



DIURNA

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Editorial by Robert Forgács: **J S Bach and Latin**

The name of Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) is no doubt known to everyone, seeing, that by common consent he is one of the greatest composers in the Western Canon. His relationship with the Latin language, though, is probably less well known. Bach studied Latin at school, like every other school boy in the Germany of his time. Latin also featured prominently in the Lutheran liturgy of Bach's time, since Luther believed that when the congregation was learned, Latin should be retained for historic and educational reasons. Bach's professional musical career began when he became a chorister at the age of 7 or 8 (the precise details are missing) and from this time he would have sung frequently in Latin. His surviving compositions to Latin texts, however, all date from his years at Leipzig, where he served as Kantor of the Thomaskirche (the main church in the city) from 1723 to 1750. These compositions include two related settings of the Magnificat canticle (dating from Christmas 1723 and July 1734 respectively), a Sanctus composed for Christmas 1724, and his great Mass in B minor, which was originally a setting only of the first two movements of the Ordinary of the Mass – the Kyrie (in Greek) and the Gloria in Latin. This early version of the Mass was composed in 1733 and sent to the Electoral Court in Dresden. It had converted to Catholicism in 1697 to obtain the crown of Poland, and Bach hoped to receive an honorific title from the court, The title was eventually bestowed, but as far as is known, this early

version of the Mass in B minor was never performed in Dresden, even though Bach sent separate copies of all the orchestral parts, as well as the full score, to make a performance easier. Between the years 1737 and 1747, Bach composed five further settings of paired Kyries and Glorias, which are usually referred to as 'Lutheran Masses', as these are the two movements of the Mass Ordinary that were commonly performed polyphonically in the Lutheran liturgy of the time. Since the early version of the Mass in B Minor was not performed in Dresden, and owing to its vast proportions and technical and musical demands it was unsuitable for Leipzig, Bach adapted three of the movements of the Gloria as a cantata for Christmas. It was entitled 'Gloria in excelsis Deo', and is Bach's only cantata with a Latin text; it was premiered in the Paulinerkirche (the University Church in Leipzig) on Christmas Day, 1742. In the final years of his life, from 1748 onwards, Bach completed his Mass in B minor by composing the other movements of the Mass Ordinary – Credo, Sanctus, Benedictus and Agnus Dei – incorporating his Sanctus setting from Christmas, 1724, as well as adapting some of his earlier compositions with German texts, by substituting a Latin one - a technique common at the time and referred to as *contrafactum*. The only composition with a secular Latin text by Bach is known simply as the 'Latin Ode' – both music and text have been lost, but the work was referred to in contemporary newspapers published on 9 August, 1723, the year of Bach's appointment to Leipzig.



The Bach statue by C Seffner dating from 1908, and restored in 1973. It stands outside the Thomaskirche in Leipzig

Diurna Competition winner – Hugo Sharkey:

Cure, Currency, Contraceptive, Cuisine- The Missing Mystery Herb that Had it All

In 500 BC, the Greek polis of Cyrene was the wealthiest city in North Africa. She paralleled the most prominent political powerhouses of the region, arguably surpassing Alexandria and Carthage. The subtle secret behind her grandeur, prosperity and power was the direct product of a seemingly unremarkable weed which littered an exclusive, 200 by 40km strip of Libyan grassland. It was printed on coins alongside deities and monarchs and was even the basis for its own unscrupulous black market. The ancients called it “Silphium.”



Asafoetida- thought to be the closest living cousin of the extinct Silphium- and even a suggested identity for the ancient super-herb. Many similar plants, possibly including asafoetida, were mistaken for Silphium, and these variants were used as culinary alternatives for the increasingly rare and expensive original.

At first sight, the plant appeared entirely unremarkable. It consisted of a stalwart root and a taut, tough stem, crowned with a vibrant display of small yellow flowers. Yet, it had such a vast spectrum of applications, that Pliny claims that it was ultimately ‘worth its weight in gold’.

Its stiff, crunchy stalks, thought to be a close relative of fennel, were a highly nutritious and coveted cooking ingredient, which could be boiled, used as garnish, eaten raw or sautéed. Its roots, shaped much like radishes, were a delectable vegetable that could be munched as a delicious appetiser. It could be mixed amongst cereals and lentils as a tremendously effective preservative, and when fed to grazing animals, their flesh became fragrant, delicate and tender. These animals were considered premium, “Silphium fed”, much like our modern, “grass fed” cows. Its sap was drained and dried and became a highly solicited condiment called

“laser”. This resin was sold at exorbitant prices and grated over sundry dishes for a delightful twist.

Even the aromatic nectar concealed amongst its effulgent blossoms had its purpose, a perfume for the necks of the Mediterranean elite.

Silphium was also a medical elixir. Pliny, in his *Natural History*, denotes that when rubbed into open wounds, it was a successful antibiotic. However, it could not be used on oral cavities- a man who tried as much allegedly threw himself off a house.

Finally, despite its disappearance, our super herb continues to disperse and germinate in a surprisingly unconventional manner. The symbol of the love heart, that red, bulbous icon of romance and sexuality, is thought by some to have its geometric origins in the heart shaped seeds of the Silphium plant. Indeed, Silphium was one of the first efficacious chemical contraceptives. Its juice was downed as an aphrodisiac, or the soft resin dabbed over fine wool, and applied as a suppository. In fact, Augustus, noticing a decline in Rome’s population at the time, introduced laws exhorting pregnancy. So, Silphium lives on, in anything from two-dollar Valentine cards to cupid tattoos.

Silphium is said to have appeared around 2500 years ago, after a ‘black rain’ swept over Libya. Perhaps a cloud of fungal spores, perhaps volcanic ash. Anyhow, the plant immediately proliferated, its yellow blooms easily visible amongst grassy hillsides and plains within the affected area. Its extreme utility, chance arrival and bright, spherical blossoms meant that it was considered a gift from Apollo.

The arrival of the Romans in 96BC coincided with an immediate and frighteningly rapid decline in Silphium stocks. Successive efforts by both the Greeks and Italians to farm the plant

yielded the same results: Silphium would only grow where it had first appeared; its seeds persistently resisted all other soils and climates. In fact, the only way to produce the herb was to leave it to its own devices. Theophrastus does mention that limited results were seen when the seeds were strewn in freshly turned earth, but a healthy, adult plant was never procured outside Libya.

Some say it was overharvesting, others a curse from the gods, anyhow, the last recorded stalk of the enigmatic ambrosia was found under Nero’s reign. It was plucked and sent to Rome as a curiosity. A tragic end to one of the most fascinating botanical tales in history. But who knows? Maybe silphium exists today, hidden in plain sight as a yellow-flowered Mediterranean weed.