

5-1982

## Cultural Commentary: Bach Cantatas, Old Music, New Recordings

Vahe Marganian  
*Bridgewater State College*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev)



Part of the [Music Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Marganian, Vahe (1982). Cultural Commentary: Bach Cantatas, Old Music, New Recordings. *Bridgewater Review*, 1(1), 16.

Available at: [https://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol1/iss1/11](https://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol1/iss1/11)

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

## Quebec ...continued

North: French-Canadian Immigrant vs. Trade Unionism in Fall River, Massachusetts", at an Assumption College conference on Les Petits Canadas de la Nouvelle Angleterre, held on March 14, 1982. Professor Silvia documented the reasons for the immigrant's willingness to work for substandard wages and the consequent weakened effectiveness of trade unionism in Fall River mills. He noted the role of the Franco Roman Catholic clergy in encouraging passivity toward labor reform matters that affected francophone newcomers.

Appearing at the same conference was BSC alumnus Ronald Petrin (Class of 1972) who is currently finishing doctoral research at Clark University. Petrin is exploring political party affiliations of French Canadians in Fall River, Holyoke, Worcester, New Bedford, and Lawrence. His paper included findings on French Canadian involvement in local and state government and was entitled "Culture, Community, and Politics: French Canadians in Massachusetts, 1889-1915."

The activities of faculty and alumni in the field of Canadian Studies demonstrate the continuing improvement of our skills and the reputation that we foster in the academic marketplace. Our involvement in professional responsibilities provides ample justification for the Canadian government's willingness to engage in academic ties with BSC. Our students will find a rewarding experience in the studies in Quebec, and our francophone guests will add another international dimension to our campus life.

Stanley Hamilton  
Associate Professor\*  
Foreign Language Department



## Bach Cantatas Old Music, New Recordings

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) occupies a special place in Western culture through his numerous compositions of exquisite vocal and instrumental music. His works hold great universal appeal since they contain most of the elements which please the ear and stimulate the intellect; melody, harmony, symmetry, counterpoint, and color. The breadth of these works is truly remarkable: from the "simple" clavichord (piano) inventions intended to instruct some of his twenty children to the monumental B-Minor Mass and St. Matthew Passion involving full orchestra, double chorus and children's choir. Between these extremes lie numerous works for solo instrument organ, sonatas, and concertos for instruments, motets, masses, passions and cantatas for voices.

The vast majority of his cantatas were composed for specific Sundays in the Lutheran Church calendar, involving Christmas, Easter, Feast Days, etc. The church cantata employed a small "orchestra" of strings, brass, and wind instruments, and percussion. It was customary then to interchange score lines for various instruments so that singers could sing instrumental parts and vice-versa. For the vocal sections, Bach scored for solo soprano, alto, tenor, bass, and for choir.

A typical cantata opens with a chorus and orchestra stating the major biblical text clearly and forcefully. A recitative (narrative) follows the chorus, the baritone singing a rapid succession of works sustained by a few chords on the organ. Next arias or ariosos (usually solo) are sung, offering melodic lines and technical challenges to both vocalists and accompanists alike. Bach typically ended his cantatas with a Choral, a serene, melodic "hymn" for all performing forces, occasionally accompanied by the congregation during the service.

As any great musician, Bach created a perfect interplay between text and music. His pictorial themes depict such images as waves, clouds, laughter, sorrow, terror, devil, angels, serpents, etc., with the proper use of fast moving strings, melancholy cellos, cheerful flutes, terrifying timpani and organ, forceful trumpets and other evocative combinations. Certainly one of the most graphic of these is No. 80, titled "Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott" ("A Mighty Fortress is our God") with its tumult expressed by repeated fast notes by the strings and by heavy use of brass and timpani. Another cantata employs correspondence of ten virgins, with dramatic syncopated

notes by the trumpets.

In addition to the 170 church cantatas, 20 of Bach's secular cantatas were discovered and analyzed by scholars. Bach produced these on such special occasions as birthdays and coronations, upon the request of friends, town mayors, and dukes. Here the music is more vivacious and bears such titles as "Coffee" (praising its virtues . . .), "Shepherd", and "Wedding".

All of Bach's cantatas have been recorded by several labels. In fulfilling current standards of performance, they use modern instruments and female voices for solo and choir parts. Many of the leading artists of the recording world have performed these cantatas, such as Ely Ameling, Janet Baker, Dietrich Fischer - Dieskau and Kurt Equiluz, under renowned conductors and with great ensembles. However, there is an outstanding collection of all of Bach's cantatas under the Telefunken label, using original instruments and the same number of vocal participants used in Bach's time. This monumental task of recording 20 volumes started in 1972 and ended in 1980, under the musical directions of Gustav Leonhardt and Nikolaus Harnoncourt with the Concentus Musicus of Vienna. Each volume (price: \$20) contains several recordings of cantatas with the following addenda: a complete score (reduced in size), complete texts in German, English and French, a history of each cantata and a description of the original instruments. The combined results of scrupulous scholarship, outstanding soloists, and boys voices, and superb acoustical engineering give predictably superlative interpretations. The total price of \$500 for such a treasure is well worth the sacrifices one undertakes occasionally.

Bach cantatas are quite frequently performed during ordinary concerts, Bach festivals, and on special Sundays in the church calendar. A few cathedrals in Europe quite regularly offer cantata cycles annually, one cantata per Sunday. Fortunately, one need not go to Europe to attend such performances. We are fortunate to be living in Massachusetts, where the Bach Cantata Cycle is superbly performed on Sundays by the Emmanuel Church Choir on Newbury Street in Boston. Should a trip to Emmanuel be inconvenient, you may hear a Bach cantata every Sunday shortly after 8:00 a.m., on WGBH/89.8 F.M.

Vahe' Margarian  
Professor of Chemistry