



Bach: Mass in B Minor

Saturday 28 January 2017

St George's, Bristol

50 years of singing Bach

The community of scholars and performers with an interest in Bach's music often talk about 'Bach Years' – those years that mark significant anniversaries of Bach's birth or death. The year 2000 was the most recent Bach Year, and the next one we have to look forward to will be 2035, the 350th anniversary of Bach's birth. Bristol Bach Choir too has its own 'Bach Year'; in our case the 50th anniversary of the founding of the choir. This seemed like a good occasion to reflect on how the performance of Bach's music has changed over this time, a time which has been particularly rich in discovery and the development of ideas about the performance of early music in general, and of Bach's music in particular.

The Bach Year of 1950 saw the initiation of a grand and ambitious project to create and publish a new collected edition of all Bach's music, known as the *Neue Bach Ausgabe* (NBA) or *New Bach Edition*. The edition was to be produced using modern editorial practices – for example, all the music was to be printed using modern clefs, rather than the multiplicity of older clefs used in Bach's time, much to the relief of anyone trying to read their way through them. The edition also made use of discoveries made in the analysis of sources, of paper and of watermarks to re-evaluate the chronology of Bach's works, and to clear up some false attributions.

It is a testament to the significance of this music that the NBA project, which continued for several decades, was an almost unprecedented example of collaboration between scholars from both East and West Europe as it existed at that time. A happy coincidence for us today is that the first volume of the edition, published in 1954, was the Mass in B minor.

By the time Bristol Bach Choir was founded in 1967, there had been an explosion of interest in early music, and what was then known as 'authentic' performance. It was the era of David Munrow and his Early Music Consort, who delighted audiences with colourful performances of medieval and renaissance music, repertoire which up until then had been considered extremely specialised and really only of academic interest. The idea of authentic performance was also applied to baroque music, as people explored 17th and 18th century performance practices, and reconstructed or revived instruments of the time. A pioneer of this movement was Nikolaus Harnoncourt, whose 1968 recording of the Mass was the first to use boys' voices in the chorus and original instruments.

Today, we tend to speak rather of 'historically informed' performance, as there is quite a minefield here for the performer. We cannot possibly reproduce every circumstance of 18th century performance, so how far should we go? For us, our choices are that we use specialist Baroque instrumentalists in our orchestra, and we are guided by the principles of articulation and phrasing that would have been used by Bach's musicians. We choose not to replicate Bach's vocal performing forces (the women of the choir would not be too impressed at this as, since Bach used only men and boys, they would then be excluded from our performances). One particular debate in the historically informed performance sphere deserves special mention. This was the furore caused in the 1980's by the musicologist Joshua Rifkin, and his suggestion that Bach's major vocal works would have been originally performed with one voice to a part. This idea is now widely accepted, but when it was first put forward, it was greeted with a great deal of scepticism and hostility. Fortunately, we have arrived at a time of compromise, where examples of one to a part performances are readily available to us should we wish to hear them, but there are also performances with more vocalists for us to enjoy – and indeed take part in.

So what of more recent Bach scholarship? An important strand of enquiry has been the evaluation of Bach as he stood within the cultural and political context of his own time. It is as if he has been taken down from his pedestal, dusted off a bit, and set down amongst his contemporaries. There has been a growing interest in music of Bach's contemporaries and colleagues, and the realisation that much can be learned from viewing Bach and his life from this perspective. An example of this in the case of the Mass in B minor has been a re-evaluation of the performing score of this work in the light of increased knowledge of the circumstances surrounding Bach's visit to Dresden, and his presentation of the performing parts to the Court there. This has resulted in the publication of a revised edition of the Mass.

Another recent development is the explosion of digital materials now available to the performer and scholar of Bach's music. Examples include *Bach Digital*, a database of Bach's works including high resolution scans of the manuscript sources, and the *Bach Bibliography* site, created by Yo Tomita of Queen's University Belfast. (Googling '*Bach Digital*' and '*Bach Bibliography*' will bring these two sites up at the top of the search results, so they are easy to find!) Then there are the wealth of performances – both bad and good, it must be said – that are available via YouTube. As never before, this music is available to performers, scholars and indeed anyone with an interest.

Things have come a long way since 1967. Ideas about Bach performance are constantly being refreshed and revised, so to re-engage with this wonderful music can never be considered old fashioned or backward looking. Bach's music continues to be the most meaningful repertoire we perform, and is at the core of what we, Bristol Bach Choir, are about. We hope you will be inspired and moved by tonight's performance, and here's to the next fifty years!