

“FOR THE CHURCH AS WELL AS FOR
THE ORCHESTRA”:
J. S. BACH, THE *MISSA*, AND THE
DRESDEN COURT, 1700–1750

Mary Oleskiewicz

It has long been clear that Bach’s musical compositions and practice were influenced by those of Dresden. The Dresden influence is particularly critical in the case of the B-Minor Mass, whose 1733 version, referred to below as the *Missa*, included only the Kyrie and the Gloria; Bach presented it to the Dresden court in the hope of obtaining a court title. The *Missa* and Bach’s accompanying letter of dedication to the new Saxon Elector and King of Poland have occasioned a number of controversies that have yet to be resolved. This paper draws on archival studies of repertoires and performance practices at Dresden to contextualize Bach’s remarks and to shed light on how he might have expected his works submitted to the court to be performed. Three issues are considered: (1) Bach’s understanding of orchestral practices at Dresden and of the term “orchestra”; (2) relationships between Bach’s music and practice and those of Dresden composers, especially the *Hofcompositeur* Johann Dismas Zelenka; and (3) the use of doubling or ripieno parts in Dresden orchestral practice and its relevance for Bach’s *Missa*.¹

As is well known, in dedicating his 1733 *Missa* to the Dresden elector, Bach declared his readiness to compose “for the church as well as for the orchestra.” This declaration, as well as his reference in the 1730 *Entwurf* to the salutary conditions enjoyed by Dresden

¹I presented an initial study of many of the archival documents drawn on here in my Ph.D. diss., “Quantz and the Flute at Dresden: His Instruments, His Repertory, and Their Significance for the *Versuch* and the Bach Circle” (Duke University, 1998), particularly in chapters 2 and 5.

musicians, testifies to Bach's familiarity with Dresden practices. In the dedication, which accompanied instrumental and vocal parts submitted to the elector, Bach wrote,

For some years and up to the present moment, I have had the *Directorium* of the Music in the two principal churches in Leipzig, but have innocently had to suffer one injury or another, and on occasion also a diminution of the fees accruing to me in this office; but these injuries would disappear altogether if Your Royal Highness would grant me the favor of conferring upon me a title of Your Highness's Court Capelle, and would let Your High Command for the issuing of such a document go forth to the proper place. Such a most gracious fulfillment of my most humble prayer will bind me to unending devotion, and I offer myself in most indebted obedience to show at all times, upon Your Royal Highness's Most Gracious Desire, my untiring zeal in the composition of music for the church as well as for the orchestra (*orchestre*), and to devote my entire forces to the service of Your Highness, remaining in unceasing fidelity Your Royal Highness's most humble and most obedient servant.

Dresden, July 27, 1733

Johann Sebastian Bach²

The *Entwurff* dates from three years earlier, suggesting that Bach was familiar with conditions at Dresden well before his first documented effort to obtain a position (or at least a title) there.³ As Bach explained in his well-known memorandum of 1730 to the Leipzig town council,

²Translated in *The New Bach Reader: A Life of Johann Sebastian Bach in Letters and Documents* [NBR], eds. Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, rev. and enlarged by Christoph Wolff (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 158; original in *Bach-Dokumente* [BDok], 3 vols. (Leipzig and Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1963–72), 1:27.

³Bach was rewarded with a title only in November 1736, after a second application (see BDok, 1:36). The *Kurfürstlich Sächsische Hofkalender* (hereafter *Hofkalender*), published nearly every year from 1728 onward, belatedly lists him as “Kirchen=Composit[eur]” in the royal *Hofkapelle* for the years 1738 to 1750. For the first three years his name appears with the qualification “Tit[ular]” (in name only), but this distinction is dropped in 1741. Until 1746 Bach is listed third and last among the *Hof-Kirchen-Compositeure*, following Zelenka and Tobias Butz. From 1747 to 1749 he is listed fourth after Michael Breunich, Butz, and Giovanni Ristori. In 1750 the list remains the same, except that Ristori has been promoted to Vice-Kapellmeister (Hasse's title is simultaneously modified from Kapellmeister to Ober-Kapellmeister). In 1751 Bach is replaced by Nicolo Porpora.

One need only go to Dresden and see how the musicians there are paid by His Royal Majesty. . . . the musicians are *relieved of all concern for their living*, free from chagrin and *obliged each to master but a single instrument*; it must be something choice and excellent to hear.⁴

Bach's knowledge of the Dresden court musicians would have come directly from personal impressions gained during visits and recitals in Dresden. Bach is known to have visited or performed in the city on the following occasions: fall 1717, when he appeared before members of the court for the first time as a soloist; on 21 September 1725; on 14 September 1731, when he probably heard the premiere of Hasse's opera *Cleofide*; on 27 July 1733, at which time he must have submitted the *Missa*; in July 1736 and again on 1 December 1736, just after his appointment as titular *Hof-Kirchen Compositeur* in Dresden; in 1738, and in November 1741. Bach's close friendships with some of the best musicians of the court, including the violinists Volumier and Pisendel, the lutenist Weiss, and the principal flutist Buffardin, also occasioned visits from court musicians to his home in Leipzig.⁵ These connections are reason enough to believe that Bach had not only good working knowledge of but also personal experience with musicians and musical practices at court.

Bach's assertion that Dresden musicians needed "to master but a single instrument" is, however, not quite accurate: that some musicians in the "orchestra" in fact played several instruments, in addition to having to participate in various ensembles, raises the possibility that here Bach knowingly stretched the truth a little to make a point. Particularly during the reign of the previous elector (Friedrich August I, 1694–1733), it was not uncommon for musicians in the court ensembles to play more than a single instrument, and various musicians were required to serve in more than one kind of role. Jean-Baptiste Volumier, for example, was hired in 1709 to serve as dancing master, but he also assumed the position of violinist and concertmaster. The contrabass player Zelenka also served as composer, eventually earning the title *Kirchencomponist*. The use of doublers involved string, wind, and keyboard players and continued, although

⁴NBR, 150; original in BDok, 1:63. Emphasis added.

⁵Werner Neumann, ed., *Kalendarium zur Lebensgeschichte Johann Sebastian Bachs* (Leipzig: Bach-Archiv, 1970).