

EIRFeature

St. Thomas Choir stuns Washington with beauty of music

by Dennis Speed

“As wondrous as the stars in heaven, as wondrous as the great ‘Messiah’ of Handel, more wondrous is the mind, that can contemplate these things.”

—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The St. Thomas Boys Choir of Leipzig, Germany, the Thomanerchor, an 800-year-old musical institution nearly four times the age of the United States, travelled to this country for the first time in February. With them, they brought, as a gift, the living spirit of Johann Sebastian Bach, the most famous of the Cantors of St. Thomas, as well as the rigor and joy of the art-science known as Classical music-practice. The choir began its visit in Houston, where they enjoyed capacity audiences and gave a special concert for schoolchildren; they then travelled to Washington, D.C., and afterward to New York City and Philadelphia.

In the nation’s capital, on Feb. 7, a truly extraordinary event occurred. Nearly 9,000 people—many, if not most of whom, had never attended a Classical music concert before, and at least one-third of them below the age of 18—jammed Washington’s Catholic Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception to hear Bach’s legacy presented to them by this choir, which is, in a true sense, Bach’s “nearest living relative.” Leo Nestor, the music director of the Basilica, commented in a message on the Internet: “In my 15 years as music director at this national Catholic church, I have never heard such wonderful music-making. In a world which, in alternate postures, both fears and deifies the music of J.S. Bach, the masses who attended were presented with a reading of his music which was at once most durable, most enlightened, and most understood by singers/conductor, hence by all in attendance.”

That statement more than adequately portrays the fulfillment of a vision that the concert organizers, the Committee For Excellence in Education Through Music, had dared to dream two years ago, when it was first suggested that the Thomanerchor might be made available for a free concert. Many individuals on the committee,



Maestro Georg Biller and the St. Thomas Choir at the conclusion of their performance in Washington, D.C. Nearly 9,000 people, of all ages and walks of life, attended the free concert in the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception.

which included members of the Schiller Institute, had been holding concerts and symposia for the past several years in the Washington area, proposing Classical music and educational methods as an alternative to the street violence, and the mind-deadening behavioral modification that passes for education in American schools today. Those thousands of people who filled every seat, aisle, and side-space in the Basilica, vindicated what had been contended by these organizers all along: If the *content* of the music, no matter how advanced, were rendered sufficiently *transparent* to a completely “raw” audience, they would be enthralled by the work, and the profound ideas, of Classical composers.

That, however, requires an exceptional mastery of, not the musical text, but the *music behind the text*. Maestro Georg Biller and his brilliant musical instrument — all the selections were sung *a cappella* — demonstrated what is meant by “vocal transparency” to a near-perfect degree. Most exciting was to watch the many five and six year olds in the audience, seeing children, just slightly older than themselves, perform some of the most complex music with confidence and total concentration. It was the *concentration of intellectual and emotional effort* on the part of the choir, that was transmitted most palpably to the audience, and increased the audience’s capacity to listen. The attentiveness of the entire audience in the Basilica to what was being performed, especially in the Bach and Mendelssohn compositions, refuted the falsehood that “average people prefer contemporary music to that of dead white European males.”

The program of the concert, which pivoted on an “internal dialogue” between Bach and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, one of Bach’s greatest champions, also featured the work of several other composers. Not only were vocal works offered,

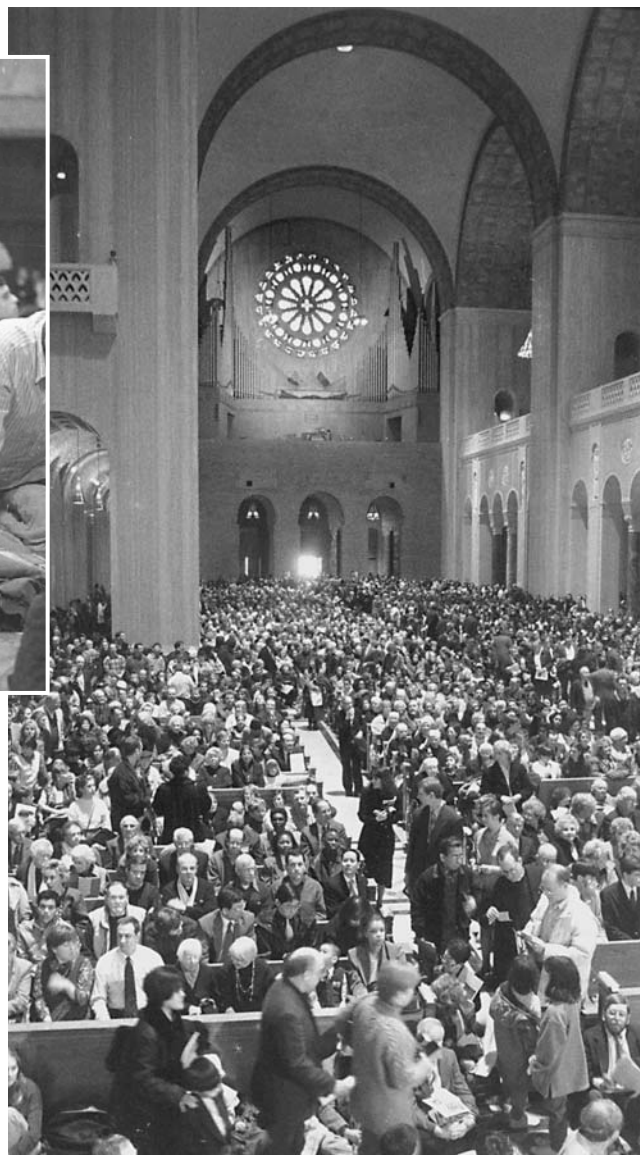
The speakers

The symposium at Howard University opened with greetings from **Bernard Richardson**, dean of the university’s Rankin Chapel. The moderator was **Dennis Speed** of the Schiller Institute. Speakers included **Charles H. Borowsky**, Ph.D., from the Committee for Excellence in Education through Music, International Friends of Music Association, and Intermuse; **Jia Hao Xu**, M.D., an ear, nose, and throat specialist; **Alfredo Mendoza**, chairman of the Department of Singing at the National University of Mexico; **David Merrell**, a 17-year-old student who had conducted a study of the destructive effects of rock music and the salutary effects of Classical music on mice; **Sylvia Olden Lee**, vocal coach for the Metropolitan Opera and founder of the organization Saving Young Lyric Voices In Advance; and **Helga Zepp-LaRouche**, founder of the Schiller Institute.



A view (right) toward the Basilica's Rose Window, as the audience begins to fill up the largest Catholic church in the Western Hemisphere.

When the seats were all occupied, concert-goers (above) filled every nook and cranny of available space.



however. Also performed were two instrumental works: the Adagio of Tommaso Albinoni (1671-1757), rendered by the Maryland Cello Ensemble, featuring Cecylia Barczyk, its music director, as soloist, and the Vivaldi (1678-1741) Violin Concerto in A Minor, which featured 10-year-old soloist Emmanuel Borowsky. Both were conducted by Sheldon Bair.

In attendance were the members of a 140-person youth choir, organized by Schiller Institute and Committee member Diane Sare, who themselves performed Franz Schubert's "Ehre sei Gott" (from his *Deutsche Messe*) for the St. Thomas Choir, at a reception immediately following the concert. According to those familiar with the new chorus, the Schubert was "performed better than they have ever done it," because of their excited response to the just-witnessed concert, and the struggle to *reproduce*, in some measure, the beauty they had just heard. The chorus is expected to grow, and improve, rapidly in the next weeks.

Symposium on musical education

Violinist Emmanuel Borowsky's father, Dr. Charles Borowsky, president of the International Friends of Music Association and CEO of Intermuse, was the moving force behind

the idea of "bringing music to the poor," and the St. Thomas Choir to Washington. In conjunction with the concert, the Committee For Excellence in Education Through Music and the Schiller Institute jointly sponsored a morning symposium at Howard University, which was attended by 150 educators, musicians, teachers, and community activists. Participants sought to determine how the level of excellence attained by the St. Thomas Choir, in musical instruction and performance, might be applied to the educational crisis confronting the United States today.

Dr. Borowsky, in his address to the symposium, said that "people are getting diplomas; but, if you ask them, what did they learn, in their long terms of attending these institutions, we may find out, that they are able to fill out the application for a job, or respond to the bureaucratic requirements of the



During an interlude, the Maryland Cello Ensemble and soloist Emmanuel Borowsky (age 10) play Vivaldi's *Violin Concerto in A Minor*. Sheldon Bair is the conductor.

society, but often we may be surprised, that there is very little *thinking*, use of brain, there's very little creativity, there's very little *humanity*. . . .

"Humans are not born with culture, as for example, bees are born with the instinct of social behavior. People learn it, and therefore the question is how? . . . Look at youngsters' lives. They are *Wunderkinder* when they are young. When they reach the age of 14, they become average. At the age of 18, below average. At the age of 20, some end up in correctional institutions. And this is because of a misunderstanding of the major factors which can contribute [to their advancement], and one of them is music. . . ."

Symposium moderator Dennis Speed amplified Borowsky's remarks, by counterposing the "oligarchical" and "republican" outlooks on music and education. He reminded the audience of the mid-1990s *The Bell Curve* controversy, and quoted a 1995 London *Times* editorial by Lord William Rees-Mogg, "It's the Elite Who Matter." In it, the oligarchical Rees-Mogg wrote, "The 21st century will require greater emphasis on the highest skills of the ablest students. . . . In international competition, perhaps 5% of the population will produce 80% of the national income, and the employment of the 95% will depend on the success of the few."

To represent the republican outlook, Speed used the words of Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, who had worked with Johannes Brahms to import the Classical music-composition method to the United States, and had lived in the United States from 1892 to 1895, attempting to create a National Conservatory of Music, together with Jeanette Thurber. (The project failed because of the effects of "Jim Crow" racial bigotry directed against Dvořák's and Thurber's attempts to educate African-American and women students.)

"It is to the poor that I turn for musical greatness," said Dvořák. "The poor work hard: they study seriously. Rich people are apt to apply themselves lightly to music, and to abandon the painful toil to which every strong musician must submit without complaint and without rest. Poverty is no barrier to one endowed by nature with musical talent. It is a spur. It keeps the mind loyal to the end. It stimulates the student to great effort."

It should be stressed that the mission of the St. Thomas Choir was originally an ecclesiastical one, of training young men, including from among the poor, for the priesthood. Stefan Altner, organist and managing director of the choir, informs us, "From the very beginning the main component of the education was liturgical singing." Later, this mission

would be extended, by such teaching orders as the Brotherhood of the Common Life, to Italy, the birthplace (through these and other efforts) of the scientific discipline known as *bel canto* (“beautiful singing”). This is how the poor were first integrated into the teaching orders.

It was in Helga Zepp-LaRouche’s keynote presentation, “Toward a New Renaissance Through Classical Education,” however, that the “organizing principle,” or metaphor, of the work of the Committee, was revealed. Mrs. LaRouche, the founder of the Schiller Institute, and a co-founder of the Committee, after first describing the political and financial crisis facing the world, referred to a theme exhaustively discussed by Friedrich Schiller in such locations as his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*: the ennoblement of the emotions through great works of art, through both their performance and composition. Schiller wrote that in order to develop beautiful souls, certain subjects of knowledge have the greatest impact. One of those is music, which “goes to the innermost depths of the heart in the most direct way.”

She contrasted this “Schillerian” view, with that of the Frankfurt School and the twentieth-century “musicologist” Theodor Adorno. Adorno, who was a pianist, co-author with Thomas Mann of the “music section” of Mann’s pro-Schoenberg novel, *Doktor Faustus*, and an early sympathizer with Nazism, was the head of the 1937 Radio Research Project, which was to create what became known as “Top 40 Radio” in the 1940s through the 1960s. (The full text of Mrs. LaRouche’s speech appears in this *Feature*.)

Signs of the times

The revealing of the heart through music, was most assuredly in evidence during the concert. One teenager, wearing both a lip ring and an eyebrow ring, commented, “Angels truly have descended upon this place!” echoing the words of Charles Borowsky, who immediately preceded Maestro Georg Biller, in addressing the Basilica concert audience. Borowsky quoted a young member of the audience who had asked him whether it were true, as his mother had told him, that “angels will sing here today.”

On the “heart of darkness” side, one observer witnessed an agitated, middle-aged white woman, during an intermission, angrily asking a shocked 12-year-old African-American child, “Do you know why you are here?” She contended that the child “had been noisy,” but the observer, sitting directly next to the child, had noticed no such thing. The woman and her husband then stormed off. Slightly later, the child, accompanied by her flabbergasted teacher, also left.

Racialism? Consider this. One of the clerics at the Basilica happily commented that the “African-American attendance is much higher than I have ever seen” for a Classical music concert. Two former Congressmen were delighted with the audience, and “sat with everyone else,” in the aisles. A diplomat, who had arrived too late to claim a seat, tried to argue that his status afforded him the right to be treated as a “VIP.”

He was informed by an usher, who pointed to the over-capacity crowd, “We’re *all* VIPs now.” So, those who were without the racist infection, or the disease of “culture-vulturism,” were free to enjoy themselves along with—not separate from—everyone else.

Unhappy late-comers also included unfortunate reporters from the *Washington Post*. The *Post* had sought to “spook” symposium and concert-goers with an article that appeared on Feb. 5, entitled “For German Boys’ Choir, a Change in Program: Appearance at LaRouche Symposium Cancelled.” The *Post* lied that “Organizers of a Washington concert by a famous European boys’ choir learned to their surprise last month that a symposium at which the group was scheduled to appear was sponsored by Lyndon LaRouche’s controversial Schiller Institute.” Schiller Institute members were part of the central group of “organizers of the concert,” as everyone, including the *Post*, knows. The *Post* had played a pivotal role in harassing a 1995 Schiller Institute-sponsored “Justice Concert” at Constitution Hall, on the eve of the Million Man March, which sought to highlight the racist attack on African-American elected officials, and the illegal and immoral persecution of Lyndon LaRouche, as exemplifying an out-of-control renegade faction of the Department of Justice, that would eventually turn against the President of the United States.

So, when the stringers for the *Post* showed up to “cover” the concert, asking, “Where are our reserved seats? We’re with the *Post*,” they were politely informed, “There are no seats reserved for the *Washington Post*.” Shocked, they threatened, “If we don’t get seats, we won’t review it at all,” refusing to recognize that they had simply arrived too late, and could not be treated any differently than anyone else. So, off they stormed, unmindful of the fact, that, as they exited, the spirit of Bach, embodied in the dialogue between these 80 young men and the hearts of thousands that came to the Basilica to hear them, laughed so loudly, that we heard music.

An Invitation

A unique institution

The Washington Post and other proponents of William Rees-Mogg’s racist theory of the “cognitive elite,” through intimidation, caused changes in the symposium held by the Committee for Excellence in Education Through Music. Though the Post reported the symposium to be cancelled, it was held, in fact, at Howard University. The following excerpts from the invitation to that symposium, give an appreciation of both the St. Thomas Choir and the work of the Committee.