bach faced many of the same challenges and setbacks we face today. He wrestled through many of the same conflicts and disagreements we might have today. He worked under the strain of deadlines, limited resources, and rehearsal stress. Essentially, his work was in many ways the work we do today, and so, we can learn from him.

It’s important to recall that Bach was employed as a teacher. And some of his most important lessons are understood when we examine just how Bach approached each of the issues mentioned above. His example calls from the past and instructs us in basic lessons we can learn and emulate that will prove to be a benefit in our labor of love. These lessons will likely never transform us into modern-day Bachs, but they will give us and those we serve the opportunity to enjoy some of the same blessings he brought to Leipzig nearly three centuries ago.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Deo Gloria'.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Lesson 1: Begin with Prayer

The first lesson we learn from old master Bach is: “how might servants of God begin their task?” Bach teaches us the lesson in the simplest terms: *In Nomine Jesu* – “In the Name of Jesus...” With these words, the Christian devotes his or her self to God’s service, be it in public worship or any other enterprise. Bach frequently initialized his efforts with the terms of this prayer. The letters I.N.J. are found atop the pages of many of Bach’s manuscripts, each lending insight into the composer’s purpose. Our *Organ-Choral Vespers* features and example. *Sie Werden Aus Saba Alle Kommen* (BWV 65) was composed by Bach in 1724 as the cantata for the Festival of Epiphany. The cantata would require a solid effort from Bach as composer, conductor and musician. Nevertheless, it is the baptized believer who puts the first ink to the page. *I.N.J.*

Bach’s devotion was not limited to his public service to the church. Bach scratched the same prayer atop a simple keyboard exercise such as BWV 944, dedicated to his eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, at the time only nine years old. “Bach considered even the most modest musical effort, even in a secular context, an act of divine praise” (Erikson, 9).



BWV 65 “Sie Werden Aus Saba Alle Kommen” (1724) Manuscript [Detail]

Bach was also fond of another simple and powerful prayer: the letters “J.J.” are frequently found next to or in place of “I.N.J.” The meaning of the prayer, *Jesu, Juva* – “Jesus, help me,” is fitting for a full-time servant of the church. It is fitting for every Christian! (Psalm 124:8) An example of this prayer is found atop his motet, *Der Geist Hilft Unser Schwachheit Auf* (BWV 226). Bach’s prayer is answered by the text of the composition: “the Spirit helps in our weakness.” Bach’s reason for including the prayer is evident not only from the text but also from the historical context in which the motet was composed. Bach wrote the piece in October, 1729 for the funeral of his respected colleague, Johann Heinrich Ernesti. What an authentic moment for a church musician! Uncertain of what the next weeks will bring, staring at a blank manuscript, frustrated by the loss of a friend, Bach begins by bringing his concerns to the Lord in prayer!

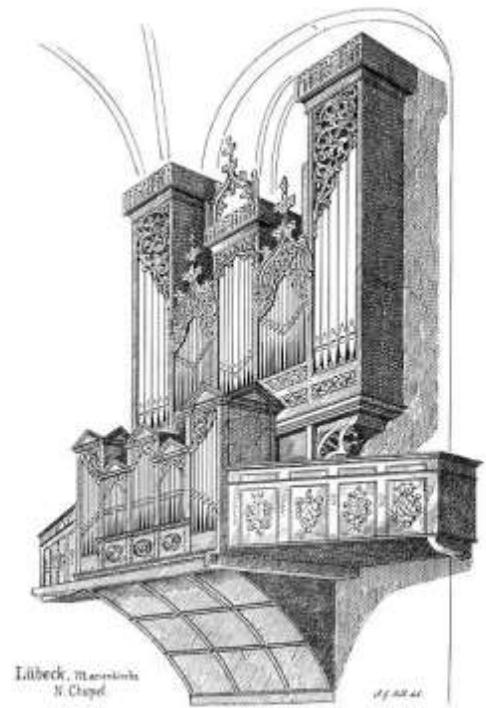
Prayers like these, coming as they are from such a musical giant, remind us of the importance of humility. Though Bach had no trouble revealing his confidence, Christian humility also comes to light in glimpses from Bach’s life. Take for example the prosaic opening bars of *Gotteskönig Sie Willkommen* (BWV 182). They are notes composed for an impressive opportunity. Bach had just received the honorable appointment of concertmaster to the Ducal Court of Weimar. His music would ring from the walls of a building called “the Castle of Heaven.” How does the German *Wunderkind* introduce himself? With the simple pace of Christ’s beast of burden, and the simple strains of solo violin. Bach, himself a violinist, may even have himself started the piece.

Discuss: As musicians, pastors, planners, and teachers, we have the pride of serving our God as his baptized children. This is a status that ought not be overlooked as we consider our daily (and weekly) work.

Lesson 2: Learn Your Craft

Johann Sebastian Bach did not become the master he was without effort. Instead, he remained a devoted student of the musical arts his entire life. Born into a musical family, his father Johann Ambrosius Bach was director of the town musicians in Eisenach. In such an environment Bach would have learned the basics of musical instruments and music-making. Those beginnings served him well when at age 10 Bach moved to live with his brother, Johann Christoph Bach, who served as an organist in Ohrdruf. Christoph provided young Sebastian with valuable training at the keyboard, while the precocious youngster soaked in as much as possible. Against his brother's wishes the young Bach would even stay up late at night making copies of valuable musical scores for his own collection. The budding musician wanted every resource possible available to him.

That tendency to grow stayed with Bach as he matured into adulthood. Rather than settle with the "vocational" level training already achieved, he took the opportunity to study as a choral scholar at St. Michael's in Lueneberg. While there, Bach studied organ under the notable Georg Böhm and visited the famous and longstanding organist of Hamburg, Johann Adam Reincken.



BuxWV 152

Even as Bach became an organist in his own right and took his first organist position at St. Boniface's Church in Arnstadt, Bach never remained satisfied with his current level of proficiency but continued to learn and hone his craft. His famous visit to the master of Lübeck, Dieterich Buxtehude, in 1705-1706 testifies to that fact, and his early compositions demonstrate his indebtedness to the masters of the generation before him. Consider, for example, how Buxtehude's Prelude in e minor (BuxWV 152) shows its influence in Bach's early compositions such as his famous Tocatta in d minor (BWV 565). Bach learned his craft from the best available sources. It was that laborious work that would give him the ability to take those styles and forms he learned to an even higher level than ever before.

Discuss: How can we learn and continue to learn our craft in the same spirit as Bach?

Lesson 3: Be Industrious

Our opening lessons teach us that Bach was humble and hard-working. Both attitudes are reflected in an oft-quoted self-assessment recorded by the composer: “I was obliged to be industrious. Whoever is equally industrious will succeed equally well.” Most of those who know the quote are musicians and musicologists, and most of them can’t help but chuckle at the notion of being “equally industrious” to Mr. Bach. Bach had already been industrious before he ever arrived at St. Thomas. He worked hard from the organ bench in Arnstadt and Mühlhausen, and kept working in places like Cöthen and Weimar. But it was in Leipzig that Bach’s industry would rise to a new level. He would become “a one man musical factory.”

Bach took the job in Leipzig in order to create a “well-ordered church music.” He would rise to become the music director of the whole city, and his supervisors had already expected creativity and consistency when they handed the new cantor his contract. But Bach had high expectations of his own. In the summer of 1723, Bach arrived in Leipzig with a plan: he would organize and compose a complete catalog of church music, including a musical sermon called a cantata, for each of the Sundays and festivals of the Church Year. And then he carried out the plan four more times in the four years that followed. At sixty services per year, Bach’s five complete cycles amassed three hundred cantatas, an effort which Christoph Wolff regards as “a musical enterprise without parallel in Leipzig’s musical history.” On the one hand, Bach was ‘obliged’ to his industry: the town council had written expectations for their Kantor right into his job description. On the other hand, Bach’s motivation was internal. Among the things that Bach loved, including music, coffee, beer, his family, and smoking his pipe, was a love for “quick and efficient work.” Bach put his work in at the outset. Bach would use his five cycles for more than twenty years.

It fit Bach’s temperament. The man liked to set a goal and then see the thing to completion. When a new system of keyboard tuning came to light in the first decades of the century, no one obliged Bach to write a prelude and fugue for each conceivable key, save for Bach himself. But that’s exactly what he did it in 1722 and then again in 1740. The forty eight results of his ambition are an encyclopedia on tonality and style. *The Well-Tempered Clavier, Books I and II* (BWV 846–893).



Ambition can be a good thing or a bad thing. But goals and industriousness are important things for servants of God’s people to keep in mind. Our church councils are not going to set the same demands for us as were set for Bach. But that need not keep us from setting big goals and seeing them through. Practice goals are good for musicians. Repertoire goals are good too. Worship committees need goals. Sermon studies need them too. Set your eyes on something and then see it through.

Discuss: What are the big goals that have motivated you in your own service to the Church?

Lesson 4: Remember Your Role

Does what we do really matter? The question certainly can cross our mind from time to time. Especially in the days of MIDI and MP3's, it might sometimes feel like no one would notice if we simply retired permanently from our work.

Bach offers an encouragement. He did not understand his role as merely an obligatory function to fill the time in between lessons and sermon with perfunctory music. If he had, he could have undoubtedly recycled from the large musical library available to him in Leipzig, especially the works of his predecessor Johann Kuhnau. Bach, however, seemed most often unwilling to do so. He understood his role to be greater than that. More than once, he stated his desire to realize the goal of making church music on a level never seen before, a "well-ordered church

music." Consider the works of the master over his decades of service, and it becomes obvious he accomplished just that. The St. Matthew Passion, for example, reflects more than what was required for Good Friday Vespers; it represents a crowning achievement not only in musical composition and performance but in sacred song as well. The meticulous fair copy Bach produced as well as its extensive revision history suggests the master understood its special place among his works (and dare we say in history?). Bach understood his role in Leipzig involved opening new horizons in worship music and bringing praise to his God in ways never done before.

St. Matthew Passion Revision history

Good Friday 1727 (Original performance)
Good Friday 1736 (Revised for two organs)
Good Friday 1742 (Revised for organ and harpsichord)
1743-1746 Further revision



Fair Copy of the St. Matthew Passion

Obviously, none of us here today can be Johann Sebastian Bach, nor must we be. The Lord asks only for faithfulness, and what faithfulness looks like varies greatly among us. While that is true, it is nevertheless also true we can take the encouragement from Bach to know

our role is an important, yes a precious thing. Our role is to proclaim the gospel in song! As we keep that role in mind, we can be an encouragement to those in our midst to give the very best for worship, to offer something new and fresh, to perfect the old standard, to understand our role to be more than just pre and post-service "filler." In this way, we too can open new horizons in the area of worship and music both for our congregations and for ourselves.

Discuss: What practical encouragements does our important role suggest about our work day in and day out?

Lesson 5: Stop and Think

What's perhaps most remarkable about Bach's workbench is the quality of work which came from it week after week after week. Every piece is thought-provoking and packed with meaning. This is consistent with the composer's self-identified purpose for composition. As a musician, Bach wanted to see God glorified, and as a Lutheran musician, he accordingly endeavored to use his music to convey the message of God in Christ. And he used every tool in the case to carry that message through. Instrumentation, harmony, melody, tempo—all the parts of the compositional choir "speak the text." As you listen to Cantata 65 at our Organ-Choral Vespers and ponder the meaning of the Magi, take a moment to reflect on one of Bach's "sermons in song." You hear themes stated in the very first notes, even before the choristers have sung a single word:

[Beginning with high horns and flutes,] Bach shows off the glittery sheen of his exotic orchestra to his advantage, so that even before the voices in canonic order, he succeeds in parading before our eyes the stately procession of three Magi and the 'multitude of camels' laden with gifts. This imposing fantasia concludes with a restatement of an octave unison theme, this time by all the voices and instruments spread over five octaves, as the caravan comes to a halt in front of the manger. (Gardner, 328)

This kind of analysis is what Bachophiles often love best about the music of the "fifth evangelist." Another one is offered online by the members of *Bach Stiftung St. Gallen*. Bach's setting of the well-loved communion hymn

Schmücke Dich, O Liebe Seele (BWV 180) portrays the relationship of Christ to his bride, celebrated in the Lord's Supper. Bach paints the picture with every note. The groom enters at a stately pace, the bride stands dressed in brilliant light, guests join in song and dance. Many identify this as a pietistic strain in Bach, but perhaps it is more simply summed up in Robin Leaver's words: Bach, the "musical theologian" and "theological musician" is displaying devotion and piety, not strict pietism.

Are any of us able to think like Bach, musically and theologically, in our service preparation? Some might object, "I'm not a composer! I'm just a pianist, or a pastor, or a planner!" Still, don't sell yourself short. Bach reveals that his work was a profoundly thoughtful enterprise. He thought about the hymns he picked, about the texts he set, and about how God's people heard the word. Choose your service music carefully. Use meaningful phrases in your preaching. Don't be random. Learn each week's theme, and find ways to communicate it.



Discuss: Bach's role as composer gave him unique opportunities to proclaim theology from the balcony. What are the opportunities available to you to become "a theological musician" or "a musical theologian?"

Lesson 6: Confess Your Faith

Bach's music was never simply notes on a page. In fact, he found no musical satisfaction in music that was written only for its own sake. Instead, Bach's music served as a confession of his faith. One could hardly exhaust



the examples of Bach confessing through the pages of his music - the theology he expresses in notes, the symbolic gestures he leaves for us to ponder, the rich liturgical tradition his music encourages.

Consider just one example: the last chorale prelude from Bach's hand. More accurately, he dictated it to his son-in-law. It was an organ prelude based on the hymn, "Before Your Throne I Now Appear" (BWV 668). Clearly, Bach's music was more than just a job; it was his heart confessing the promises of God he knew to be true.

Consider also how Bach not only confessed his own faith, but he allowed his listeners, even listeners who perhaps did not have the same musical acumen as he did, also to hear his music to their edification. The extensive use of chorale in Bach's cantatas serve as a good example. As Bach would employ recitative and aria of his own creation, he would at the same time intersperse the beloved chorales of the church and so offer even the unmusical worshipper something to grasp. An excellent example of just that occurs in BWV 65 in which Bach concludes with *Was mein Gott will*.

None of us possess the skills for composing Bach enjoyed. None of us enjoy the time or resources Bach had for making music; nevertheless, our music too can be a confession of our faith. The tempo we choose for the various songs of the liturgy, the way we interpret hymns with registration and settings, the music we choose to beautify the time before and after service, none of these things are matters of unimportance or indifference. Instead, they can be our confession of faith; moreover, they can help worshippers define and appreciate their confession of faith too. When we recognize that, then we recognize the high calling we enjoy!

Discuss: In what ways can we ensure our music helps worshippers confess their faith?

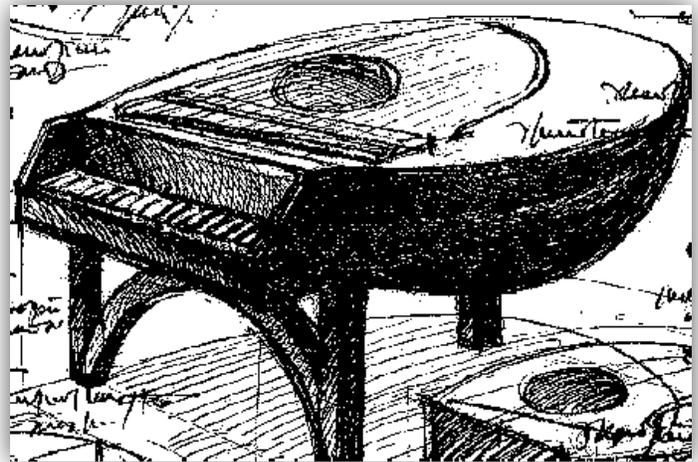
Lesson 7: Try New Things

As Bach set out to render theological texts in creative forms, he found ways to use both notes and sounds to his full advantage. The craftsmen of Leipzig provided Bach with additional advantages in instrumentation. Bach himself was a born tinkerer. Indeed, he first drew notoriety not as a musician or composer but as an analyst of pipe organs and their construction. Bach's willingness to test a machine to its limits often caused consternation among pipe organ builders. But his relationship with other luthiers and craftsman was much more productive.

One such relationship was shared between Bach and Johann Heinrich Eichentopf, an oboe manufacturer in Leipzig. By the time Bach arrived there in 1723, Eichentopf was already testing new ideas. In 1722, he had created a wood and brass oboe-prototype. It's hybrid sound, according to Bach's contemporary Johann Friedrich Fasch, seemed 'suitable for hunting.' The oboe di caccia was born.

Perhaps the sound was even more exotic than that. John Eliot Gardiner assumes that Eichentopf was being influenced by oriental instruments. The Leipzigers knew exotic coffees; they likely knew exotic sounds as well. Indeed, the construction of the *oboe di caccia* is not dissimilar from Indian *shenai*, an instrument we would recognize today accompanied *tabla* and *sitar*. As Bach sat down to compose a cantata regarding kings traveling from Sheba, Bach saw a new instrumental opportunity: what better choice than the brand new *oboe di caccia*?

Now before we get "switched on" and start looking for Bach's electric guitar or synthesizer, it's important to know that Bach introduced new instruments sensibly and intentionally. Bach enjoyed pushing the envelope (he had begun doing so already in Arnstadt) but he pushed the envelope with a modicum of understanding. Nevertheless, Bach's cantatas feature cornets, lutes, slide trumpets, and trombones. Bach knew that many instruments, even those with secular sounds, could be put into the service of well-ordered church music. In addition, it's worth noting that Bach expected instruments of high quality. He strove for authenticity in the sounds



called into God's service. He wanted sounds that would project and carry, as demonstrated in his stated preference for the beautiful sonorities of the lute-harpsichord. Bach paid good money for these new sounds. He took no shortcuts and expected the church council in Leipzig to understand the cost of good music.

Our 21st century offers us instruments and technologies that would have left Bach speechless. It's important for us, like Bach, to keep up to speed with them, to incorporate them, and to do so with Bach's same measure of good sense. Understand where the edge is. Make use of the digital, the electric, and the novel, but do so sensibly. Demand quality.

Discuss: Can you think of a new sound, song, or idea that worked in your congregation? Can you think of one that didn't? How do you stay up to speed with what's available in instrumentation?

Lesson 8: Anticipate Tension

To view the past with rose-colored glasses is an easy pitfall for any student of history. To imagine 18th-century Leipzig was the ideal home for Bach and that he never encountered a single problem or an ounce of resistance in his work - these are easy things for church musicians of the 21st century to think and assume.



Arnstadt to Lübeck

Reality, however, gives us a more accurate perspective. Bach encountered a number of challenges in his work. Early in his musical career, for example, Bach served as organist in the city of Arnstadt. While the post had much to commend itself for the young Bach, tension nevertheless developed. The town council took exception to his extended absence while he visited Buxtehude in northern Germany. (In defense of the council, Bach did make this journey during Christmas – not an ideal time for a church musician to take vacation!) Furthermore, Bach found the skill of the choir singers available to him lacking and not only hesitated to work with them but made his displeasure on the subject known. Not only did Bach grapple with such practical issues as these, but he also faced resistance in his musical endeavors. The consistory in Arnstadt, in fact, complained to Bach that his treatment of the chorales confused worshippers and that he should therefore avoid “tonus contrarius”! (Consider, for example, Bach’s *In Dulci Jubilo* BWV 729). Nor can we imagine that the problems stopped when Bach reached his final position in

Leipzig. Even there, he frequently squared off against the town council to ensure his music budget did not depreciate. On another occasion, he needed to assert his authority to ensure he would select the musicians for service (which had always been the cantor’s responsibility). On another, he appealed to the monarchy in a dispute with the town council. In short, Bach’s life as a church musician was no less (and perhaps even more) tension-filled than the life of a musician today.

We cannot look back and commend Bach in every respect, of course. He was no more perfect than you or I. Something worth noting, however, was Bach’s tenacious defense of his art. Bach may have tolerated disagreements in certain matters. He may have suffered personal injury, but he was unyielding in his defense of his music. To Bach, the primary concern was always to uphold his high standards of worship and its song.

As tension is a near certainty for all of us too, we know our goal is always to speak the truth in love, yet it’s also worth considering how Bach dealt with setback. He was willing to assert himself for the sake of the gospel proclamation in song. Perhaps we can remember that when music budgets are facing cuts, or questions about whether to compensate musicians arise, or whenever we can offer a gentle reminder of what a blessing the music of the church is, and in those moments we might face criticism of an unfounded or unkind variety, we can remember even the great Bach faced the same thing in his time as church musician.

Discuss: How can we face tension appropriately within our role as church musicians?

Lesson 9: Recognize your Resources

Bach was keen on acquiring the best instruments available, and he was able to find the brightest instrumentalists to perform them. You may notice in our Organ-Choral Vespers that a performance of a cantata requires skilled players. Bach not only set *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen* with the new sounds of the *oboe di caccia* but also the well-known sounds of the *corno di caccia*, which was the constant companion of nobility,



Gottfried Reiche, holding an 8' *Waldhorn* and a copy of Portrait by E.G. Haussman the *Abblassen Fanfare* (1727)

pomp, and circumstance. Unfortunately, Bach and his fellow baroque composers would expect from these instruments far more tones and semitones than had ever been intended for the old hunting horn! Bach would require skilled players to see that the tunes could be played to their potential.

It just so happened that Bach *had* skilled players. Not only did these players know their chosen instrument, they knew many instruments. Several held the job description of 'town piper,' so-called because of their multiple proficiencies on oboe, traverse flute, *trompette*, *waldhorn*, violin, and bass instruments such as the bassoon. When Bach arrived in Leipzig in 1723, his first-chair "town piper" was a true virtuoso, Gottfried Reiche. Performers like Reiche were the ones whom Bach had featured back in 1720 when he wrote concertos for the court of Brandenburg. Now in Leipzig, the knowledge Bach had gained about how instruments worked would be showcased in the city's churches. Bach struck up a quick friendship with his trumpeter. There is even evidence that Reiche's famous *Abblassen* fanfare was

composed for him by Bach as a birthday gift.

Bach also enjoyed the benefits of working in a cosmopolitan city and a university town. He would most often be able to rely on the talents of his *alumni* to sing the vocal solos of the cantatas, but in years where voices were short he was able to draw from the university's singers as well. Bach's first cantata would call for the polished skills of bass and tenor soloists, especially in an aria such as *Nimm mich dir zu eigen hin*.

Of all the lessons from Leipzig, this might be the most difficult to realize in our modern context. An event like this conference helps us recognize that our churches enjoy great talents and skilled players. But having so many resources in one place at one time seems unique to Bach's situation. The whole company of musicians was auditioned, hired, and paid handsomely. Bach's compensation was double that of his pastors. And the confessional culture in Leipzig was different than our own. The church councils were able to unite with the town councils in wanting professionals to play in their churches. Don't be disappointed by the differences. Work to develop the resources you already have within your congregation and be creative in finding new ones. Consider how professional development and compensation can improve the efforts of your people. Recruit, refine, and recognize talent.



Church Musicians at the time of Bach
Frontispiece of J. Walther's *Musicalisches Lexicon Leipzig*, 1732

Discuss: What have you found to be the best ways for developing and fostering the talents of your congregation? Where have the challenges come?

Lesson 10: Appreciate the Arts

Isn't it easy as a church musician to feel like you've fallen into a rut? The grind of weekly preparation for worship can quickly sap up the vigor and excitement with which we as beginners approached our craft.

One certainly could not have blamed Bach if he had felt that way. Consider how on a weekly basis he was responsible not only to lead the performance of a cantata for the divine service but would often compose it as well. Consider how in addition to the weekly regular services he was responsible for weddings and funerals. Not only that, but Bach also found time to provide music for recitals and other special celebrations as well. Bach

could have easily allowed the stress of his position to rob him of the joy of church musicianship.

In spite of this, Bach maintained a deep love for music. In part, he maintained this love by somehow finding time to appreciate music as an art in and of itself. History records how Bach, with his oldest son Wilhelm Friedemann, would make the journey to Dresden to enjoy the opera. Bach was by no means an expert in the opera, and yet he found time to take it in its beauty. He



Dresden

maintained his love for music.

That love certainly showed in Bach's music. Consider the Fantasia in G Major (BWV 572) from the choral vespers service. Though Bach would in all likelihood not have used such a piece during a sacred service, he would have found ample opportunities to showcase such works – in recitals at Leipzig, in his frequent opportunities to examine newly-built instruments (examinations which would end in a recital), and in the other special invitations he received. Bach's works reflected the love for music he had, a love which led him to explore and appreciate a great variety of form and style not native to his own background.

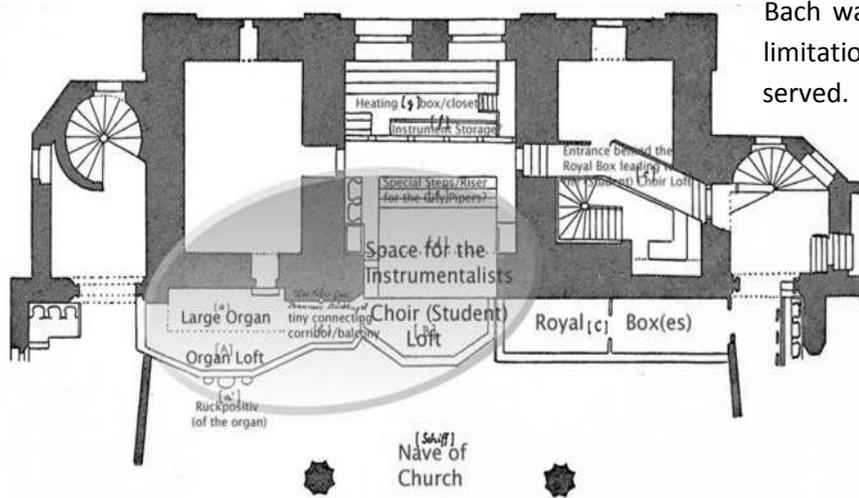
For the 21st century church musician, Bach's example serves a useful reminder. In a world full of entertainment and distraction, find opportunities to grow in your love and appreciation for God's gift of music. Attend a symphony concert. Take in a musical. Appreciate music in all its forms, and it will serve to keep you fresh in your own proclamation of the gospel in song, especially considering as church musicians, we like Bach have the privilege of making music not just for its own sake but to proclaim Christ.

Discuss: In what ways can we better appreciate the arts?

Lesson 11: Know Their Limits

Bach enjoyed the employ of musicians whom he could count upon and whom he could push to their limits. At the same time, Bach struggled with classes of student singers whose skills were far from professional. As the choir master, Bach required to make an annual assessment of his student's capabilities. One example is recorded in May of 1729. Of the twenty-one students, Bach states only ten "can be used in music," with the remaining eleven, "having no musical accomplishment." Such are the frustrations we may feel when we're training church and school musicians in our own congregations!

A close look at Bach's compositions show the kinds of adjustments the composer was willing to make to keep the demanding schedule of services from simply overwhelming his singers. A fine example is present from the *colla parte* writing of the Choral Vespers' cantata. The opening chorus of *Sie werden aus Saba*, an unsupported canon of four voices begins the cantata's theme, but the theme is soon reiterated, this time with flutes supporting the sopranos, second violins supporting the altos, violas supporting the tenors, and continuo following the basses note-for-note. The difference may seem subtle to the listener, but not to the singer! Several period ensembles demonstrate what Bach may have had in mind for his choir: the cantor would be able to offer the opening canon to his *favoriti* singers, giving weaker singers the chance to respond as a well-supported *tutti* chorus. On the other hand, it may be that Bach was writing to address an issue other than the skills of his weaker singers: *Saba* would have been the eighth in a schedule of nine cantatas. There simply may have been no more time for singers to learn the notes for themselves!



Bach was also constantly considering the physical limitations of the worship spaces in which he served. Bach had to take care that the large scale pieces set for the balconies at the *Thomaskirche* could still be sung making the most of the tight spaces of the *Nikolaikirche*. Perhaps we must re-imagine what Bach's masterworks truly sounded like: The choirs of Karl Richter and the orchestras of Leopold Stokowski simply would not have fit in a space the size of most of our living rooms!

As planners, players, and people, limitations are a part of daily life. Spaces are cramped, time is short, and the tools at our disposal are rarely state-of-the-art. It's important to redirect our consternation into compromise and creativity. Make sure you're not asking the impossible of your people. Remember that in busy seasons like Christmas and Easter, less can very often be more. Advocate for adequate worship space, supplies, and resources. But while you wait, be a maximizer instead of a bemoaner.

Discuss: Can you think of a time when you exceeded the limits of your students or singers? How might you adjust in terms of their time or talents?

Lesson 12: Push Yourself

“Practice makes perfect,” goes the saying. Perhaps nowhere is that more true than in the art of musicianship. Johann Sebastian Bach never simply expected perfection. He never merely relied on the fact of his musical genius to carry him through performances and services with little thought or preparation given them. Instead, virtuoso though he was, Bach received commendation throughout his lifetime of service regarding his attention to practice and rehearsal. While many in similar positions and ranks would entrust much practice to the responsibility of underlings, Bach would often hold rehearsals under his own direct supervision. Undoubtedly those were rigorous times spent with his musicians, especially considering sometimes he would only finish a cantata for the upcoming Sunday late in the week!

It is likely a lesson we have heard repeated to us again and again - probably first by our mothers and our first piano teachers, but it always bears repeating: Time for serious practice is essential for giving our best for the proclamation for the gospel. It was not below Bach, nor ought it be below us.

The importance of practice underscores as well the importance of worship planning. It is important for pastors and worship committees to select hymns, psalms, and anthems in such a way as to provide musicians not only sufficient time to prepare but sufficient time to choose appropriate service music and make other preparations. It is important for musicians to give thought to what will happen on Sunday morning long before the end of the week, perhaps weeks before if at all possible. Practice is the hard work that makes our work an offering of love to our God and the people we serve. God give us strength to carry it out in the same way Bach did during his lifetime.

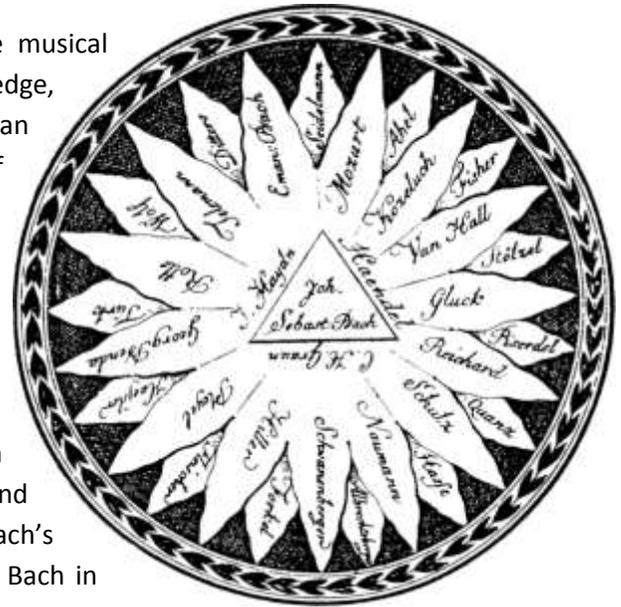


Discuss: What makes rehearsal time successful?

Lesson 13: Keep Good Company

In designing the Organ-Choral Vespers for this conference, we wanted to explore an entire “Bach Vespers” without setting a service which was entirely Bach. We wanted to keep in mind that there was a rich variety of Lutheran church music being composed at Bach’s time. Indeed, there is an important lesson to be learned from the fact that Bach’s own vespers were likely not comprised completely of Bach’s own music. As cantor of the *Thomaskirche*, Bach had one of the oldest and most extensive libraries of Lutheran music at his fingertips. He knew the works of Johann Hermann Schein, who held the position of *Thomaskantor* from 1615-1630. Bach likely knew many of Schein’s contemporaries such as Samuel Scheidt, whose motet *Puer Natus in Bethlehem* opens our Vespers.

At the same time, we notice Bach avoiding some of the musical choices made by those who came before him. To our knowledge, Bach did not perform a single work of Johann Kuhnau, the man who held the post before him. Bach did perform the works of Vivaldi, Handel, Pachelbel, and Telemann. Bach had even asked Telemann to serve as baptismal sponsor of his son, Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, in 1714. It seems as though the friendship continued. We are unsure whether or not Bach ever performed Telemann’s *Meine Seele erhebt den Herrn* (TWV 9.18), which is excerpted in Thursday night’s service, but the provenance of the sources is telling. The only known manuscripts of Telemann’s work were copied in Leipzig around 1730 by two of Bach’s students: J.A. Kuhnau (nephew of Bach’s predecessor) and J.A. Harrer (who would go on to succeed Bach in



“Sun of Composers,”
by A.F.C. Kollmann, 1799

1750). Indeed, such a performance would make sense. Bach had just completed his own *Magnificat in Eb* (BWV 243a) for Christmas Day and Christmas Vespers in 1723. As January 1724 arrived, the consistency of vespers services would constantly demand more settings of the canticle. His friend Telemann just happened to have a setting, orchestrated with the same instruments as the evening’s cantata- serendipity!

The lesson to be learned is this: none of us, no matter what our talents may be, can afford to become an island. There simply is too much work to do. Each of us ought to sharpen and hone our talents with a group of colleagues. As each Christmas comes around, keep in touch with your fellows. Find out what they’re purchasing and playing. There are great benefits for each of us.

Discuss: Other than the WELS National Worship Conference, what are the opportunities you take to “keep good company” and “stay sharp” in your practice and planning? Who are your colleagues?

Lesson 14: Train the Next Generation

As cantor at St. Thomas, a good portion of Bach's work was teaching. Although Bach hardly seemed passionate about some of his teaching responsibilities (some of which he would delegate to others), Bach took an active role in teaching the next generation of church musicians. This was especially true when it came to those he identified as students with special potential. One of his most important works, the so called "Little Organ Book" (*Orgelbüchlein*), served the purpose of teaching. The title page begins with these words: "In which a beginning organist receives given instruction as to performing a chorale in a multitude of ways..." It is no surprise that Bach would have used this book as part of his "résumé" when applying for the position in Leipzig, a position that required teaching.



Our circles typically enjoy a rich heritage of education and general concern for the training of the next generation. Perhaps second only to instruction in God's Word, instruction in the area of music is fundamental for ensuring the church of tomorrow continues to enjoy the rich liturgical tradition we do today.

As you have the privilege of following in the footsteps of someone great like Bach, as you have the privilege of serving God's church with his gift of music, consider ways that you can instruct and encourage the next generation. Encourage lessons. Offer opportunities for the youth to serve. Identify those with special gifts and advocate for them to receive advanced instruction. Like Bach, train the next generation. In this way, that generation too will treasure the heritage we enjoy today.

Discuss: How do we strike a balance between maintaining excellence in worship and offering opportunities for new/young people to serve?

Lesson 15: Don't Burn Out

The completed cycles of church cantatas, the various settings of masses and canticles, and the volumes of chorale preludes provided more than enough ecclesiastical capital to carry Bach from the year 1740 for as long as he was likely to hold the post. Now Bach turned his attention to establishing his legacy as a complete musician. He gathered material from his five cycles of church music and his five decades of teaching and cataloged his thoughts in masterworks such as the *Mass in b minor* (BWV 232) and the *Art of Fugue* (BWV 1080). Bach's creativity would continue to serve the church, though some of the industry had begun to wind down.

In fact, new research is showing that Bach's late-life struggles may have been noticed beyond the composer's workbench. A new discovery by the Bach Archive in Leipzig regards a résumé written by one of Bach's students in 1751. In it, Gottfried Benjamin Fleckeisen offers his credentials, among them, "leading and conducting" the services of St. Thomas and St. Nicolai "for two entire years." Archivist Michael Maul identifies these years as 1744-1746 and is set to publish an extensive essay in the next *Bachjahrbuch*, to be published this coming February.



Johann Ludwig Krebs

Was the one-man musical factory of Leipzig beginning to show signs of strain? Likely, the health and eyesight of the respected cantor was beginning to fray. As a result, it's no wonder that some of the works attributed to Bach are often claimed to be the compositions of his students. A particular example is the *Fuge sopra Magnificat* (BWV 733) set as a musical offering in our Organ-Choral Vespers. Musicologists are divided in attributing the work to Bach or to his student Johann Ludwig Krebs. Definitive answers in either case will be difficult to find.

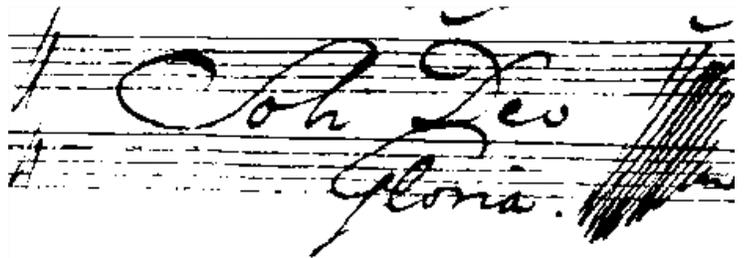
What may be easier to find is a lesson from the end of the master's life: the service of God is our life's work—but it ought not kill us either. There is great importance in the refreshment that comes with rest. There is also much to be said of the importance of bequeathing our work to those whom we have mentored. And this "life of work" is truly only finished when we consider our final lesson:

Lesson 16: Check Your Attitude

Bach graced the end of his church compositions and several of his secular compositions with three more simple letters – S.D.G. The words *Soli Deo Gloria* - to God alone be glory - summarize well his approach to worship and music. Bach understood music as a gift from God first and foremost served its most important function as it returned praise to him. The ultimate goal of Bach's work, therefore, was to give glory to God. For Bach, that was true whether he was writing a festive and elaborate cantata or a musical exercise for one of his lessons. For the people of Leipzig, worship inculcated that truth. Consider, for example, how Vespers always ended with *Nun danket alle Gott*, as it does in organ-choral vespers this week.

Music in the church serves many functions, and as such it results in many blessing. It touches the listener's heart in a unique way and so serves to edify the believer. It can serve as a teaching tool, as for example the songs of the liturgy teach the same fundamental truths week in and week out. The ultimate goal of all we do, especially in the realm of church music, however, is always the same: to give glory to God.

How beneficial it is for us to learn this attitude from Bach, especially as we consider how we can face the temptation for unwholesome attitudes like personal pride or showiness. We today can learn from the master of St. Thomas to put aside such things as we employ God's gift of music for its first and ultimate purpose!



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