

## Oberlin Cantata Project puts Bach's church cantatas in perspective

by Daniel Hathaway



Beginning this Saturday, Oberlin student Matt Bickett will be putting Johann Sebastian Bach's church cantatas into context with his Oberlin Cantata Project. Bickett will lead an ensemble of mainly student singers and instrumentalists in three performances of Bach's cantata *Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott*, BWV 80, that will surround the work with Dietrich Buxtehude's *Alles was ihr tut* and Johann Pachelbel's *Gott ist*

*unser Zuversicht* — other pieces that might have been heard during the same service at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig.

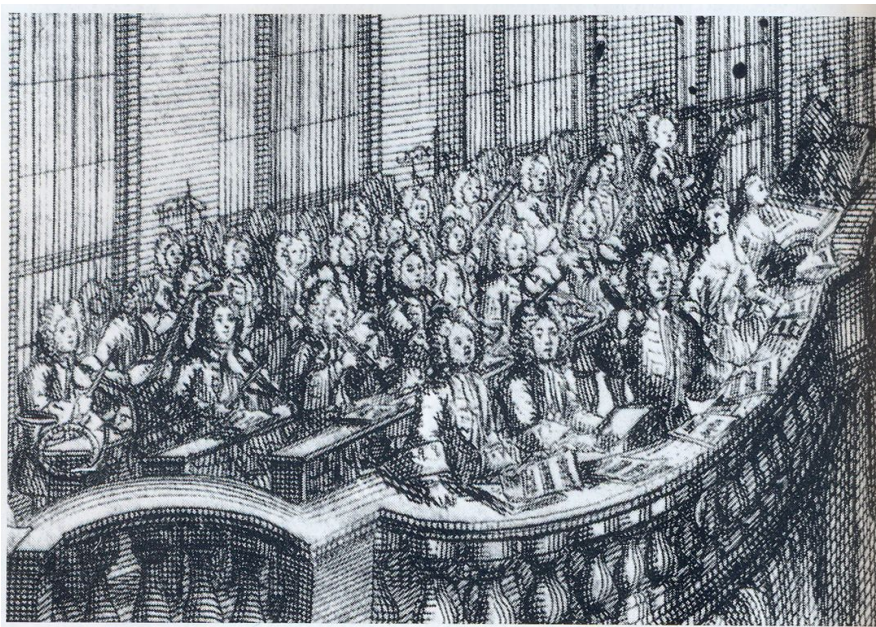
The Cantata Project will be presented on Saturday, October 28 at 7:30 pm at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Cleveland Heights, on Sunday, October 29 at 6:30 pm in Warner Concert Hall in Oberlin, and on Sunday, November 5 at 5:00 pm at the Church of the Covenant in Cleveland. All events are free.



Bickett (left, with Jonathan Moyer), is a native of Portsmouth, Ohio, and a fourth-year student at Oberlin studying religion, organ, and historical performance. He first developed the idea of the Cantata Project in conjunction with the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. "I was going to program a Bach cantata on Reformation Sunday at a small Lutheran church in Amherst where I play," he said in a telephone conversation. "I began working on it, and interest grew in the project. We decided to expand the ensemble I was originally going to use, and I asked my organ teacher,

Jonathan Moyer, if he'd be interested in hosting an event at the Church of the Covenant, where he's music director. It kept growing, and now we've developed into a full orchestral ensemble and an eight-voice choir."

The performances at St. Paul's and in Oberlin will be presented in a concert format, but the November 5 event at Church of the Covenant will take the shape of a Sunday service at the Thomaskirche on a special feast day. The audience will become the congregation and will join in singing *A mighty fortress is our God* during the afternoon. But Bickett won't subject the listeners to a thoroughly historical recreation of such a service — which would have begun at 7 am in an unheated church, lasted until 11 am, and included an hour-long sermon. "We're going to avoid that," he said.



Bickett has conceived of his performing forces according to the still-controversial views of musicologists like Joshua Rifkin who maintain that Bach usually assigned only a single singer to each voice part. "Although Bach normally used only a quartet of singers for the Sunday cantata, he would have added four more singers from the Nikolaikirche on important feast days," Bickett said. Doubling the number of vocalists also allows Bickett to program Pachelbel's eight-voice motet.

"It's especially authentic to use student voices. Bach would only have had student performers, along with a few pros, to draw on for his Leipzig ensembles," he said. Soloists for the cantata will include soprano Theodora Nestorova, countertenor Joe Schlesinger, tenor Ben Martin, and bass Matthew Payne.

The orchestra will comprise eleven string players, two oboists, and three continuo players who will support the bass line on harpsichord (Abraham Ross), organ (Albert Bellefeuille), and theorbo (Collin Sterne). Bickett originally planned to conduct from a keyboard instrument, but the arrangement of some of the venues would make that physically impossible.

And although the Oberlin Conservatory is well provided with keyboard instruments for use in Warner Concert Hall, Bickett and his colleagues will have to move Oberlin's continuo organ to St. Paul's — "their chamber organ is tuned at A=440 hz, and we'll be performing at A=415" — and wrestle a harpsichord up into the gallery at the Covenant. "It's going to be a lot more work than I anticipated, but it's all good," Bickett said.

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