

DIURNA

NEWSPAPER OF THE 28TH LATIN SUMMER SCHOOL: DIES MERCURII, JANUARIUS XIX

Editorial by Robert Forgács: J S Bach, Latin and the Thomanerchor (Choir of St Thomas's Church Leipzig)

As was noted in yesterday's editorial, Bach's association with Latin is not generally well known. When Bach was appointed Kantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1723, one of the traditional duties of the Kantor was to teach Latin for 5 hours per week to the members of the Thomasschule – the St Thomas's school in Leipzig, where his choristers were educated and where Bach and his large family lived. Although Bach had a positive attitude to Latin, he found this task irksome. Therefore, he appointed a deputy (at considerable cost to himself) to do the teaching, so as to devote himself entirely to music. The Thomanerchor still exists – it consists up of around 100 boys, aged between 9 and 18, which is larger than in Bach's day. The boys are all educated at the Thomasschule, which has been rebuilt several times, and is now a lovely, very well-equipped modern co-educational school, for both day pupils and boarders. The choir, church and school celebrated their 800th anniversary in 2012, with several beautiful books being published and some excellent DVDs being made about the life of all three institutions. In these, the music of J S Bach forms the central core. In fact, there is nowhere in the world where Bach and his music are more lovingly remembered and performed. Bach's grave is in front of the high altar of the Thomaskirche, his birthday is always celebrated in the church, and during the ceremony at which new choristers are admitted to the

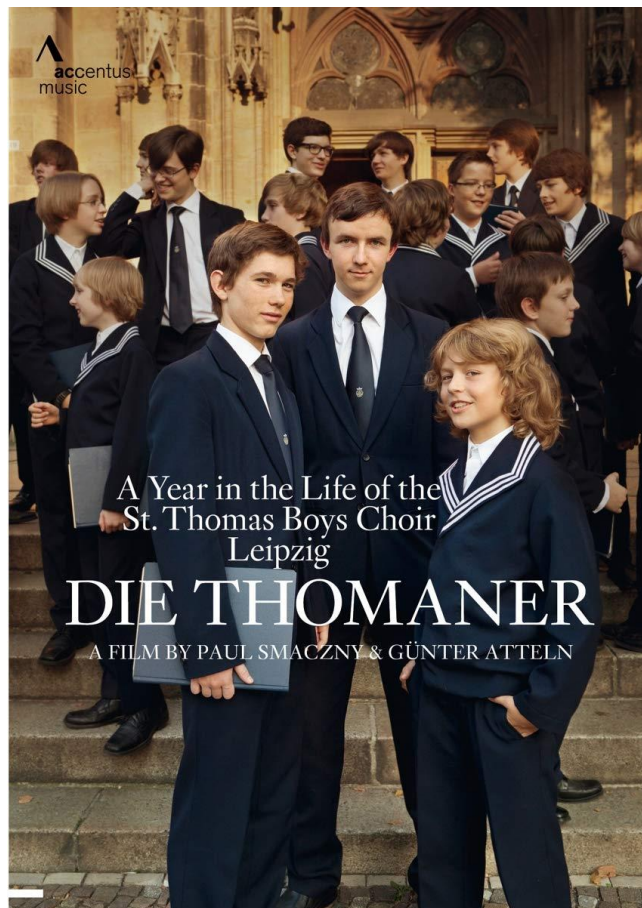
Thomanerchor, these new choristers place sunflowers on Bach's grave.



Bach's grave in the Thomaskirche decorated with flowers

While music is the subject which demands the attention of the choristers most, Latin is the foreign language which they study first – followed by English. This makes sense; as the choir often sings in Latin, it is far better if they can understand the text themselves than have it translated for them. Latin also features prominently in the day-to-day life of the choir, as in Bach's time. When the present-day Kantor wants silence during rehearsal, he uses the Latin word 'Silentium', rather than its German

equivalent. The same word is also used when silence is requested during their meals. As Hagen Kunze has commented in his small book *Das Thomaner-Büchlein* (2014) “Es schadet nicht, Latein zu können” (it doesn’t hurt to know Latin). The Latin title ‘domesticus’ is used for the student who acts as the spokesman of the choir, and the choir is divided up into small groups, each of which includes choristers of every age - this unit is referred to as a ‘Famulus’. It is believed by the administration that the retention of Latin terms helps to strengthen the association between the present-day choir and its glorious past, being summed up in the saying: *Semel Thomaner, semper Thomaner* (once a Thomaner, always a Thomaner). Similar attitudes are also characteristic of another outstanding German boys’ choir, the Windsbacher Knabenchor in Bavaria. Although the choir is only 75 years old, it is educated along the same lines, with Latin being an obligatory subject for all its members. How different to attitudes in other countries!



The special DVD made in 2012 to celebrate the 800th anniversary of the choir



Above - the choir rehearsing for the 2021 Bach Festival during the Covid-19 pandemic; left - part of the choir performing Bach’s Mass in B Minor in 2013

Diurna Competition winner - Elsa Tonkinwise:
Flora in Classical Poetry

*Sicelides Musae, paulo maiora canamus!
Non omnis arbusta iuvant humilesque
myricae.*¹

Virgil, *Eclogues* IV.I–2.

Botanical symbolism in literature is a field of its own. Even when one is unfamiliar with the specific connotations of a shrub or bloom, however, a primal delight comes from the recognition of a plant whose presence we still enjoy. The precision of classical poets' floral references serves as a tangible, aromatic thread between their age and ours. This piece serves as a brief *florilegium* (in the most literal sense) of this thread.

“Crisp salad plants”, staples of the modern *pauperis hortus*, are often favoured (Smiley, 1921). In *Odes* IV.II, Horace writes: *Est in horto, Phylli, nectendis apium coronis, est hederæ vis multa, qua crinis religata fulges.*² With distinct references to two species — *apium* and *hedera* — Horace achieves verisimilitude. To this day, garden walls are mantled with ivy and meals garnished with parsley (less sinewy than its Roman counterpart, but *apium* nonetheless).

The bucolic genre is, needless to say, equally rich with botanical references. Theocritus features salad plants in his *Idylls*. He paints a

comely face: καὶ γὰρ ἔμοι τὸ πάροιθεν ἐπάνθεεν ἀδύ τι κάλλος / ὡς κισσὸς ποτὶ πρέμνον, ἔμᾶν δ' ἐπόκαζεν ὑπήναν, / χαῖται δ' οἷα σέλινά περὶ κροτάφοισι κέχυντο.³ No abstract imagery could so elegantly and economically establish the subject's naturalism. In the fourth book of *Georgics*, Virgil furnishes a landscape with parsley and sprays of myrtle: *quoque modo potis gauderent intiba rivis / et virides apio ripae... / et amantis litora myrtos.*⁴ His setting is not impressionistic, but precise. Philodemus' work also abounds with this vegetal “aesthetic satisfaction” (Grant, 1971). Rustic meals are lent focus: ἤδη καὶ ῥόδον ἐστὶ, καὶ ἀκμάζων ἐρέβινθος, / καὶ καυλοὶ κράμβης, Σωσύλε.⁵ The crops we sow to this day warrant a graceful poem; agrarian work from millennia past retains its freshness.

Time and time again, plants strengthen the modern attachment with their familiar scents and sights. Catullus' work blossoms with alpine buds (*quos Thessala magnis / montibus ora creat, quos propter fluminis undas / aura aperit flores tepidi fecunda Favonif*), and even crass Martial foregrounds his elegy to Vesuvius with verdure: *Hic est pampineis uiridis modo Vesbius umbris, / presserat hic madidos nobilis uua lacus.*⁷ In the dialogic “*Lamella Orphica*”, a simple poetic brushstroke — the mention of a tree species — refines an otherwise abstract

¹ “Muses of Sicily, let us attempt a rather more exalted theme. Hedgerow and humble tamarisk do not appeal to all.” (Tr. Rieu, 1949.)

² “In the garden, Phyllis, there is parsley for plaiting into garlands, and a generous swathe of ivy which makes you look brilliant when you tie up your hair.”

³ “For beauty once bloomed upon me like ivy on a tree trunk, cloaking this chin of mine, and its tendrils lay thick upon my temples like parsley.”

⁴ “How endives flourish in a trickling rill, / parsley at brookside green... / pathways, bordered green / with myrtle.” (Tr. Williams via Smiley, 1921).

⁵ “Roses are already here, Sosylos, and fresh peas... and the tender leaves of crinkly lettuces.” (Tr. Rexroth, 1999).

⁶ “(He brought flowers from the meadows), alpine buds from Thessaly's mountains, riverside blooms nurtured by the balmy, fruitful gale of Favonius.”

⁷ “Here stands Vesuvius, only recently verdant, shrouded with vines; here the noble grape filled vessels until they overflowed...”

moment: ἀλλὰ πῆμου κράνας αἰερώ ἐπὶ
δεξιά λευκῆ κυπάρισσος.⁸

In all instances, greenery lends a remarkable richness to poetry, connecting us to an otherwise alien epoch.⁹ *Qua quid potest esse cum fructu laetius, tum aspectu pulchrius?*¹⁰



Fresco at Pompeii in the House of the Golden Bracelet, 1st century AD

Latin at WEA Sydney in 2022

WEA Sydney is offering Latin classes at different levels and different times in the summer term beginning at the end of January. The cost of each of these courses is \$275 for nine weekly lessons of two hours each, with a concession price of \$248. Some of these classes are on Zoom only and some will be hybrid classes.

For more information contact WEA Sydney on 9264 2781 or google *Latin at WEA Sydney*.



Virgil Eclogues illustration 5th century AD – Musei Vaticani

⁸ “But let me drink from the ever-flowing wellspring on the right. There! A bright cypress.”

⁹ Of course, *nota bene* that not all agree with this reading. Scholar Thomas Rosenmeyer is at odds with my interpretation of specific flora as a means of opening the world of the poem. He writes in *The*

Green Cabinet (1969) that “the clarity with which the landscape is articulated suggests the limited confines of an interior.”

¹⁰ “What, indeed, could be more delightful to the taste or more beautiful to the eye?” Cicero, *De Senectute*.