

Cantata

A piece of music that is sung, as opposed to Sonata, which is only played. As it pertains to Bach, the cantata was most often a multi-movement work for one or more vocal soloists along with a chorus, accompanied varied numbers and kinds of instruments, and most frequently a liturgical work. Some secular cantatas by Bach exist, such as the “Coffee” cantata.

Chorale

A movement which typically features a four-part hymn supported by the orchestra such that the high-pitched instruments play the same line as the sopranos, mid-range instruments play the alto line, etc.; in a Lutheran service, chorale movements allowed the congregation to join in song

Concerted

A compositional style wherein two or more independent groups of instruments or voices interact with or against one another.

Motet

A sacred piece of choral music with multiple vocal parts but with no instrumental accompaniment

Orchestrating (orchestration)

Choosing which instrument or instruments will play a particular part of the music at any given time. This is normally done by the composer and indicated in the score, and sometimes done by an arranger. However, in music composed before the middle of the 18th century, composers oftentimes left orchestration to the performers.

Organ stop; “pull a stop”

On a pipe organ, the stop, once pulled, admits air into one or more pipes, thereby causing them to sound. The larger the organ, the more stops, and the more variety of sounds that can be produced.

Polyphony

A highly-controlled and skilled setting of multiple independent musical lines set against each other, and the ways in which they interact.

Tempo

Italian for “time;” that is, the speed at which a passage of music should be played. Before the advent of the metronome, composers indicated their desired tempo only with terms such as allegro (“lively,” “fast”) or largo (“large,” “slow”). This left much room for variation to the taste of the performer.

Thomanerchor

Founded in 1212, this was the boys’ choir of St. Thomas’s Church in Leipzig. Bach was the church’s director of music from 1723 until his death in 1750, and not only directed (and disciplined) the boys but every so often also took on teaching duties covering the liturgical and linguistic materials which formed the boys’ education.