

Grace in the prayer hall

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750): *Easter Oratorio: Kommet, eilet und laufet (Come, hurry and run)*

Event: Easter Sunday

Readings: Epistle - I Corinthians 5:6-8; Gospel - Mark 16:1-8

Libretto: probably by Christian Friedrich Henrici (Picander)

Characters: Mary, daughter of James: soprano

Mary Magdalene: alto

Peter: tenor

John: bass

- I. *Sinfonia* (instrumental prelude)
- II. *Adagio* (instrumental prelude)
- III. Chorus: *Kommt, eilet und laufet (Come, hurry and run)*
- IV. Recitative - alto, soprano, tenor, bass: *O kalter Männer Sinn (O cold minds of men)*
- V. Aria - soprano: *Seele, deine Spezereien (My soul, your spices)*
- VI. Recitative - tenor, bass, alto: *Hier ist die Gruft (Here is the tomb)*
- VII. Aria - tenor: *Sanfte soll mein Todeskummer (Gentle should be the sorrow of my death)*
- VIII. Recitative - soprano and alto: *Indessen seufzen wir (Meanwhile we sigh)*
- IX. Aria - alto: *Saget, saget mir geschwinde (Tell me, tell me quickly)*
- X. Recitative - bass: *Wir sind erfreut (We are delighted)*
- XI. Chorus: *Preis und Dank (Praise and thanks)*

First performed as a cantata, April 1, 1725 - revised as an oratorio (1732-1735).

If you're going to borrow, borrow from the best. Bach did, and he frequently borrowed from himself. Good music shouldn't go to waste. A laudatory birthday cantata for Duke Christian of Saxe-Weissenfels received a textual costume change to become a sacred cantata for Easter Sunday, 1725, then morphed back into a secular cantata for Count Joachim Freidrich von Flemming before being revised as an oratorio, which affirming outcome we know and love 270 years later.

The cantata and the oratorio are both multi-movement musical settings of text. For solo singers, groups of singers and different combinations of accompanying instruments, they both originated in the 1600's and were generally intended for unstaged performance (no scenery, costumes or action). But the cantata can be secular or sacred in text and purpose, where the oratorio is always of religious or ethical focus. *Cantata* is the 17th-century Italian indication for a piece that is *sung*, as opposed to a *sonata*, a piece played on instruments. Cantatas range from cozy works for one or a few solo singers and a few accompanying instruments to large, commemorative affairs with chorus and orchestra. Oratorios are always larger-scale works with librettos (texts) that are dramatic-narrative, such as Bach's *Passions*, Haydn's *The Creation*, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*; or dramatic-contemplative, such as Handel's *Messiah*. The word *oratorio*, "prayer hall," first referred to a community building adjacent to a church, reserved for lectures and music to nurture the soul, the innovation of a 16th-century Catholic reform movement called the Congregation of the Oratory. But if you thought "oratorio" referred to tearing and sharing a chocolate-wafer-and-cream cookie, well, that's a nice thought, too.

If you want to talk about the sweet, latticed wafer of form and the rich, expressive cream filling found in the choral works of Johann Sebastian Bach, the *Easter Oratorio* provides a delicious first taste, with no sugar high but plenty of nourishment for the soul.

A compact narrative, intimate in voicing, the work is abundant in melodic beauty and dramatic depth. Its action centers around Christ's empty grave and the host of emotions on the part of the witnesses. Just as the *Easter Oratorio* is a nice introduction to Bach choral works, the libretto (text, or lyrics) is a good example of Baroque religious poetry. It's not certain

who wrote it, but it was likely the poet known as Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici), whose texts Bach set in his *St. Matthew Passion*, *St. Mark Passion*, and in many cantatas.

How perfectly the stage is set, so to speak, by the balance between joyful *sinfonia* and sighing *Adagio*. The first voices we hear press us to “Come, hurry and run, you swift feet, / get to the cave that covers Jesus!” in unforgettable, expressive arcs. From this chorus until the oratorio’s conclusion, we hear simply alternating recitatives, one or a few solo voices in rather free-flowing, sparsely accompanied segments; and arias, straightforward vocal solos with more formally textured accompaniment.

The first recitative, in which all four characters briefly appear, expresses fearful sorrow and ambivalence: “O cold minds of men! / Where is the love gone / that you owe to the savior?” - continuing in the following aria: “My soul, your spices / should no more by myrrh. / For only / with the splendor of the laurel wreath / will your anxious longing be satisfied.”

In the second recitative, “Here is the tomb,” Peter, John and Mary Magdalene dare express hope in Jesus’ rising. And in Peter’s aria, “Gentle should be the sorrow of my death,” is a hopeful berceuse to the soul.

The brighter “Meanwhile we sigh / with fervent yearning,” for soprano and alto, and the next aria, “Tell me, tell me quickly / Tell, where may I find Jesus” preserve the emotional balance of the piece. The urgency of “Come then, come, embrace me, / for my heart is without you / quite orphaned and distressed” somehow increases tension *and* graceful lightness, readying us for the following bass (John) recitative, “We are delighted / that our Jesus lives once more” and the closing chorus, “Praise and thanks.”

Emotional wealth, diversity of textures, indissoluble marriage of text and tune: these are Bach’s own “congregation of the oratory.” They are grace in the prayer hall.

English translations © 2002 by Francis Browne, printed with permission. The Saint Joseph Symphony thanks Mr. Browne and the Bach Cantatas Website: <http://www.bach-cantatas.com>.