

Doug Cowling's question from his posting to the BCML on April 21, 2014 has not yet been answered completely. My partial answer was given at:

<http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Articles/FeastDaysChristmas.pdf>

His original query was:

Particularly appealing were the Lehms non-festive texts for the Second and Third Days of Christmas, using the alternate New Testament Readings for the Feast of St. Stephen (December 26), the first Christian martyr, and St. John, the Evangelist (December 27).

I have never been able to discover the ecclesiastical regulations that governed which feasts were celebrated on December 26 and 27 which both had two sets of "proper" readings: St. Stephen's Day or the Second Day of Christmas; St. John's Day or the Third Day of Christmas.

Here's how Bach organized his cantatas.

[I had to undertake some necessary modifications and corrections in the following:]

2nd Day [12/26] of Christmas:

[BWV 40](#) *Dazu ist erschienen der Sohn Gottes* ([Leipzig](#), 1723)

[BWV 121](#) *Christum wir sollen loben schon* ([Leipzig](#), 1724) [St. Stephen's Day]

[BWV 57](#) *Selig ist der Mann* ([Leipzig](#), 1726) [St. Stephen's Day] Die Stephanuskantate.

[BWV 248/2](#) *Weihnachts-Oratorium* „Es waren Hirten“ ([Leipzig](#), 1734) [St. Stephen's Day]

3rd Day [12/27] of Christmas

[BWV 64](#) *Sehet, welch eine Liebe hat uns der Vater erzeiget* ([Leipzig](#), 1723)

[BWV 133](#) *Ich freue mich in dir* ([Leipzig](#), 1724) [St. John's Day]

[BWV 151](#) *Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt* ([Leipzig](#), 1725)

[BWV 248/3](#) *Weihnachts-Oratorium* „Herrscher des Himmels“ ([Leipzig](#), 1734) [St. John's Day]

Note: It is difficult to decide which feast links with the cantata because Johannine texts are chosen for both sets of readings.

Although Parts Two and Three of the Christmas Oratorio use the scriptural verses of the Infancy Narrative, these verses are not taken from the Gospel readings proper to these days.

Who decided which feast was to be observed? It's unlikely that Bach could choose. Either there was a traditional pattern (alternating years?) or the clergy who had to preach on the readings made the decision. That decision must have been communicated to Bach in time for the writing of the libretto, composition of the music and choice of the hymns for the service.

Does anyone what Bach wrote on the wrapper of the parts for these eight cantatas?

Response by Thomas Braatz on May 8, 2014:

The answer to the latter question has already been placed on the BCW. See above.

Yes, there was a traditional pattern and that pattern was for these feast days (St. Stephen's Day and St. John's Day) to be celebrated every other year. The only firm documentation is found in the following primary sources:

Leipziger Kirchen-Andachten: Darinnen der Erste Theil, Das Gebetbuch oder die Ordnung des gantzen öffentlichen Gottes-Dienstes durchs gantze Jahr...Der Ander Theil, Das Gesangbuch... ed. J. F. Leibniz (Leipzig, 1694), p. 54.:

„Der dritte Weihnachtstag wird ein um das andere Jahr als Johannistag begangen.“

[„The 3rd Day of Christmas is celebrated as St. John's Day every other year (in alternating fashion).“]

Leipziger Kirchen-Staat: Das ist, Deutlicher Unterricht vom Gottes-Dienst in Leipzig (Leipzig, 1710) pp. 20-21: states:

„daß an denselben Wechselsweise ein Jahr um das andere erkläret wird das Evangelium Joh. 1 von 1. bis 14. Vers / und das andere Joh. XX von 1. bis 24. Vers.“

[„that on those days in alternate years the sermon was based on John 1:1-14 and John 20:1-24.“]

There is no similar firm documentation mentioning St. Stephen's Day, but it can be assumed by direct evidence from Bach's cantata libretti and from evidence based on the biblical texts used for the sermons whenever St. Stephen's Day was observed. The only clear reference to St. Stephen's Day in Bach's cantata texts is found in BWV 57/6 recitativo for bass/soprano: “Ach! Jesu, mache mir nur, wie Stephano, den Himmel offen!” “O Jesus, do open the heavens for me just as you did for [St.] Stephen!” Alfred Dürr has correctly dubbed this cantata Bach's ‘Stephanuskantate’. It is from the date of the first performance of this cantata [December 26, 1726] that we can work forward and backward to other even-numbered years when the rule of alternation can be applied. This then will be true also for the St. John's Day celebrations. Martin Petzoldt in

Martin Petzoldt, *Bach-Kommentar: Theologisch Musikwissenschaftliche Kommentierung der Geistlichen Vokalwerke Johann Sebastian Bachs; Vol. 2, Die Geistlichen Kantaten vom 1. Advent bis zum Trinitatisfest*; Internationale Bachakademie Stuttgart (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2007), p. 223.

informs us that the Gospel readings alternated on St. John's Day with John 1:1-14 being read in uneven-numbered years and John 21:20-24 in the even-numbered years. It appears that Bach was free to accommodate these readings as he wished. He was not bound by these observances! This is quite evident in 1734 when his *Weihnachts-Oratorium* was being performed during a year when Sts. Stephen and John were being celebrated. For instance, on December 26, 1734, when Bach performed Part II of the *Weihnachts-Oratorium* during the early service at the *Thomaskirche*, the sermon was held by the pastor of the *Thomaskirche*, D. Christian Weise (1671-1736) on the sermon Gospel reading from Matthew 23: 34-39 about St. Stephen and not on the 2nd Day Christmas reading which is designated as being taken from Luke 2. A similar situation occurs with the sermon Gospel readings for the 3rd Day of Christmas on December 27, 1734 which should be celebrated as St. John's Day. On that day Bach performed Part III of the *Christmas Oratorio* during the early service at the *Nikolaikirche* where the Archdeacon Friedrich Wilhelm Schütz held the sermon on John 21:15-24. The main point here is that Bach was not bound by the regulations involving the observance of these Saint Days.