

# Meet the Bach Collegium San Diego and Director Ruben Valenzuela

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Friday, 28 January 2011

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BY CHRISTOPHER BRODERSEN

*Q: Today I'm talking with Ruben Valenzuela, the congenial director of the Bach Collegium San Diego. The topic is the group's debut CD, a recording of the Bach motets. To be sure, there are many, many recordings of this music in the catalog, but I think what we have here is a unique approach, even for the early music world. Tell us a little bit about your group and its background: When it was formed, who its members are, etc.*

A: The group was rather casually put together in early 2003 for an *ad hoc* performance of the *St. John Passion* of Bach. Soon after, the singers met and decided more or less unanimously to continue performing together. By mid 2004 we were giving concerts every few months and we began programming the Bach motets; we did at least one of them on every concert. In 2006 we formalized the group even further and started mapping out concert programs for the entire year, which at that time consisted of four to five concerts. We started exploring the Bach cantatas, then large-scale works such as the B-Minor Mass and *Messiah*. In 2008 we performed the rarely heard Handel oratorio *Theodora* under the guest direction of Richard Egarr. We've branched out considerably from the initial concept of a 12- to 16-voice chamber choir with minimal instrumentation, ranging all the way to 40 voices with chamber orchestra, the forces that we used to perform Haydn's *Creation* in 2009. You can see that the makeup of the group varies quite a bit.

*Q: Had there been much of a tradition of choral music in San Diego up to that point, at least on the scale of a chamber choir?*

A: In San Diego there are many amateur choral groups—church and community choirs, that sort of



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thing. There is now a lot of choral singing going on in this area, but what had been lacking for a long time is a professional chamber choir to cover repertoire from the 16th to 18th century. There have been a couple that have come and gone over the last 10 years or so—I've been in San Diego myself for 15 years. Of course, we really do think of the group as carrying with it an instrumental component, whether it's a small continuo group such as used on the Bach motets CD, all the way up to a Baroque orchestra of around 26 players for the B-Minor Mass. I think we're rather unusual in that way, in that we've been able to cover everything from chamber music to large scale works with orchestra.

*Q: Where do the instrumentalists come from—is there a standing Baroque orchestra in San Diego?*

A: There isn't, really. With the exception of myself and our concertmaster, Pierre Joubert, everyone else is imported. The bulk of the string players come from Los Angeles, whereas many of the wind players come from San Francisco, Portland, and even some from Boston and New York. This particular aspect makes budgeting and scheduling particularly challenging, but well worth the high level of playing that these musicians bring to our projects.

*A: What's the background of the singers in your group? Are any of them teachers at the university level? Public schools, perhaps?*

A: All of them are professional singers. Obviously most of them teach, either privately or at the high school or university level, or have day jobs but work as professional singers. In the case of the soloists, the early-music world tends to be rather close-knit, so these are the same singers you might see in other early-music groups up and down the West Coast, or even back East. It's really a blend—about half of the singers are local, but we usually import the soloists.

*Q: So you used imported soloists on the Bach motets CD?*

A: On that particular CD there were a few individuals who were imported. A handful came from Los Angeles and Orange County, and two from the East Coast.

*Q: I have to say that I'm not very familiar with the music scene in San Diego. I heard the San Diego Symphony once a few years ago—they seem to be a very fine group.*

A: Yes, they are.

*Q: Didn't they have some financial difficulties a while back and were forced to disband?*

A: They filed for bankruptcy in 1996; however, the symphony was revived in 1998, led by a group of individuals that included Joan and Irwin Jacobs, the CEO of Qualcomm. Due to millions in grants and bequests, the symphony remains quite active and has just celebrated its 100th anniversary.

The music scene in San Diego tends to be conservative in many ways. The Bach Collegium San Diego is the only fully professional early-music ensemble in town. The group takes the name of San

Diego mostly because I live here, and because this is where it was founded. However, as I mentioned, most of the instrumentalists come from elsewhere. There just isn't the kind of infrastructure to support a permanent instrumental ensemble, the way you might find in the Bay Area, for example. Or Boston, where there's a harpsichordist on every block. That's simply not the case here!

*Q: It's certainly to your credit that you can put together an early-music group of this caliber in a relatively short time, in a place where none had existed before. Tell us a little about your own background.*

A: First and foremost, I'm coming from the organ and harpsichord bench. Over time that inevitably led to choral and instrumental conducting. For a church organist especially, this is a common and natural transition. I'm also a musicologist; I have a master's degree in musicology and I'm currently working on a Ph.D. in musicology. I've always had an interest in early music—musicology, early music, and historical performance practice go hand-in-hand in so many ways. That's basically where I'm coming from.

*Q: Obviously many organists tend to morph into choral conductors, but they may not always understand the mechanics of singing. Have you done any singing?*

A: Yes, I've done a lot of choral singing—all through high school and college. Besides my work with the chorus of the BCSD, I regularly direct two choirs as part of my church job. So yes, choral singing and conducting are important parts of what I do. From an early age, I have grown up around a culture of singing.

*Q: Let's talk a bit about your approach to the Bach motets. It seems to me that there are basically two different ways of performing them: either as choral pieces with a larger group, or as chamber music with one or two voices on a part. I think most people would say that your approach falls in the second category.*

A: I definitely think of the motets as written for soloists, even virtuosos. As you pointed out, you can certainly do them with a larger group, and they have been frequently performed that way. However, with a large ensemble I believe the textual priorities of the music suffer; the counterpoint tends to blur. Not just Bach, but all music of this period. I like to hear each line clearly, not to mention the interaction between the lines. That sort of textual clarity and purity of line can best be achieved when you have virtuosic singers at your disposal. On two of the motets we had only one singer to a part; on the double choir motets we generally used a total of 16 singers.

*Q: Isn't it also a function of the individual singers? With a big choir you get a sort of generalized approach—well, I don't even know if you get that. The singers may or may not be motivated, or know what the meaning behind the words is in such a way that they can deliver them with the proper expression. With soloists it's an entirely different matter; they're in a much better position to "sell" the song, as it were.*

A: Yes, of course—it's the dedication that a soloist brings to the table. The individuality and expression of a soloist lend a completely different color to the music, which is especially vital in Baroque music.

In 17th- and 18th-century music, the rhetorical aspect is central; declaiming the text and projecting the overall “affect” of the music are of prime importance. You're able to do that so much more easily with soloists than with the anonymity of a large choir.

*Q: And I think that's the point that's often missed by detractors of period-instrument performance—they tend to focus on secondary aspects such as vibratoless strings. To me, it comes down to the individual expression of the player—or singer, in this case.*

A: Absolutely. There's also been much discussion as to the role of instruments in the motets, and whether they have any place at all. Some groups have performed them completely *a cappella* ; some have performed them with instrumental doubling. One of the motets, *Der Geist hilft* , does have surviving instrumental parts that double the voices. However, there are many decisions to be made when it comes to performing the Bach motets. I think of two of the motets— *Der Geist hilft* and *Lobet den Herrn* —as exclusively chamber music. So that's a major departure from the way they're usually performed. That's not to say that the choral society approach is invalid. I'm just coming at the music from another angle entirely.

*Q: There's one recording of the motets conducted by Sigiswald Kuijken that actually has a full orchestra playing along with the singers, the instruments doubling all the voice parts. That was quite controversial when it first came out.*

A: I do know that recording. It's a perfectly valid approach. There's a recent fine recording by Masaaki Suzuki and Bach Collegium Japan that also features instrumental doubling alongside a choir of 16, I believe. Both recordings are very effective, and I highly respect both Kuijken and Suzuki's work. Two giants of Bach interpretation.

*Q: I haven't heard the Suzuki recording yet—I've been meaning to.*

A: It may be the most recent recording of the motets prior to ours.

*Q: Are there any more recording projects on the horizon? More Bach? Other composers, perhaps?*

A: We're looking at a number of different possibilities. We keep coming back to the idea of recording some of Purcell's music. We started a recording project over a year ago that never made it to the editing stage: a Purcell suite along with the music of Matthew Locke. So, we would like to revisit that soon. Since we have the Bach motets and several of the cantatas under our belts, it's also a goal of ours to tackle something larger, say one of the Bach passions or a Handel oratorio.

*Q: You said that you've performed the St. John Passion and the B-Minor Mass. Have you attempted the St. Matthew or the Christmas Oratorio yet?*

A: Those are definitely on our hit list, but for obvious reasons ...

Q: *Those would require a lot of extra forces.*

A: A lot of extra forces, and highly specialized players. We will be doing the *St. John Passion* again in April, the first time since our inaugural concert in 2003. Our performance this time should shake up the San Diego music scene—a total of nine singers: eight in the choir, the ninth being the Evangelist, with truly minimalist instrumental forces. Essentially a chamber-music version of the *St. John*. Our proposal has been met with a lot of puzzled faces around here! *[laughs]* Many people, when they think of the *St. John Passion*, think of a 40-plus-voice choir and a relatively substantial instrumental component. We hope to change their minds; the emotional impact of a dramatic piece like the *St. John* performed by a chamber group made up entirely of soloists should be quite intense and reminiscent of Baroque opera.

Q: *Of course, this sort of controversy harkens back to the days of Harmoncourt and Joshua Rifkin.*

A: Right. You'd be surprised how, even in the year 2010, it still raises eyebrows. Last season when we performed the Bach motets in two concerts we did one of the double-choir motets with one singer to a part; even portions of the other motets—the trios in *Jesu meine Freude*, for example—were sung by soloists. Many people in the audience found this challenging, which gives you an idea of what most people are used to around here.

Q: *Did you get negative press about it?*

A: The reviews were actually quite favorable. Most of the surprised reactions came from choral conductors, some of whom are associated with academic institutions in San Diego. Perhaps their frame of reference might be recordings by Helmuth Rilling, or even Karl Richter, that sort of thing.

Q: *So despite its proximity to Latin America, the choral tradition in San Diego is more closely aligned with, say, 19th-century Anglo-American Protestantism?*

A: Most definitely. The big school here, San Diego State University, has a choral program that is rather on the low end right now, but their choral concerts usually feature large choirs of over 100 voices and large orchestras doing major choral works. Also, the larger churches in San Diego tend to do things along these scales as well, which is understandable not being an academic environment. Contrast this with our B-Minor Mass performance from a few years ago that featured 26 singers, including soloists, with as many instrumentalists. That should give you some idea of the artistic gamut here in San Diego.

Q: *Being so close to Mexico, do you have any interest in or involvement with Latin American Baroque music?*

A: Yes, very much. In the past, the group has regularly participated in a music festival in Mexico City. We would have gone this last November but the budget didn't allow it. It's actually an organ

festival featuring historic instruments; however, we were invited to bring a choral ensemble. Another time we took a chamber-music ensemble and that gave us the opportunity to perform in Mexico City Cathedral. Just two weeks ago, our opening concert of the season was a program of South American and Mexican Baroque music with guest director Rodolfo Richter. Our second performance took place in the historic Mission San Luis Rey, which is one of the original Franciscan missions here in San Diego. It was a perfect marriage of repertoire and venue.

*Q: From what little I know about the subject, I gather that there is this vast uncharted continent of Latin American music waiting to be edited and performed.*

A: Yes. That happens to be my field of specialization in musicology. Although 17th- and 18th-century European music is my bread and butter, the music of Latin America, specifically Mexican Baroque music, is the area of my directed research toward the Ph.D. I devote a lot of time to the subject currently.

*Q: Perhaps we'll see a CD or two of that music from the Bach Collegium San Diego in the near future.*

A: I hope so. It makes perfect sense from a geographical perspective for us to record that music. But since the group has been so deeply rooted in Bach and Handel since its inception, it's been a little hard to escape that mold.

*Q: In the long run, it's probably what draws people into concerts and sells CDs.*

A: Exactly.

*Q: This has been quite fascinating. I hope to be able to hear the group in person someday.*

A: Sure. As I said, we have performed in Mexico City, and we've put out tentative feelers about performances in Arizona and New Mexico for next season, possibly under the auspices of one or more of the early-music groups there. So yes, I hope to see you at one of our concerts someday. Of course, the weather's always great here! *[laughs]*

*Q: And if all goes well, eventually a cross-country tour.*

A: That will happen in the near future.

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**BACH 6 Motets, BWV 225–230** • Ruben Valenzuela, dir; Bach Collegium San Diego (period instruments) •  
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Although the six surviving motets of Sebastian Bach are ostensibly a capella choral music, they really should be considered as a kind of subset of the church cantata. Like his many cantatas, Bach's motets were written for specific occasions, usually one or more Sundays on the liturgical calendar. Instruments were almost certainly part of the composer's original tonal concept, either in the form of basso continuo, or in the case of *Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf*, BWV 226, as instrumental doubling for the voices. At the beginning of the Bach revival and into the early years of the 20th century, the use of basso continuo in the motets was considered optional (it's still listed that way in the Bach Werke Verzeichnis Kleine Ausgabe). Instrumental participation got a big boost with Nikolaus Harnoncourt's historic recording with the Stockholm Chamber Choir on Telefunken, first released in 1980. Since then, instruments have been a regular feature of almost every historically informed recording to date, and as noted in the interview, many have added the optional string and wind choirs in BWV 226, along with reconstructed instrumental parts for the other motets.

Two aspects of the present CD set it apart from almost every other period-instrument recording in the catalog. One is the continuo group, here consisting of organ, arclute, and violone. It's tempting to say that these three instruments are likely to have been Bach's own choice (the harpsichord would have been out of place in a church setting). The concept of "authenticity," of course, has become an anathema to many early-music specialists; any CD emblazoned with this label nowadays is routinely looked on with suspicion. I would rather go on record, as Valenzuela has by making this CD, by saying that the choice of instruments makes the most musical sense, as it provides the ideal accompaniment to the often complex vocal writing. The firm 16' bass of the violone is an essential underpinning, while the fullness of the organ, punctuated by the delicious sounds of the arclute, imparts the necessary harmonic backbone. Since the vocal lines are handled mostly by soloists, this almost has the effect of an accompanied aria (or duet, trio or quartet).

The other aspect that sets this CD apart is the individual contributions of the singers. While there have been recordings featuring a smallish choir—for example, the Scholars Baroque Ensemble on Naxos—the style of singing never strays very far from the traditional, corporate kind of choral work. Here, the individual singers of the Bach Collegium San Diego purport themselves as true soloists. Their overall expression is tied closely to the rise and fall, the strong and weak beats of the words; luckily, they are in general agreement about this, thanks no doubt to the gentle guidance of conductor Valenzuela. Compared with the eight singers of the Scholars Baroque Ensemble, who sing with a more conventional, operatic kind of sound (i.e., *con vibrato*), the 16 singers of the BCSD produce a straighter sound marked by very flexible phrasing. It's the sort of individualized expression that characterizes the best early-music performances. Ironically, with twice as many singers (not all are used on every piece), the BCSD produces a more transparent sound than the smaller Scholars Baroque Ensemble. Every line of the BCSD's performance is discernable (one more so than the others—see below). You could take harmonic dictation from this CD, if your ear and hand are quick enough to keep up with Bach's constantly shifting counterpoint.

As has been the case too often in my experience, this private-label recording falls short in one critical area: engineering. Specifically, it is the resonant acoustic of the venue, an Episcopal church in San Diego that is the problem. Ordinarily a resonant church acoustic will result in an extremely blended choral sound; the individual voice parts get subsumed in the overall sound of the group. Here the acoustic produces a lopsided balance; the sopranos predominate at the expense of the lower voices. The resultant choral sound is rather thin and lacking in body. Since there are only four sopranos—against five altos,

four tenors, and four basses—and they don't belt it out as in other choirs, one cannot fault the singers. All sorts of acoustic factors could have played a role: odd reflections from walls and ceiling; less than ideal microphone placement; even the choice of equipment. It's too bad, since this is a recording that, from a performance perspective, affords many pleasures and can stand up to repeated listenings. While this may not be my desert-island version of the Bach motets, I recommended it for the fine performances.

**Christopher Brodersen**

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Recording the six motets of JS Bach seems to be almost a rite of passage for most up-and-coming choral groups nowadays. It seems that new ones are always popping up, such as, for example, recent ones by Sine Nomine and the Setti Voce. Coming on the heels of fine versions by Marlowe, Cantus Cölln, Herreweghe, Holten, and Kuijken (not to mention a plethora of other recordings that march into the past like a line of choral soldiers), it would seem that there is hardly room for yet another, but this grouping of the traditional six by the Bach Collegium San Diego adds yet another dimension to the canon.

The performance practice of these works is always debatable. Were they done with extremely reduced forces, possibly only one or two to a part, or was the choir larger? Just what, if anything, accompanied them? If one turns these around, one can find enough leeway to support a variety of interpretations without running afoul of the spirit of these works. Here, Ruben Valenzuela's group uses a basic ensemble of 16 voices (with some rearrangement for BWV 226 and 230), along with a continuo consisting of a large archlute, a violine, and the inevitable organ. Although only BWV 230 has an actual continuo part, these instruments are used throughout. One will find that the sound of this group is quite rich, almost as if it were considerably larger. The tempos move along quite nicely, if perhaps a bit reverently, and the singers, who perform with only a touch of vibrato (particularly the sopranos), are spot on pitch. I would have liked to see a bit more differentiation between the various works, perhaps a bit more text-painting such as one find in the Cantus Cölln recording, but for once I find the words rather nicely comprehensible. Given the rich texture, this is an admirable feat. And when it comes to the contrapuntal sections, such as the fugue in BWV 226, the Collegium makes the work seem effortless. My only real concern is that the performance venue appears to reverberate a bit much, which may account for the acoustical richness and perhaps reverent tone I observed. This is not bad, but I would have preferred a bit more clarity of sound.

There is little more to say about this addition to a long tradition. It is a fine recording, and the Bach Collegium San Diego clearly has a good future ahead of it. I am not convinced that it excels beyond other recordings of these works, and for me there doesn't seem to be something extra-special that would make it stand out above a large crowd. If one doesn't have a recording of the motets, this one will do admirably, and if one collects the various performances, then this should be added to the collection. If, however, a generalist already owns a good recording, then I'm not sure this will add anything novel. What I would like, though, is for this group to explore and hopefully record some of the vast unknown repertoire of choral works by Bach's students and contemporaries. I think that they could make a distinct mark here.

**Bertil van Boer**

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*Fanfare* March/April 2011 Interview and Review of Bach's Six Motets, the inaugural release of the **BachCollegiumSanDiego**.

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