

## Burning Issue: ‘Ways to Bach’

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Before I begin, as I am the last speaker I should just like to thank Reinhard, Yo and fellow Trustees of Bach Network UK for planning and organizing this splendid weekend – an inspiring way to begin the year.

What I have to say is in very stark contrast and prepared from an entirely different perspective to any Paper that has been presented hitherto. Some of you might even think my ‘burning issue’ is irrelevant in the context of the Bach Network’s *raison d’être* and is therefore out of place here, but I hope that the following shows that ‘New Directions in Bach Studies’ in today’s world means promoting a much wider brief than might otherwise have been considered.

I have been at the sharp end of the London Bach Society’s pioneering work now for over 35 years, working closely with my husband the late Paul Steinitz,<sup>1</sup> founder of the London Bach Society and whose centenary it is this year.

LBS is essentially performance-driven. In addition to our work promoting period-style performances, we completed our historic Bach cantata cycle in 1987<sup>2</sup> and promoted many other complementary and innovative projects alongside it. In the years since Paul’s death in 1988 I have endeavoured to build on these achievements, using his and the Society’s musical legacy in a positive, productive and contemporary way. Since foundation in 1946 the way LBS has presented its Bach performances has been in the spirit that his music is for *everyone*, and it remains at the very centre of what we do. We cater for those who know a lot about Bach to those who know very little. Similarly, we have also created a platform in the UK for lesser-known works to be performed, including compositions by the Bach family (many of them first performances here<sup>3</sup>), their precursors and other complementary eighteenth-century composers,<sup>4</sup> so that these too may eventually come to find equal favour with audiences, raising their awareness and enhancing their knowledge of the Bach story, setting it in the context of its time and place.

We have achieved this from the concert platform, from within the conservatoire and university, and in the community. New generation singers and players grace our stage and work alongside seasoned specialists and all this has

<sup>1</sup> 1909–1988

<sup>2</sup> 1958–1987

<sup>3</sup> Meaning ‘in the UK’

<sup>4</sup> Including Telemann and Handel.

been with the support of a loyal and enthusiastic following. Not only do we want to keep it that way, but also to go forward and, for us and others like us, to be continually useful in the community.

The music of Bach has enjoyed an unprecedented revival in the last sixty years, however it is my firm belief that, whether we want to face it or not, the days when Bach's music is so freely performed and enjoyed may well be numbered. When you go to your next public concert, look around ... you may well see a full house and feel satisfied as a consequence ... especially if you are the promoter! But look again, this time more closely and then assess the average age of that audience ... how many young people are there present? By young I mean under 30.

The fashion, taste, lifestyle and culture of the teens and 20s today is inspired by the internet, texting, emailing, the mobile phone, downloading music and so forth. Instant! Instant! Instant!

Societies are now multi-cultural, generating wider cultural often secular musical interests that move away from the traditional and familiar Western European mainstream...and that includes the music of J. S. Bach.

What chance is there then of our being able to build on so much that has been achieved in Bach study and performance by so many in the last half-century and to take it forward? Is the Bach world to become rarefied, small and exclusive – an 'enclave'? Or will his music drift into obscurity for another generation to re-discover? Yes, it might possibly. These are all factors to be faced, unless we take action now...all of us – scholar, performer, listener and devotee. There are no quick fixes either.

Engaging young people in what is called 'classical music' is a massive task. In this country at Public Schools there will be many and sustained opportunities for pupils to experience first-hand the classical and contemporary music repertoire. As a consequence and backed up by parental support, though not necessarily, those who, for example, then move on to become Oxbridge Choral Scholars will do so having been given a base on which to build. The door has been opened. Some will then enter our profession, but we are dealing with a small number here.

However, it is a very different story in the State School system where most of our children are still educated. The opportunities for them are at best still limited and at worst non-existent. Therefore how much talent lies untapped; how much interest is unstimulated? There is also the question of the demise in German language teaching. Only about 4% of Brits speak German.

Since the 1980s pressure on budgets and an ever-changing and more demanding curriculum have determined that the study of music must be way down the pecking order in many schools, their failing to grasp that the discipline, powers of concentration and the enhancement of self-esteem the study and practice of music requires, provides and nurtures are all powerful adjuncts in the whole education process for our children.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The situation in Britain's Primary Schools is of greatest concern because it is here that children could have their first introduction to a wide variety of music and discover latent talents. Some

In the wider social sense, setting cultural life today in context with our cultural heritage going back 1,000 years often meets with ignorance, prejudice and that dreaded word 'elitism'. Should we accept that or use our skills to help fill gaps and reverse prejudices?

Forever optimistic and to set an example, for the last three years LBS has included a schools' project<sup>6</sup> at its annual autumn Bachfest. Knowing where and how to start has taken some thought, I can tell you.

- First: find the common ground, *a way to Bach* – dance. (This also avoids any perceived religious conflicts or difficulties.)
- Give the children the best, both in expertise and in the choice of music
- Create an informal atmosphere and get the children *involved* in something 'completely new'.
- Be prepared to get down to the very basics – reference to 'that piano-thing over there' (a beautifully decorated Italian harpsichord loaned to LBS one year) convinced me that we could not be accused of patronizing them – this was all new experience 'big-time' as they say.
- Imagine today's young people learning about and performing baroque dances, about the gestures, what they mean and convey, and how these relate to the methods of communication used today in flirtation, to show well-being, to create an impression, an image, to convey a mood etc.

Last November we welcomed over 100 teenagers, including a party from schools in Dresden (c.25), who were taught<sup>7</sup> and then danced a *farandole* (all 100 of them) and then similarly a *sarabande* with a smaller group of about twelve. To complement, movements from Bach's first Suite were played, the musicians<sup>8</sup> demonstrated their instruments (most of the pupils never having seen a violin in the flesh before never mind a baroque one!) and each participant was given a CD of the Bach Suites as a gift.

*Most if not all of the pupils present were hearing Bach's music for the very first time* – especially the British pupils. By the end of this two-hour interactive session they were not only excited, but also surprised by their excitement. It was fun. Previously in 2003, we had taken a similar presentation into the plush modern Board Room of a festival sponsor whose employees were insurance brokers! They too were equally surprised at their enjoyment!

Other organisations<sup>9</sup> are also including imaginative schools' projects in their itineraries, with equally surprising results. We need *every* music organisation the length and breadth of the country to engage with local schools. Imagine what could be achieved over the long-term if there was a regular slot for participation

State Secondary Schools possess a Performing Arts department that includes Drama and Dance as well as music. These are still comparatively few in number.

<sup>6</sup> Promoted in collaboration with the British-German Association's Youthbridge Scheme.

<sup>7</sup> By Baroque dance expert Mary Collins.

<sup>8</sup> Members of Steinitz Bach Players – the LBS's own professional period instrument orchestra founded in 1968.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, LSO and Halle Orchestras.

by children in, for example, the annual Christmas concert or summer bonanza promoted by the local music society?

Young people today are not indifferent, but they cannot be expected to wholeheartedly embrace Bach's music, or Mozart's, Beethoven's, Brahms' etc., just on our 'say so' or if the door to knowledge or experience of it is closed to them. The remedy lies in our own hands and we must be unselfish about it. This is not just another opportunity to market how wonderful we are as musicians or scholars either! Bach's music is not just a means to promote ourselves, but to *give* life-enhancing experience. After all, he too served the community. So must we.

2009 is a very special year and I suggest that, amidst all the financial gloom and doom, it is also a year of *opportunity* as well as celebration. Purcell, Handel, Haydn, Mendelssohn all have anniversaries and in the Bach world, it is the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first performance in Britain of a Bach choral work directed by Samuel Wesley.<sup>10</sup> It is a year when vitally important Bach research will continue; Bach Festivals around the world will cope somehow with the precarious financial climate prevailing. But above all it is an opportunity for us to reflect upon *how* we should like to see Bach's musical legacy to be promoted in the future—with a small heart or a big heart? Are we prepared to reach out and to think *out of that box* to ensure Bach's legacy is available and accessible to all?

For example: Building upon the 2009 Leipzig Bachfest's event on 20 June (a family day focusing on Mendelssohn<sup>11</sup>), when a new and exciting discovery next emerges from the Bach-Archiv's current survey, how about giving the first performance of it at a specially devised concert for schools—let them be the first to hear and experience it? A more positive statement of intent we could not possibly make—providing a latchkey and a new direction in Bach study.

I want us to nurture a generation that is as much at ease with Bach, Mozart etc. as it is with the popular culture—prejudice out of ignorance giving way to tolerance and understanding.

Thank you.

<sup>10</sup> 3 June 1809, Bach's motet *Jesu, meine Freude* BWV 227. See Philip Olleson, 'Samuel Wesley and the English Bach Awakening', in Michael Kassler (ed.), *The English Bach Awakening: Knowledge of J S Bach and his music in England 1750-1830* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), pp. 275–6.

<sup>11</sup> Born 3 February 1809.