

St Thomas Boys Choir Leipzig

The history of the St Thomas Boys Choir spans 804 years and is full of disputes of national and municipal politics, religion and the school itself.

The members of the choir are all boarders: They live, learn and rehearse in the “Alumnat” about 1.000 yards away from the historic site and attend St Thomas Secondary School just across the street. The school is connected with St Thomas's Church, which is their main workplace.

The St Thomas Boys Choir is only a half century younger than Leipzig itself and hence the city's oldest cultural institution. At the Parliament in Frankfurt in 1212 Otto IV of Brunswick endorsed the formation by members of the Augustinian order of the St Thomas choral foundation initiated by Margrave Dietrich the Oppressed of Meissen. The foundation included a seminary originally intended to train boys for the priesthood. However, it was soon also opened to boys who were not part of the foundation. Liturgical singing was on the curriculum from the outset.

The first in the long row of Thomaskantors (directors of music at St Thomas's) was Georg Rhau, during whose two-year term of office the famous disputation between Martin Luther and Johann Eck took place in Leipzig (1519). While the early office-holders remained for relatively short periods, Sethus Calvisius was Thomaskantor for twenty years, from 1594 to 1615. He was followed by such famous figures as Johann Hermann Schein (1616-1630), Johann Kuhnau (1701-1722) and Johann Sebastian Bach, who held the post from May 31, 1723 for 27 years.

Subsequent Thomaskantors who exerted influence on Lutheran church music were Gottlob Harrer, Johann Friedrich Doles, Johann Adam Hiller, August Eberhard Müller, Johann Gottfried Schicht, Christian Theodor Weinlig, Moritz Hauptmann, Ernst Friedrich Richter, Wilhelm Rust, Gustav Ernst Schreck, Karl Straube, Günther Ramin, Kurt Thomas, Erhard Mauersberger, Hans-Joachim Rotzsch and since 1992 Georg Christoph Biller. He, a former “Thomaner” as well, is the 16th successor of Johann Sebastian Bach.

The boom of mass transportation in the twentieth century allowed the St Thomas Boys Choir to extend its concert activities to other cities and countries. The choir had of course established itself in the concert life of Leipzig and its performances of motets and cantatas on Fridays and Saturdays as well as the church service on Sundays in St Thomas's Church have become important musical events. Under Straube's direction the regular performances of J.S. Bach's Passions, Christmas Oratorio and B minor Mass attained the degree of perfection they retain to this day.

In 2012 the St Thomas Choir, St Thomas School and St Thomas Church as the trio of “THOMANA” celebrated their 800th anniversary. In April 2013 the “Thomaner” moved back into their new “Box”, which was expanded and renovated for two years. Today the choir consists of 106 choristers aged 10-18.

Press

http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/14/arts/music/a-concert-by-st-thomas-boys-choir.html?partner=rss&emc=rss&_r=0

The New York Times

Music Review

The Traditional Chorus That Keeps Bach Young A Concert by St. Thomas Boys Choir



Hiroyuki Ito for The New York Times

St. Thomas Boys Choir of Leipzig performing at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin on Tuesday as part of Lincoln Center's White Light Festival.

By [ANTHONY TOMMASINI](#) Published: November 13, 2013

To comprehend the legacy of the [St. Thomas Boys Choir of Leipzig](#), consider this: When Bach became its music director, called Thomaskantor, in 1723, this eminent institution had already been around for 511 years. Last year, the choir celebrated its 800th anniversary. Currently it is finishing an American tour, presenting 11 concerts over 16 days.

On Tuesday night the St. Thomas Boys Choir, conducted by Georg Christoph Biller (the 16th Thomaskantor since Bach) and joined by members of the excellent [Leipzig Baroque Orchestra](#), presented an exquisite program of works by Bach and Vivaldi at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin near Times Square. This was a highlight of Lincoln Center's [White Light Festival](#).

This remarkable choir, traveling with 42 boys ranging in age from 10 to 18, is dedicated to maintaining an honored tradition. Surely this is what it must have been like to hear Bach lead the ensemble in one of his cantatas. Yet, maybe not. The rhythmically crisp execution and unsentimental directness of the performances seemed somehow contemporary.

A [recent article](#) in The New York Times Magazine pointed out that over the years, boys everywhere have been reaching puberty earlier. This makes it a challenge for the St. Thomas choir to maintain its ranks of boy sopranos and altos.

For 75 minutes on Tuesday night, however, such questions were out of mind as the audience that packed the church seemed transfixed by the performances. Backed by a small ensemble of period instruments from the Leipzig orchestra, the choir began with two Bach cantatas written when he was in his early 20s, about 15 years before he arrived in Leipzig.

“Der Herr Denket an Uns” (“The Lord Thinks of Us”), written for a wedding, opens with a stirring instrumental sinfonia before the contentedly jubilant first chorus. The tender, clear sound of the sopranos and altos had uncanny carrying power in the church. These voices held their own easily against the robust, youthful sounds of the somewhat older tenors, baritones and basses. The blending and balancing of the voices was just about perfect. It was charming to see telltale signs of boyhood (the younger ones could not help rubbing some sleepy eyes and fidgeting in place) coming from musicians so accomplished and confident.

The second movement, a minor-mode aria for soprano, turns contemplative and wistful. It was beautifully sung by Johannes Hildebrandt, a standout in the choir who had several solos on the program.

There was also some exceptional solo singing in the next cantata, “Nach Dir, Herr, Verlanget Mich” (“For You, Lord, I Am Longing”). In these two works, the choir deployed only about two dozen singers. Still, the ensemble effortlessly produced a full-bodied sound in the dramatic opening chorus, built on a plunging chromatic line and in the final chorus, a halting piece rich with thick, overlapping harmonies.

Using all of its touring members, the choir sang two Vivaldi works. The “Magnificat” in G minor opens with a somber chorus that unfolds in wide-spaced block chords, dispatched here with resonant sound and surprising intensity. For one disarming duet, Mr. Hildebrandt was joined by another fine soprano, Nils Adam Wahlgren. And Hans Jakob Wetzig, an alto with a warm, textured sound, excelled in an aria from “Gloria.” A vibrant performance of this popular work ended the program.

Happily, there were encores: Bach's well-known Air from his Suite in D for Orchestra, with a "Dona Nobis Pacem" text fitted to the music by Mr. Biller; and movements from motets by Mendelssohn, another towering figure in Leipzig's musical history; and to end, naturally, Bach.

The White Light Festival runs through Nov. 23 at various New York locations, 212-721-6500, whitelightfestival.org.

The New York Times Magazine

Where Have All the Sopranos Gone?

The ever-earlier onset of puberty is reshaping the legendary Leipzig boys choir.

Some members of the St. Thomas Boys Choir rehearsing Felix Mendelssohn's "Jauchzet dem Herrn, alle Welt." Directed by Rineke Dijkstra for The New York Times. Camera assistant: Heine Godehart Petschulat.

By ELIZABETH WEIL **November 8, 2013**

Photographs by Rineke Dijkstra for The New York Times

After school and lunch but before afternoon rehearsals, the sopranos and altos of the St. Thomas Boys Choir in Leipzig, Germany, tried to master their skateboards, while the tenors and basses kissed their girlfriends and texted. Thoralf Schulze, the Latin teacher and the choir's dean, walked among them, describing each with the analytical intimacy of a coach, calling out the age at which each chorister's voice broke and how long he sat benched before he could sing with the choir again.

"Twelve! Six months only!"

"Twelve! One year!"

"Thirteen! One year!"

"Thirteen! Six months!"

The boys live at St. Thomas and attend a public school nearby. Schulze entered the boys' dorm, called the "alumnat," and walked up the stairs, extending a hand to a handsome young bass. "Adrian," Schulze said smiling with relief. "He was 15."

Puberty is always momentous, awkward and bittersweet, but perhaps nowhere more so than here. The St. Thomas Boys Choir is 801 years old. Johann Sebastian Bach served as its Thomaskantor, or choirmaster, from 1723 to 1750, during which time he complained about the boys' lack of musical talent and paid a co-worker to take over the Latin class that he was also supposed to teach. Since then the choir has become something of a Bach historical re-enactment program — a homage to its greatest musical director; not quite Colonial Williamsburg but inching in that direction.

Each weekday, the choir rehearses under the direction of Georg Christoph Biller, a stern man with wild hair. Each Friday, when they are not traveling in Germany or abroad, they sing a motet at St. Thomas Church. Then, during the weekend, as it has for at least 200 years, the choir usually performs a composition by Bach. (The choir will be singing at Lincoln Center on Nov. 12.)

But maintaining Bach's legacy has become more difficult. The problem is with the sopranos. At St. Thomas, as in all boys choirs, the oldest of those singers with unbroken voices are the most prized. Like flowers that are most beautiful just before they die, these boys have the most power, stamina and technique. There are scholars who say that in Bach's day, some boys' voices didn't change until as late as 17. Now boys' voices are changing earlier, a lot earlier. Medical records tracking puberty through history do not exist, but Joshua Goldstein, chairman of the demography department at the University of California, Berkeley, has analyzed mortality patterns among boys, which can show increased risk-taking and, by extension, the onset of puberty. His research suggests that the age of puberty for boys has dropped, on average, 2.5 months a decade since the mid-1700s. That would mean that boys are sopranos for a shorter time. To maintain a well-stocked soprano section, St. Thomas needs to start with and train more boys. To house growing numbers of recruits, the choir has built a new, larger glass-and-steel-frame alumnat.



Zacharias Krämer, alto, 11

Schulze poked his head into some of the boys' living quarters, a warren of twin beds, messy desks and pictures of rock bands and beautiful women taped to the wall. For centuries, choristers of all ages have lived together in suites, the older taking care of the younger in St. Thomas's prefect system. But the gap between the "knowing and unknowing" or "bearded and unbearded" boys, as various music scholars have put it, is becoming wider. Boys enter the choir at the start of fourth grade, age 9. Some in the alumnat still miss their mothers; a few call home at night and ask to sleep there. But nine years later, when the Thomaners graduate from high school and the choir, many no longer fit the angelic chorister model. One corner of the suite could have been in a frat house: free weights, beer bottles, deodorant, soccer balls.

Schulze didn't seem concerned about the collegiate-style mess. One of his goals is fostering what he calls normal boys who know how to relax and enjoy themselves outside rehearsal. What he

cares about, as does everyone at St. Thomas, is the singing. Leaving the suite, on the way to his office, Schulze passed the laundry room, its clothes racks filled with the Thomaners' performance outfits: blue jackets and pants for the older boys, the tenors and basses; sailor uniforms for the sopranos and altos. The younger Thomaners' costumes were better than robes and ruffles, the fate of boys in other choirs. But who wants to wear a big infantilizing sailor collar into his teens? I asked Schulze at what age, in his estimation, voice change would ideally occur — when he would like to see the boys switch from sailor suit to jacket and pants. “Fifteen would be not so nice for the boy,” he said, “but for the choir, sublime. He comes to live at the alumnat at 9 years. He’s at the level of the choir at 10. If he goes at 12 for voice break, we have only two years together to get the music made.”

Weeks generally have a rhythm at St. Thomas. Learn new music on Monday. Perform throughout the weekend. Race like crazy to prepare in between. On the Tuesday I visited last spring, the boys woke up at 6:45 a.m., as always, ate breakfast at 7:10 a.m., attended school from 7:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and then ate lunch. Some of them later went back to school while others had free time until their afternoon lessons and rehearsals. Next was practice with the whole choir at 6 p.m., then dinner at 6:45 p.m.



From left: Stean Simon, soprano, 9; Benedikt Voigt, soprano, 12.

Puberty is always momentous, awkward and bittersweet, but perhaps nowhere more so than here.

In a brick building near the alumnat called the Villa, Biller sat behind a grand piano dressed in a black turtleneck and black pants. Biller, who is 58, is the 16th Thomaskantor since Bach. Bach was almost not a Thomaskantor at all; he was offered the job only after two other men turned it down.

About 10 minutes into the soprano rehearsal, a young singer in a Ron Jon T-shirt opened the heavy door and took his place among the 10 other sopranos. Biller raised a formidable eyebrow.

“Why have you not joined us earlier?” Biller asked in German. (A bass with a British mother translated for me.)

“I was playing soccer,” the boy said.

Ashamed but not ashamed enough, the soprano took a seat under an ancient chandelier. Behind him sat a boy a head taller than he, a Harry Potter look-alike named Lukas — thin, with round glasses, excellent posture and sweeping hair. Biller nodded at Lukas. Earlier he had praised the older boy saying, “You are almost ready to lead the section now.” But how long could Lukas maintain that role? Puberty is typically a three-year or four-year process, with a growth spurt that starts before voice change. Already Lukas’s pants looked a little too short.

Biller, conducting with facial expressions while his hands were tied up playing piano, led the sopranos through “O Domine Jesu Christe,” a motet written by Johann Hermann Schein, who was a Thomaskantor a century before Bach. The boys sounded a little weak and fuzzy but still beautiful, precisely the sound that people have loved for at least 500 years. Of course, achieving that sound has been tricky for as long as it has been treasured. Gripping in 1547, the Swiss music theorist Heinrich Glarean wrote, “Boys especially could sing the highest voice if they were not frequently unacquainted with the song.” In 1668, Bénigne de Bacilly, a French vocal instructor and composer, voiced what has been a persistent complaint: “As soon as a teacher has taken great care and pains to train a boy’s voice, it disappears.” At one point, Bach presided over 55 choristers, about a quarter of whom were sopranos, and he listed 17 of them as “unproficient.” (There are 106 today, including only 11 sopranos.) But the challenges were part of the job, and Biller had no time to waste. It was his second of only five rehearsals with this section that week. In three days, well-prepared or not, they would sing in St. Thomas Church on risers in front of Bach’s grave.



Frank Bonsong-Segovia, soprano, 12

Toward the end of the session, Biller turned to Bach's "Mass in B Minor" and began to offer a lesson. Along with teaching music, Biller was charged with maintaining a cultural legacy. "What is Bach's idea?" Biller asked the boys as they opened their worn scores.

Nobody answered. Biller's brows pinched. He soon excused the sopranos, and the tenors and basses entered, their bodies filling the room. Their diction sounded crisp, their voices strong. Finally, singers old enough to handle the music. Biller's face relaxed.

"Now we have the possibility of a young boy sounding like Joe Cocker," Michael Fuchs, an ear, nose and throat specialist and the voice doctor of the choir, told me. "We can have an early adult voice without an adult personality. He sounds like his father when he's still a boy."

Fuchs's own voice broke in 1983, when he was a Thomaner, age 13. He liked the voice doctor of the choir then and decided to follow his career path. Now trim, goateed, in good shoes and fashionable eyeglasses, he's among the world's experts on the timing of voice break. Certainly nobody cares more. "We have a problem in the choir," Fuchs said, when we met in his office at Leipzig University hospital, echoing concerns I heard time and again. "The balance is shifting. We have more men's voices and fewer boys' voices." The obvious solution — starting boys in the choir at 8 instead of 9 — does not work. The choir tried, and the 8-year-olds couldn't handle life in the alumnat, learning all the pieces and attending all the rehearsals. So the plan now is to squeeze every day out of the soprano voices. "We try to let the boys sing as long as possible without risking overloading the boys and damaging the voice," Fuchs said. Many of the Thomaners hold Fuchs in mystical esteem, claiming he can predict to the day when their voices will break.

"Of course not the day," Fuchs demurred, "but maybe two, three weeks."

In the years before the boys hit puberty, Fuchs saw them every three months to record growth, hormone levels and voice. He played for me recordings of one boy speaking and singing the same passage of a choral piece every year from age 11 to 14. Even to my untrained ear, the differences over time sounded stark, the boy's voice becoming richer and fuller until the day it shattered. Mining data from the recordings, Fuchs constructs scatter plots showing changes over time in jitter (variation in pitch), shimmer (variation in loudness), noise component (breathiness) and range. All this data provides context so that he can distinguish what is causing flaws in a boy's voice. "Is it a cold? A problem of singing technique? Voice break can sound like laryngitis."



Slideshow | 15 Slides

Clockwise from top left: Arthur Ernst Kinder, baritone, 15; Friedrich Oskar Krieger, baritone, 16; Friedemann Meinhardt, tenor, 15; Felix Wege, bass, 15.

Martin Ashley, founder of Boys Keep Singing, a British group dedicated to keeping boys in choirs, is the author of the monograph “How High Should Boys Sing?” In it, he quotes a vocal expert who describes the boy-chorister sound as “clear, cold, piercing and transparent . . . disembodied, ethereal and ghostly . . . enchanted, naïve and guileless.” A typical boy’s voice falls from about 500 Hz as a baby to 300 Hz as a toddler to 200 Hz before puberty, and it’s the last sound that choir directors and listeners crave. In 1927, “Hear My Prayer,” by the 15-year-old British soprano Ernest Lough, became HMV’s first classical record to sell a million copies. In 1955, Keith Richards, then 11, performed in Westminster Abbey with two other boy sopranos for the queen.

To see how a boy is maturing physically, Fuchs threads a tiny camera through the nose and into the larynx so he can watch and record the vocal anatomy while the boy sings. (When Fuchs was a Thomaner, the doctor used what amounted to a dental mirror on a long, narrow stick to see into their throats; by comparison, Fuchs said, his test wasn’t bad, once the boys learned to control their gag reflex.) The videos are intimate and alarming — the vibrating glottis, the gaping trachea: Jonah’s view from inside the whale. “That red is the leading edge of cells growing,” Fuchs said, pointing to a vocal fold on his computer screen. “Can you hear how it’s not possible to bring the vocal cords into good vibration?” he added during a particularly scratchy patch. “If this were from overstress and not voice break, you would see it on the surface. Like if you went to the forest to cut wood. You’d have nodules on your hands and edema. Stress on the vocal cords looks the same.”

The gap between the “knowing and unknowing” or “bearded and unbearded” boys, as various music scholars have put it, is becoming wider.

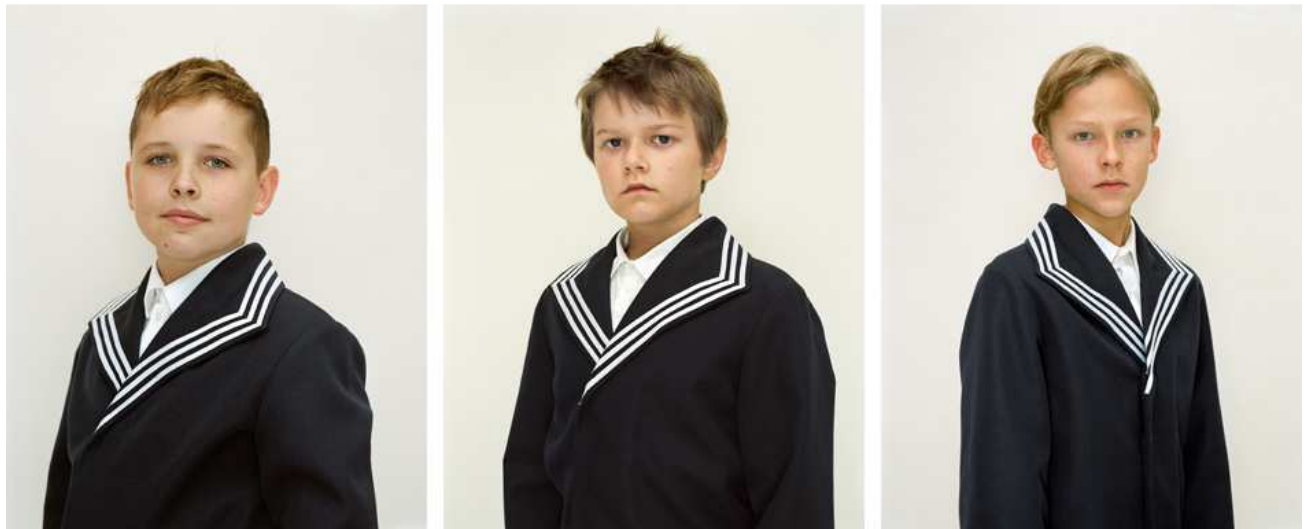
While their voices are changing, Thomaners don’t rehearse or perform, but they still have bi-weekly singing lessons, during which they work on diction and breath control. Singing too much while your voice is changing can lead to bad habits and injuries, similar to an athlete playing hurt. Late Wednesday afternoon, a tall, awkward, 13-year-old named Alexander spent half an hour with a private instructor, meticulously enunciating — la-pla-lu ma-la-plu, la-pla-lo ma-la-plo — and making sounds like deflating balloons and air compressing into tires. His teacher was a lovely young concert singer in an argyle sweater and white boots. She massaged the stress out of Alexander’s jaw and neck while he did his best to stare at the wall. “Va vey vop voop veep vip.” Toward the end of the session, Alexander sang scales ranging two octaves, his teacher writing down which notes he lost at the top, dropped in the middle and gained at the bottom.

This was nobody’s fantasy of being a Thomaner, but you can’t stop the body from maturing — even though the thought has occurred at St. Thomas. “Of course, Cantor Biller asks me at times, ‘Do you have some idea to delay onset?’ ” Fuchs said. Puberty-stalling drugs do exist. They are prescribed by endocrinologists for children with extremely early sexual development. But preserving sopranos’ voices through chemistry? Not even the most passionate choir fans suggest

using pharmacology to replace the bygone castrati. “That’s absolutely forbidden from the medical point of view,” Fuchs said.

Thursday evening, Georg Biller sat on a stool in front of the entire choir in the atrium of the public school, which was being used for rehearsals until the new alumnat was completed. A 12-year-old, on voice break, stood by his side and turned pages of music for him. Biller directed the choir with his hands and used his head, too, as a conducting tool, forehead and eyebrows working together in a facial interpretive dance. The next day at 6 p.m., a few hundred people would file into St. Thomas Church to hear the choir perform. Leipzig has a half-million people. BMW and Porsche have plants on the outskirts, but the city’s heart and identity remain in music. Bach, Wagner, Schumann and Mahler all lived and worked in Leipzig. In 1936, the mayor refused to follow Nazi orders to destroy a Mendelssohn statue. (It was destroyed anyway.)

Biller took “O Domine” from the top. After a minute he folded his hands and stopped the singing. The sopranos were flat.



From left: Angelo Grobe, alto, 10; Joseph Caspar Georgi, soprano, 10; Anton Kups, soprano, 10.

Many at St. Thomas hope the sopranos will have an easier time if they receive more early training. In 2008, an organization affiliated with the choir opened a kindergarten, where children learn to read and write music at the same time they learn to read and write words. Each morning I was there, 5-year-olds with slippers on the wrong feet sang “Hänschen Klein” and played rhythm games, listening for light or ominous sounds as their teacher played piano. On the wall outside the kindergarten’s administrative office hung violin-shaped hooks and paint-by-number portraits of Bach. “We are able to realize very soon if a boy will be able to be a Thomaner,” Heike Hübler, the kindergarten administrator at the time, told me. “Maybe 60 to 70 percent learn an instrument, too, piano or violin, outside of school.”

In addition, Lana Toshev, the primary scout for the choir, scours Leipzig’s other kindergartens, searching for boys who can sing at least an octave above middle C. Those boys can join St. Thomas’s music program in partnership with a public elementary school, where she trains the

boys four days a week. That Thursday she sat at a baby grand piano before a semicircle of 7-year-olds, including her own son. Few of their feet reached the floor. Most of their just-in adult front teeth looked too big.

One by one, the boys walked over to the piano bench. Toschev plinked a note; the boy, as directed, sang that pitch and then a third above.

“Every day is hard work,” she told me. Still, they all wanted to be Thomaners. Not as much as they wanted to be professional soccer players or cyclists or pilots, but being a chorister ranked high among their dreams. Toschev’s pupils are not guaranteed a spot in the choir; they compete in auditions with boys throughout Germany. “Maybe 70 percent will be able to be Thomaners,” Toschev said as she erased notes from the music staff on the chalkboard. “They are very valuable, these boys. Without them, the Thomaner choir cannot exist. But they have to be intelligent, they have to love music, they have to have rhythmic feeling.”

Back in the atrium, Biller began the next pass through the motet. This time, the sopranos overcorrected; they sounded sharp and screechy. The third time, Biller asked them to stand and sing. Generally, he works the sopranos longer and harder than any other section. While the young boys sang, a few older boys furtively pulled out smartphones, but most sat poised and paid attention. At last, on the fourth pass, the sound was better, the high notes clear and bright.

After rehearsal, on the way to dinner, I asked one of the tenors how he felt when his voice changed. “Of course, you want to be a man,” he replied. “But you are only a boy once, and here, when your voice breaks, you are a bit . . . angry.”

Bach scholars and musicians question whether trying to wring passable Bach out of tweens is worth the trouble. Why not just have older females sing the soprano roles? Who would know the difference?

There have been studies that try to answer this question; they are sort of like studies that try to detect whether people can distinguish between cheap and expensive wine. Judging blind, few can tell the two apart. Bach used boy sopranos at St. Thomas because it was an all-male institution. But he is also known to have on occasion employed female sopranos, boy sopranos and adult males singing falsetto. “I fear I can’t see any evidence that Bach cared particularly about boys at all,” Joshua Rifkin, a conductor and professor of music at Boston University, told me. “All of this is our modern projection back.”

In addition, Rifkin said, given his youth and inexperience, “the boy singing today is further away from the boy of Bach’s day than the woman singing now is from the woman of Bach’s day.” Records of Bach’s 1729 audition show a number of 13- and 14-year-olds *entering* choir. Joseph Haydn still had such a good soprano voice well into his teens that his choirmaster encouraged him to have surgery to make him a castrato. (Haydn’s father objected, however, and he was spared.) “It’s a terrible parallel to draw, but we don’t have that instrument,” Rifkin continued. “Just like we don’t have castrati.”



From left: Frank Bonsong-Segovia, soprano, 12; Maximilian Hohmann, tenor, 16; Dragan Lautenschläger, alto, 11 (seated); Claudio Gemsa, bass, 16; Claudius Pilz, alto, 11; and Paul Vogel, tenor, 15.

But in fact, in many ways, the choir is more invested in its all-male tradition than ever. Before the Berlin Wall fell, Leipzig and St. Thomas belonged to East Germany, and the state ran the choir. “In the former time,” Stefan Altner, the general manager of the choir, told me, “it was all the central agency from Berlin: ‘You have to make a tour in Japan. We organize it for you!’ ” Now, he said, “We are responsible for bringing the choir to the worldwide market.” The modest admission price for the Thomaners’ Leipzig recitals and the small fee the parents pay do not cover the choir’s costs. The city of Leipzig, along with the Thomanerchor foundation and a parents’ association, provide significant financing. Yet the pressure to raise money remains. “We make films, we do radio, we talk to journalists and to media for the choir’s future,” Altner said.

“Always when you go on stage, you have to be so good that each person in the audience can compare the sound with the CD and compare it with other choirs on the market. Always you have to be so good as to be the best.”

Friday afternoon the Thomaners, in their skinny jeans and sneakers, stood on the balcony of St. Thomas Church and rehearsed the motet one final time. Tourists below paused and snapped pictures as Biller worked the sopranos again and again. Some of the music sounded so sad, so burdened, so aware of death, it was hard to imagine how the boys could connect with it. Two very old men shuffled in and sat on the wooden pews. Just across the brick plaza stood the Bach Archive, which includes a repository for 18th-century instruments still used for occasional performances. In a strictly rational sense, the boy sopranos might belong there as well. But as Andrew Parrott, the British conductor famed among aficionados for his historically informed performances of Bach, said: “We may have gotten emotionally attached to the presence of the boy in a nonmusical way.” Rifkin added: “There’s something utterly magical and profoundly heart-wrenching about it. Maybe particularly in music, where people have to reach into and give you something so deep from within themselves.”

After the final rehearsal, the boys walked back through town. At 4:15 p.m., a bell rang in the alumnat signaling that it was time for the sopranos and altos to line up in front of Simon Jacobs, an 18-year-old bass. Jacobs was the Thomaners’ domesticus, and every Friday evening he sat on an ornate wooden chair and inspected the young boys to make sure they looked concert ready — shoes shiny, sailor jackets straight, hands clean. In his cluttered suite, fabric brush in one hand, shoe polish in the other, Jacobs spun around a 10-year-old, smoothing the back of his jacket and picking some loose threads. According to Thomaner tradition, tenors and basses are spared this ritual. The choir assumes a singer with a broken voice can dress himself. Lukas, among the choir’s most talented sopranos, dashed into his room five minutes late, changed quickly into his sailor suit and headed back out again without stopping for inspection. Just before the concert, I asked him why he skipped the domesticus ritual. “Today is my birthday!” Lukas said. “I turned 13.” Presumably, he felt too old.

The church bells rang at 6 p.m., and the Thomaners walked two by two from the back of the church to the front. Passing through the crowd, the boys seemed marvelous and otherworldly. So much about the concert was humble: the risers, Biller’s conductor’s stand, the audience in sensible shoes and jeans. But the singing was magnificent, soaring and poignant and hard won. When the choir finished, Biller bowed very slightly, and the boys walked back through the sanctuary again, spilling out onto the church stairs and into the night. The older Thomaners clutched their girlfriends, the younger ones, their mothers. Fuchs suspected that Lukas’s soprano would last no more than a year longer, two at most. Then his ethereal voice would slip away, joining all those that rose and fell before his in St. Thomas Church.

THE HUFFINGTON POST



[Laurence Vitte](#)

Montréal Bach Festival Opens With First Canadian Performance by Boys Choir From Leipzig Church Where Bach Once Was Cantor

Posted: 11/11/2013 8:59 pm



The Leipzig St. Thomas Boys Choir. Photograph by Gert Mothes

On Thursday night November 14 at the [Notre Dame Basilica](#) in historic Old Montréal, the [Leipzig St. Thomas Boys Choir](#), 40 strong, will celebrate the [Seventh Montreal Bach Festival](#) by performing in Canada for the first time in its 800-year old history.

Accompanied by the 9-member original instrument Leipzig Baroque Orchestra, the Boys Choir, aged 10 to 18, will perform early cantatas by Bach and Vivaldi's *Gloria* and *Magnificat*. The connection with Bach, the Choir and the Festival makes perfect sense: Bach was cantor at St. Thomas Church from 1723 until his death in 1750.

Scheduled for a week before the Festival proper begins on November 23, presumably so that the town will have some quiet time in which to get into the proper Bachian mood, the Boys Choir concert will serve as a prelude to a panoply of events which reflects Montreal's unique ability to incorporate culture into the fabric of daily life - including classical music which the young consume both voraciously and casually, as if they were best friends.

On the road

Meanwhile, the Choir has been on the road for the last 16 days. When I talked to the Choir's Managing Director Stefan Altner a few days ago, they had already sung in Houston, New York City, Madison, Kansas City, and St. Louis. "Eleven concerts already," he said, "but after Montréal, we go home."

I asked Altner whether the Boys Choir could sing with the period instruments and in the authentic performance practice styles that are now so popular. "In Leipzig," he said, "the Choir sings often with the modern instrument [Gewandhaus Orchestra](#), but they also have lots of opportunities to perform with period instruments at festivals and on tour."

Altner pointed out laughing that "Anyway, it's not so difficult for singers to sing at authentic pitch because it's usually a half tone lower. A half tone higher would be another story."

As for authentic style, he reminded me that on their tour and for their concert in Montréal the Choir will "sing like in Bach's time, with a very small group of singers accompanied by five period instrument string players, one bassoonist, two oboists and an organist."

When I told him that the Festival would be finishing with a Bach event at the other end of the interpretive spectrum, Bach's B Minor Mass played by the Montreal Symphony and Chamber Chorus conducted by Kent Nagano, Altner reassured me that the results will probably be surprisingly in tune with modern ways of Bach thinking.

"Musicians in orchestras like the Montréal Symphony are now increasingly well informed about how it sounds when period instruments play, and the importance of historical knowledge in adapting their modern way of playing on modern instruments," Altner said.

In other words, it could be a B Minor Mass created uniquely for 21st century Montréal.



The Bach Monument in Leipzig. Photograph by Gert Mothes

The Collegian

St. Thomas Boys of Leipzig visit Manhattan



[Megan Wheeler](#) Nov 7, 2013 The Collegian, Kansas State University

The St. Thomas Boy's Choir, the oldest cultural establishment of the city of Leipzig, Germany, performed at the First United Methodist Church in Manhattan last night.

Influenced by medieval Protestant church music, St. Thomas Church sent one of their groups, consisting of 39 singers and nine musicians, to visit various cities in Kansas, including Manhattan.

"Such extraordinary talent for such young boys," Anna Winstel, Manhattan resident, said.

Georg Christoph Biller, the present St. Thomas Cantor, is the 36th Cantor of the St. Thomas Church. Following in the footsteps of his predecessors, Biller has continued the tradition of church music, but with an emphasis on the liturgical composition of motets and concerts.

"The talent of such youth never ceases to amaze me," Jo Rodrigez, retired elementary school music teacher in Kansas City, Kan. said. "Their ability to change up the tempo and yet remain in harmony is true talent for such a young age of boys. Sheer beauty, the mix of high and low pitches."

Many Manhattan residents came to see the performance, as well as other people from around Kansas. Internationally known, this group of young singers draws a crowd wherever they tour. Daniel Wilsbury from Junction City said this is the third time he and his wife have seen the boys' choir.

"[They're] absolutely marvelous," Wilsbury said. "It's such a joy to be able to come back and see the young boys perform. It adds beauty and culture to our church experience and lets us remember when we were younger and seeing the choir for the first time."

There have been changes since back in the 1990's. "I have noticed the age of the boys are getting slightly younger each time we see them," Wilsbury said. "Their hormones are beginning to kick in earlier and earlier, messing up and deepening their voices. And of course, this simply will not do."

Not all were impressed with the boys choir, however. "These boys are too young to understand what they are singing. They have not yet experienced the emotions one gets with age, they are innocent and pure, singing about the struggle of purity. Yet they do not know what temptation is," Alissa Plummet, Kansas University graduate student in music theory, said. "The technical and musical side of their performances are stunning, they possess great skills. But one must have experience and memories if they are to convince the audience that their message is true."

The Washington Post

Leipzig's St. Thomas Boys Choir copes with voices deepening at a younger age

By Michael Birnbaum, April 07, 2012



For 800 years, the St. Thomas Boys Choir has been filling churches with pure, young voices. Now it's confronting a confounding phenomenon: Every year, those voices are cracking with teenage angst just a little earlier than before.

Other boys choirs have been noticing it, too, as an unrelenting march of puberty sweeps voices into rebellion. Over recent decades, the already-short careers of their sopranos have started to end between six months and a year earlier, challenging them at times such as Easter, for which choral music such as J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion was written with difficult lines for boys free of hormonal woes.

At the venerable St. Thomas Boys Choir, where Bach once drilled pupils in their scales, leaders have redoubled recruitment efforts and taken in boys at a younger age to make sure the choir has a full stock of voices ranging from the deepest bass to the most clarion-pure soprano. Children whose voices are deepening wait out the change by working the ticket booth.

The cause of the shift remains unclear. But some choir leaders say it is having a subtle effect on their music, and it's not just that they have to buy more acne medication. The younger the boy, the less life experience and maturity underpins the complex emotions in what they sing, even if they're more willing to study their scores instead of pining about romance.

"We have only a short time, from age 9 until 12, to squeeze in all the musical training for the boys," said Stefan Altner, manager of the [St. Thomas Boys Choir](#) and once one of its singers. When he started working at the choir in 1993, most voices broke when boys were 14 or 15, he said. Now the average is closer to 13.

Because most boys join the choir when they are 9, even small changes are felt in the balance of the singers, he said, because after their voices deepen, the boys sing lower lines or drop out of the choir completely. In 2008, the choir added a nursery school, and in 2010, it opened a primary school as a way to identify and attract talent at a younger age.

"We want to find a way to have them from kindergarten all the way until Abitur," the German high school graduation, Altner said.

The changes introduce an artistic conundrum to the hotly disputed studies of puberty, which some data indicate is starting earlier in girls, at least in the United States. Less attention has been focused on boys. Hypotheses about possible causes of earlier puberty in girls include improved nutrition, increased obesity, exposure to chemicals that mimic estrogen and changes in social pressures.

Among girls, researchers note that although studies have found that breast development may be starting earlier, the onset of the first period has remained constant, lengthening puberty rather than accelerating the process. Among boys, some studies have suggested that puberty might be starting earlier, but scientists agree that more research is necessary before they can say for sure.

"That puberty might start earlier in boys nowadays than it did decades ago is likely," said Jean-Pierre Bourguignon, a professor of pediatric science at the University of Liege who has done research on early-onset puberty. But he cautioned that a change in the timing of when boys' voices break could, in theory, be separate from a shift in puberty as a whole.

Maturity aids interpretation

The St. Thomas Boys Choir's long history has made it ripe for special scrutiny, and studies of records from Bach's time — he led the choir from 1723 until his death in 1750 and is entombed in St. Thomas Church — suggest that during his tenure, most boys' voices started to change between ages 17 and 18. The age spiked over the eight-year War of the Austrian Succession,

which began in 1740 and plunged the city into poverty, leading some scholars to wonder whether diet and health affected the boys' voices.

“In terms of the musical ability, the older the boys are in the choir, the more they can relate to the music in a way like grown-ups,” said Mogens Halcken, the head of music at Copenhagen Municipal Choir School, which has collaborated with researchers interested in the accelerated timing of voice change in boys. “If we take them in earlier, of course they will be more childish, and maybe they cannot relate to the music in the same way.”

The Danish school keeps careful records about when its boys' voices crack, which is what attracted the researchers. Over the past 30 years, the timing has shifted six months earlier on average, Halcken said. The school plans to move boys into the choir half a year sooner to make up the difference, he said.

A storied institution

In Leipzig, an east German city of 530,000 where [opera singers](#) in stage makeup take lunch breaks at a chain restaurant on the city's largest square, the St. Thomas boys are an institution. The 97 choir members, who range in age from 9 to 19, live in a boarding school on Sebastian-Bach Street.

There, the older boys — who sing the lower tenor, baritone and bass lines — look after the younger ones. All receive a rigorous musical education. Boys whose voices are changing, a process that takes between three months and a year, take a break from the choir to study music theory, do light voice training and sell tickets and CDs at concerts. The group performs 100 times a year and regularly tours around the world.

The tours are “a bit like a class trip, and then concerts, that's kind of like a football game,” said Oskar Didt, 16, a baritone who joined the choir when he was 9 and “they were a bit short on sopranos.”

In Leipzig, the issue has inspired local research and efforts to help prolong the boys' soprano careers by keeping them singing the high parts until their voices change.

“Every choirmaster tries to cast the older boy singers as close as possible to the onset of puberty and the voice change,” said Michael Fuchs, who heads the voice, speech and hearing disorder department at Leipzig University Hospital and is a former member of the boys choir. Because research on testosterone levels has advanced in recent years, “we are able to predict with relative precision when the voice change will start,” Fuchs said.

But some aspects of the choir remain unchanged over the centuries, said Altner, the choir manager. Bach's melodies are the same, as is their power.

“For the boys,” he said, “it's very impressive to see what they have done to the audience.”

Special correspondent Petra Krischok in Berlin contributed to this report.

