

MUSIC

On Feb. 7, the St. Thomas Boys' Choir (*Thomanerchor*), of the St. Thomas Church of Leipzig, Germany, the world's oldest and foremost boys' choir, performed in Washington, D.C. before an overflow audience at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception (the Basilica is the largest Roman Catholic Church in the Western Hemisphere).

Estimates of the crowd attending the free concert varied from 7,000 to 9,000, and at least half, if not more, of those in attendance were young people under the age of sixteen. For most of these, it was their first concert of Classical music. Sources close to the *Thomanerchor* reported that this was not only their best performance, but also the largest audience before which they have ever performed.

The concert was sponsored by the Committee for Excellence in Education through Music, of which the Schiller Institute is a member, in arrangement with Intermuse music agency, in collaboration with the Basilica. Inspired by the presence of the *Thomanerchor* in Wash-

ington, the Committee also sponsored a symposium at Howard University [SEE article, page 83].

During the week prior to the concert, the *Washington Post* had attempted to prevent both the concert and the symposium from taking place. The *Post* wrote 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." The *Post's* real concern was revealed one paragraph later: "The Institute has also sponsored events

## Thomanerchor Brings The Spirit of J.S. Bach To the Poor



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

*Listeners poured out into the aisles to hear the Thomanerchor present this historic free concert.*

addressing supposed crimes committed by the . . . Anti-Defamation League against the Black community."

The ideology behind the *Post's* attempt to "red-line" African-Americans out of contact with the *Thomanerchor* was exemplified by a Jan. 5, 1995 editorial by Lord William Rees-Mogg, in *The Times* of London, entitled, "It's The Elite Who Matter." Mogg stated that "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."

In contrast to the Rees-Mogg/*Post* notion of a "cognitive elite" destined to rule over the disadvantaged, the view of the concert organizers was that expressed by the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, who lived in the United States from 1892 to 1895: "It is to the poor that I turn for musical greatness. 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." This was also the perspective of the Brotherhood of the Common Life, the teaching order founded at the end of the Fourteenth century, which was dedicated to the education of the poor, an effort which contributed directly to the Renaissance of the Fifteenth century.

Leo Nestor, Music Director of the Basilica, succinctly characterized what was *really* occurring: a historic, once-in-a-lifetime event. "Seven thousand people exceeded the seating capacity of the Basilica . . . at a time access-

sible to families [4:00 p.m.—ed.], of which there were many, and classes of children, for whom many seats had been reserved. . . . In my fifteen years as music director at this national Catholic Church, I have never heard such wonderful music-making. In a world which . . . 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."

*Alan Ogden contributed the following two reports on this historic musical event.*

# Thomanerchor: A Moment of True Happiness

The concert given by the eighty boys and young men of the choir of the St. Thomas Church of Leipzig, Germany, was a precious and rare gift, the music of Johann Sebastian Bach and Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy as we have never heard it before. Under the direction of *Thomaskantor* Georg Christoph Biller, in their first U.S. tour, the *Thomanerchor*, as it is called in German, presented a program of eleven sacred works and three encores to repeated standing ovations.

The choir has an unbroken tradition, since its founding in 1212 in the eastern German city of Leipzig, and is nearly as old as the city itself. It is closely identified with the music of the two greatest composers of the Lutheran Confession: J.S. Bach, who was *Thomaskantor* there for twenty-seven years, and wrote many of his works for this choir, and Mendelssohn, a native of Leipzig, who was the primary reviver of Bach's works. Their whole choral program was sung *a capella*.

In the two interludes during which the choir rested—a normal feature of a concert of this length (over two hours)—instrumental music was provided by the Maryland 'Cello Ensemble. During the first interlude, they performed the A minor Violin Concerto by Antonio Vivaldi. Ten-year-old violinist Emanuel Borowsky played the solo with a beautiful consistency and a presence which delighted especially the many children in the audience. Ensemble director Cecylia Barczyk played the 'cello solo in the second interlude, an Adagio by Tommaso Albinoni, a contemporary of Bach and Vivaldi.

These reflective instrumental interludes seemed to set off, and enhance, the power and impact of the complex contrapuntal choral music. The sustained and unified effect of the choir's performance—a sort of choral guided missile—, with the attention of the singers riveted on their *Kantor* and their minds cooperating with the



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

*"Their mastery caused the listener to experience, with joy, his mind being freed to think."*

minds of Bach and Mendelssohn, had an impact on the audience so uplifting, that it was fairly described as *overwhelming*. The works presented were primarily "double choral" works, with eight-part counterpoint, with the *Thomanerchor* singers divided into eight independent "voices": two choirs, standing side by side, each with soprano, alto, tenor, and bass sections. The resulting performance conveyed the profound antiphonal effect of the presentation of a dialogue between man and the Creator.

The Classical principle in art and music is the creation, by the composer and the performers who share his creative passion and understanding, of insight in the minds of the audience, into the power of their own minds to think and create. This is done through paradox and metaphor, and transmits a higher, unspoken *idea*. The passionate and beautiful presentation by the *Thomanerchor* was true to this Classical principle. The individual member of the audience was enabled, and actually *caused*, to experience the kind of happi-



EIRNS/Stuart Lewis

*"Double choral" arrangement: two choirs, side by side, each with soprano, alto, tenor, and bass sections.*

ness and clarity of thought which brings out “the better angel” of his or her nature. The precision and mastery of vocal differentiation with which the boys sang, caused the individual in the audience to experience, with joy, his mind being freed to think. As one high school student observed: “The way they sing, I could *understand*, even though I didn’t understand most of the German words!”

### Ordering Principle

The ordering of the selections in the program contributed to the powerful effect of the concert. Not only were the specifically liturgical compositions placed in the program in much the same way that they are situated in the order of a liturgy, but from the first Mendelssohn piece, *Warum toben die Heiden?* (“Why do the heathen rage?”) to the final “Amen!” encore, but the entire program

diately in this first motet. The fine and precise phrasing with which they sing, in the context of the antiphonal counterpoint of this repertoire, was a hallmark of the entire performance.

The next two pieces, both settings by Mendelssohn, of the liturgical *Kyrie Eleison* and *Gloria*, implore God’s mercy on mankind. The answer to the prayer was in the next selection, the magnificent Bach motet *Fürchte dich nicht* (“Fear not for I am with thee”), a setting of Isaiah 41:10. The promise of help is proclaimed by Bach and his choir, in the insistent “I am thy God. . . . Be not dismayed. . . . I strengthen thee.”—phrases brightly illumined by the choir, and cornerstones of the full fugue which drew the audience in. The fugal section of this motet revealed the choir’s full power to sustain an idea, through increasing contrapuntal tension, a driving rhythm, and the ability to sudden-

1969 as part of a requiem for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which is a setting of the Beatitudes; and a motet [*O grosser, unbegreiflicher Gott* (“O great, unfathomable God”)] written in 1994 by Siegfried Thiele and dedicated to the *Thomanerchor* and its *Kantor* Georg Christoph Biller.

The program was capped by three more Mendelssohn pieces: a German Sanctus (“Holy, Holy, Holy”); *Um unser Sünden willen* (“For the sake of our sins”); and *Denn er hat seinen Engeln befohlen über dir* (“For He shall give His angels charge over thee”). The encores included one selection in English, “Alleluia: Glory Be to the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,” a demanding piece with a quick tempo, which the choristers clearly love to sing; the widely known Seventeenth-century chorale *Lobe dem Herren* (“Praise to the Lord, the Almighty”), which in its English translation is a well-known hymn; and finally, a short and spirited chorus on “Amen.”

A further word concerning the musicality of these boys, which lay behind the impact of this concert: The very precise phrasing of this choir gave many who heard it the impression of having heard polyphony as it is meant to be, as one audience member remarked, “for the first time.” The enormous differentiation in volumes in which they are skilled—even used dramatically for the poetic differentiations between individual words or individual syllables—brings a clarity to the ideas in this great music which often would be missed by performers, and therefore by audiences. The *Thomanerchor’s* separation of the vocal lines, through articulation and phrasing, was outstanding, and yet, the voices blended in a way unique to a boys’ choir. The freshness of the young bass and tenor voices so closely matches the qualities of the boy sopranos and altos, only a few years younger, that often one could not tell whether a particular entrance was an alto or a tenor one. Herr Biller used this to advantage, unifying the choir as he conducted even the individual consonants in the “vertical” passages, where several different voice lines sing a section of the text together—for example, in the great cadences at the end of the Bach motets.



Ten-year-old violinist Emmanuel Borowsky performs the Vivaldi *A minor Violin Concerto*.

successively traced out the Christian history of salvation from sin and death, including, as the compositions followed from one to the next, Christ’s teaching, Crucifixion, and Resurrection.

The text of the opening Mendelssohn motet is Psalm 2, proclaiming the power of the Lord over “the kings and judges of the earth” who defy and set themselves against the will of God. This piece rises quickly to an intense, repeated, and sharply accented “*du sollst sie mit eisernen Zepter zerschlagen*” (“thou shalt break them with a rod of iron”). The *Thomanerchor’s* excellence was apparent imme-

ly step up the tempo. Truly, fear was vanquished in this motet, a high point of the program, and more than a few in the audience felt tears of joy rising in their eyes.

Two other Bach motets were powerfully sung, *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf* (“The Spirit lifts us from our weakness”) from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, and *Jauchzet dem Herrn alle Welt* (“Make a joyful noise, all ye lands”), a setting of Psalm 100. The middle of the program included two works from living Leipzig composers—*Drei Seligspreisungen* (“Three blessings”) composed by Volcker Braeutigam in

# The *Thomanerchor* Is a Culture of Education

Because I am a speaker of German, I was privileged to serve as one of several full-time chaperones, for a group of nine *Thomaner* singers during their entire stay in Washington. I emphasize “privileged,” because the experience was not only an opportunity to host these accomplished children and young men, it was a rare opportunity to get a glimpse inside what makes this unique and superlative Classical musical institution “tick.”

As Americans, we are not in general accustomed to the quality of sustained and pervasive performance orientation which shines through every moment of the collective life of this choir. I was so astonished at some of the practices and institutional culture in which this group is steeped, that I felt myself in the presence of something nearly outside my nearly fifty-two years’ experience, which includes a fairly extensive musical background.

The performance of music in a manner true to the spirit and intentions of J.S. Bach, and of the spirit of Leipzig native and Bach-revivalist Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, is the understood, shared mission of the teachers, officials, musicians, and singers of this institution, from *Thomaskantor* Maestro Biller, down to the newest singers, nine and ten years old, in the *Chor*.

There is also something quite characteristically German about the *modus operandi* of this school-and-choir, which is distinguishable from the individualistic and informal approaches more characteristic of Americans. It was recently reported, for example, that university students in Germany demonstrating against the vicious austerity gripping that country, wrote on their placards, “Germany without education is like Kuwait without oil.” To be a Classical choir in Germany, is to be a participant in one of the great traditions of Renaissance culture. And, of course, the choir is *old*. To be the world’s oldest continuous musical institution, to be the living representatives of a cultural effort unbroken for 786 years, is to have an historical identity and institutional memory in a way virtually impossible in America. Maestro Biller, for instance, is

identified as “the sixteenth *Thomaskantor* since Bach.”

Dr. Charles Borowsky, in introducing the *Thomanerchor*’s Washington, D.C. performance, said, that in a sense, we will hear angels sing. Maestro Biller, also speaking briefly (in German) before the concert, humorously dissented, saying that although some of his singers may be angels (“*Engel*”), he thinks others may be rascals (“*Bengel*”). He also remarked that the important thing about the *Thomanerchor* is not merely that they have sung for eight hundred years, but

strong discipline here,” some are tempted to think. “Why are my children so fussy, when these boys, hardly any older than my children, are so far away from home and so calm?” think others. To answer these questions, you must consider the opportunities given the mind, and the discipline within the mind, in an environment of education. What you see, when you see these boys, is not arbitrary or harsh discipline, but rather, a group which has been educated, through the art of their music.

For example, as a friar toured the



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*“In many ways, they are boys like any others. But, because of their education and the dedication of their teachers, they have brought thousands of Americans a moment of passion and happiness.”*

that all during that eight hundred years, they have sung the praise of God. He said that it is important to give this concert in the capital city of the United States, because Bach and political power have come together in one place. So, Maestro Biller, himself once a *Thomanerchor* singer, suggested some interesting paradoxes, about how this very-highest musical presentation is produced.

Everyone in the audience of a *Thomanerchor* concert notices immediately the quiet, dignified, concentrated, and patient behavior of the singers, as they prepare for and sing their long programs of the most demanding music. “There must be some very strict or

boy singers through the historic monastery in which they were housed during their Washington, D.C. stay, the meanings of the religious symbols and history were alive and accessible to the students, because, as part of their choral rehearsals, they “study texts” of the great sacred music which is the heart of their schooling, for two hours *per* day. As young artists, they understood quickly the paintings, panels, sculptures, mosaics, and stained glass windows, as coherent with their own experience and part of their own heritage. Some were reading and translating the Latin inscriptions for their younger fellow choristers, and others were clarify-

ing historical or theological points for their fellows. As their two tour buses carried the choir and their German teachers by the Lincoln Memorial, and I explained that Lincoln was the national leader who “ended slavery in America,” the boys cheered vigorously.

When one of the men on tour with them wants to call them to attention, one word is sufficient: A booming “SILENTIUM!” When the groups are to divide to the lodgings for the night, the boys themselves prepare the lists of groups in advance, balancing each group between older, middle, and younger boys. When the lists are read off by a teacher, once through the names (last names only) is sufficient, even in a cold outdoor setting. When the chorus gathers for a concert, the roll is taken by the boys themselves for their section. When a younger child begins to act up, there is no big dispute, only a clear statement of standards of behavior and a reminder of “the way things are done in the *Thomanerchor*” (and have been done, for centuries). The details of life on tour are no problem for this group. High morale, *esprit de corps*, and self-discipline are hallmarks of their method. Accustomed to seeing each other as friends and collaborators, with whom they live and work, each boy is confident who will wake them, and that they will not be rushed or late. The older ones make sure the younger are in bed on time, before they go off to talk or play cards. Each knows how to arrive on time for breakfast. No one would think of leaving the table, without clearing it. The boys are unfailingly polite and friendly to their hosts. Delays or disruptions in schedules are greeted with good humor and a degree of patience which would be astonishing in an adult. I realized, that they are not newcomers to what it takes to make music. They know how to organize themselves, to minimize distraction, in order to maximize their musical concentration. The details have been honed

over the centuries.

At breakfast, I asked the boys about their concerts. I said, have you performed all over Germany? “Yes,” they answered. I pressed the point: “Other countries, too? The Czech Republic?” Yes, they answered, and Poland, Austria, Italy, Greece, England, France, and Switzerland. Have you performed in Sweden or any other Scandinavian countries? I asked. “No,” they replied, “The last time we sang in Scandinavia was in the ’thirties or ’forties; I think 1938.” “Oh?” I replied, “that was when you guys were really young!” But, they failed to get the joke. I realized, that they think that everything the *Thomanerchor* has done, *they* have done. They understand themselves as being that historical institution.



Maestro Biller presents his students. Some may be “angels,” others “rascals”—but their performance shows their mastery of the intellectual qualities achieved through “Excellence in Education.”

### Musical Preparation

When asked how the incoming nine-year-olds are screened, the boys said, “it is those children who are most attracted to singing, who are chosen.” Traditionally, the *Thomanerchor* boys are drawn from the Leipzig local area, but they explained that since German reunification, they are now drawing from the Munich area and from other parts of Germany. Roughly half the current singers are Leipzig-area natives. They have accepted one boy from Switzerland.

The boys average about a year out of singing during their voice change, when they lose their status as a member of the alto or soprano sections and cease being

able to sing at all, and they count the days until they can rejoin the rehearsals and performances as a tenor or bass. Every student at the St. Thomas school is required to learn to play an instrument, and most study piano. Each boy, in addition to their regular academic courses, studies choral singing and rehearses either in small groups or as a whole chorus, hours *per* day. They have only one hour each *per* week of private voice coaching, and this time is generally spent in singing exercises. They said that although it is known to happen, as part of the individual voice instruction, it is unusual for any of the boys to work on *lieder*. They are choral specialists, and stick to the choral work. They do not generally sing parts which are not their

own, they explained, but master their own part. One American teacher asked them, “What if one of the boys wanted to branch out into individual singing, say, into opera?” The answer was, “He could only do that if he got permission from the *Kantor* first, and then he would have to take a test, but before he could take the test, he would have to have the permission of the *Kantor*.” The *Kantor*, for his part, is a figure of great respect and authority, who apparently speaks to the boys only on the most important musical and performance matters, and who commands total attention simply by speaking.

The preparation for a single concert,

apart from all the educational, musical, voice training, rehearsal, and logistical work, which by the time of the concert date has all been finished, begins hours in advance, with attention to proper eating (not too much before the concert), and the final stage before getting dressed and getting to the concert hall: “*Schlafruhe*,” when all the boys sleep. This is an example of the dedication to excellence: They set aside an hour and a half to two hours for sleeping before all concerts. The reasoning, as explained to me by one of the teachers, is this: The singing is improved by sleeping, therefore, since we want the singing to be as good as possible, obviously, the boys must sleep. There is no dispute about this. The boys obey this rule: they agree; they cooperate; they sleep. Below age fifteen, it is mandatory. Ages fifteen and above, sleep is recommended, but rest and quiet, minimally, is required.

### Concert Preparation

Next comes the sound check, at least in the very difficult acoustical environment of the National Shrine, which is an enormous, cavernous echo-box, as all very large churches tend to be. This is a process of singing bits of the concert pieces a few hours in advance of the concert, with one of the older singers functioning as conductor, as an understudy, and the *Kantor* listening from various points in the church, and, by bits and degrees, instructing the student conductor and the singers on how the performance is to be adapted to overcome the problems presented by the acoustics. The adjustments are complex, but the amount of time required to complete them successfully is also known in advance. The process involves changing the tempi to the exact ones appropriate to the acoustic response of the space, the echoes, and the “layering” of sound. This is for the benefit of both the audience, and the singers, who will be presented with intonation problems resulting from the changes in pitch as the echoing sound comes back to their ears. It involves adopting certain approaches to tone quality, demanded by the specific environment, varying perhaps from piece to piece, as well as carefully adjusting the balance between the eight sections.

Then, the *Kantor* speaks quietly, at length, with the assembled choir about their place in history, their responsibility, the history of the *Thomanerchor*, their relationship to the audience, and the circumstances surrounding the specific concert.

The next stage is to assemble in a warm-up room, for the long wait until concert time. The room available was too small for such a large chorus, but they handled the situation beautifully. They spoke quietly with each other and with the several adults who travel with them. Some read schoolbooks or novels. Some of the younger ones carefully studied their complex musical scores. It was hot and crowded, without enough seats, but calm and concentration prevailed. Someone had provided inviting large bowls of delicious-looking red punch, with ice floating in it, in these hot and stuffy conditions. Yet, because of the level of preparation by the chorus, not even the youngest drank any punch (it would have an adverse effect on their singing). Instead, some bottled water, kept at room temperature, was passed around, and some drank about a half cup of it. As the brief vocal warm-up was about to start, those who had medical problems, a cold, a cough, a stuffed-up nose, a sore throat, or a cut finger, were treated by the small *Thomanerchor* staff.

### Focussed Concentration

The Maestro ran the chorus through some exercises, for a period not exceeding ten minutes, primarily designed, it was explained to me, to properly focus the vowels just before the performance. These exercises, for the most part, seemed German-language specific. When the singing began in the warm-up room, there was no commotion. It turns out, that with no specific last-minute instructions needed, all eighty boys had entered the room earlier in the exact order needed, for them to be in their own place in their own section! A little special upper-body physical stretching and posture exercises were done, led by the Maestro, to refresh the mind and body for the coming performance. A small time was then spent in last-minute focussing of the choral presentation, and a little more work on the tempi.

The work is very, very efficient, owing to the high level of musical education they have accomplished. In a sense, they are working on the accumulated experience and institutional memory of the better part of a millennium. The conductor will refer to a very advanced musical concept, which the boys already understand, such as the idea of “quietly concentrated.” The chorus will respond instantly, correcting the phrase as the Maestro wants it, according to his quick reference—no long explanations. And, it stays corrected—the chorus does not fall back to a lower level. They are excellent, and build very quickly on their excellence. I had the feeling, once again, that I was witnessing something magnificent and unusual, whose existence derives from a long, accumulated, and concentrated process of perfection, and dedication.

Finally, the Maestro speaks again with his students. He does not condescend, or doubt. He talks to the singers with respect, as artistic collaborators with him in a great project. He speaks quietly about their hopes for a successful performance. He reminds them, that from this moment on, until the end of the concert, not one word will be spoken by any singer. “The only sound we will hear is the sound of your feet walking through the church to the risers.” He thanks the boys for their effort, and their “toil.” Then, without a word, they walk through the lower church and up the stairs to their places in the sanctuary.

Of course, these are actual boys, living in the same reality and decade of historical crisis other boys around the world are in. Some are from broken homes. Some are wearing earrings. Some are lonely. They are surrounded by hostile political and cultural forces. In many ways, they are boys like any others. But, because of the passion of the Classical composers who gave them their compositions, and because of the education and dedication of those who teach them, they have, through their music, brought many thousands of Americans, this month, that experience of a moment of passion and happiness which, by setting a standard, will help us to win the battle for “Excellence in Education.”

—Alan Ogden