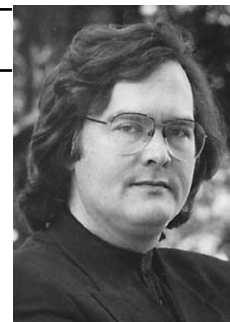

Interview: Georg Christoph Biller



Leipzig Thomanerchor will sing in Washington

Georg Christoph Biller has been the Cantor of the St. Thomas Boys Choir in Leipzig, Germany since 1992. The Thomanerchor, as it's known, has existed continuously since the year 1212, nearly 800 years. The great composer Johann Sebastian Bach occupied the post of Cantor at the St. Thomas School from 1723 until his death in 1750, and to the present day, the choir has a special sense of duty toward Bach's choral works. Young singers enter the choir at age seven, and remain at the boarding-school in Leipzig up through high-school.

Professor Biller was interviewed by Ortrun and Hartmut Cramer for the German magazine Ibykus in November 1992; the interview appeared the Fourth Quarter 1993 issue. The full interview, translated into English by John Sigerson, was published in the Jan. 19, 1998 issue of the weekly newspaper New Federalist. For the first time in 70 years, the choir will perform in the United States, on Feb. 7 in Washington, D.C. In anticipation of their performance, we present an abridged version of Professor Biller's interview.

Ibykus: Mr. Biller, for about a year now, you have been Cantor at the St. Thomas School in Leipzig; you are therefore a successor to Johann Sebastian Bach. How do you view yourself in this post?

Biller: As a successor to Johann Sebastian Bach—albeit a distant one—one is, of course, custodian of the grand tradition; but at the same time, one must also have the present day constantly in mind's eye, and help to shape the present. Because, you would have completely misunderstood Bach, if, today, you were to conceive of yourself as a kind of curator of a Bach museum. Bach learned much from his contemporaries and his predecessors, and he transposed this experience into his own unmistakable works. And I see precisely this as my task today: to take our own era in, and help shape it, even though, thanks to the great treasury of Bach's works, the task has also been passed to me, to preserve the life of things past. . . .

Ibykus: Your tenure comes at a very special time, four years after the revolution in East Germany. In those four years, what has changed?

Biller: We are living through a quite difficult phase following this awakening out of lethargy and captivity. It's as if a dream that was just too beautiful to really be true, had suddenly become reality. . . . And suddenly, you realize that the reality is in fact quite different from the dream. Today, many people forget that, in the final analysis, we had been liberated from a veritable prison. People in the former German Democratic Republic must now learn to look ahead; this requires that we all practice more patience than many are inclined to muster; it also requires much more boldness and strength. We will also have to re-learn where we must resist the tide of the *Zeitgeist*. A good first step toward self-improvement, would be if everyone stopped relying on others' opinions; and that goes especially for the press, and even more so for television. . . .

Ibykus: You say that, on the one hand, art was used by the East German system to "pacify" people, while on the other hand, art provided the individual with the opportunity to preserve his own intellectual identity. What is the role of art, of music, in the new German states today?

Biller: . . . For many people, the content communicated via music, was an "oasis." Whenever an oratorio was performed somewhere, during this entire 40-year period, the churches would always be full. These were not members of the congregation. For many party members or teachers, it was already quite normal for them to make an appearance in a church. In the period just before the revolution, when the political rumblings were growing loud, the churches were packed to the rafters whenever there was a concert. Also, hopelessness was becoming increasingly widespread, and people found consolation at such events.

To return to your question: I believe that music continues to play this role today, because, contrary to what [German Chancellor Helmut] Kohl says, there are many people who are worse off today than they were previously. Unlike former times, the store windows are filled, and you can buy anything—only you can't afford it. And, unfortunately, consumption is the first order of the day. The situation has gotten harder for music, too: Orchestras are being shut down, other institutions cut back, and ticket prices have had to be raised,

because the additional costs must be covered somehow. And so, once again, there is a danger that those who seek consolation in music, will not be able to afford to do so.

On the other hand, we see here in the St. Thomas Church, that the sanctuary is always completely filled at our regular cantata performances, which are held on Friday and Saturday every week.

I try to shape the musical programs in such a way, that they are not merely sonic experiences, but, so that they communicate real content. And I should point out that this is the rule, even when we often expect listeners to deal with quite heavy fare, such as recently, with a great motet setting of Bonhoeffer texts by Manfred Schlenker, "Stations on the Path to Freedom," which demands much internal grappling on the listener's part; you can't just avoid that.

So, to repeat: Once again, I see a certain situation of need, but one which at the same time leads to spiritual grappling.

Ibykus: Your answer leads us right into our next question: The Pope has issued a call to Christians, regardless of their particular confession, for a new evangelization of the world, and especially of the *Western* world. He dismisses communism and radical liberal capitalism as equally dangerous, and admonishes us to return to a life filled with thought, and carried forward by love. How do you see music's role in this?

Bill: For me, Bach is the model for this effort. Bach was constantly grappling intensively with the Bible, as shown not only by the many marginal notes in his personal copy of the Bible, which are still extant, but also by his cantatas, every one of which deals with a theological matter. In a sort of musical sermon, he grappled with the texts of the Biblical readings for that particular Sunday. And these texts have lost none of their poignancy today, even though our [church] fathers have so often thought that it might be better to alter them. On the contrary: The language of Bach's era is much more filled with imagery, and is often much more drastic than our modern language; but there's absolutely no doubt that it demands serious grappling with the text. . . .

I don't know who first coined the phrase that music represents a dialogue with Heaven. . . . Man, viewed in this way, is actually independent of the particular location where he listens to, or plays music. So many people today talk about the things they didn't have behind the Iron Curtain; but the creative intellects, on both sides of the Iron Curtain, were relatively independent of this. . . .

Ibykus: It is the young people who are being hardest hit by unemployment and the general absence of any future prospects. How does this situation affect the choir?

Bill: Because of its age structure, the choir offers a special opportunity, since other boys of the same age will ask themselves: "That boy's singing in the choir, while I'm using (or, better, abusing) my afternoon time playing computer games;

so, there must be something to what that boy's doing after all, since at any rate, he hasn't exactly fallen on his head doing it." The young singers sacrifice a lot of time for art, and put a lot of energy into it. That, already, is a special opportunity for a children's choir. . . .

Above all, I try to impress upon the choir, the fact that our goal is not simply to sing ever more beautifully — that would be much too small a challenge for me, personally, as well — but, rather, in order to get across a message. . . .

Only just recently, I told the boys that our primary principle is to sing, regardless of what is going on around us. The St. Thomas boys have never stopped singing, even during the days when Leipzig was being ravaged by the Black Plague. At one point, there were only three singers left, some time during the Thirty Years' War. But the work went ahead.

Ibykus: What challenges do you see ahead for the St. Thomas Boys Choir?

Bill: People often ask me: "What are you going to do that's new?" Perhaps that's a logical question, but I'm involved with the preservation of a tradition, something that has become a tradition precisely because it is always taking what is right, and doing it anew. In other words, in every era, the St. Thomas cantors have always repeatedly taken the same content, the same substance, and have re-shaped it anew. And that's the challenge I'm facing, too. This means that tradition must not be allowed to become a constraint that would, for example, preclude new discoveries in practical performance. But it is the same, ever-unchanging "Soli Deo Gloria" ("To the Glory of God Alone"), which was not just Bach's own personal creative motto. The old cantor's motto, "Singet dem Herrn ein *neues* Lied" ("Sing a *New* Song unto the Lord"), has to be taken seriously once again. This means that you're growing on top of very old roots indeed. . . .

Then there's Bach's cycle of cantatas. I'm attracted by the idea of actually performing all the Bach cantatas in chronological order, over a delimited period of time, instead of merely taking snippets from his cantata opus. It's exciting, too, to stand before such an entire body of work; you become even more overwhelmed by the sheer profusion of Bach's creative work. How he started out from the mundane, only to go far above and beyond it! . . . In certain cantatas, you can recognize that he was writing for very specific singers . . . but never allowed himself to be guided by practical limitations, instead always writing beyond the existing conditions! . . .

The scope of the St. Thomas boys' work is so prodigious, that all you need to do, is make sure it is always filled with sufficient content. Our great tradition assists me in doing what's right. Things are always coming up which need to be reconceptualized, but that's completely normal. It's as with a good building, which has to be remodeled occasionally, but which doesn't need to be re-built from the ground up.