

Cantatas for the Feast of St John the Baptist
St Giles Cripplegate, London

Returning to Stansted airport from the midsummer celebration of Trinity Sunday in Orkney, we plunged straight into rehearsals for two long and demanding programmes, for St John the Baptist's day and Trinity 1. Unusually, we had the luxury of two shots at each programme – and in the same venue: St Giles Cripplegate, the war-damaged church in the city of London where Milton is buried. Standing opposite the Barbican complex, it is a haven in that man-made concrete jungle.

Bach composed BWV 167 **Ihr Menschen, rühmet Gottes Liebe** shortly after assuming his post in Leipzig in the summer of 1723. To illustrate the way prepared by John for Christ's entry into the world (so fulfilling God's ancient pledge) Bach inscribes a modulatory arc through the five movements of this cantata, curling downwards from G major via E minor to A minor, then up again to G. There is no opening chorus; instead, Bach begins with an aria for tenor and strings, a spacious 12/8 movement with an intriguingly varied phrase-pattern, a meticulous dynamic scheme and an almost Weberian leaping passage to describe 'das Horn des Heils'. The alto recitative which follows concludes with an *arioso* section of winning tenderness and wistfulness over an arpeggiated cello continuo, to describe the repentant sinner's journey to paradise (anticipating Schumann's oratorio *Das Paradies und die Peri* by 120 years). The centrepiece of the cantata is an extended soprano/alto duet with oboe da caccia. The lyrical oboe melody gets pared down to the singers' three-note phrase ('Gottes Wort') and its four-note answer ('das trüget nicht') in thirds and sixths – euphonious and pithy, and typical of Bach's consummate skill in unifying instrumental and vocal material. The fast middle section is constructed as an eight-bar canon for the two voices with lavish *roulades*, passing almost imperceptibly into 3/4 at the words 'haben wir Gottlob erfahren', a delicious shift of stress and metre. The final *Loblied*, 'Sei Lob und Preis mit Ehren', uses the same technique of sparkling *piacevole* string and oboe writing over a walking bass to contrast with the chorale, one that Bach used four months earlier to conclude his Leipzig test piece, BWV 22, and was to use again a few days later for the First Sunday after Trinity in BWV 75, with the burnished open tones of a *clarino* etching the hymn tune.

For the same feast the following year, as the third chorale cantata in his second year cycle, Bach composed BWV 7 **Christ unser Herr zum Jordan kam**. It is a monumental piece, especially its opening chorale fantasia, a stirring setting of Luther's baptismal hymn with the melody in the tenors over a French overture for two oboes d'amore, solo violin and strings, replete with grandiloquent baroque gestures to suggest both the processional entrance of Jesus and the powerful flooding of the River Jordan. Getting the tempo right is just one of the many interpretative challenges – one that can accommodate the natural momentum for the violin *barriolage* representing the surging of the river, yet remain spacious enough for the rhetorical gestures to make maximum impact.

In No.2, an aria for bass and continuo ('Merkt und hört, ihr Menschenkinder') Bach does the preacher's job for him to perfection, with varied inflection, lengths and stresses – and a dash of humour (was there a particular Leipzig cleric whose mannerisms and delivery were being parodied here?). A tenor recitative (No.3) prepares us for Christ's teaching, in an aria (No.4) which describes, through its pair of soaring violins, the circling flight of the Holy Spirit as a dove. The bass returns with an *accompagnato* (No.5) to remind the listener that Christ's passion and resurrection were the inspiration behind the conversion and baptism of the heathen. This leads to an unusual, terse aria (No.6) for alto (with the two oboes d'amore doubling the violins), exhorting mankind to be cleansed by faith and baptism and not to 'perish in the pit of hell'. That seems to be the theological kernel of what is otherwise a rather depressing doctrinal dismissal of the benefits of good works and a blameless life. Johann Walther's tune, heard in the opening chorale fantasia, then returns with Luther's baptismal words about faith alone being capable of understanding 'the power of the blood of Christ'.

Many years later in 1738 Bach adapted a recent bipartite serenata, 'Angenemes Wiederau' (BWV 30a) with a text by Picander, to celebrate St John the Baptist's day: **Freue dich, erlöste Schar**, BWV 30. Its opening and closing chorale words are fitting as a welcome ode to Christ's prophet. Huge energy and fizz is generated in Bach's most brilliant, ceremonial manner. The *Loblied* announced by the bass (No.3) is also stirring, a sturdy G major *passepied* with garlands of triplets passed from one string line to another and, for good measure, a written-out cadential flourish for the bass soloist before the *da capo*. This is one of four excellent arias: a spirited E minor *gigue* (No.10) for soprano and violins (we used three) and a second bass aria in B minor, this time with solo violin and oboe d'amore with full strings (No.8), and – the pick of them all – an enchanting *gavotte* for alto, flute and muted violins, with pizzicato lower strings (No.5). Everything is fresh and new about this number, from its unusual ground plan of two eight-bar instrumental strophes, both repeated, to its syncopated theme and its boogieing triplets. Even to a congregation well used after fifteen years to Bach's habit of weaving giges, gavottes and bourrées into his church music, its sheer cheek and elegant cool must have raised eyebrows, and, one hopes, caused his first listeners to smile. It is the perfect riposte to those who might claim, even for the blink of an eyelid, that Bach is dull and heavy.

Cantatas for the First Sunday after Trinity

St Giles Cripplegate, London

Trinity 1 was of particular significance during Bach's time in Leipzig. It marked the starting point for the first two of his cantata cycles, providing him with the opportunity to announce himself musically to his new community (in BWV 75) and, exactly a year later, to establish a new stylistic orientation (with BWV 20). It also marked the beginning of the second half

of the Lutheran liturgical year: the Trinity season or 'era of the Church' in which core issues of faith and doctrine are explored, in contrast to the first half, known as the 'Temporale' which, beginning in Advent and ending on Trinity Sunday, focuses on the life of Christ, His incarnation, death and resurrection. The three surviving cantatas for Trinity 1 are all large-scale, bipartite works, musically ambitious and of the highest quality. All three take their lead from the Gospel of the day, the parable of Dives and Lazarus, and the theme of pursuing riches on earth or in heaven, and from the Epistle, which defines love of God and the need for brotherly love. Bach's treatment of these themes in each of the cantatas is diverse. Our grouping them together in a single programme made for a fascinating glimpse into the workings of his imagination – a display of his virtuosic mastery of varied musical rhetoric.

As Bach's first official Leipzig cantata on assuming office, BWV 75 **Die Elenden sollen essen** was performed eight days after he and his family arrived in Leipzig, and two days prior to his formal installation. Judging from the neat appearance of the autograph score and the non-Leipzig paper on which it was written, it seems likely that Bach had begun composing while still in Köthen. The cantata is in fourteen movements (fourteen was Bach's own symbolic number), seven dealing with wealth and poverty from a material viewpoint, seven with the challenge they represent to the Christian soul.

Bach sets off with a French overture in slow triple time, with an oboe solo playing rhetorical flourishes, very much in the vein of Handel's opus 3 concerti grossi. The chorus announces that 'the meek shall eat and be satisfied' (Ps 22:26) with pathos and a majestic and fitting seriousness. This is balanced by a lively fugue begun by the four *Concertisten*, 'your heart shall live for ever', with an extended tail to each phrase for 'ewig' and lively melismas for 'leben'. Clearly Bach is setting out his compositional stall. The arias that follow are in the style of an up-to-the-minute French dance suite: a tenor aria (No.3) as *polonaise*, a soprano aria (No.5) with oboe d'amore as *minuet*, an alto aria (No.10) with violins as a stately *passepied* and a brilliant bass aria (No.12) with trumpet as *gigue*. Each half of the cantata ends with a presentation of one of Bach's best-loved hymns, 'Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan', set against a catchy *ritornello* (which cries out for French 'inégaie' treatment). But there is more to all this than just show. In the opening chorus Bach emphasises not just the obvious differences between poverty and riches, but the idea that priorities are reversed between heaven and earth. In the second part of the cantata he develops the contrast between 'Armut' (privation or poverty) and 'Reichtum' (wealth) at a spiritual level: the alto sings 'Jesus makes me rich in spirit', to which the bass adds that the individual can recognise the Spirit in the sweetness of love ('Jesus' süsse Flammen').

Still more imposing is BWV 20 **O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort**, composed a year later. Confronted by the baffling and disquieting subject of eternity, and specifically the eternity of hell, Bach is fired up as never before. The text expounds the paradox that we can only work towards our salvation by dealing with the here and now. Johann Rist's chorale of 1642 runs to sixteen

verses, here reduced to twelve, three of which are retained verbatim, the others paraphrased. This work opened Bach's *Jahrgang II*, consisting of chorale-based cantatas; it is a radical switch, not just of musical style but of theological emphasis, underlining the severity of God's judgement, the flip side to the forgiving, loving nature referred to in the Epistle. Fear, rather than comfort, is now the theme, the prospect of an eternity of pain and suffering the spur to man to save his soul (No.6), with the imminent arrival of the coffin-cart clattering across the cobbles to the front door (No.9). Does Bach take his cue from the Epistle – the need for 'boldness in the day of judgement'?

BWV 20 opens with an elaborate choral fantasia fitted over a French overture. Three oboes confront the string band: each group hammers out a whole bar's worth of semiquavers, suggesting a heart-thumping terror. The rising melodic *cantus firmus* ('O Ewigkeit') doubled by the martial (almost apocalyptic) *tromba da tirarsi* carries the lower three voices in its wake up to a top F, before they splinter off in the double-dotted style of the instruments ('du Donnerwort'). In the *vivace* the oboes and strings join together to present a double fugue, the second of which descends chromatically, appropriate to the text 'With my great grief, I do not know which way to turn'. The lower voices are now more detached from the tune, containing several powerful cross-accents and a huge upward sweep for the basses on 'Traurigkeit'. Abruptly the orchestra grinds to a halt on a diminished seventh: out of the dramatic silence, terse and horrific fragments are tossed from oboes to strings and back again before the choir resumes with 'My terrified heart quakes so, that my tongue cleaves to my gums'. The fragmentation and disjointed nature of the discourse is uncompromising and leaves no room for hope. We seem to have been propelled forward by some eighty years to the world of Beethoven.

The tenor prolongs the mood of torment (Nos 2 and 3) – 'as Jesus says, there is no redemption from agony' – ramming home the themes of anxiety, pain, hell and the quaking heart. Bach uses a varied thematic armoury: long notes and undulating quavers to suggest eternity, chains of appoggiaturas stretched over tortuous figurations to suggest fear, wild runs for flames and burning, broken fragments, chromatic and syncopated, for the quaking heart. Sudden silences at phrase-ends add to the sense of disjointedness and terror. Yet all this profligacy of dramatic imagery is perfectly and seamlessly integrated into the overall design.

The bass soloist (Nos 4 and 5) climbs back into his pulpit – literally in our performance, as Dietrich Henschel strode purposefully from his place in the back row of the choir – to deliver another harrowing contemplation of 'a thousand million years with all the demons'. Suddenly we are in the world of *opera buffa*, or rather of ducks, three of them (all oboes), and a bassoon, quacking in genial assent to the singer's claim that 'Gott is gerecht'. The mood seems to jar horribly. Have we been conned by all the earlier fire and brimstone? Or was it a deliberate ploy to dissipate the gloom – like bleeding an over-pressurised radiator – offering a glimmer of hope to the now-battered Christian soul? Dietrich Henschel suggested that

Bach's purpose here is to insist that there really was 'kein Problem': all that is required is for the believer simply to trust in God. You can almost see him sitting back in his chair, favourite pipe in mouth, blowing smoke circles contentedly. If so, the reprieve is only temporary. The strange sequel, an aria (No.6) in triple time for alto and strings, 'O mankind, save your soul', is presented with extravagant rhythmic dislocation, no doubt representative of 'Satan's slavery', regular 3/4 bars alternating with single or double hemiolas. Stranger still is the way that Bach repeats the singer's second phrase with orchestra alone: twenty-three bars of singer-silent *Nachspiel* out of a total of sixty-four. A pessimistic, even nihilistic chorale stanza (No.7) closes Part I: 'Torment shall never cease'.

What did the preacher use as his sermon text? Perhaps the call to the lost sheep to throw off the sleep of sin, the subject of the superb bass aria in C major for trumpet and strings (No.8) which opens Part II, Bach's answer to Handel's 'The trumpet shall sound' from *Messiah*. It is immensely taxing both for singer and trumpeter, requiring technical control and dramatic delivery.

The alto soloist now launches into a threatening tirade against the carnal world, which leads to an alto/tenor duet (No.10) with continuo only, made up of successions of six chords over a disjointed quaver line, proto-Verdian in its terse, tense working out. The parallel thirds and sixths in the voice parts give way first to imitative and answering phrases, then to lavish chromaticism, anguished when they evoke the bubbling stream and the drop of water denied to the parched Dives. The voices join in one last evocation of the forbidden water, the continuo play their last furtive snatch of *ritornello*, then... black out... dissolve. Extraordinary! Only the final chorale (No.11), this time ending with a plea to God to be taken from life's torments and temptations and the ghoulish spectre of eternity, brings a glimmer of hope to this technicoloured cantata.

Two years later and we're into the world of natural disasters and charitable appeals: BWV 39 **Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot**, composed in 1726. This seems to have been Bach's second use of a text from the court of Meiningen where his cousin Johann Ludwig was employed. The Meiningen pattern entailed the quotation of two biblical texts: from the Old Testament for the opening movement, 'Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot' (Isaiah 58:7-8), and from the New Testament 'But to do good and to communicate forget not' (Hebrews 13:16), the common thread an injunction to help the poor.

The opening chorus is multi-sectional and, at 218 bars, immense. It begins with repeated quavers tossed from paired recorders to paired oboes to the strings and back. This gives way to a lyrical semiquaver passage in thirds which later accompanies the choir when it sings 'take into your house'. The choir also enters in pairs, and with imploring gestures, emotionally choked, their pleas breaking and stuttering. This leads to sustained chromatic phrases for 'and those that are in misery', then the semiquaver passage in thirds for 'führe in's Haus' with weaving melismas. The tenors embark on a new condensed fugal theme with prominent A flats and D flats, which has a pathos all of its own, especially when for eight bars

it is joined in imitation by the altos. After ninety-three bars the time signature changes to common time: the basses begin unaccompanied, and are then answered by all voices and instruments very much in the old style of Bach's Weimar cantatas, with a florid counter-subject to suggest the 'clothing' of the naked. At bar 106 the time changes to 3/8 (again a Weimar feature) and the tenors lead off in the first of two fugal expositions separated by an interlude with a coda. The sense of relief after the stifling pathos of the opening sections is palpable and comes to a sizzling homophonic conclusion with 'und deine Besserung wird schnell wachsen' ('and thy health shall spring forth speedily'). The basses now instigate the second fugal exposition, 'the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward'. After so much pathos, the final coda led by the sopranos 'und die Herrlichkeit des Herrn wird dich zu sich nehmen' releases the pent-up energy in an explosion of joy.

There are other beauties in this cantata: an *alla breve* continuo aria (No.4) for bass where the underlying pulsation and grouping seems to be in 3 not 2, a delicious soprano aria (No.5) accompanied by the two recorders in unison, a touching alto *accompagnato* (No.6). But all are dwarfed by the immensity, vigour, flexibility and imagination of the opening chorus, every phrase of its text translated into music of superb quality.

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