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Baroque Scoring

More (and Less) on Bach's Orchestra

Joshua Rifkin

For Hans-Joachim Schulze, bigger clearly means better; and in his recent article "Johann Sebastian Bach's Orchestra: Some Unanswered Questions,"¹ he seeks to persuade us that Bach shared this enthusiasm. "A certain opulence of sound," Schulze writes, "was . . . essential to Bach."² Insofar as we understand this opulence in compositional terms — in the profusion of line and color — the statement would seem unexceptionable. But Schulze has something different in mind. As even a casual reading makes plain, he intends his survey of "the orchestras that Bach can be demonstrated to have known or . . . was very likely to have known"³ as a counter-move against the performance of Bach's concertos, cantatas, and other ensemble works with forces significantly smaller than even those to which the so-called baroque revival of the 1950s and later has accustomed us. Specifically, Schulze's arguments focus on the string complement and — less explicitly but by no means incidentally — the vocal choir. In both, his message reads, Bach always reckoned with several performers on each line. To make this case, however, Schulze has to load his evidential dice in some curious ways.

1. In *Early Music* 17 (1989): 3-15.

2. *Ibid.*, 14.

3. *Ibid.*, 3-4.

Consider, for starters, two revealing comments not directly related to Bach. The cantatas of Zachow, Schulze reports, "consistently call for strings (sometimes including *divisi* violas). . . ."⁴ Behind the innocent-looking parenthesis lurks an untested and rather debatable assumption: that "strings" necessarily implies "sections" in the modern orchestral sense. Schulze would not presumably speak of the two or more oboes sometimes demanded by Zachow as "divided" oboes. His use of such language in connection with the violas, therefore, signals an unreflective projection of present-day habits onto the past — a projection that obscures rather than clarifies the issues arising from the primary evidence.

We see much the same process at work in Schulze's statement that C. P. E. Bach "complained about a lack of singers" in Hamburg.⁵ The accompanying footnote refers to a letter in which Emanuel notes that he does not have enough singers to cover the ten vocal parts of Johann Christoph Bach's concerto *Es erhub sich ein Streit*, which he would otherwise "gladly perform. . . ."⁶ At the time of writing, Emanuel normally had an ensemble of eight singers at his disposal.⁷ This obviously made it impossible to present a work like Johann Christoph's. But the letter does not say that Emanuel regarded his singers as numerically insufficient for the performance of his or, for that matter, his father's music — or that he would have considered a group of ten solo voices too few for *Es erhub sich ein Streit*.

Given Schulze's point of departure, it comes as little surprise that some of the evidence pertaining to Bach himself proves hard for him to accept. He recognizes, for example, that neither the chapel at Weimar nor that at Köthen had enough full-time members to present — at least on a routine basis — the kind of performance he has in mind. To make good the deficiency, he suggests that additional musicians "were entered under other rubrics in the court's records" and posits the more or less regular importation of civic musicians or other guests.⁸ The documented existence of such practices obviously points to a need for caution in dealing with the bare statistics of personnel lists. But caution cuts both ways. A chapel does not invariably use its entire membership at once, any more than a baseball team simultaneously uses every pitcher on its

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. *Ibid.*, 10.

6. *Bach-Dokumente* 3, ed. H.-J. Schulze (Kassel, 1972), 292.

7. Cf. Joshua Rifkin, "': . . . wobey aber die Singstimmen hinlänglich besetzt seyn müssen . . . ' — Zum Credo der h-Moll-Messe in der Aufführung Carl Philipp Emanuel Bachs," *Basler Jahrbuch für historische Musikpraxis* 9 (1985), 157-72.

8. Schulze, "Bach's Orchestra," 6, 9.

roster; nor do guests necessarily augment the band, they also replace absent members or appear in solo roles. Registers of the sort we have from Weimar and Köthen, in other words, represent at best crude tools that merely indicate tendencies rather than allow very specific conclusions. For more exact information, we must look elsewhere — which almost invariably means to surviving performance materials.

An examination of those from Weimar, for instance, might reduce Schulze's puzzlement over the Easter cantata *Der Himmel lacht, die Erde jubiliert*, BWV 31.⁹ While not all the earliest parts have come down to us, precedents established by other Weimar materials make it fairly clear that the set must have consisted of one part each for 2 sopranos, alto, tenor, bass; 3 trumpets, timpani; 3 oboes, *taille*, *bassono*; 2 violins, 2 violas, violoncello; and perhaps a separate part for organ as well as a violone part and one for the unknown solo instrument that played the chorale line in No. 8.¹⁰ Comparison with a list of the Weimar chapel drawn up between March 1714 and December 1716¹¹ shows that a performance with one singer or player per part would barely have stretched the group's normal resources; only for the oboes, the cello, and, if he used it, the violone would Bach have had to bring in "extras." This modest augmentation of the chapel for a major feast day hardly gives us license to imagine the deployment of still greater forces, especially on a regular basis. We might bear in mind, moreover, that the personnel enumerated in the register would have sufficed with little or no reinforcement for virtually every other cantata Bach performed at Weimar, including such richly scored pieces as BWV 21 and BWV 172 — assuming the use of one player or singer for each part. Does Schulze have any evidence to assume more?

If the documentary record fails to meet Schulze's expectations, so too do the musical sources. Performance materials from Mühlhausen, Weimar, and Köthen almost never include more than one copy of each violin part, and the same holds true for such portions of the Leipzig repertory as the instrumental music and smaller secular cantatas. Even if players might have shared their parts — something I very much doubt but do not wish to argue at this juncture — these sources appear to set a decidedly modest limit on the size of the ensembles that used them. Just as Schulze invokes musicians absent from the chapel registers, therefore, he

9. *Ibid.*, 6.

10. Cf. Alfred Dürr, "Neue Erkenntnisse zur Kantate BWV 31," *Bach-Jahrbuch* 71 (1985), 155-56.

11. *Bach-Dokumente* 2, ed. Werner Neumann and Hans-Joachim Schulze (Kassel, 1969), 62-63.

suggests that the manuscripts once allowed for larger forces than their present state would suggest. Writing of the Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, he emphasizes that "it is . . . possible that the set of parts that has survived is no longer complete; it may have been broken up, for example, when Bach's estate was divided among his heirs."¹² Again, the cautionary note leaves a lot unsaid. As every Bach scholar knows, the composer or his heirs parcelled out much of his ensemble music in such a way that the score of a given work would go to one member of the family while another received the parts. In the case of the Leipzig church cantatas, whose materials did routinely include a second copy of each violin part as well as multiple continuo parts, the duplicate copies commonly went to whoever inherited the score. When a Leipzig cantata survives only in a set of parts lacking such duplicates, therefore, we can usually assume that these once existed but have vanished with the original score. I see no reason, however, to extend the model of the Leipzig sacred music to the rest of Bach's output — and many reasons not to.

Particularly telling evidence in this regard comes from two early cantatas — BWV 70a from Weimar and BWV 134a from Köthen — that Bach revived and reworked at Leipzig. In each instance, he retained most or all of the original instrumental parts. At the same time, however, he had additional violin parts copied by local scribes. Surely, he would not have gone to this effort if he already had duplicates to hand. Hence short of assuming that he lost or discarded such parts before going to Leipzig, we have no choice but to accept at least these particular Weimar and Köthen materials at face value. Four more early cantatas — BWV 71 from Mühlhausen and BWV 182, 185, and 199 from Weimar — survive in Bach's own score as well as the parts of the first performance; with both lines of transmission represented, there would seem little reason to question the essential completeness of the existing material. BWV 199 contains a second copy of Violin 1, the only true duplicate part in all of Bach's pre-Leipzig music; BWV 182 has much of its single violin line doubled by a ripieno part.¹³ But neither of the other works includes a violin doublet of any sort, nor do the parts to BWV 199 provide a duplicate for the second violin.

As for Leipzig compositions with single violin parts, two of them — the Coffee Cantata, BWV 211, and the A major Harpsichord Concerto BWV 1055 — survive in score as well as parts, which again cuts the ground from under the lost-doublet hypothesis. Among compositions

12. Schulze, "Bach's Orchestra," 9.

13. Cf. *Early Music* 17 (1989), 87.

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Nor can I see much substance in the assertion that Bach "frequently called for forces substantial enough" to emulate the supposedly opulent sonics of the Dresden court.¹⁶ In the context of Schulze's article, we must surely take "called for" as a factual statement rather than a subjective musical judgment. Yet the supporting examples — the string parts to arias in the cantatas BWV 82 and 104¹⁷ — suggest otherwise. BWV 104 comes down to us in a typical set of Leipzig materials shorn of its violin doublets, and nothing in the surviving parts implies more than the regular number of players. The parts to BWV 82, admittedly, include three copies of each violin part rather than the usual two. But Bach did not have the triplicate copies prepared until the mid-1740s, when the cantata already had a performance history going back some twenty years. In all likelihood, moreover, he meant the new parts to replace one of the older pairs rather than supplement them, as his latest revisions — notably the insertion of an *adagio* marking at the end of the second aria — occur only in the new copies and one each of the earlier ones. In any event, we must ask what typically Dresdenish "effect" Schulze means his examples to demonstrate. While the Saxon *Hofkapelle* unquestionably summoned up lavish ensembles for operas and at least some larger sacred works, it evidently presented the greater portion of its concerto repertory with solo strings.¹⁸

Schulze's final paragraph deserves quotation in full:

Recently, an altogether different view of historically "correct" performance practice has produced the B minor Mass sung and played by soloists, with the aim of ensuring "complete aural transparency" and "revealing" the structure of the work. (In any case, who can be certain that this was the ideal sound Bach had in mind?) Such an approach places insufficient emphasis on the fact that those works that have survived in apparently complete sets of Bach's own performance parts (for example, BWV 174, 207) consist of a total of some twenty or more instrumental and vocal parts. Evidence of this kind surely provides the material from which to draw conclusions about the size of Bach's performance forces, and, in turn, about his ideals of musical sonority.¹⁹

16. *Ibid.*, 14.

17. *Ibid.*, n. 54.

18. See, among other sources, Ortrun Landmann, "The Dresden Hofkapelle during the Lifetime of Johann Sebastian Bach," *Early Music* 17 (1989), 27-28.

19. Schulze, "Bach's Orchestra," 14.

With these remarks, Schulze's subtext at last becomes explicit. Again, however, his arguments prove anything but compelling. For one thing, I fail to see much point in his comparison between a B minor Mass "sung and played by soloists" and those "sets of Bach's own performance parts" that "consist of some twenty or more instrumental and vocal parts"; the original materials to the *Missa* that later became the Kyrie and Gloria of the Mass themselves contain no fewer than 21 parts.²⁰ Nor do BWV 174 and 207 lend Schulze much support. The opening sinfonia of BWV 174 presents the first movement of the Third Brandenburg Concerto in expanded orchestral guise: to the three violins, three violas, three cellos, and violone of the original Bach adds two horns, an oboe trio, bassoon, two ripieno violins, and a ripieno viola — with all parts represented in the performance materials by a single copy each. The relevance of this unique line-up to questions concerning the more conventional string disposition that Bach usually employed would seem anything but self-evident; and if we truly accept BWV 174 as a key to Bach's "ideals of musical sonority," then we must simultaneously relegate the Third Brandenburg Concerto to the status of a failed attempt.

BWV 207 — which also expands on a Brandenburgian antecedent, turning the third movement of the First Concerto into a chorus ablaze with trumpets and timpani — survives in a set of materials notable for its large number of string parts: three copies each of Violins 1 and 2, and two viola parts. But Schulze's emphasis on the "complete" state of this source creates a misleading impression. Aside from BWV 207 and, perhaps, BWV 82, Bach exceeds the Leipzig norm of four violin parts and one viola part in only one instance, the final version of the St. John Passion. Would Schulze have us believe that none of Bach's other materials — including the eighty-odd sets with "only" two copies of each violin part — survive intact? It seems far more likely that BWV 207, no less than BWV 174, represents the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, the ceremony for which Bach wrote the cantata — a professor's inaugural lecture — did not lie within his regular sphere of duties; its performance, therefore, may well have involved a different body of musicians from the one normally available to him.

In other words, neither BWV 207 nor BWV 174 tells us anything about "the size of Bach's performance forces" beyond the fact that he could on occasion put together a group of players — although not necessarily singers: both sets of materials contain only the customary four vocal parts — somewhat larger than the one he usually had to work with. No

20. Cf. Notes 64 (1988-89), 796-97.

doubt he welcomed these opportunities, and I see no reason to think that he would not have revelled in the sound that such a "big band" could produce. But I also see no reason to think that he meant all his ensemble music to sound this way, let alone for us to beef it up accordingly. Let me suggest an analogy. In a letter written from Mannheim on 3 December 1778 Mozart remarked to his father, "ah, if we only had clarinets! — you can't believe how wonderful an effect a symphony with flutes, oboes, and clarinets makes."²¹ Some years later, he augmented the orchestration of the "Haffner" Symphony, K. 385, with both flutes and clarinets, and later still he added clarinets to the G minor Symphony K. 550. If we applied the same logic to this evidence that Schulze applies to Bach, we would wind up proposing that Mozart intended every one of his symphonies to have clarinets and that we should amend the scoring of those that do not.²²

Surely, we do an injustice to an artistic life as long and complex as Bach's to reduce his "ideals of musical sonority" to a single denominator rather than to imagine that his wishes could have varied according to time, place, genre, and even whim. On the present state of the evidence, Schulze's article offers little more than the circular confirmation of an *a priori* assumption — an assumption, moreover, that flows less from the archival or musical sources of Bach's time than from musical experiences of a considerably later date.²³ If we hope to get closer to what Bach actually did and wanted, then we must approach the sources both more carefully and with more open minds.

I must close on a personal note. The first sentence of the paragraph quoted above on p. 10 ends with a footnote directing readers to two articles of mine [the two articles are cited below, ed.].²⁴ Taken in conjunction with the quotation marks in Schulze's text, the reference suggests I have advocated the performance of Bach's works "by soloists," and done so in the interests of "transparency." In fact, nothing that I have had to say — either in these articles or elsewhere — on the subject of Bach's performing forces bears much relationship to Schulze's précis; not even the "quotations" come from me. Curiously, though, the terms in which Schulze misrepresents my work rather strikingly echo some remarks in his own earlier writings. Concerning the harpsichord

21. *Mozart: Briefe und Auszeichnungen*, ed. Wilhelm A. Bauer and Otto Erich Deutsch, 2 (Kassel, 1962), 517.

22. See, indeed, the remarks of Paul Henry Lang in *High Fidelity*, Dec. 1982, 68.

23. Cf. *Notes* 64 (1988-89), 798.

24. Joshua Rifkin, "Bach's 'Choruses' — Less Than They Seem?," *High Fidelity*, Sep. 1982, 42-44; *idem*, "Bach's Chorus: a Preliminary Report," *Musical Times* 123 (1982), 747-54.

concerto BWV 1052, for example, he once stated that the "subtle treatment of solo instrument and strings suggests that Bach only counted on a small body of string players"; and he advanced similar conclusions, on similar grounds, about the violin concerto BWV 1041.²⁵ Perhaps he has got me and his former self confused. I can only hope that he might now actually read my articles and find out where our differences lie.

25. See the prefaces to Edition Peters 9384a (1974) and 9380a (1972).