

'This most crabbed of all earthly music':  
the performance and reception of Bach's vocal music in  
Dublin in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

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When the 'Crucifixus' from Bach's Mass in B minor was performed for the first time in Ireland, by the University of Dublin Choral Society in May 1865, the *Dublin Daily Express* described it as 'this most crabbed of all earthly music'.<sup>1</sup> Reactions such as this to the rich complexity of Bach's vocal music and to what seemed to the nineteenth-century music lover to be its sometimes almost insurmountable technical demands reflect prevailing attitudes which contributed to the delay in its more widespread acceptance in the English-speaking world of the nineteenth century. This essay examines the introduction and reception of Bach's major vocal works to Dublin in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, concluding with reference to two significant Bach performances in the 1950s. An analysis of the programmes of all relevant public concerts given by the many choral and other musical societies which flourished during this period has yet to be undertaken, but contemporary commentators repeatedly acknowledged that it was the University of Dublin Choral Society which pioneered the performance of Bach's vocal music. In focussing here primarily on the University Choral Society, the major outlines of the Bach revival in Ireland will be drawn. Questions raised by these early performances of Bach will then be explored: what evidence exists for contemporary performance practice? How was the music received? And who were the audiences who heard these performances?

The developing appetite for music amongst the emerging middle-class in mid-nineteenth century Dublin led to a growth in public support

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for music, replacing the largely aristocratic patronage on which the city's musical life in the eighteenth century had been based. Professional concerts were promoted, the development of rail and of regular steam ferry connections across the Irish Sea encouraging leading soloists from overseas to perform in Dublin. Meanwhile, amateur choral and other musical societies proliferated to cater for the public's growing desire to involve itself directly in music.<sup>2</sup> The English obsession with the music of Handel was shared by the largely English-oriented Dublin musical public. The fact that *Messiah*, Handel's most popular work, had received its first performance in Dublin further encouraged local adulation of Handel and provided some basis for an interest in the music of composers of earlier generations. However, the composer Charles Villiers Stanford, describing his teenage years in Dublin before he went to England in 1870, reflects the extent to which Bach's music, with the exception of the Well-Tempered Clavier and some of the organ fugues, was virtually unknown even to a keen student of music at that time. He recounts his introduction in the 1860s to the scores of Bach's vocal music through his teacher Michael Quarry who had recently returned from Leipzig where he had been a pupil of Ignaz Moscheles:

it was a new world which opened to my eyes, when I first read the score of the St Matthew Passion, which till then had never penetrated to Ireland. Until I saw it, I did not even know that Bach had written anything which was not a fugue for pianoforte or for organ.<sup>3</sup>

The first performance of (what was then thought to be) Bach's vocal music in Ireland took place at a concert given on 16 December 1847 by the University of Dublin Choral Society, founded as a student choir 'for the cultivation of choral music' in 1837:<sup>4</sup> a mixed programme of sacred music included *Blessing, Glory, Wisdom and Thanks*, an adaptation

2 On nineteenth-century musical life in Dublin see Aloys Fleischmann, 'Music and Society, 1850-1921', *A New History of Ireland*, vi, ed. W.E. Vaughan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 500-22; Derek Collins, 'Music in Dublin, 1800-1848', *To Talent Alone: the Royal Irish Academy of Music 1848-1998*, ed. Richard Pine and Charles Acton (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1998), 12-27; Ita Beausang, 'Dublin Musical Societies 1850-1900', *IMS*, v, 169-78.

3 C.V. Stanford, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (London: Edward Arnold, 1914), 75-6.

4 For a history of the University of Dublin Choral Society, see Gerald FitzGibbon, 'College Choral', 1837-1987, *Hermathena*, cxliv (Summer 1988), 35-68.

published in the same year of the motet, *Lob und Ehre und Weisheit* (BWV Anh. III 162) subsequently identified as being not by Bach but by his close friend Georg Gottfried Wagner.<sup>5</sup> Although not therefore technically the first performance of a vocal work by Bach in Ireland, this was effectively the case in that the music was believed at that time to be by Bach. The programme had been selected by Robert Prescott Stewart who had been appointed conductor of the Choral Society the previous year, a post he was to hold until his death in 1894 (alongside, amongst other positions, organist at Christ Church cathedral from 1844 and professor of music at the university from 1861).<sup>6</sup> *Blessing, Glory, Wisdom and Thanks* would be performed again by the University Choral Society in March 1854.<sup>7</sup>

Bach's name does not reappear until February 1865 when George Crawford, a member of the Society living in London, informed the committee that:

5 Stated by Olinthus J. Vignoles to have been 'an adaptation made by Alfred Angel of Exeter' but commenting in a footnote that 'The genuineness of this composition is disputed'. *Memoir of Sir Robert P. Stewart, Kt., Mus. Doc.* (2nd ed., London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent; Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, 1899), 23. This identifies the edition as: *Blessing, Glory, Wisdom and Thanks ... An anthem for eight voices, composed by Sebastian Bach. Adapted to English words. With an accompaniment for the organ or piano forte ... by Alfred Angel* (London: J. Alfred Novello, [1847]) listed in *The Catalogue of Printed Music in the British Library to 1980*, iii (London, Munich, New York, Paris: Saur, 1981). Novello subsequently published an edition in 1876 'Revised for the use of the "Bach Choir"', in which the English text was partially changed, notably in the two chorales.

6 On Stewart see Vignoles (as n.5) and Lisa Parker, *Robert Prescott Stewart (1825-1894): an Assessment of his Compositions and Contribution to Musical Life in Dublin*, unpubl. MA thesis, NUI Maynooth, 2000.

7 Printed programme, 15 March 1854 (bound volume 'University of Dublin Choral Society: Programmes Seasons 1850-8', Choral Society collection in the keeping of the Society); the *Dublin Evening Mail* described it as 'one of the finest compositions of the kind' (17 March 1854). *Blessing, Glory, Wisdom and Thanks* was proposed for concerts in April 1866 and December 1867 but not included in the final programmes. University of Dublin Choral Society Minute Book 1857-69: 5 March 1866, 5 Nov. 1867. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/6.

I have also lithographed a perfect novelty for you, a short Crucifixus from Bach's Mass in B minor which is one of the most *transcendent* specimens of sacred writing I know ...<sup>8</sup>

Both this and Gounod's *Ave Maria* based on Bach's C major Prelude with violin obbligato were performed on 2 May 1865, the 'Crucifixus' from the Mass in B minor (sung in Latin) thus becoming the first known piece of vocal music genuinely by Bach to be performed in Ireland. Two years later, on 30 May 1867, a mixed sacred programme included the soprano recitative and aria 'Although mine eyes with tears o'erflow' and 'Jesus, Saviour, I am thine' ('Wie wohl mein Herz in Tränen schwimmt', and 'Ich will dir mein Herze schenken') from the St Matthew Passion. The comment in the printed programme that the music was from Bach's 'Grosse Passion' suggests the use of Sterndale Bennett's 1862 edition entitled 'Grosse Passions-Musick (according to the Gospel of St Matthew) ...'.<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the apocryphal motet, no complete vocal works of Bach had yet been heard in Dublin. However, the cheap vocal scores of Bach's music in Novello's octavo editions which began to appear in the 1870s soon influenced concert programmes. The first complete work of Bach thus to be performed was *God's time is the best* (*Gottes Zeit is die allerbeste Zeit* BWV 106) on 21 December 1874.<sup>10</sup> Both *Freeman's Journal* and *Saunders's Newsletter* commented on this being the first performance of the work in Dublin, the latter also commenting, not entirely accurately, that:

This ... is only the second instance of Bach's vocal works being produced in Dublin: the first having been that of the eight-part motet,

<sup>8</sup> The emphasis is original. Letter dated 25 Feb. [1865] communicated to a meeting of the committee on 27 Feb. 1865. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/6.

<sup>9</sup> *Grosse Passions-Musick (according to the Gospel of St Matthew)* ... *The English translation & adaptation by Miss H.F.H. Johnston. The whole edited & revised by William Sterndale Bennett* [vocal score] (London: Lamborn Cook, Hutchings & Co. [1862]); programme from 'University of Dublin Choral Society: Programmes Seasons 1864-82', Choral Society collection.

<sup>10</sup> *The Catalogue of Printed Music in the British Library* (as n.5) gives 1875 as the date of publication of the Novello edition edited by J. Troutbeck.

"Lob und Ehre" (blessing, glory, wisdom, and thanks), first produced by this society in 1848 [*sic*].<sup>11</sup>

Two years later the University Choral Society applied for permission to perform the St John Passion in the College Chapel at Easter 1877. Although permission was refused on practical grounds, the Society brought the work to performance on 9 February 1878. Heralding this as 'the first performance in this country', the printed programme explained that:

The extraordinary choral difficulty of the work, which occupies months in preparation, the extremely unvocal character of the solo music, and the singularity of the orchestration (for obsolete instruments, *oboe di caccia*, *viola d'amore*, *viol di gambe*, and *lute*) will account for the neglect which, for a century and a half, has attended a work of unquestionable originality and grandeur.<sup>12</sup>

The next performance of Bach at Trinity College Dublin—again a 'first' in Ireland—was of the *Magnificat* in D on 18 February 1882 in a programme which also included Beethoven's Mass in C, preceded by a short extract from Haydn's *Creation* described by the *Irish Times* as 'an interlude ... in strong contrast to the strictly classical and severer cast of Bach's music'.<sup>13</sup> The three complete works by Bach performed by the University of Dublin Choral Society up to this stage would receive no more than one further performance each over the next twenty-five years. *God's time is the best* was performed early in 1890 (although it had been planned for a concert in February 1883, eventually being replaced with the first Irish performance of Carissimi's *Jonah*).<sup>14</sup> At a concert to mark the Bach and Handel bicentenary in 1885 the *Magnificat* was included together with the chorale 'O Lord, who dares to smite thee' from the St John Passion, the soprano aria 'My heart ever faithful' ('Mein gläubiges Herze' from BWV 68) and the C-sharp major Prelude and Fugue from the Well-Tempered Clavier I. The St John Passion had to wait until 1902

<sup>11</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Dec. 1874; *Saunders's Newsletter*, 21 and 22 Dec. 1874.

<sup>12</sup> 'University of Dublin Choral Society: Programmes Seasons 1864-82', Choral Society collection.

<sup>13</sup> *Irish Times*, 20 Feb. 1882.

<sup>14</sup> Choral Society Committee Minute Book 1883-1900: 23 Oct., 5 Nov, 15 Nov. 1889. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/9, [n.p.]; Choral Society Committee Minute Book 1876-83, 14 Nov. 1882, TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/8, [n.p.].

for its second full performance at Trinity College Dublin, twenty-four years after it had first been heard.

Although the University Choral Society had pioneered the performance of Bach's vocal music in Dublin, it did not have a monopoly in this regard. On Maundy Thursday 1871 music from the St Matthew Passion had been introduced at Westminster Abbey, St Paul's cathedral following this example where it became a regular part of the Holy Week services from 1873.<sup>15</sup> This provided the model for St Patrick's cathedral, when in 1880 evening services on the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of Holy Week included a sermon on a topic from Christ's passion with appropriate music from Bach's St John Passion.<sup>16</sup> This practice of performing selections from the St John Passion—or possibly the entire work over the four evenings (details are unclear, available service lists merely stating 'Anthem:—"The Passion" (St John) J.S. Bach')—was repeated in following years until 1889 when the St Matthew Passion was introduced. The significance of this being its first performance in Ireland was recognised, the *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette* noting that it had 'never yet been sung in Ireland' and the cathedral's Annual Report noting that 'It is a much more difficult work than the "St John" which had been sung for several previous years, but received a very good rendering from the Choir, which was augmented for the occasion'.<sup>17</sup> Again, it is not clear precisely how much of the St Matthew Passion was performed in all. Twenty years later, a report on the 1909 Holy Week performances commented that 'Usually elsewhere [the St Matthew Passion] is sung in a much abbreviated form. In St Patrick's Cathedral, by dividing the whole into four portions, a larger part of the work is given'.<sup>18</sup> However, five years later the same newspaper would

15 F.G. Edwards, 'Bach's Music in England', *The Musical Times*, xxxvii/646 (1896), 799.

16 In 1880, for example, the titles of the sermons were 'St Peter's Denial' on Monday, 'Christ before Pontius Pilate' on Tuesday, 'The Inscription, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews"' on Wednesday, and 'The veil of the Temple was rent in twain' on Thursday, the *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette* commenting that 'the sermons were earnest and impressive discourses, and were listened to all the more eagerly as being admirably fitted in with the sacred words of Bach's Passion music, sung both before and after each discourse'. *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, xxii/13 (27 March 1880), 268.

17 *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, xxxi/484 (12 April 1889), 301; *Report of the Cathedral Board of St Patrick's National Cathedral, Dublin ... for the Year 1889* (Dublin: [St Patrick's Cathedral], 1890), 8.

18 *Daily Express*, 6 April 1909.

note that: 'The opening chorus "Come, ye daughters" which begins the work ... was sung for the first time at these services last year, and it was repeated in part as a prelude the three following evenings'.<sup>19</sup> This practice of singing either the St John or the St Matthew Passion in sections, more often the former, became a regular feature of Holy Week at St Patrick's until 1953 when the St John Passion was performed by the cathedral choir complete on one occasion (rather than spread over a number of services) on Easter Sunday.

Although the 'Crucifixus' had been performed in 1865, the complete Mass in B minor was not performed in Ireland until 26 March 1908, again by the University of Dublin Choral Society, thirty-two years after its first complete English performance in 1876. The programme note accompanying the second performance of the work given in December of the following year did however note that:

It is a matter of no small gratification to think that ... Dublin has secured a lead over many recognized English musical centres, notably Liverpool, which will not hear the work for the first time until March, 1910, or two years behind the Irish capital.<sup>20</sup>

This first performance in Ireland of the Mass in B minor was acknowledged as a special occasion not only for the Society, but also for the University itself.<sup>21</sup> The one remaining of Bach's large-scale works to enter the common repertoire was the Christmas Oratorio, Parts I and II of which were performed by the University Choral Society on 12 December 1911. Although all of Bach's major vocal works had by now been heard in Dublin, the actual frequency of performances (leaving aside the annual Passion services at St Patrick's) was low: in over 190 concerts given over a period of sixty-four years between 1847 and 1911, the University of Dublin Choral Society had included music by Bach (excluding occasional performances of his keyboard music), or thought to be by Bach, on only thirteen occasions.

Some idea of how Bach's music was performed can be obtained from the numbers of performers involved, from contemporary reports,

19 *Ibid.*, 7 April 1914.

20 'University of Dublin Choral Society Concert Programmes 1873-1930', Choral Society collection.

21 'Report of the Committee for the Season 1907-8', TCD, MUN/CHORAL/1/10.

and by reference to the editions used. The size and makeup of the University Choral Society changed considerably between the early performances of the apocryphal motet and the 1870s when the more substantial performances of Bach began. In 1847 the choir numbered thirty men,<sup>22</sup> plus about six to eight outside professionals and three or four boys, usually members of the two Dublin cathedral choirs, who sang the soprano choral and solo parts.<sup>23</sup> The 1865 performance of the 'Crucifixus' was held outside the university in the hall of the Antient Concerts Society, making it possible to use women sopranos (women were not at this period allowed within the college grounds),<sup>24</sup> although four boys were also still used.<sup>25</sup> The surviving music for this performance of the 'Crucifixus' comprised thirty 'Soprani', nineteen alto, thirty-one tenor and thirty-one bass parts (111 in all), suggesting that a chorus of about one hundred or so was envisaged.<sup>26</sup> Women were admitted as performing members in 1870, and in 1875 and 1876 one hundred vocal scores of works (not by Bach) were ordered for forthcoming concerts, again suggesting a chorus at this period of at least one hundred singers.<sup>27</sup> This may however be an underestimate: on occasion the choir could number considerably more. Robert Prescott Stewart's *Tercentenary Ode* to mark the tercentenary of Trinity College in July 1892 was performed by a choir of 192 singers.<sup>28</sup>

22 Minutes of the [University of Dublin Choral] Society's Meetings 1844–52: 16 Dec. 1847. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/2.

23 The precise number of boys is not clear: three are individually named in newspaper reports (see for example *Freeman's Journal*, 17 Dec. 1847), but in later years four appear to have been usual (see below).

24 FitzGibbon, 'College Choral', 41 (as n. 4).

25 Minutes of the University of Dublin Choral Society 1857–69, 6 Mar. 1865, TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/6. George Crawford's letter (see note 8 above) refers to the choir not being able to get any clear idea of the music of the 'Crucifixus' 'till they both know it themselves and get the women with them'. The engagement of four boys was discussed during planning for the concert in December 1867 for which the motet *Blessing, glory wisdom and thanks* was originally planned (*ibid.*, 18 Nov. 1867).

26 Complete vocal parts formerly held by the University of Dublin Choral Society; copies of each voice part now in the library of Trinity College Dublin (Early Printed Books, Choral 370).

27 See for example minutes of the University of Dublin Choral Society: 5 Oct. 1876. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/7.

28 Printed concert programme, author's collection.

A fairly ragged standard of performance must have been common as the essentially amateur choir struggled with the acknowledged difficulties of Bach's vocal writing. One review of *God's time is the best* in 1874 referred to its 'offering much embarrassment to vocalists not possessing considerable experience, capacity, and art culture' and went on to refer to the conductor, Sir Robert Prescott Stewart, keeping 'his little musical army well in hand, but it was quite evident that the enemy, in the shape of ponderous difficulties, was too many for it'.<sup>29</sup> Another reviewer however commented on 'the choruses flowing very sweetly, especially the finale, which was rendered with great power and effect'.<sup>30</sup> One reviewer of the 1878 *St John Passion* offered the backhanded compliment that the chorus 'Let us not divide it' was 'the finest bit of choral singing ... [which] could not possibly have been given better with the material at the service of the conductor'.<sup>31</sup> When the *Magnificat* was presented for a second time in 1885 it was described as being performed 'upon the whole fairly well' but with the comment that 'The chorus work, considering the difficult nature of the music, it would be unfair too severely to criticise'.<sup>32</sup> Many of the chorales in the *St John Passion* in 1878 were sung without instrumental accompaniment and 'with a tolerable regard to piano and forte effects'.<sup>33</sup> A description of the choruses in the 1885 *Magnificat* as sounding 'pompous and significant' was clearly intended as complimentary but suggests that the tempi were predominantly slow.<sup>34</sup> However, twenty-three years later in 1908 the choruses in the *Mass* in B minor were 'given with great vigour'.<sup>35</sup>

Subjective and imprecise descriptions such as these are clearly no basis upon which to build any firm idea of performance style. Interesting however is that as an organist, Robert Prescott Stewart phrased Bach in a manner described by Stanford as suggestive of violin bowing and considered progressive for the time, although others criticised him for the fast speed at which he played many of the preludes and fugues.<sup>36</sup> Performances of Handel's *Messiah* in Dublin retained some eighteenth-

29 *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Dec. 1874.

30 *Saunders's Newsletter*, 22 Dec. 1874.

31 *Ibid.*, 12 Feb. 1878.

32 *Irish Times*, 23 Feb. 1885.

33 *Daily Express*, 11 Feb. 1878; *Saunders's Newsletter*, 12 Feb. 1878.

34 *Daily Express*, 23 Feb. 1885.

35 *Irish Times*, 30 March 1908.

36 Stanford, *Pages*, 47.

century features which had been superseded elsewhere, Stanford noting that the overture was performed in the 1860s with double dotting and that some singers still introduced ornamentation into solo arias.<sup>37</sup> It is not known if such practices were carried over into Bach's vocal music.

Although the St Patrick's cathedral performances of the Passions were accompanied by organ, it was usual for an orchestra consisting largely of amateurs but strengthened by professionals to accompany the University Choral Society. A review of the 1878 St John Passion complained of:

the constant, and somewhat wearisome tone-colour of an orchestration of the simplest school, consisting of two flutes, two oboes, and stringed band, of four violoncellos, three contrabassi, and some half-dozen violins and tenors.<sup>38</sup>

It also mentions a harmonium 'used to sustain soft chords for the recitative'. An intriguing question is whether or not either the harpsichord or the spinet belonging to Robert Prescott Stewart since 1883 was ever used.<sup>39</sup> A harmonium was used in the 1885 Bach-Handel programme, but it is not impossible that the harpsichord or spinet may have been used in the 1890 performance of *God's time is the best*: it was certainly planned to be used in Purcell's *Tempest* and *Dido and Aeneas* in March 1894, a concert which was cancelled following the death of Sir Robert Prescott Stewart the previous day.<sup>40</sup>

The question of what to use when faced with Bach's use of obsolete instruments created its own solutions. The opening *Sonatina to God's time is the best* in 1874 was played on flute, violin and 'cello (substituting for two recorders, two violas da gamba and continuo). In the St John

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-3.

<sup>38</sup> *Daily Express*, 11 Feb. 1878.

<sup>39</sup> In 1883 Stewart wrote to a pupil: 'For the piano lecture I got a harpsichord by Weber and an old spinnet [sic] by Keene. There are no others of the sort in Ireland yet remaining. I swept the whole island for them ere I netted those two specimens', *Vignoles, Memoir*, 147. Ferdinand Weber was the leading organ and harpsichord maker in Ireland, active between 1749 and his death in 1784. No keyboard instrument maker named Keene is recorded in Dublin, but the reference could be to Thomas Kenny of 12 Mercer St. listed as 'pianoforte maker' in the Dublin Directories of 1797 to 1800.

<sup>40</sup> Choral Society Committee Minute Book 1883-1900: 7 March 1894. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/9.

Passion a harp (played 'with great delicacy') substituted for the lute in the *arioso* 'Consider, O my soul' ('Betrachte, meine Seele').<sup>41</sup> One reviewer of the 1878 St John Passion regretted 'how inadequate the orchestral accompaniments of Bach are to the requirements of the music' and suggested that the chorus 'Let us not divide it' ('Lasset uns den nicht zerteilen') 'needed but a couple of trumpets and a pair of kettledrums to make the above piece perfect'.<sup>42</sup> Bach's use of obsolete instruments was regarded by some as a fault which needed to be corrected: in attempting to explain the comparative neglect of Bach's music compared to that of Handel, another critic in reviewing this same performance wrote somewhat facetiously that:

the orchestral accompaniments are laid out for obsolete instruments, such as—though no one now hears—we may see laid up, as it were, in lavender at the South Kensington Museum. Which of us has ever heard an *oboe d'amore*, or an *oboe da caccia* (fancy a huntsman cheering on his dogs while blowing an oboe) ...<sup>43</sup>

For the 1885 *Magnificent* performance 'the revised orchestration by the famous German editor, Robert Franz' was used 'for the first time',<sup>44</sup> but by the time of the 1908 premiere of the Mass in B minor the possibility of 'getting over [from England] the special wind instruments peculiar to the Mass' was discussed, although (probably for financial reasons) not eventually realised.<sup>45</sup>

The preparation of special vocal parts for the 1865 'Crucifixus' performance has been noted above. Copies of these survive in the Trinity College library but there are no pencilled or other performance indications, as one can see in the bass part shown in Illustration 13.1. The music is very much as it appears in the 1856 Bach Gesellschaft edition, with a *piano* marking near the end but otherwise no expression or dynamic markings. However, the tempo indication *Larghetto*, not known

<sup>41</sup> *Saunders's Newsletter*, 12 Feb. 1878; the *Dublin Evening Mail* referred to the harp obbligato in the alto aria 'It is finished' (*Es ist vollbracht*), 11 Feb. 1878.

<sup>42</sup> *Saunders's Newsletter*, 12 Feb. 1878.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Express*, 11 Feb. 1878.

<sup>44</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 23 Feb. 1885.

<sup>45</sup> Minutes of the University of Dublin Choral Society: 6 March 1908. TCD, MUN/SOC/CHORAL/1/11.

Bass Crucifixus (Mass in B minor) f. Bach  
 Sep... tu... te...  
 Crucifixus... qui...  
 qui... pro... nobis...  
 crucifixus... qui...  
 qui... pro... nobis...  
 qui... pro... nobis...  
 qui... pro... nobis...

Illustration 13.1 Vocal part (bass) specially engraved for the 1865 Trinity College Dublin performance of the 'Crucifixus' from Bach's Mass in B minor.

from printed editions available at that period,<sup>46</sup> has been added. With the exception of the solos from the St Matthew Passion sung in 1867, all subsequent Bach performances evidently used the Novello octavo editions. Early copies of relevant works exist in the libraries of both the University of Dublin Choral Society and St Patrick's cathedral, and the records of both provide evidence for their purchase from Novello's.<sup>47</sup> Due to the continued use over many decades of even the oldest vocal scores, however, the presence in some copies of pencilled marks cannot be used to determine performance practice at any particular period, nor which parts (or how much) of either Passion were performed at St Patrick's during the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

Although the 1847 performance of the apocryphal motet *Blessing, Glory, Wisdom and Thanks* was described by one reviewer as 'containing some splendid single and double choruses, and a delicious quartette, which was admirably sung ...',<sup>48</sup> by and large, reaction to Bach's vocal music was at best guarded before the later nineteenth century. This has much to do with the context of the vocal concerts in which the music was heard, and the technical difficulties involved in performing the music. The typical concert programme of the period comprised a selection of mainly shorter items often including part songs, glees or solos and choruses selected from longer works.<sup>49</sup> Concerts were considered as oc-

46 I am grateful to Dr Yo Tomita for this information.

47 For example, the University of Dublin Choral Society paid an invoice from Novello's in April 1878 which included orchestral and vocal parts to the St John Passion performed that year, and ordered '10 Bach Magnificat 1/- each' (the cost of Novello's octavo edition vocal scores) from the Dublin music shop Pigott & Co. in February 1883 (uncatalogued book of invoices, receipts and accounts, University of Dublin Choral Society); Novello's were paid six guineas by St Patrick's cathedral in April 1889, when they first sang the St Matthew Passion, for 'Passion Music' (St Patrick's Cathedral: Board Minute Book, 1872-92, 392), and at least one copy of the 1872 Sterndale Bennett/Novello edition in the cathedral is stamped '13 APR. [18]89'.

48 *Dublin Evening Mail*, 22 Dec. 1847.

49 This style of programme continued well into the twentieth century. For example, the Culwick Choral Society, founded in 1898 and one of Dublin's foremost amateur choral societies throughout the twentieth century, did not perform a single-work concert before its bicentenary performance of *Messiah* in 1942; programmes usually consisted exclusively of part songs, madrigals, etc., occasionally with excerpts from major works including the opening chorus from the St Matthew Passion (Sept. 1927) or the *Sanctus* from the Mass in B minor (March 1929), or with one or more works of medium length included. See *The Culwick Choral Society celebrates one hundred years, 1898-1998*, eds. Jane Clare, Magdalen O'Connell, Ann Simmons (Dublin: The Cul-

casions of popular entertainment with an emphasis on tuneful melody, and a clear distinction was recognised between music that appealed to the wider public and that which might only be appreciated by the trained musician, a category epitomised by Bach. When the *Magnificat* was first performed in 1882 it was described by one critic as 'weighty and unwieldy, and better suited for the critical student than as a composition for popular entertainment'. The review went on to comment that 'it proved uninteresting. Opening with a bad start, it only once or twice claimed the attention'.<sup>50</sup> Different critics of the 1885 Bach and Handel concert which included the *Magnificat* repeated similar views. One wrote that: 'No doubt there are plenty of splendid themes in Bach's music, but their power seems to be musical and intellectual rather than the offspring of passion or emotion'.<sup>51</sup> Another commented: 'We think that a better choice might have been made than the "Magnificat", noble and scholarly music as it is. No doubt it is characteristic, but to a mixed audience it could hardly prove interesting'.<sup>52</sup> A third opened his review with an extended discussion on how to maintain an audience's attention when the music is other than 'the rhythm of dance tunes, or ballads upon the only subject which every one can understand—love'. He cited Wagner's efforts to 'discourteousness frivolity' and to teach audiences that 'to be only attracted by dance rhythms, to which any one can nod with the head or tap with the foot, is about the lowest development of musical intelligence', and concluded that 'The music played and sung ... last Saturday was by no means an appeal to the heels of the audience, but rather to their hearts and understandings'.<sup>53</sup> Newspaper critics sometimes admitted themselves unable to appreciate Bach's music: in 1865 one found that the 'Crucifixus' 'did not make an impression',<sup>54</sup> while the description of this as 'the most crabbed of all earthly music' was cited at the beginning of this essay. Twenty years later the solo numbers of the *Magnificat* were described as 'not attractive', 'Deposuit potentes' and 'Et

wick Choral Society, 1998), 44–53. The University of Dublin Choral Society under Robert Stewart was a pioneer in introducing concerts sometimes devoted to no more than one or two major works.

50 *Freeman's Journal*, 20 Feb. 1882.

51 *Ibid.*, 23 Feb. 1885.

52 *Irish Times*, 23 Feb. 1885.

53 *Daily Express*, 23 Feb. 1885.

54 *Saunders's Newsletter*, 3 May 1865.

*misericordia*' being singled out as 'if not absolutely ugly ... certainly bizarre, and ... sadly unvocal at best'.<sup>55</sup>

It was this complex, 'unvocal' character of Bach's writing, with its technical demands which could make it 'nearly impossible'<sup>56</sup> or 'remarkable for awkwardness of vocalisation, and extravagance of vocal compass'<sup>57</sup> which proved to be the greatest obstacle to a wider appreciation of his music. Already in 1847 it had been described as 'wanting in the rich flow of melody which Haydn and Mozart display ... [and] so full of research, and as it were veiled that ... this, among other peculiarities, will prevent Bach from being ever very popular, except among musicians'.<sup>58</sup> A similar sentiment was still evident in 1874 when the view was expressed that:

his fame amongst the majority of the musical public will continue to rest on his wonderful compositions for the organ—not because of any absence of genius in his vocal productions, but because of their extreme difficulty and of their not being calculated to evoke the sympathy of a general audience.<sup>59</sup>

But the nineteenth-century concept of 'worshipping' at the feet of the 'great composer' was beginning to establish itself. When Robert Prescott Stewart and the University Choral Society premiered the St John Passion in 1878, a large portrait surmounted by a bust of 'the great Johann Sebastian Bach' and adorned with laurel leaves was prominently displayed in the hall 'after the manner of German musical festivals'.<sup>60</sup> By 1908 Bach's music had gained wide recognition and acceptance and the Mass in B minor was described as 'the profoundest sacred choral work in the whole literature of music'.<sup>61</sup> The occasion of its performance for the first time in Ireland was considered to be of such significance not only for the Society but also for Trinity College itself that the Board exceptionally consented to grant the use of the Examination Hall for an

55 *Daily Express*, 23 Feb. 1885.

56 *Ibid.*

57 *Saunders's Newsletter*, 22 Dec. 1874.

58 *Ibid.*, 17 Dec. 1847.

59 *Freeman's Journal*, 22 Dec. 1874.

60 *Saunders's Newsletter*, 12 Feb. 1878.

61 'Report of the Committee for the Season 1907–1908', TCD, MUN/CHORAL/1/10.



evening concert.<sup>62</sup> The *Irish Times* opened its review by stating 'The genius of Bach is accepted by everyone' (although adding the qualification 'and recognised by but a few'), favourable comparisons with Elgar, Wagner and Mendelssohn, being used to establish Bach as a composer of the present, not merely as 'old-fashioned, because he lived in the eighteenth century'.<sup>63</sup>

Who actually heard these early performances of Bach? All the performances outlined above took place in the context either of Trinity College, Dublin or St Patrick's cathedral, both at that period bastions of protestantism in a society divided sharply along religious and social lines. Admission to concerts of the University Choral Society, a private society, was limited to members and friends. While these would have included a significant proportion of the educated, concert-going public, for evening concerts it would probably have excluded not only Catholics but, initially, also women who were not allowed within the university after 6pm.<sup>64</sup> Thus the 1847 and 1854 performances of the apocryphal motet were effectively restricted to protestant gentlemen who were members or invitees of the University Choral Society. By the 1870s, with concerts held in the afternoon or outside the College, women could both perform and attend as audience, but even then the audience may be assumed to have been limited mainly if not entirely to Dublin's protestant minority. It goes without saying that the same confessional limitations applied when Bach's Passion music was performed at St Patrick's cathedral from 1880 onwards. Thus the opportunity to perform or hear Bach's music was effectively limited not just to that small proportion of any urban population who sang in choirs or constituted the concert-going public, but to the smaller proportion of that Dublin population who were protestant.

In conclusion, two significant Bach performances in Dublin in the mid-twentieth century deserve mention. In 1950 the Music Association of Ireland organised a Bach bicentenary celebration, the highlight being a performance on 29 September of the Mass in B minor conducted by Otto Mazerath with the Culwick Choral Society and the Radio Eireann

62 *Ibid.*

63 *Irish Times*, 30 March 1908.

64 An exception was made for the summer 'Ladies' concert in May. In its review of the 1847 concert *Saunders's Newsletter* (17 Dec. 1847) argued against the exclusion of women from the Choral Society's concerts both as 'hearers or singers'.

Choir and Symphony Orchestra. In the absence in Dublin at that time of any suitable hall with an organ, the National Museum of Ireland was persuaded to allow their Ferdinand Weber harpsichord to be put into playing condition and loaned out for the performance (a reminder of how attitudes to the conservation of historic instruments has changed), when it was played by John Beckett. This was probably the first time at least since the 1890s (when Stewart's harpsichord or spinet was used on occasion in concerts) and possibly even since the late-eighteenth century that a harpsichord was used for continuo in a public concert in Dublin. Two players of the D trumpet were also specially brought over from England and considerable excitement was expressed at the time at what were considered to be ground-breaking steps towards recreating the sound of Bach's music.<sup>65</sup>

Although (aside from the Holy Week performances at St Patrick's cathedral) the inclusion of selected choruses and solos from the St Matthew Passion were not unknown in mixed choral programmes,<sup>66</sup> a performance of the work in March 1958 by the St James' Gate Musical Society conducted by Victor Leeson appears to have marked its first full concert performance in Dublin.<sup>67</sup> Again faced with the absence of any suitable hall with an organ, and the unavailability of a harpsichord, the expedient was arrived at of having the two continuo parts played on an electronic organ and a piano which the *Irish Times* described as "harpsichordized" so that it was almost indistinguishable in John Beckett's hands'.<sup>68</sup>

By the mid-twentieth century Bach's music had become widely known and had entered the repertoire of many choral societies. One could comment that performances of Bach's vocal music in Dublin had

65 Brian Boydell, unpublished radio scripts for 'Topical Notes', broadcast on Radio Eireann, 19 and 26 Sept. 1950.

66 For example at a concert of the Dublin Oratorio Society on 14 April 1908 when a small selection, including the opening and concluding choruses, formed part of a longer, mixed programme. *Freemans' Journal*, 15 April 1908.

67 The St Matthew Passion does not appear ever to have been performed by the University of Dublin Choral Society. Although the 'Programme and Libretto' provided at the 1958 St Matthew Passion concert (22 March 1958, St Francis Xavier Hall, Dublin) is silent on whether this was its first Dublin concert performance or not, the *Irish Times* music critic, Charles Acton, described it as 'probably the first [complete performance] in Ireland'. *Irish Times*, 24 March 1958.

68 *Irish Times*, 24 March, 1958.

developed over a period of 110 years from what was not in fact music by Bach, to a performance of the St Matthew Passion in which a piano with drawing pins inserted into the hammers substituted for a harpsichord. The resistance of nineteenth-century audiences to its complexities and technical difficulties had been overcome, Bach had long since been acknowledged as an outstanding composer with performances of his music no longer being unusual but, despite the best intentions of those involved in these flagship performances of the 1950s, the striving after historical performance practice was still in its infancy. Without the initiative of the University of Dublin Choral Society and in particular of Robert Prescott Stewart, such a dominant figure in nineteenth-century Dublin music, it would undoubtedly have taken even longer than it did before Bach's vocal works became known in Dublin.

## Bach at the turn of the twenty-first century

HANS-JOACHIM SCHULZE

In his dictionary of musicians, the Sondershausen court organist Ernst Ludwig Gerber (1746–1819), son of J.S. Bach's student Heinrich Nicolaus Gerber, made the apt comparison: 'this great artist [Bach] has left behind for us 'the following works in order to test our talent, just like the bow of Ulysses'.<sup>1</sup> Gerber knew whereof he spoke: one of the printed copies of the *Clavierübung* III (1739)—in the United States since the 1920s and now at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York—was once in Ernst Ludwig's possession and contains, in addition to the date 1765 (when Gerber presumably acquired it), comments entered between 1799 and 1814 that refer to his own performances of this *opus summum* of organ music. Strictly speaking, Gerber, in his comparison with the bow of Odysseus, should not only have had the measuring of talent in mind, but also the testing of a special ability, for the 21st *canto* of Homer's epic describes in detail how it was not only a matter of the span of the bow, but also of the skill to send the arrow through the upper metal loops of twelve carefully-aligned battle axes. Talent here also includes perforce a sure eye to judge.

How do things stand today with our ability to judge, after two centuries of engaged and occasionally extremely fruitful research activity, the life and works of the greatest of all Leipzig cantors of St Thomas? Gerber's remark, that Bach left *works* behind for us, must be taken literally: in spite of all patient searching, the documentary basis for Bach's biography remains despairingly small. We know almost nothing about the man himself, little about circumstances accompanying his duties (at most only official information), again nearly nothing concerning the performance and resonance of his works during his lifetime.

The sharpening of scholarly methods that has occurred in recent times, however, has not let itself be deterred by this permanent *nescimus*:

<sup>1</sup> Ernst Ludwig Gerber, *Historisch-biographisches Lexicon der Tonkünstler* (Leipzig, 1790–2), i, col. 90.