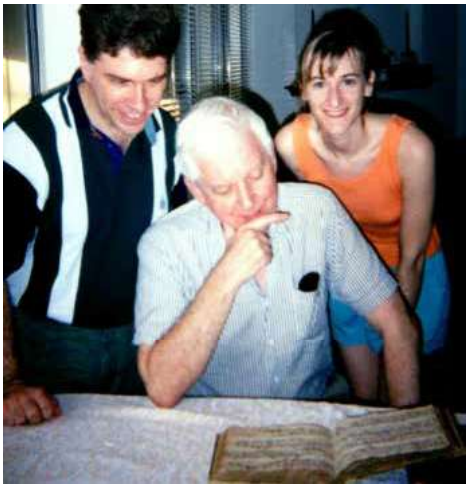
In Memoriam: Peter F. Williams (14 May 1937—20 March 2016)

Peter F. Williams, distinguished harpsichordist, organist, musicologist, teacher, and one of the most prolific scholars of our time, devoted his life's work to the study of Johann Sebastian Bach. He passed away at the age of 78, just a few hours after reviewing the proofs of his final, forthcoming book on the composer. Details of his professional biography can be found in other tributes written in Peter's honor (see weblinks at the conclusion of this article). The memorial shared here is instead one by a grateful student to an admired teacher.



Williams, with David Schulenberg and Mary Oleskiewicz. Peter is examining a stolen Bach manuscript recovered by David in Montreal and returned to Germany by Hans-Joachim Schulze.

Peter's scholarly legacy has overshadowed his immense dedication and contribution to pedagogy. In the classroom he inspired awe (in the most literal sense) and excitement amongst junior researchers. Awe, because his universal knowledge of music, exceeding far beyond Bach and Baroque, was couched in a formidable understanding of philosophy, literature, world history, geography, and ancient texts and languages. Excitement, because everyone knew they were in for the intellectual ride of their life with an incredible mentor, whom no one dared disappoint.

Peter's exacting standards were tempered by his great affection for students and his love of teaching. Humor balanced seriousness: apparently annoyed by a graduate student who always wrote on the same topic, one day he told the charming story of a grammar school class he once taught. A little boy in this class always talked about moles, he told us. So, thinking he could outwit the little boy into writing about something else, the school students were assigned a report about coal mining. However, as Peter explained, the little boy managed to indulge himself and began the essay "The animal most like a coal miner is a mole." Everyone in the seminar had a hearty laugh, and the graduate student understood the wink.

Peter never used email. But unlike the subject of his most famous writings, this organist wrote numerous personal letters — by hand, on old-fashioned, blue aerogram stationery. He wrote to graduate students researching dissertations abroad, and while in Germany I was among the grateful recipients of his correspondence. His letters acknowledged the loneliness one can experience while researching for months in a foreign place, and he shared funny tales about crawling through the Silbermann organs in Germany together with the Potsdam organ builder Karl Schuke (1906–1987) — "Old Schuke" as Peter called him — as ashes from Schuke's cigarettes fell into the precious Baroque pipes. In another letter he recounted his glee in driving a shockingly bright blue automobile into communist Dresden, amongst a population accustomed only to blandly pastel-colored Trabants. For leisure he recommended visiting the city's "big round Kino" and reading Kurt Vonnegut's *Schlachthaus 5*. He especially liked the Poles, he said, because they were lively and wild.

Peter was born Methodist but as a youth joined the Church of England and sang as a choirboy. Devoutly religious, he kept everyone around him abreast of saints' days. Once, during Lent, he remarked with a smile that he always gave up sugar in his coffee, and relished how glorious it would be on Easter morning when he could finally add the sugar back.

Peter's lifelong enthusiasm for learning and discovery was contagious. At Duke University he became the center of a veritable community of scholars in which everyone, regardless of actual status, was at once colleague and student. While he was writing *The Chromatic Fourth During Four Centuries of Music* (1998), colleagues and students alike were buzzing in the halls, discussing new examples of music with chromatic fourths they'd found (that is, the interval of a fourth, filled in chromatically, as in the bass line to Purcell's "Dido's Lament"), which they hoped might later turn up in the book.

Peter's scholarship posed more questions than it provided answers, much to the consternation of peers, but it was precisely the many questions that inspired his students' (and encouraged colleagues') curiosity and originality. He chuckled with obvious delight when his publisher returned the manuscript of *The Life of Bach* (2004) to him, saying it contained far too many question marks. (This brings to mind Niemetschek's anecdote about Emperor Leopold II, who tells Mozart he has written "too many notes" and, of course Mozart replies "only as many as necessary, your Majesty"). Some at Duke fondly mused that, if Bach were miraculously resurrected and wandered into his office, Peter would be terribly disappointed finally to know the answers.

In graduate seminars on Bach's cantatas or pithy discussions during coveted office hours, it was common for Peter to dash with excitement to the harpsichord and play an unexpected passage from *Das Rheingold*, or perhaps a Mahler symphony. The connections he drew between seemingly unrelated ideas were always surprising and often stunning. Peter was a role model, too, in another, perhaps more significant way: he welcomed and respected keen observations, even from students, that challenged his own views.

Peter generously and openly discussed his research. Before presenting at a conference, he would send a formal invitation to students and faculty to hear him give the paper on campus. Few failed to attend. He taught practical seminars on realizing continuo in which everyone had to play, and his patience—particularly with those for whom keyboard was not a first instrument—was remarkable. He attended graduate student recitals, and he played concerts for us. He gave praise when praise was due, commented thoughtfully on our writings, and shared personal, real-world advice from the perspective of a seasoned performer and about surviving in academia. On occasion, he would invite a few lucky advisees to his home, where they were greeted by polite, well-behaved children, shown a curious collection of large, taxidermied owls from Europe, and treated to a dinner that was followed by Peter's delicious homemade crepes with rum sauce. Never mind that he didn't know where the tablecloths at home were kept, it was just easier to eat in the kitchen.

Peter Fredric Williams, born 14 May 1937, in Wolverhampton, UK, died 20 March 2016. He liked to say that he was a coronation baby (12 May 1937 was the crowning of George VI and Queen Elizabeth). When he died at five minutes to midnight it was already 21 March in Leipzig. Whether Herr Bach was prepared — on his birthday, no less — to answer a lifetime of questions, or whether his student truly desired the answers, we shall never know.

Mary Oleskiewicz

Weblinks to other memorials:

John Butt, "Peter Williams Obituary: Perpetually Inquiring Scholar of the Organ and of J. S. Bach" in *The Guardian*: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/apr/08/peter-williams-obituary

David Yearsley, "Skepticism, Irony, and Doubt: Williams on Bach" in *Counterpunch*: http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/05/06/skepticism-irony-and-doubt-williams-on-bach/

Review — "Geheimnisse der Harmonie": Bachfest Leipzig 2016

The annual Bachfest Leipzig, organized by the Bach-Archiv Leipzig, ran from 10 to 19 June 2016. The motto chosen for this year was "Geheimnisse der Harmonie" (Secrets of Harmony), a reference taken from the obituary of 1754 which praised Bach's extraordinary compositional skills. The program, consisting of 115 events, had distinct topics including the juxtaposition of multiple versions of some of the best-known choral works and the performance of several cantatas from the 1723/24 annual cycle. We also heard pieces by anniversary composers Max Reger (100th of his death) and Ferruccio Busoni (150th of his birth), both of whom played major roles in promoting Bach's works through their own compositions. These and other topics were illuminated in a series of lectures by Bach-Archiv scholars Michael Maul, Andreas Glöckner, Wolfram Enßlin, Christiane Hausmann, and Klaus Rettinghaus.

Reflecting on the Motto

Exploration of the meaning and the implications of Bachfest's motto began with a performance of the Passacaglia BWV 582 at the opening concert in the Thomaskirche at 5:00 p.m. Ullrich Böhme's delicate and imaginative execution on the "Bach organ" brought to my mind an answer to the question of motto's meaning: the secret might be the persuasive power of logic. After the speeches, the new Thomascantor Gotthold Schwarz led the Thomanerchor, ThomasSchulChor, and the Leipziger Universitätschor with Gewandhausorchester in three works based on the idea of apocalyptic visions: *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort,* BWV 20, Reger's Requiem WoO V/9, and the final chorale of BWV 60 before a fully-packed house.

On the following day I attended a panel discussion moderated by Thomas Bille at the Altes Rathaus at 11:00 a.m. in which Peter Wollny and Sir Roger Norrington discussed the annual motto and wider issues including Norrington's "pure tone" approach to performance, which he demonstrated admirably in his concert on 15 June at the Nikolaikirche at 8:00 p.m. in a performance of the 1724 version of Sanctus BWV 232^{III}, Handel's *Ode for St Cecilia's Day,* HWV 76 and Haydn's *Harmoniemesse,* Hob. XXII:14.

The event at which the quest for meaning was most methodically explored was the chamber concert by Anne Freitag (traverso and recorder), Susanne Scholz (violin) and Jean-Christophe Dijoux (organ and harpsichord) in the Grassi Museum for Musical Instruments on 16 June at 5:00 p.m. Entitled "Canones Diversi," their program traced the ways in which canonic composition evolved from the Renaissance through the early Baroque to the time of Bach. Using the instruments of each time period and with a brief introduction on the pieces, it was effectively a lecture on music history that vividly portrayed the complexity of Bach's harmony and contrapuntal art, the artistic breadth and depth, and the technical challenges that performers face, particularly in the trio sonata of the *Musical Offering.*

No. 25 Fall 2016

Bach Notes

Newsletter of the American Bach Society

Conference Report: "J. S. Bach and the Confessional Landscape of His Time" University of Notre Dame, 7–10 April 2016

The American Bach Society held its biennial meeting on the University of Notre Dame's grand campus in South Bend, IN, 7–10 April 2016. The program, "J. S. Bach and the Confessional Landscape of His Time," covered many topics: various composers and compositions; 18th-century happenings in cities and at courts; confessional divides, personal conflicts, and more. Also featured were excellent concert performances by Notre Dame faculty, students, and musical guests.

Friday morning opened with a keynote address by Notre Dame Professor of History **Mark Noll**. Noll's address, "Bach in Time: Then and Now," mused about an imaginary meeting, in late July 1738, of Sebastian Bach and John Wesley, the latter passing through Leipzig on pilgrimage. Noll scripted for us Wesley's reaction to the extant cantatas for the 9th Sunday after Trinity, all of which are on the topic of condemnation. Noll pointed out that Bach and Wesley's different musical views echoed their confessional disparities and explained why promotion of Bach's works in England fell to Wesley's younger relatives.

Craig Cramer, Paul Walker, and doctoral student recitalists

Derek Stauff began Friday's first session by examining use of the word "Elend": its etymology and its significance in selected cantata passages. Stauff hypothesized that themes of exile, warfare, and suffering performed "confessional work" in additional cantatas. **Christine Blanken**'s discussion of a printed libretto cycle by Christoph Birkmann followed. She explored Birkmann's connection to Johann Abraham Birnbaum, famous defender of Bach, Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Leipzig. Blanken also illuminated lesser known aspects of Birnbaum's career, hypothesizing that he could have compiled libretti for Bach, or even served as a librettist himself.

In the second session, **Mark Peters** proposed that an emphasis on God's mercy distinguished Lutheran Magnificat settings from Catholic ones. Situating works in the context of commentaries from Luther onwards, Peters argued for a particularly Lutheran division of movements, emphasized by different compositional choices. **Daniel R.**

In This Issue:

© 2016
The American Bach Society