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Abstract:

“The Social Significance of Changing Choral Timbres:
Evidence from the Performance History of Bach’s B-minor Mass”

At the annual meeting of the AMS held in Boston in 1981 Joshua Rifkin conducted a performance the Mass in B Minor with a single singer to each voice part and therewith ignited a raging debate about Bach performance practice. Before Rifkin, historically informed performances contrasted two or three dozen singers with the hundreds of singers that had become the tradition for performing Bach’s masterpieces. Rifkin soon after published a series of essays elaborating his argument about the size of the chorus with which J. S. Bach performed the majority of his choral compositions. Rejoinders by other scholars followed. The shift in scholarly consensus on the matter, however, hardly matches the much more widely experienced change in the sound of Bach’s choral music in an ever growing number of performances and recordings featuring a single singer per part.

This paper seeks to understand the broad social motivations underlying the size and significance of choral forces in Bach performances. From the beginning of the Bach revival associated with Mendelssohn’s 1829 performance of the St. Matthew Passion, large choral ensembles represented not only a Romantic choral ideal but also the possibility of mass participation in a newly appreciated cultural nation. While the choral forces arrayed in performances at the Bethlehem Bach Festival in twentieth-century United States sounded quite similar to their German counterparts of a hundred year earlier, they represented the aspirations of a rapidly expanding middle class striving to exhibit the cultural attainment equivalent to that of an otherwise exclusive elite society. Rifkin’s innovations meanwhile reflected and reasserted the countercultural dimension of the early music florescence that began in the 1960s. This paper strives to demonstrate how the choral timbre of Bach performances signifies not just changing tastes or scholarly perspectives but also deep cultural concerns.