



The Philharmonia Chorale with Director Bruce Lamott (center)

Credits:
courtesy of Philharmonia Baroque

Bach's splendid choral diversity

Last night in Herbst Theatre, before the Philharmonia Baroque performance of Johann Sebastian Bach's BWV 232 setting of the Mass text in B minor got under way, I realized that, since my arrival in the Bay Area in 1995, I have heard more performances of this work than I had heard in my lifetime prior to that year. Nevertheless, like so many of Bach's compositions, this is a listening experience that never succumbs to burn-out. Not only does this score (which was actually composed in pieces over an extended period of time) offer such an extensive sampling of Bach's creative powers; but also it provides ample opportunity for different ensembles to explore different approaches to performance.

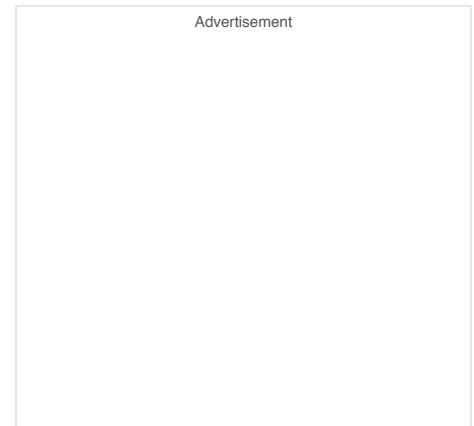
Recently, I have found myself writing at some length about "[Bach the pedagogue](#)," exploring the premise that many of his instrumental compositions were composed more for the sake of teaching than for concert performance. This is not to dismiss the act of performing such music before an audience (or in a recording studio) but simply to try to clarify how Bach saw himself as a "man who makes music" (an identity that, as we have seen, linked him not only to his [sons](#) but also to many of [his ancestors and other relatives](#)). With his arrival in Leipzig in 1723, however, sacred music became his "bread and butter." This was not just a matter of providing compositions for the choir to sing and for the organist (usually Bach himself) to play. Rather, as [Albert Schweitzer](#) and many others have observed, it entailed a personal commitment to provide music that would facilitate the congregation's understanding the texts of the service of the day. This could only come from a man who was as committed to his religion as he was to his pedagogical mission.


Nevertheless, these "two paths of Bach" often cross; and, taken in its entirety, BWV 232 probably stands as the most extensive example of what happens when the paths not only cross but actually merge. This is particularly evident in the extent to which rich polyphonic counterpoint dominates the entire score. Indeed, the polyphonic textures are so abundant and so diverse that those few passages in which the chorus comes together for homophony almost carry a certain shock value. Of course the operative adjective in that last sentence is "diverse." Bach's imagination seems inexhaustible in his explorations of the different ways one may approach polyphonic writing; but we can say that about his entire life, going all the way to the diversity in his BWV 1080 *Art of Fugue*, which he was still working on at the time of his death.

A performance of BWV 232 is thus one of the grandest adventures in how we on audience side can *listen* to polyphony as much as it is a major undertaking for orchestra, chorus, and soloists (both vocal and instrumental). Last night at Herbst the resources were the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra, the Philharmonia Chorale (Bruce Lamott, Director), and four vocalists (soprano Sherezade Panthaki, countertenor Daniel Taylor, tenor Thomas Cooley, and baritone Nathaniel Watson), all under the baton of Nicholas McGegan. It was clear that McGegan accepted this premise of adventure, and his explorations of all those threads that weave the texture of Bach's polyphony made for some of the most stimulating listening experiences of the season.

Ultimately this always came down to making sure that every line of a complex contrapuntal configuration had its proper say. In this respect McGegan offered a clear and comprehensible reading of how those component voices would shift place between foreground and background. He also recognized when Bach would strip down his resources to chamber music scale, often at a "trio sonata" level of vocalist, instrumental soloist, and continuo; and he would similarly scale back his presence as a conductor to let the chamber music run its course. Thus, while the program named all the vocalists, it is just important to recognize the contributions of those instrumental soloists, particularly violinist (and Concertmaster) Elizabeth Blumenstock, flutist Stephen Schultz, hornist R. J. Kelley, and particularly Gonzalo Ruiz and Michael DuPree, both of whom alternated between oboe and oboe d'amore. Likewise, the continuo was always sustained by cellist William Skeen, bass Kristin Zoernig, and organist Hanneke van Proosdij. (The latter two shared with McGegan the distinction of being on their feet for the entire evening.)

The result was Bach at his most devout executed in a manner that was both informative and entertaining without compromising any of the composer's religious values, in other words the perfect setting for listening to Bach's sacred music.



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