



PROLOGUE A BUMPY SELECTION PROCESS

Johann Sebastian Bach is widely associated with Leipzig, the city where he composed his most renowned works. But Bach's appointment as cantor of St Thomas's in Leipzig 300 years ago was by no means a foregone conclusion. History could have easily taken a different turn.

Being cantor of St Thomas's was one of the most prestigious municipal posts in the world of Protestant music. Previous incumbents, including the exceptional composers Sethus Calvisius, Johann Hermann Schein, Sebastian Knüpfer and Johann Schelle, had established the position's reputation far and wide. The cantors were appointed for life, so after Johann Kuhnau's death on 5 June 1722, the city council tried to fill the vacancy quickly. But it proved harder than expected...

Round 1

July – November 1722

Initially, the situation appeared straightforward. The city council swiftly reached a consensus on Georg Philipp Telemann as the prime contender. Hamburg's director of music had launched his career in Leipzig and had a strong bond with the councillors. On 9 August, he underwent an audition, and just two days later, he was selected as the cantor of St Thomas's. However, Telemann's response kept the council waiting, and after three months, he eventually withdrew.

Round 2

November 1722 – March 1723

On 23 November, the council made another attempt to reach a consensus but faced a major disagreement. They couldn't decide whether it was more important for the new cantor to possess exceptional musicianship or to be an exemplary teacher.

An audition on 29 November with three other candidates failed to produce a result. It was not until two promising applicants were added to the list on 21 December that the selection process moved forward. The court kapellmeisters Christoph Graupner from Darmstadt and Johann Sebastian Bach from Köthen were both invited to audition.

Again, the 'Leipzig' candidate came out on top: Graupner, who'd attended St Thomas's School and studied in Leipzig, was given the nod. And on 15 January 1723, even before the official auditions, the council agreed on him. But on 22 March, Graupner also had to decline when his employer refused to release him.

Finale

April / May 1723

On 9 April 1723, the city council convened once again. As before, there was disagreement over whether to prioritize the candidate's teaching abilities or musical prowess.

Councillor Abraham Christoph Platz's infamous quote went down in history: "Since the best can't be obtained, mediocre ones will have to be accepted." However, this statement needs some context. Platz was the main advocate for

the schoolmaster faction. Since the best composers couldn't or wouldn't teach, Platz, aged 65, tried to introduce a new candidate: a competent teacher but only a 'mediocre' composer and musician.

During the meeting, the council reportedly decided to extend an offer to Bach. He signed a preliminary contract on 19 April and was unanimously selected as the cantor of St Thomas's on 22 April. After passing the theological examination, the Electoral Saxon Consistory confirmed his appointment on 13 May. Now there was nothing standing in Bach's way.

If Bach is elected, we can forget Telemann.

Gottfried Lange, Mayor of Leipzig on 22 April 1723

THE FAVOURITES

The preferred candidate:

Georg Philipp Telemann (1681–1767)

director of music in Hamburg

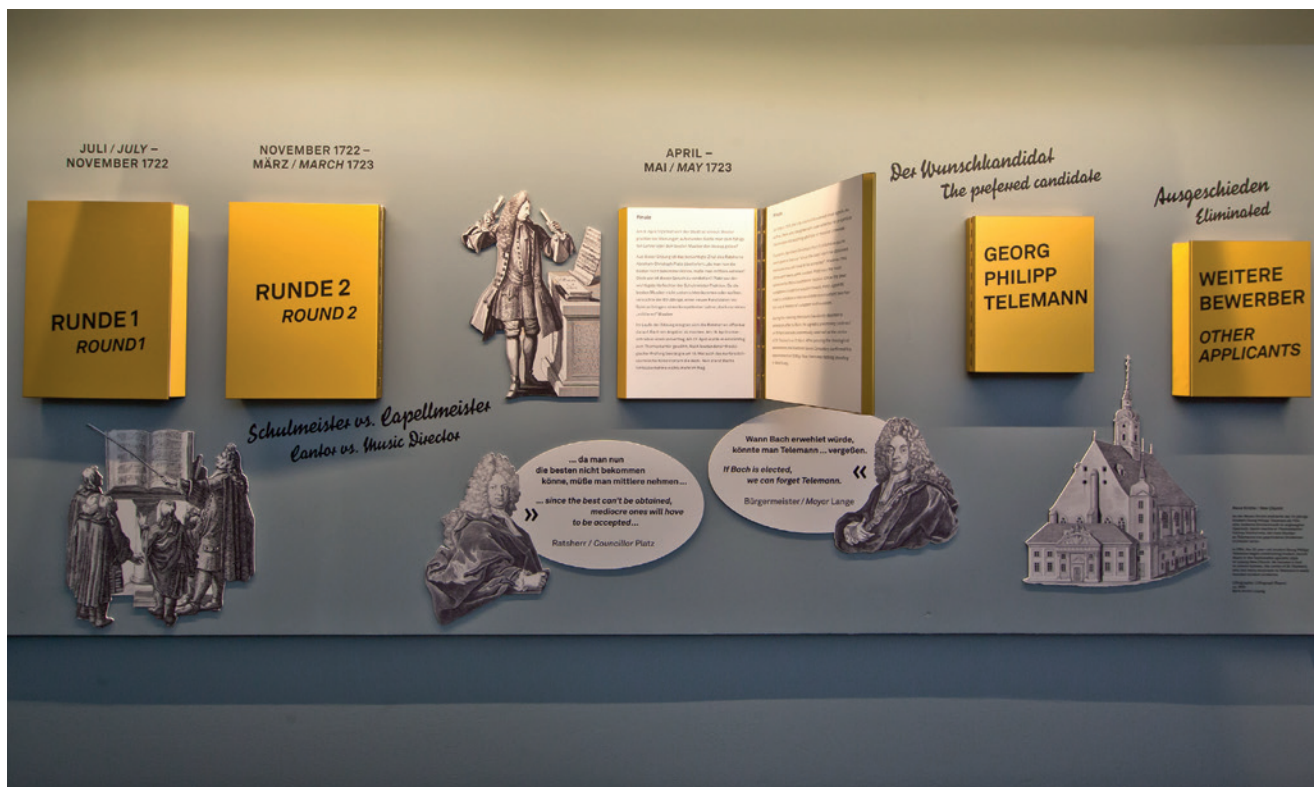
The preferred candidate quickly emerged. Telemann had caused quite a stir in Leipzig as a student with his church music and operas. Unfortunately, he left the city after a few years, much to the disappointment of the locals. As a renowned composer and musician who had held comparable municipal positions in Frankfurt am Main and Hamburg, he met the council's high expectations. On 11 August 1722, the council appointed him cantor of St Thomas's. However, Telemann declined the offer as he'd received a more appealing proposal from Hamburg city council.

Eliminated:

Other applicants

Johann Friedrich Fasch was a promising candidate. Like Telemann, he was well known in Leipzig, where he'd founded an orchestra, given concerts and performed operas while still a student. Now the court kapellmeister in Zerbst, he withdrew his application because he didn't want to teach.

Andreas Christoph Duve (cantor in Brunswick), Georg Friedrich Kauffmann (organist and director of music in Merseburg) and Georg Balthasar Schott (organist



and director of music at Leipzig New Church) gave auditions but weren't short-listed. Other applicants included Georg Lencke (cantor in Laucha), Christian Friedrich Rolle (cantor in Magdeburg) and Johann Martin Steindorff (cantor in Zwickau).

The favourite in round 2: Christoph Graupner (1683–1760) court kapellmeister in Darmstadt

When it was a choice between Graupner and Bach, the former emerged as the victor. He'd taken piano and composition lessons from Schelle and Kuhnau, both cantors of St Thomas's, during his education in Leipzig. Even before his official audition, he was asked to compose a Magnificat for the Christmas services in Leipzig's main churches. And on 15 January, he was selected by the council – three days before his cantorial audition! However, Graupner's employer, Landgrave Ernst Ludwig of Hesse-Darmstadt, threw a spanner in the works by refusing to release his kapellmeister.

THE WINNER

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

court kapellmeister in Köthen

Johann Sebastian Bach underwent his cantorial audition on 7 February 1723. Unlike the other contenders, Bach had never worked in Leipzig before. Nevertheless, he wasn't entirely unknown, as his virtuoso skills had caught people's attention when he'd inspected the organ at St Paul's Church at the invitation of the university. Despite being the only applicant without a university degree (usually a necessary qualification for cantors at St Thomas's), the council selected him.

AUDITION CANTATAS

The city council invited at least six candidates to cantorial auditions. They each performed cantatas composed especially for this occasion complete with choir and orchestra at a church service. The texts to be used were provided by the city council. While Telemann, Graupner and Bach were each allowed to perform two cantatas (one before and one after the sermon), the other candidates had to be content with only one.

The audition cantatas by Christoph Graupner and Johann Sebastian Bach are known to us. New research suggests that Georg Philipp Telemann composed the cantata *Ich muss auf den Bergen weinen und heulen* ('I will weep and wail for the mountains') for his audition.

Bach performed the two elaborate cantatas *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe* ('Jesus gathered the twelve to Himself') and *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn* ('You true God and Son of David') at his audition in St Thomas's Church. Hear for yourself the musical quality of the favourites!

CD tip: Leipzig 1723 – Telemann | Graupner | Bach

Georg Philipp Telemann

Ich muss auf den Bergen weinen und heulen ('I have to cry and weep on the mountains'), TVWV 1:591

Christoph Graupner

Aus der Tiefen rufen wir ('Out of the depths we cry'), GWV 1113/23a

Christoph Graupner

Lobet den Herrn alle Heiden ('Praise ye the Lord, all ye nations'), GWV 113/23b

Johann Sebastian Bach

Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe ('Jesus took aside the twelve'), BWV 22

Johann Sebastian Bach

Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn ('Thou, very God and David's Son'), BWV 23.2

ÆLKGUT: Isabel Schicketanz – soprano, Stefan Kunath – alto,

Florian Sievers – tenor, Martin Schicketanz – bass

Capella Jenensis

Accentus 2023

CANTOR OF ST THOMAS'S AND MUNICIPAL 'KAPELLMEISTER'

Bach advanced to one of the most prestigious musical posts in Germany. The prospect of becoming cantor of St Thomas's — a secure position for life — must have appealed to him immensely, as it provided an almost ideal setting for his work.

Being cantor of St Thomas's meant Bach was also the city's music director, allowing him to combine his aspirations to be both church composer and kapellmeister. Leipzig, a university city and a bustling centre of commerce, was home to an upwardly mobile bourgeoisie and music-loving students, and frequented by merchants from abroad. This diverse community provided him with a stimulating environment and access to a wide range of people and activities. Despite the disputes and disappointments that arose from being cantor of St Thomas's, Bach's creative freedom was much greater than it had been at the royal court. He was no longer dependent on the whims of a prince, although he strived to obtain prestigious titles at court to reinforce his position as an exceptional artist.

Bach took advantage of the scope provided by his municipal position, devoting himself to a range of activities beyond his official duties. During his 27 years in Leipzig, he produced a diverse, innovative body of vocal and instrumental works that secured his outstanding place in music history.

Music to the exhibition on Spotify:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/72BluaFOLKLpMGHLFherMF?si=93396020dc4943aa>

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