J. S. BACH:
Lessons Learned from His Life and Music

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Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) is a towering figure in music history. His compositions have been studied and revered by countless instrumentalists, keyboardists, and singers over the past 300 years. His life and work have been thoroughly researched and documented.[2]

Bach's last name appears on the exterior southeast corner of Reynolds Auditorium, which is located on the south side of Cowden Hall, the music building on the campus of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Adjacent to Reynolds Auditorium is the Bowld Music Library addition that was opened in 1992, which houses the library as well as the practice rooms and one classroom.

I believe that this placement of Bach's name is symbolic of several things. First, Reynolds Auditorium is where students perform vocal, instrumental, keyboard, and choral music. Second, the Bowld Music Library is where students study and research in a substantial church music and worship library. On the bottom floor of Bowld are the practice rooms where students develop their applied keyboard and vocal skills. Bach's music reaches into each of these three areas.

It is also significant that Bach's name faces Roberts Theological Library. This library is next to the Memorial Building, which houses Scarborough Hall where theological courses are taught. Bach's life as a church musician reveals a deep connection to faith and Lutheran doctrine.

Furthermore, it is no coincidence that Bach and Luther's names are side by side on Cowden Hall. Bach's personal library included no less than 112 theological and homiletic titles. In *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, John Eliot Gardiner notes Bach's lifelong reverence for Luther's

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[2]For example, see Christoph Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach: The Learned Musician* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2000) and other works cited in this article.

writings in his personal and professional capacities.[3]

I remember a conversation I had with a Southwestern colleague years ago. We were talking about Bach and his influence on church music. He lamented that our school had performed so little of this great composer's choral music. We hear his keyboard music frequently from our piano majors. Our guitar majors play transcriptions of his work in their applied studies. Our voice majors sing a few cantata and passion arias. Yet, his choral music is much more challenging to program.

Nevertheless, there are still lessons that can be gleaned from his music for today's church musicians. In the following narrative, I will first give a brief account of my personal "journey" with Bach's music, followed by nine lessons I have learned from Bach's life and music.

MY BACH JOURNEY

My first exposure to Bach's music came through his works for keyboard, specifically Invention No. 13 in A minor. I played this piece in my early years as a piano student. I started piano later than most, at age 15. The two-part counterpoint kept my mind and fingers in knots for weeks. As I progressed in skill, I eventually played a portion of the French Suite in E minor and then the familiar Prelude and Fugue in C minor.

During my college years, I encountered Bach's music for voices. In my senior year, our college choir performed the Kyrie and Gloria from the *B Minor Mass* with organ. Also, I was recruited to sing the motet *Jesu, meine Freude* in English with two church choirs for Lenten programs at two churches. Later, in graduate school, I performed two Bach arias for master's- and doctoral-level recitals.

In my career as a collegiate choral director, I have since programmed Bach's motet *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*. The Southwestern Singers learned it during the fall of 2016 and performed it on our spring tour in 2017. The motet is a wonderful, yet ambitious piece for double choir. The opening two sections retain the double choir format and then the two choirs join together for the closing fugue.

I have also programmed Bach's only motet for single chorus, *Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden* with two different choirs. The first time was with a college choir in Georgia. We performed the closing "alleluia" section for a conference and later performed the entire motet for our spring concert.

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[3]John Eliot Gardiner, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 154–55.

Bach's music kept the choir on its toes as it proved to be quite challenging for them. One of the parents of a choir member remarked that she was nervous for us to hold it together. She was not alone. I revisited this motet years later and enjoyed teaching it to another choir.[4]

In March 2020, I was planning to present Bach's Cantata No. 4, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, in a combined choir program, but the concert was cancelled due to the COVID-19 epidemic. Since then, I have programmed two cantatas (BWV 61 and 113) for concerts with the Southwestern Singers and Gambrell Street Baptist Church's Sanctuary Choir.

Most recently, my journey with Bach has led to performances of the *St. Matthew Passion* and *Magnificat* as both chorister and soloist with a professional choral group. I was also invited to sing with the Crescendo Bach project for Cantata Nos. 4 and 140. In the same year, I also performed Cantata 191 as a soloist with a youth chorale in Louisiana. Therefore, I fondly refer to 2023 as my "Bach Year."

In *A Listener's Guide to Bach's Choral Music*, Gordon Jones remarks that "listening to this [Bach's] music has never been easier. Everything Bach wrote has been recorded many times."[5] Yet, it is typically more difficult to find Bach's choral music performed live. However, it is even more challenging to program Bach's choral music.

Each time that I have programmed Bach's choral music it has proved to be demanding for the choir to learn it. The harmonic language and the counterpoint present complexities for the average choral singer. Most of his music is in German and that presents yet another layer of difficulty. The conductor must also navigate the historic instruments required to present some of the choral music. Many of today's recordings by early music groups will often perform the works at Baroque pitch (A=A415). However, it is still worth the effort to sing Bach's vocal and choral music.

The following narrative outlines nine lessons from Bach's music for today's church musician. Most of these lessons are based on personal experiences from twenty years of teaching in Christian higher education and thirty years of music ministry.

[4]If you are going to go through the trouble of learning a piece this difficult, you need to make sure you can perform it several times to make it worth the investment of time.

[5]Gordon Jones, *Bach's Choral Music: A Listener's Guide* (New York: Amadeus Press, 2009), ix.

LESSON NO. 1: I AM FIRST AND FOREMOST A CHURCH MUSICIAN.

My strongly held conviction is that God uniquely calls individuals to serve in music and worship ministry. For those called to such, it is essential to remember that—although you may do many things—you are first and foremost a church musician.

The study of Bach's life reveals a rich career of five distinguishable periods that roughly correspond to positions that he held, most of which related to church music.[6] His first period consists of his first two positions at Arnstadt (1703–7) and Mühlhausen (1707–8) as organist. His second period includes his position at Weimar (1708–17) as court organist then as concert master of the orchestra. His third period coincides with his position at the court of Cöthen (1717–23) as capellmeister and director of chamber music. Although he wrote the bulk of his keyboard music during this time, Bukofzer states that "Bach's chamber music must be regarded as the highest manifestation of the Cöthen period."[7] His fourth period of his development begins with his position as cantor at St. Thomas in Leipzig (1723–50) and closes with the last year of composition of his cantatas (1745).[8] Bukofzer proclaims that "Bach's choral compositions reach their absolute peak in the four monumental works of the Leipzig period: the two Passions, according to St. John and St. Matthew, the *Magnificat*, and the Great Mass in b minor."[9] His fifth and last period culminates with his most mature works, including the Canonic Variations for organ on the chorale *Vom Himmel hoch, the Musical Offering*, and the *Art of the Fugue*.[10]

In *Sacred Choral Music Repertoire: Insights for Conductors*, Tim Sharp states that Bach was referred to by Paul A. Pisk "as the center of the crossroads of the development in Western Civilization."[11] Sharp asserts that Bach's compositions were always written for a specific purpose. Much of the keyboard music was written for a pedagogical purpose. His chamber music was written for the entertainment of royalty. His sacred choral music

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[6]Manfred F. Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era: From Monteverdi to Bach* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1947), 271.

[7]Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era*, 288.

[8]Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era*, 291.

[9]Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era*, 294.

[10]Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era*, 300.

[11]Paul A. Pisk, "Bach in Our Time," *Bach: The Quarterly Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute* 4, no. 3 (July 1973): 13. Quoted by Tim Sharp, *Sacred Choral Music Repertoire: Insights for Conductors* (Chicago: GIA Publications, 2020), 265.

was written for the immediate needs of his own church music activity.[12] For church musicians like myself, Bach's choral music for the church is essential repertoire to know and study.

Bach composed his choral cantatas for the purposes of the weekly liturgy. These works served the needs of worship for that time. Gordon Jones states that "it makes good sense to view his choral music as inseparably bound to the needs of the church."[13] The cantatas represent the bulk of his work. In an article on Bach's cantatas, Pat Flannagan remarks that musicians have long marveled at the virtuosity and variety evidenced in the compositions of Bach:

> Perhaps nowhere within the *oeuvre* of Bach is this more obvious than in the cantatas, with over two hundred extant works available for investigation. In this large corpus of generically similar works can be discovered almost any compositional device that existed in the Baroque era, of which Bach is often seen as the artistic culmination. Despite some disclaimants, … Bach must be viewed as a church musician and his cantata compositions should therefore be viewed as the focal point of his work. In no way does this diminish the significance of his other compositions, but serves to emphasize the requirements of Bach's numerous jobs as a church musician.[14]

The further significance of Bach's cantatas is expressed by John Eliot Gardner. He describes the cantatas in his Bach Cantata Pilgrimage 2000 Tour that celebrated the birth of the founder of one of the world's great religions and the 250th anniversary of Bach's death by stating, "What more appropriate way to do so than via the work of the greatest musical advocate, with performances of all the cantatas concentrated within a single year? Bach's Lutheran faith is encapsulated in this extraordinary music. It carries a universal language of hope that can touch anybody regardless of culture, religious denomination or music knowledge. It springs from the depths of the human psyche and not from some topical or local creed."[15]

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[12]Sharp, *Sacred Choral Music Repertoire*, 265.

[13]Jones, *Bach's Choral Music*, 17.

[14]Pat Flannagan, "*Selected Examples of Choreinbau* in the Cantatas of J. S. Bach," *Choral Journal* 45, no. 5 (December 2000): 25.

[15]Gardiner, *Bach*, 15.

Likewise, Gordon Jones states that "it makes good sense to view his choral music as inseparably bound to the needs of the church."[16] The cantatas represent the bulk of his work, but there were other significant works, also not the least of which were the two passions.

The importance of church music within his overall repertoire can be traced back to his musical beginnings, which included a post as a choral scholar at St. Michael's School in Lüneburg. During this time, Bach became well versed in liturgical plainsong and polyphonic music. As Christoph Wolff emphasizes, "Since the rich trove of Lutheran hymns, sung with or without organ accompaniment or set polyphonically, played such a critical role in the music and educational practice of the German lands, Sebastian [Bach] early on became intimately familiar with this vast and varied collection of tunes and sacred poetry."[17] Likewise, Bukofzer describes Bach's devotion to sacred music: "The more Bach progressed in years, the more he tried to make his music subservient to the liturgy …."[18]

As church musicians, we face a variety of performance demands. Therefore, I firmly believe that, as we hone our skills, we should perform as much as possible as many different types and styles of music. We should develop our skills and stretch ourselves as musicians. Performing classical music is a wonderful opportunity. But we must remember that we are church musicians first and foremost.

LESSON NO. 2: BACH'S VOCAL MUSIC TAUGHT ME HOW TO SING MELISMATIC MUSIC.

As mentioned above, Bach's vocal music is demanding. In fact, it is often criticized for its difficulty. John Eliot Gardiner states that "Not all Bach's melodies are singer-friendly in the way, that say, Purcell or Schubert's are."[19] Wolff reports that Bach "was accused of requiring that the throats of his singers have the same facility that his own fingers had at the keyboard."[20] In defense of Bach, Gardiner counters that "Bach understood the physiology of the voice far more than he is given credit for and made it very much part of his expression."[21]

In my own vocal training, I encountered my first Bach solo aria as

[16]Jones, *Bach's Choral Music*, 17.
[17]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 43.
[18]Bukofzer, *Music in the Baroque Era*, 293.
[19]Gardiner, *Bach*, 3.
[20]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 470.
[21]Gardiner, *Bach*, 314.

a graduate student by studying "Frohe Hirten, eilt, ach eilet" from the *Christmas Oratorio*. It is a highly melismatic (multiple notes per syllable) aria with continuo and flute obbligato from the second cantata of the oratorio. The exuberant and agile vocal line is meant to portray haste on the part of the shepherds so that they can see the Christ child and share their joyful expressions to "freshen hearts dejected." This aria is satisfying to sing but it is vocally and musically demanding. A few years later, I was assigned "Erwäge" from the *St. John Passion*. This is an extremely taxing da capo aria for tenor with long phrases, a high tessitura, and relentless melismatic passages at a slower tempo. I was fortunate enough to perform both arias with continuo accompaniment on recitals.

As a singer who enjoys performing Baroque music, Bach's music is vocally satisfying. It requires solid technique and great sensitivity to German diction. I would argue that Bach's vocal music challenges us to develop agility skills that, in turn, helps us nurture legato singing as well.

LESSON NO. 3: BACH'S MUSIC TAUGHT ME HOW TO LEARN MUSIC EFFICIENTLY.

Imagine this scenario. It's almost 7:30 on a Wednesday evening and the church's Sanctuary Choir rehearsal is about to start. Choir members are still gathering in the loft and rushing from their previous activities. The director takes a moment to look at a new email on his smartphone. He has been asked to learn an additional solo for Saturday's concert with a professional chorus. He panics for a moment, puts his phone away, gathers himself, and proceeds with the rehearsal. The rehearsal goes well and the director heads home for the night. It is now 9:30 and the director sits at his piano to read through the new solo. Anticipation turns to panic as he discovers what is on the page. He had spent three to four months preparing another solo for the same concert. Now he turns his focus on this newly-assigned aria to learn in less than three days.

The work was Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* for double chorus. The tenor had learned all of choir 1's tenor parts and the corresponding solo recitative and aria. The newly assigned recitative and aria was assigned to a tenor in choir 2. The original plan was to perform the work at Baroque pitch (A=A415). However, the director emailed the choir on Wednesday afternoon, the day before the first choral/orchestral rehearsal, and informed them that due to the unavailability of specific wind instruments they would have to now perform the work at modern pitch levels (A=A440).

Once the original soloist read that email, he reneged on his assigned aria.

How did the story end? The singer spent every spare moment listening to the continuo accompaniment line from the aria. He listened to the melodic line against the bass line over and over to grasp the counterpoint of the aria. Nevertheless, the Thursday orchestral rehearsal for soloists did not go well with the newly assigned aria. The tension in the room was noticeable to all. The conductor acknowledged that the soloist was sight reading the aria, which garnered some sympathy. That night on the drive home, the tenor listened to the aria's accompaniment for an hour allowing the melodic line and continuo part to be etched into his mind and ear. The Friday rehearsal went better. At some point, the tenor singing the Evangelist role offered the weary tenor an easy way out by offering to sing the newly assigned aria. Now the singer felt even more emboldened to learn and perform the brand-new aria.

Saturday's performance arrives and the concert forces are gathered. The tenor stands to sing "Geduld! Geduld!" and he performed it as if he had been studying it for months. The concert review described the singer as "a pleasantly sinewy tenor." The singer was relieved to read the concert review, especially since the reviewer was oblivious to the circumstances leading to the performance.

The above scenario actually happened to me in March 2023. I have never worked so hard, so fast, to learn something so difficult. Years ago, I read this admonition by Judith Malina: "Tremble: your whole life is a rehearsal for the moment you are in now." Singers are the only musicians that perform on a self-contained instrument. Everything we experience—stress, emotion, and fatigue—is also experienced by our instrument. Our training and technique must rise above the stress of the moment and allow us to perform at our very best that we can achieve in that moment. As I learned from this experience, Bach's vocal music keeps us on our toes at all times.

There is an abundance of drama in the aria "Geduld! Geduld!" The doleful viola da gamba and continuo introduction anticipates the peaceful accompaniment under the word Geduld ("patience") that quickly gives way to jagged rhythms and wide leaps under *Wenn mich falsche Zungen stechen* ("when false tongues pierce"). This juxtaposition throughout the aria displays forbearance amidst suffering.

Studying Bach's music for decades teaches musicians how to learn music efficiently. Everything relates back to the bass line. We utilize everything

we understand about music theory, harmony, and counterpoint to digest his vocal music. I believe that the reason we continue to study classical music in our schools is so that we will cultivate our ability to learn difficult music. Skill follows drill. God does not honor the path of least resistance.

LESSON NO. 4: BACH'S KEYBOARD MUSIC TAUGHT ME HOW TO PRACTICE.

As mentioned, in my early life, I studied piano for about ten years. My keyboard studies included Bach's Two-Part Invention in A Minor, Fantasia in C Minor, Prelude and Fugue in B-flat Major, Prelude and Fugue in C Minor, and two movements from the French Suite No. 2 in C Minor. As a vocal major in college and seminary, I nevertheless pushed myself to learn as much as I could about playing piano. Bach's keyboard music represents a significant portion of my piano repertoire. I was never a great keyboard performer, but it helped me develop functional skills so that I can teach myself vocal and choral repertoire. I have a much deeper understanding of texture, counterpoint, and harmony because of Bach's keyboard music. I utilize my keyboard skills every single day as an applied voice teacher and choral director.

For Bach, his organ position in Arnstadt afforded him much time to practice. Wolff describes Bach's time from 1703 to 1707 as "circumstances that bordered on the ideal."[22] He continues, "In an economically secure and socially agreeable situation, Bach enjoyed an extremely light workload as organist of the New Church, leaving him time for practicing, studying, and composing." He satisfied what Wolff describes as his "own strong yearning to advance."[23] He invested the time to develop and master his keyboard technique.

You must take time to hone your skill. If I could tell a teenager who has been called into music ministry anything, I would plead with them to learn piano as early as they can and do not give up. As soon as I revealed that God had called me into music ministry, my minister of music told me to start taking piano immediately. I kept up piano in college and throughout graduate studies at seminary. I use it every single day, but it requires commitment.

[22]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 92.
[23]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 92.

LESSON NO. 5: BACH'S CHORAL MUSIC DEMONSTRATES HOW TO CONNECT CHORAL MUSIC TO OUR FAITH.

Choral music occupies a significant place in the music of Bach. His compositional output includes two hundred surviving sacred cantatas. Approximately one hundred additional cantatas have been lost. Cantatas are usually based on a German chorale or hymn tune, and therefore Bach's choral cantatas bear witness to his focus on the music for his church. In Leipzig, Bach's cantatas were interwoven in the overall worship liturgy. The subject matter of the cantata was often linked to the theme of the weekly Gospel reading, which immediately preceded the cantata.

The following narrative was included in the program notes for a recent choral concert featuring a Bach's cantata *Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut* (1724) and illustrates its liturgical purpose:

> The textual basis of the cantata … is the eponymous chorale from 1588 by the theologian Bartholomäus Ringwaldt (1530–1599); the melody dates from the same time, but its composer is unknown. The contextual relationship between the cantata text and the gospel reading for the Sunday (Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, Luke 18: 9–14) consists in the recognition of one's own sinfulness and the acceptance by Jesus, which is the particular focus of movements 5 and 6.[24]

The opening movement is a simple prayer to Jesus and set as a choral fantasia with sparse scoring, just two oboes joining with the strings and continuo. The first violin is the single thread running through the movement forming what Julian Mincham describes as "doleful counterpoint against the choral entries that accentuate the ceaseless sadness of the lonely sinner."[25] The second movement is an alto aria that features a three-voice texture between the alto, unison violins, and the continuo. The text asks for compassion but also provides a sense of optimism. The bass aria that follows is in a major mode and set to a lilting 12/8 rhythm with two oboes that portray a pastoral atmosphere.[26] The bass continues in the fourth

[24]Sven Hiemke, Foreword to Johann Sebastian Bach, *Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gu*t, BWV 113, ed. Reinhold Kubik, trans. David Kosviner (Stuttgart: Carus-Verlag, 1983), 4.

[25]Julian Mincham, "The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach: A Listener and Student Guide," accessed October 10, 2024, https://www.jsbachcantatas.com/documents/chapter-12-bwv-113/.

[26]Hiemke, Foreword, 4.

movement, which features interpolations of recitative and articulates the principle of God's healing words and the joy penitents may receive from it. The fifth movement is a tenor aria with an effervescent flute obbligato highlighting the text that communicates that Jesus calls to us and forgives us. The tenor recitative that follows conveys a plea for forgiveness since Satan has placed a yoke of sin upon us ("break it, that I may return to a state of grace and childlike innocence"). The seventh movement is a soprano/alto duet depicting a prayer that is not so much an expression of refined reflection as one of breathless urgency symbolized by the seemingly endless melismas in the vocal lines. Mincham describes the closing chorale as one that reiterates the substance of prayer that underpins the entire cantata: "heal, wash, and fortify me as I depart this world."[27] The sinner has been warned and chastised, and his prayers for strength and healing are matters of seriousness.

This cantata serves as a wonderful introduction to Bach's choral music. The two choral movements serve as the bookends of the cantata and are both homophonic. Therefore, the choral parts are not that challenging aside from the German language. The most demanding music occurs in the arias and the duet. The bass and tenor arias call for long phrases, melismatic passages, and a high tessitura. And all the text calls for faith in Christ.

Gardiner argues that even non-believers acknowledge Bach's faith. He quotes the Hungarian conductor György Kurtág:

> Consciously, I am certainly an atheist, but I do not say it out loud, because if I look at Bach, I cannot be an atheist. Then I have to accept the way he believed. His music never stops praying. And how can I get closer if I look at him from the outside? I do not believe in the Gospels in a literal fashion, but a Bach fugue has the Crucifixion in it—as the nails are being driven in. In music, I am always looking for the hammering of the nails …. That is a dual vision. My brain rejects it all. But my brain isn't worth much.[28]

If even Kurtág, as an atheist, was impacted by Bach's music, how much more so should it impact people of faith?

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[27]Mincham, "The Cantatas of Johann Sebastian Bach."

[28]Bálint András Varga, ed., *György Kurtág: Three Interviews and Ligeti Homages* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009). Quoted in Gardiner, *Bach*, 154.

LESSON NO. 6: BACH'S *ST. MATTHEW PASSION* CONNECTS US TO THE LITURGICAL YEAR.

Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* is one of the most significant landmarks of western music. It was composed specifically for Good Friday. Jones describes the work in detail:

> The scale of *St. Matthew* is huge, in conception and in forces. The choral music, for instance, is conceived for double choir, each with its own separate continuo group, a capable double orchestra, and there is indeed, in the final revision, a third choral force, that of the boy soprano unison choir, supported by organ, that appears in a number of places, most strikingly in the opening number, where it holds the cantus firmus chorale "O Lamm Gottes unschuldig" (O Lamb of God Unspotted), making nine choral lines. … Among many other daring musical inventions is the use of instrumental accompaniment in the recitatives (violin 1 and 2, viola, continuo) for the words of Jesus, except for his dying words, when the ensemble deserts him.[29]

This "halo of strings" that accompanies Jesus's recitatives differentiates from the instruments accompanying another soloist, the Evangelist. The point of all these massive musical forces was to tell of Christ's Passion.[30]

A pastor once told me that the Scriptures never command us to celebrate the birth of Christ. However, Advent and Christmas are really important to us as we plan musical celebrations in the church. Just as much, we must celebrate his death and resurrection. What would happen if you as the music minister/worship pastor were to program Holy Week events such as specific Palm Sunday liturgies, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and then Resurrection Sunday? Palm Sunday liturgies are not that complicated. It is effective, yet quite simple to have children process around the sanctuary waving palm branches. The liturgy can focus on the events that happen during Jesus's triumphant entry. A Maundy Thursday service focuses on the Last Supper. The name comes from the Latin word "mandatum," which means mandate, based on John 15:17 where Jesus says: "This is

[29]Jones, *Bach's Choral Music*, 91.

[30]Gardiner states that, due to the *St. Matthew Passion*, Bach's Leipzig listeners knew every inch of the road to Calvary. During Bach's day, "The entire Passion story [was] … heard in the listener's conscience and [would] … be relived every Good Friday hereafter." Gardner, *Bach*, 428.

what I command you: Love one another" (CSB). The services ends with Jesus and the disciples in the garden of Gethsemane. A Good Friday liturgy focuses on the trial, crucifixion, death, and burial of Jesus. All these services culminate in Resurrection Sunday.

Baptist worship leaders and music ministers must reclaim the Church Year. The thoughtful progression through Advent helps a congregation understand that we celebrate Christ's first coming as we eagerly, yet patiently, await his triumphant return. Likewise, a progression through Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday can culminate in Resurrection Sunday.

LESSON NO. 7: THE NECESSITY OF BEING CHALLENGED.

In his description of Bach's instrumental music, Wolff states, "Bach's unaccompanied violin and cello compositions … epitomize virtuosity, and, on account of the singularity, to a degree even greater than his keyboard works of comparable technical demands."[31] Wolff also comments that "striving for 'musical superiority' meant much more than pushing the limits of performing skills and compositional techniques. It meant systematizing the new paths he was forging through the maze of twenty-four keys, countless genres, a profusion of styles, a myriad of technical devices, melodic and rhythmic fashions, [and] vocal and instrumental idioms."[32] In sum, Bach did this "not merely to teach others but to challenge himself."[33]

Bach constantly challenged both his performers and his listeners. As Maul points out,

> For three whole years he constantly presented the citizens of Leipzig with new cantatas, as well as two unparalleled settings of the Passion and a splendid Magnificat—a masterpiece a week, every one of them composed at an inconceivably high level and with technical demands that left no room for compromises, indeed that challenged the abilities of even the most accomplished musicians in Leipzig. He demanded not only of himself and his performers that the works be convincing but also that both his performers and his listening public rise to their level. And it may well

[31]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 232.
[32]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 234–35.
[33]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 235.

> be said without exaggeration that in the whole history of Western culture it would be difficult to find a parallel example of a large body of comparable artistic quality produced under such unremitting time pressure for such a long period of time.[34]

As church musicians and church music listeners today, we should attempt difficult things.

LESSON NO. 8: MINISTRY CAN BE FRUSTRATING AT TIMES.

Reading biographies of Bach demonstrates that the great composer had his share of disappointments and frustrations, including deteriorating conditions at the St. Thomas School, congregants' poor behavior, limited rehearsal time, pressure to produce copies of scores with limited resources, and the overall demands of larger productions. Gardiner states that "by the time of Bach's appointment in 1723, the best days of the Thomasschule were past. The old system of pooling resources to create a concert of 40–50 voices made up of town musicians, students, and other musicians had long ago ceased to function."[35] Bach had to deal with the lack of capable musicians. Maul describes an event where Bach and the rector were evaluating the twenty-seven applicants for the nine vacated places among the boarders at St. Thomas in 1729. On this occasion, Bach presented an overview of the numerical composition of the four church choirs, from which he would utilize forty-five of the fifty-five boarders for the music in the four churches. According to Maul, Bach "presented examination results and rankings that document the extent to which in his opinion twenty-one of the twenty-seven candidates had a talent 'for music.' Eleven of the boys Bach considered wholly unsuitable and twelve (among them eight sopranos, two altos, and tenor) as more or less acceptable."[36]

Bach also had to deal with issues related to congregational behavior in worship. Gardner describes "the widespread habit of congregants arriving late and leaving early,"[37] concluding that "our modern patterns of concert hall listening and of church service decorum inherited from nineteenth-century conventions are of no help in evaluating the way Bach's

[34]Michael Maul, *Bach's Famous Choir: The Saint Thomas School in Leipzig*, 1212–1804, trans. Richard Howe (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2012), 187–88.

[35]Gardiner, *Bach*, 159.

[36]Maul, *Bach's Famous Choir*, 192–93.

[37]Gardiner, *Bach*, 269.

music was received at the time.[38]

Third, Bach was challenged to keep pace with the demands in Leipzig, especially regarding the production of weekly cantatas. As Gardiner states, "there was the copying out parts and guiding his (as yet) untrained group of young musicians in how to negotiate the hazards of his startling and challenging music with a bare minimum of rehearsals. Come the day, there was first a long, cold wait in an unheated church, then a single shot at a daunting target."[39]

Moreso were the multiple challenges of performing the large-scale seasonal works. Maul states that "the gigantic *St. Matthew Passion* with its two choirs and orchestras … put the *chorus musicus* of the St. Thomas School, and the municipal musicians, violinists, and volunteer assistants, to what was perhaps the greatest test of the Baroque era, [and] also strained the attention span of the congregation with its three-hour length."[40]

As these examples show, Bach was no stranger to frustrations and disappointment. Likewise, in much of what we do as church musicians, we are constantly swimming upstream in ever-changing conditions. We must use music to build and encourage God's people and never yield to the temptation of using God's people to make music.

LESSON NO. 9: BACH'S MUSIC POINTS US TO GOD.

How did Bach's own reading of the Bible impact his view of church music? Wolff provides a glimpse of Bach's spiritual life with notations from Bach's Calov Bible. A section of 2 Chronicles 5, titled by Calov "As the glory of the Lord appeared upon the beautiful music," deals with the presence of the invisible God at the divine service in the Temple. Verse 13 ends with the words "when they lifted up their voices with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord … then the house was filled with a cloud." It is this very point where Bach added his own comment: "NB. With devotional music, God is always present in his grace."[41] Over the past 275 years, Bach's music has encouraged and nourished many people's faith in God by pointing the created back to the Creator.

The title of Gardiner's book, *Bach: Music in the Castle of Heaven*, is a

[38]Gardiner, *Bach*, 272.
[39]Gardiner, *Bach*, 298.
[40]Maul, *Bach's Famous Choir*, 190.
[41]Wolff, *Johann Sebastian Bach*, 339.

reference to Himmelsburg, which can be translated "Heaven's Castle." It refers to the architectural layout of a church where, as Gardiner explains, "the cramped musicians' gallery high up in the private chapel of the dukes of Weimar cut in the ceiling, where he [Bach] and his small ensemble were out of sight to the Duke and his guests. This created a vertical sound perspective in which the music floated downwards as though from celestial spheres—a metaphor for the unfathomable perfection of God-directed music and an explanation of the chapel's name, *Weg zur Himmelsburg* ('the path to the heavenly citadel')."[42]

Perhaps here at Southwestern we should look up to the heavens more often as we walk around Cowden Hall. Bach's name, along with the names of many other musical figures, is etched in stone to remind us of why we are church musicians. We are here to point others to God.

[42]Gardiner, *Bach*, 263.