

Bach Cantata Choir

By Daryl Browne

Few choirs dedicate themselves to a specific performance achievement goal around one composer, but the Bach Cantata Choir of Portland has done just that. In 2004, Portlander Ralph Nelson came upon Helmuth Rilling's landmark CD collection of *Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (1985). Within two years of listening to the short and little-performed liturgical and secular works, Nelson had formed the Bach Cantata Choir. He and the choir's volunteer singers are on a thirty-year mission to perform every existing sacred and secular cantata composed by Johann Sebastian Bach.

Johann Sebastian Bach, who lived during the baroque period of Western European music (from about 1600 to 1750), composed most of his cantatas in Leipzig from 1723 to 1750. Just over 200 of the cantatas survive. They are compact works, most from twenty to thirty minutes in length, featuring soloists, full chorus, continuo (keyboard and/or strings), string orchestra, and wind instruments. Vocal and instrumental solo segments of the cantatas are some of the most virtuosic pieces in the repertoire.

The Bach Cantata Choir, with approximately fifty singers, performs these challenging cantatas in the original German. Most of the singers are amateurs with significant choral experience. Their season includes at least three free-will-admission (pay what you will) concerts, each offering one or two cantatas; the annual Super Bach concert, which coincides with and counterbalances the football frenzy on Super Bowl Sunday; and a Christmas concert that often includes parts of Bach's *Christmas Oratorio* of 1734. Rose City Park Presbyterian Church is the choir home for performances and weekly rehearsals. The Bach Cantata Choir, an Oregon nonprofit, relies on foundation grants, individual donations, and ticket sales for support. The singers pay annual dues.

The choir toured in 2018 to Leipzig, Germany, to perform at the Nikolaikirche and the Thomaskirche, where Bach was choirmaster for twenty-seven years. The choir also performed in other important locales in Bach's life, including Erfurt, Weimar, and Dresden. Following the 2018 tour, the choir was invited to participate in the Leipzig Bach Festival in 2020. They have also performed at the Mt. Angel Abbey Bach Festival.

Ralph Nelson, the choir's artistic director, studied composition and conducting with Nadia Boulanger in France and conducting with Helmuth Rilling. Nelson's lectures at the beginning of each concert offer insights into the programmed works, illuminating not only their musical aspects but also their liturgical and historical significance.

In addition to performing Bach cantatas at each concert, the choir performs works that coexist in harmony with the cantatas, either by liturgical celebration (Easter or Lent) or by location (Leipzig or Weimar). As of 2018, the Bach Cantata Choir had performed sixty-eight cantatas for Portland audiences.

Sources

Whittaker, W. Gillies. *The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1981.

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