

FASCH AND THE BEGINNING OF MODERN ARTISTIC CHORAL SINGING

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Today's historically-informed performances mirror the view that eighteenth-century musicians were our equal in technique and musicianship, and that they performed with great refinement. To all appearances, this has not been documented, but simply presumed. Have we considered the significant role that limited education and class distinctions played in the eighteenth century? Knowledge of the level at which early musicians performed is vital to interpreting early texts in many areas. A case from one small corner of music history involving Carl Friedrich Christian Fasch will document that Johann Sebastian Bach did not likely have musicians of the quality we imagine for his works. Before taking up the subject matter in the title of this article, we need some background information.

A TIMELINE OF MUSICAL PROGRESS IN STANDARDS OF PERFORMANCE

In 1721, Johann Mattheson said, in essence, that many musicians have no ear, for they hear nothing amiss when unequally tempered instruments built at different pitch levels play together by transposition to a common pitch.¹ Without the uniform intonation to which we are accustomed, there could have been no precision (in the modern sense of the word), for players would have been unable to judge their own

¹Mattheson (*Das forschende Orchestre* [Hamburg, 1721], 426, 438) quoted in Jerold, "Pitch in the Vocal Works of J. S. Bach," *BACH* 31/1 (2000): 90. Other documentation for low skill level in the eighteenth century is found in my, "Why most a cappella music could not have been sung unaccompanied," *Choral Journal* 40 (Feb. 2000):21–27 and "Fontenelle's famous question and performance standards of the day," *College Music Symposium* 43 (2003): 150–60.