

Bach on a Budget

by Gary Harney

Introduction

Bach's cantatas are among the greatest achievements in the history of church music, yet with the exception of the expanded chorale from Cantata 147 (usually sung today to the words "Jesu, joy of man's desiring") and a few similar movements, Bach cantata choruses are seldom heard in liturgies, even though portions of other large collections (e.g., the Byrd *Gradualia* or the motets of Palestrina) appear with regularity on church music lists. Why is this the case?

The project *Bach on a Budget* was undertaken to address some of the likely causes. In this article, I will explore three issues—selection, language, and accompaniment—behind the infrequent performance of Bach choruses in churches today, and discuss how *Bach on a Budget* addresses each.

Issue #1: Selection

There is so much music in Bach's roughly 200 church cantatas that it can be difficult knowing where to begin the selection process. The prospect of sifting through roughly 170 choruses (plus a few dozen expanded chorales) looking for movements with texts suitable for a given occasion is daunting and time-consuming. Editors have already identified many Byrd and Palestrina motets from which a choir director can choose without having to survey the composer's complete *oeuvre*; indeed, these often come today in high-quality, free editions. This degree of sifting has not been done with Bach's choruses, however, leaving a choir director with the job of searching for just the right chorus for a given occasion from the 170+ possibilities.

Another determining factor in selection is vocal difficulty, which many perceive to be a stumbling-block in approaching Bach's choral music. To be sure, many of Bach's vocal lines can demand considerable vocal agility; however, this is not always the case. In addition to several full choruses with easily approachable lines, the vocal technique found in continuo choruses and expanded chorales (see below for discussion and examples) would be familiar to choirs accustomed to singing Renaissance polyphony.

Some will remember that William J. Bullock took on a similar task in his 1984 book *Bach Cantatas Requiring Limited Resources*. But whereas Bullock defined "limited" as having access only to a string quartet, two oboes, and continuo, *Bach on a Budget* defines "limited" as organ, or organ plus 1-2 obbligato instrumentalists—a much more common situation in today's churches. Bullock also addressed (to some degree) the issue of instrumental replacement, and most choir directors today have a story of making substitutions in Bach (e.g., saxophone for trumpet, clarinet for oboe), only to have the

result still be satisfying. This supports Bullock's statement that "although the distinctive colors of Bach's scoring would be compromised [by a reduction or substitution of instruments], the alternative of no performance at all is certainly less desirable." (Bullock, p. 12.)

The first mission for *Bach on a Budget*, therefore, was to facilitate the selection process by suggesting choruses and chorales which are useful in today's liturgies, categorizing their vocal difficulty level and the nature of their texts, seasonal appropriateness, etc. This can be found at <http://www.immanuelbachconsort.org/bach-on-a-budget.html>. In the sections which follow, some examples are provided for reference. Additional selections (along with free scores) are available on the website.

Issue #2: Language

Choral singers are accustomed to singing in Latin, but far fewer are proficient in German. One way to resolve this for Bach's choruses would be by creating/identifying singable English translations. While this has been done for a few of the chorale-based movements, it is not a task taken on yet by *Bach on a Budget*. Instead, I hope choirs will sing in German. That being said, some Bach choruses contain only a few words (as few as seven, and many with fewer than twenty). We have identified these as good places to start if language is a perceived barrier. With a few exceptions (e.g., *Nun danket alle Gott*/"Now thank we all our God"), *Bach on a Budget* presents the works in German, with English translations provided for printing in bulletins and programs.

Issue #3: Accompaniments

Bach had at his disposal 20+ instrumentalists, whereas choir directors today have organ, or perhaps organ plus one or two obbligato instrumentalists. Creating suitable accompaniments for reduced instrumentation will be the principal subject of this article, as it might constitute the single biggest barrier facing the director today who wishes to perform Bach's music liturgically.

Continuo choruses

From an accompaniment standpoint, the most straight-forward style of Bach chorus is what can be termed the "continuo chorus." This includes movements for which the original accompaniment was *basso continuo* alone, as well as those which contain only doubling instruments and continuo. In these cases, all that is required for satisfactory organ accompaniment is a serviceable continuo realization. A few good choices include:

- *Sei nun wieder zufrieden*, from Cantata 21;
- *Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren*, from Cantata 28;
- *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir* from Cantata 38.

Choruses with independent instrumental lines

The reduction challenge is when working with movements containing independent instrumental lines. A few organists have well-deserved reputations for their ability to create and play organ transcriptions of orchestral scores, but this has never been among my strengths. Still, I wanted to learn to accompany Bach choruses on organ alone, or with organ and a limited number of instrumentalists. I mentioned this to Gerre Hancock during an improvisation lesson in 1977, and he responded with a comment that set the stage for the next thirty years of my career—“If you look carefully at Bach’s accompaniments, you’ll see they often contain only one principal line and bass, or you’ll find them to be in a trio sonata texture, with only two principal lines and bass. Once you understand this, the process of creating a reduction which captures all that is truly essential becomes manageable.” And while there are exceptions, Gerre was right (indeed, all *Bach on a Budget* scores are dedicated to Gerre, as he was the project’s inspiration). By following this guidance, many of the accompaniments can be *reduced* (rather than *transcribed*) for organ alone. Some worthwhile examples include the following:

- *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen*, from Cantata 65 (Epiphany);
- *Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ*, from Cantata 67 (Easter);
- *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt*, from Cantata 68;
- *Glorie, Lob, Ehr und Herrlichkeit*, from Cantata 106;
- *Was willst du dich betrüben*, from Cantata 107.

Given the nature of a movement with one principal line, reduction to organ alone usually involves either a single manual and pedal, or a solo manual with accompanying second manual and pedal. Once the movements contain two essential lines, however, accompaniment for organ alone becomes a more significant challenge. It is often preferable in these two-principal-line movements to utilize obbligato players, leaving the organ to provide supporting continuo. With these forces, the great majority of Bach’s cantatas are within reach.

Reduction Techniques

So you’ve decided to create a reduction. What are some techniques you might employ? You are well on your way if you keep a few things in mind. First is that continuo bass lines do not necessarily make for idiomatic pedal parts, and often require modification or simplification. These lines were written for performance by bass instruments and the keyboard player’s left hand. While they sometimes translate easily into pedal parts, it is more often the case that adjustments need to be made in order to create more idiomatic pedal lines. A few things to consider are:

- Octave transposition is often appropriate and helpful;
- Scalar passages can be simplified, keeping only the strong (the “good” in Baroque literature) notes and omitting the weak (the “bad” in Baroque literature) notes, as needed;
- The line can sometimes be divided between pedal and the left hand, playing the stronger notes in the pedal and taking the weaker notes in the left hand.

As an example of a movement with one principal line, let's look at the opening chorus from Cantata 68, *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt*, in which each of these techniques is used to some degree. This is one of the most accessible and usable of Bach's choruses. The text is a paraphrase of John 3:16, and the vocal lines are straight-forward and interesting. While the original is for horn (doubling the soprano *cantus firmus*), two oboes, taille, strings, and continuo, the essence of the instrumental parts is one principal line (played by first violins and first oboes) with accompaniment. It is not difficult, therefore, to reduce the accompaniment to organ without losing its essence. What follows is the instrumental introduction, first in its original form, and then in a reduction for organ:

The image shows a musical score for the instrumental introduction of Cantata 68. It consists of six staves: Oboe I / Violin I, Oboe II / Violin II, Taille / Viola, and Continuo. The music is in 12/8 time and G minor. The Oboe I and Violin I parts play the principal melodic line, which includes a triplet in the third measure. The other parts provide accompaniment.

can be reduced to

The image shows an organ reduction of the instrumental introduction from Cantata 68. It consists of three staves: Man. I (Right Hand), Man. II (Left Hand), and Pedals. The Man. I part plays the principal melodic line, while Man. II and the Pedals provide accompaniment. The reduction maintains the original's structure and includes the triplet in the third measure.

Second, it is important when creating reductions of Baroque music to remember that when you look at a score, you are not seeing everything that would have been played, as you are not seeing the realized continuo. Thus, it is common to only see on the page notes which lie in higher tessituras (i.e., violin, oboe, and flute parts), and forget that the gap between these and the bass line would have been filled in by the continuo realization.

This is where I would argue many modern-day Baroque accompaniments get it wrong—too much is scored too high, leaving an awkward gap between parts. After working through many of these works, I have come to the conclusion that it is better when reducing a movement with one principal obbligato line to start by thinking of the movement as containing *only* that line and the bass line, treating the movement as if it were a sonata for a solo instrument and continuo (in other words, to start from the premise that no other notated instrumental parts exist). Where the obbligato and bass lines are static, it can then be helpful to factor in the notated accompanying parts. This technique was used in the last measure of *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt* above.

It is also worth remembering that organists have the luxury of playing in multiple ranges simultaneously by virtue of stops at different pitch levels. A supporting part played in the

left hand using 8' and 4' stops covers the gap between bass and the top voice better than a supporting part played on an 8' stop in the violin/oboe range, as it might appear on the page. Similarly, an obbligato line originally pitched high often sounds more idiomatic to organ if played down an octave (sometimes with 8' and 4' stops, so the original tessitura is also represented).

Expanded Chorales

While most of this article has focused on Bach's full choruses, mention should be made of the many expanded chorales present in the cantatas, as these prove especially useful where shorter, simpler works are desired. Expanded chorales are movements in which the choral parts are largely as they would be in a simple chorale, but which include instrumental interludes between chorale phrases. In addition to *Jesus bleibet meine Freude* (i.e., "Jesu, joy of man's desiring") from Cantata 147, these expanded chorales are simple and useful:

- *O Gott, du frommer Gott*, from Cantata 24;
- *Nun danket alle Gott*, from Cantata 79;
- *Herr, gib, daß ich dein Ehre*, from Cantata 107;
- *Sei Lob und Preis mit Ehren*, from Cantata 167.

Similarly, there are several examples of simple chorales which contain an obbligato instrumental line (not unlike a hymn descant). These movements are simple, brief, and usually straight-forward to reduce for organ alone. *Sei Lob und Preis* from Cantata 29 (trumpet) and *Der Leib zwar in der Erden* from Cantata 161 (flute) are examples of this genre. Further, because they are in the form of a simple chorale, it is easy to substitute other verses of the chorale, if needed. For example, *Der Leib zwar in der Erden* is a setting of the well-known "Passion Chorale," so if one doesn't want to sing the original text ("The body indeed in the earth will be consumed by worms"), any other verse of the Passion Chorale text can be substituted.

The "Mini-Cantata"

Another effort undertaken by *Bach on a Budget* is the "Mini-Cantata." Late in his career, Bach wrote two cantatas which contain only 3 movements each—*Gloria in excelsis Deo* (Cantata 191) and *Nun danket alle Gott* (Cantata 192). Cantata 191 consists of an opening chorus, a soprano/tenor duet, and a closing chorus. Cantata 192 consists of an opening chorus, a soprano/bass duet, and a closing chorus.

It is common when creating a reduction of a full cantata for a single movement to pose seemingly insurmountable reduction difficulties, even though the rest of the cantata reduces well. But what if you were to construct a multi-movement work which omitted the problematic (and perhaps other) movements? Could a shorter version of the original cantata be created in which both textual and key relationships seem natural? We have found this to often be the case. A few suggestions include:

- *Schwingt freudig euch empor* (Cantata 36)
Movements 1 (chorus), 2 (duet), and 4 (chorale);
- *Was willst du dich betrüben* (Cantata 107)
Movements 1 (chorus), 5 (aria), and 7 (expanded chorale);
- *Wir danken dir* (Cantata 29)
Movements 2 (chorus), 3 (aria), and 8 (chorale).

Many other cantatas hold this programming potential as well. If performance time, single-movement reduction issues, or soloist availability are a concern, it might be worth following the pattern of Cantata 191 and Cantata 192, presenting the work as one with only three movements. Such an approach is also useful in situations such as a pre-service program (e.g., before a Christmas Eve service), or in a concert setting where one might want to present elements of a Bach cantata without allocating 20-25 minutes to its performance.

Conclusion

Many of Bach's choruses are within reach of a capable church choir, if you know where to find them, are willing to sing in German, and either are provided a reduced accompaniment or know how to create one. I hope the suggestions given here, and the recommendations and free editions provided on the *Bach on a Budget* website, will encourage directors to venture more deeply into the rich world of Bach cantata choruses.

Works Cited

Bullock, William J. *Bach Cantatas Requiring Limited Resources*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1984.

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