



2010 Bach

THE COMPLETE CHORAL CANTATAS



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BWV 110: Unser Mund sei voll Lachens
BWV 91: Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ
BWV 63: Christen, ätztet diesen Tag

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Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ



- 1 All praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
Born as man, the son so prized,
And of a virgin, this is true:
All angels do rejoice in you.
Kyrie eleis.
- 2 The all eternal Father's son,
To us all he has now come.
Yes, in a manger we can find
The holy one as man confined,
Kyrie eleis.
- 3 All this he did for us alone,
His great love for us was shown.
Rejoice all Christians everywhere,
Give thanks, his mercy all declare!
Kyrie eleis!

TRANSLATIONS



BWV 110: UNSER MUND SEI VOLL LACHENS

1. Chorus

Unser Mund sei voll Lachens und unsre Zunge voll Rühmens.
Denn der Herr hat Großes an uns getan.

May our mouths be full of laughter and our tongues full of
praise. For the Lord has done great things for us.

2. Tenor Aria

Ihr Gedanken und ihr Sinnen,
Schwinget euch anitzt von hinnen,
Steiget schleunig himmeln
Und bedenkt, was Gott getan!
Er wird Mensch, und dies allein,
Dass wir Himmels Kinder sein.

You thoughts and musings,
soar away now,
climb rapidly to heaven
and consider what God has done!
He has become human, and for this alone,
that we might be children of heaven.

3. Bass Recitative

Dir, Herr, ist niemand gleich. Du bist groß und dein Name ist groß
und kannst's mit der Tat beweisen.

There is no one like You, Lord. You are great and Your
name is great; and You can reveal it with Your deeds.

4. Alto Aria

Ach Herr, was ist ein Menschenkind,
Dass du sein Heil so schmerzlich suchest?
Ein Wurm, den du verfluchest,
Wenn Höll und Satan um ihn sind;
Doch auch dein Sohn, den Seel und Geist
Aus Liebe seinen Erben heißt.

Ah, Lord, what is a human being,
that you so sorely seek his salvation?
A worm that you curse
when hell and Satan surround him;
yet also Your son, who calls soul and spirit
his inheritance out of love.

5. Soprano-Tenor Duet

Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe und Friede auf Erden
und den Menschen ein Wohlgefallen!

Glory be to God in the highest and peace on earth;
and a happy occurrence for humanity!

6. Bass Aria

Wacht auf, ihr Adern und ihr Glieder,
Und singt dergleichen Freudenlieder,
Die unserm Gott gefällig sein.
Und ihr, ihr andachtvollen Saiten,
Sollt ihm ein solches Lob bereiten,
Dabei sich Herz und Geist erfreun.

Awaken, veins and limbs,
and sing those same songs of joy
that are pleasing to our God.
And you, devout strings,
you should prepare such praise for Him
so that heart and spirit are delighted.

7. Chorale

Alleluja! Gelobt sei Gott,
Singen wir all aus unsers Herzens Grunde.
Denn Gott hat heut gemacht solch Freud,
Die wir vergessen solln zu keiner Stunde.

Alleluia! Praise be to God,
we all sing out of the depths of our hearts.
For God has made such joy today,
which at no time we should ever forget.

BWV 91: GELOBET SEIST DU, JESU CHRIST

1. Chorale

Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ,
Dass du Mensch geboren bist
Von einer Jungfrau, das ist wahr,
Des freuet sich der Engel Schar.
Kyrie eleis!

All glory to thee, Jesus Christ,
For thou man today wast born,
Born of a virgin, that is sure,
Thus joyful is the angel host.
Kyrie eleis!

2. Soprano Recitative & Chorale

Der Glanz der höchsten Herrlichkeit,
Das Ebenbild von Gottes Wesen,
Hat in bestimmter Zeit
Sich einen Wohnplatz auserlesen.
Des ewgen Vaters einigs Kind,
Das ewge Licht von Licht geboren,
Itzt man in der Krippe findt.
O Menschen, schauet an,
Was hier der Liebe Kraft getan!
In unser armes Fleisch und Blut,
(Und war denn dieses nicht verflucht, verdammt, verloren?)
Verkleidet sich das ewge Gut.
So wird es ja zum Segen auserkoren.

The light of highest majesty,
The image of God's very being,
Hath, when the time was full,
Himself a dwelling found and chosen.
Th'eternal Father's only child
Th'eternal light of light begotten,
Who now in the crib is found.
Ye mortals, now behold
What here the pow'r of love hath done!
Within our wretched flesh and blood,
And was this flesh then not accursed, condemned, and fallen?
Doth veil itself eternal good.
Yet is it, yea, for grace and blessing chosen.

3. Tenor Aria

Gott, dem der Erden Kreis zu klein,
Den weder Welt noch Himmel fassen,
Will in der engen Krippe sein.
Erscheinet uns dies ewge Licht,
So wird hinfüro Gott uns nicht
Als dieses Lichtes Kinder hassen.

God, for whom earth's orb is too small,
Whom neither world nor heaven limits,
Would in the narrow crib now lie.
Revealed to us this lasting light,
Thus henceforth will us God not hate,
For of this light we are the children.

4. Bass Recitative

O Christenheit! Wohlان, so mache dich bereit,
Bei dir den Schöpfer zu empfangen.
Der grosse Gottessohn
Kömmt als ein Gast zu dir gegangen.
Ach, lass dein Herz durch diese Liebe rühren;
Er kömmt zu dir, um dich for seinen Thron
Durch dieses Jammertal zu führen.

O Christian world,
Now rise and get thyself prepared
To thee thy maker now to welcome.
The mighty Son of God
Comes as a guest to thee descended.
Ah, let thy heart by this his love be smitten;
He comes to thee, that he before his throne
Through this deep vale of tears may lead thee.

5. Soprano-Alto Duet

Die Armut, so Gott auf sich nimmt,
Hat uns ein ewig Heil bestimmt,
Den Überfluss an Himmelsschätzen.
Sein menschlich Wesen machet euch
Den Engelsherrlichkeiten gleich,
Euch zu der Engel Chor zu setzen.

The weakness which God hath assumed
On us eternal health bestowed,
The richest store of heaven's treasures.
His mortal nature maketh you
The angels' glory now to share,
You to the angels' choir appointeth.

6. Chorale

Das hat er alles uns getan,
Sein groß Lieb zu zeigen an;
Des freu sich alle Christenheit
Und dank ihm des in Ewigkeit.
Kyrie eleis!

All this he hath for us achieved,
His great love to manifest;
Rejoice then all Christianity
And thank him for this evermore.
Kyrie eleis! (Lord have mercy!)

BWV 63: CHRISTEN, ÄTZET DIESEN TAG

1. Chorus

Christen, ätzt diesen Tag
In Metall und Marmorsteine!
Kommt und eilt mit mir zur Krippen
Und erweist mit frohen Lippen
Euren Dank und eure Pflicht;
Denn der Strahl, so da einbricht,
Zeigt sich euch zum Gnadenscheine.

Christians, etch ye now this day
Both in bronze and stones of marble!
Come, quick, join me at the manger
And display with lips of gladness
All your thanks and all you owe;
For the light which here breaks forth
Shows to you a sign of blessing.

2. Alto Recitative

O selger Tag! o ungemeines Heute,
An dem das Heil der Welt,
Der Schilo, den Gott schon im Paradies
Dem menschlichen Geschlecht verheißt,
Nunmehr so vollkommen dargestellt
Und suchet Israel von der Gefangenschaft und Sklavenketten
Des Satans zu erretten.
Du liebster Gott, was sind wir arme doch?
Ein abgefallnes Volk, so dich verlassen;
Und dennoch willst du uns nicht lassen;
Denn eh wir sollen noch nach dem Verdienst zu Boden liegen,
Eh muss die Gottheit sich bequemen,
Die menschliche Natur an sich zu nehmen
Und auf der Erden
Im Hirtenstall zu einem Kinde werden.
O unbegreifliches, doch seliges Verfügen!

O blessed day! O day exceeding rare, this,
On which the world's true help,
The Messiah, whom God in the Paradise
To mankind's race already pledged,
From this time forth was perfectly revealed
And seeketh Israel now from the prison and the chains of slav'ry
Of Satan to deliver.
Thou dearest God, what are we wretches then?
A people fallen low which thee forsaketh;
And even still thou wouldst not hate us;
For ere we should according to our merits lie in ruin,
Ere that, must deity be willing,
The nature of mankind himself assuming,
Upon earth dwelling,
In shepherd's stall to be a child incarnate.
O inconceivable, yet blessed dispensation!

3. Soprano-Bass Duet

Gott, du hast es wohl gefüget,
Was uns itzo widerfährt.
Drum lasst uns auf ihn stets trauen
Und auf seine Gnade bauen,
Denn er hat uns dies beschert,
Was uns ewig nun vergnüget.

God, thou hast all well accomplished
Which to us now comes to pass.
Let us then forever trust him
And rely upon his favor,
For he hath on us bestowed
What shall ever be our pleasure.

4. Tenor Recitative

So kehret sich nun heut
Das bange Leid,
Mit welchem Israel geängstet und beladen,
In lauter Heil und Gnaden.
Der Löw aus Davids Stamme ist erschienen,
Sein Bogen ist gespannt, das Schwert ist schon gewetzt,
Womit er uns in vor'ge Freiheit setzt.

Transformed be now today
The anxious pain
Which Israel hath troubled long and sorely burdened
To perfect health and grace.
Of David's stem the lion now appeareth,
His bow already bent, his sword already honed,
With which he us to former freedom brings.

5. Alto-Tenor Duet

Ruft und fleht den Himmel an,
Kommt, ihr Christen, kommt zum Reihem,
Ihr sollt euch ob dem erfreuen,
Was Gott hat anheut getan!
Da uns seine Huld verpfleget
Und mit so viel Heil beleget,
Dass man nicht g'nug danken kann.

Call and cry to heaven now,
Come, ye Christians, come in order,
Ye should be in this rejoicing
Which God hath today achieved!
For us now his grace provideth
And with such salvation sealet,
More than we could thank him for.

6. Bass Recitative

Verdoppelt euch demnach, ihr heißen Andachtsflammen,
Und schlägt in Demut brünstiglich zusammen!
Steigt fröhlich himmelan
Und danket Gott vor dies, was er getan!

Redouble then your strength, ye ardent flames of worship,
And come in humble fervor all together!
Rise gladly heavenward
And thank your God for all this he hath done!

7. Chorus

Höchster, schau in Gnaden an diese Glut gebückter Seelen!
Laß den Dank, den wir dir bringen, angenehme vor dir klingen,
Laß uns stets in Segen gehn, Aber niemals nicht geschehn,
Dass uns der Satan möge quälen

Highest, look with mercy now at the warmth of rev'rent spirits!
Let the thanks we bring before thee to thine ears resound with pleasure.
Let us e'er in blessing walk, But yet / Let it / never come to pass
That we Satan's torments suffer.

BWV 110: Unser Mund sei voll Lachens

The opening of this cantata, written for Christmas Day 1725, poses some musicological questions. The orchestral introduction is in fact the first movement of Bach's fourth *Orchestral Suite*, the same work from which the famous *Air on the G String* comes. The provenance of the music, however, is a bit dubious, posing some "chicken and egg" questions. The final version of the orchestral suite dates from 1730, five years after the composition of BWV 110. Joshua Rifkin has suggested the Bach added the trumpet and wind parts to an earlier version of the suite specifically for this cantata, which he then later added to the final version of the orchestral suite.

Regardless of which came first, the opening movement of BWV 110 is amongst the largest scale movements from any of Bach's choral works, both in terms of the piece's structure and its massive orchestration, which includes trumpets, timpani, flutes, oboes, bassoon and strings. After the French *ouverture* style introduction, the choir bursts in with a triplet-based *gigue* vocal concerto. The exhilarating but fiendishly difficult coloratura vocal parts are derived entirely from the idea of "laughter" in the text, a quotation from Psalm 126. In concerto style, Bach contrasts the bubbling "laughter theme" with a solo group singing of the great things God has done (a major Christmas theme), accompanied by a thinner orchestral texture. These A and B sections alternate until Bach recapitulates the opening French *ouverture* section as a coda to this massive movement.

The tenor and alto arias which follow are in many ways exemplars of the sort of material that Bach reserves for these two voice parts in many of his choral works. The meditative tenor aria, in which the congregation is called to "consider what God has done," is reminiscent of the "Erwäge" aria from the *St John Passion*. Constructed in binary form (AB), the first half implores the listener to consider, and the section half tells them *what* to consider: in this case, that God has taken on human form. The use of two flutes with a designated bassoon continuo has an other-worldly feel, with the canon in the flutes representing the thoughts that fly towards heaven.

Just as Bach often uses the tenor to call his listeners to meditation, he often uses the alto to explicate complex theological ideas. In this alto aria, preceded by a short bass recitative setting of biblical text, Bach again departs from his usual *da capo* form, using binary form to contrast two ideas. In this case, he juxtaposes the idea of man as a "worm that you curse" with the redeeming thought that man is "yet also a son." The combination of alto and oboe *d'amore* (often used to represent God's love) brings out the idea of *schmerz*—an impassioned pain. The large leaps and triplet *arabesques* in the oboe part suggest a soul-searching often found in such movements; as the redemption is announced in the B section, the searching stops and then is transformed into a more joyful version of its former self.

Like the opening section of the first movement, the soprano-tenor duet is also a parody of a former composition. This duet is a reworking of *Virga Jesse*, the cradle-song that is one of the four interpolations into the first version of the

music by setting the angels' words to the shepherds, even though another of the *Magnificat* interpolations had already set those words. In this duet, Bach replaces the original bass with a tenor, and uses the three different sections of the music to represent the angels' praise, peace on earth and God's goodwill towards people. This final section was originally an *alleluja*.

The only *da capo* aria in the cantata (and even this is truncated) is the triumphant bass aria with trumpet and strings. Perhaps it is a pun to have "*wacht auf*"—"wake up"—follow what had originally been a lullaby. Regardless of Bach's intention, this is certainly the result! The music is very rousing, with the first violins providing melismatic accompaniment to the fanfare-like trumpet solo, echoed in the bass part as well.

The chorale closes with the last verse of the hymn *Wir Christenleut habn jetzund Freud* from 1592.



BWV 91: Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ

Unlike the other two cantatas on this programme, BWV 91 dates entirely from Leipzig, Bach having composed it for Christmas Day 1724. The form of the cantata is typical of the Leipzig cantatas: an opening chorale-prelude followed by a series of solo (or duet) movements including both recitatives and arias, and concluding with a homophonic verse of the hymn.

Indeed, Luther's Christmas hymn *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ* plays a ubiquitous role in this cantata. In addition to appearing with the original melody and text in movements 1, 2 and 6, movements 3-5 are paraphrases of three other hymn verses. The chorale juxtaposes the two identities of Christ: the high king of heaven who humbles himself to become the lowest of men.

The opening chorale-prelude has a brilliant ritornello in which the three oboes and strings enter canonically with a brisk melismatic figure, representing the angels' rejoicing. The sopranos sing the *cantus firmus* above florid counterpoint in the other three voice parts. As we saw in BWV 1, the horn parts are associated with the annunciation.

The recitative which follows includes interpolations from the chorale, in an innocent meditation on God's choice of a lowly manger for his incarnation. The innocence of the soprano voice gives way to a meatier meditation by the tenor, who reflects on how God, "for whom the orbit of the whole world is too small" would have chosen to "imprison" himself in a crib. The use of the three oboes, tripping over each other in a web of imitation, is often seen in many other examples of Bach's music when he wants to illustrate chains.

The bass recitative calls the congregation to prepare themselves for incarnation. The chromatic setting of *Jammertal* ("vale of tears") illustrates how man is lost and wandering without God. That wandering is transformed into a walking bass line in the soprano-alto duet, where it seems to represent Jesus' earthly pilgrimage. The angular, dotted unison violin theme suggests the humiliation that Jesus takes on by becoming man. However, the beautiful counterpoint of the two singers

characterised by imitation and suspensions, shows how God and man become interchangeable in the incarnation: God becomes man in the person of Jesus, but man also inherits God's heaven, being "made like the glory of angels." The length and structural complexity of this duet suggest that Bach places great importance on this doctrine for Christmas.

Just as we saw in *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern*, the horns' fanfare-like accompaniment to the closing chorale reminds us of kingship and annunciation.



BWV 63: Christen, ätzet diesen Tag

Even a cursory glance at the score of this famous Christmas cantata reveals several unique characteristics. First, the orchestration calls for four trumpets instead of the usual three—a requirement that is only otherwise found in BWV 119, *Preise Jerusalem, den Herrn*, a cantata celebrating the inauguration of the Leipzig Town Council. Both the opening and closing choruses are on a very large scale, and there is no chorale. Perhaps most surprising for a Bach cantata, there is not a single aria; instead, there are two duets. Instead of *secco* recitatives, accompanied only by continuo, there are two extended *accompagnato* recitatives, where the singers are accompanied by the orchestra.

In fact, it is these pairs of movements—choruses, duets and *accompagnato* recitatives—which provide the key to the structure of the literally monumental movement. Using a short central *secco* recitative as the pivot of the structure, Bach sets the pairs of movements in symmetry around the centre:



Bach uses this structure in many compositions, but particularly in music related to Easter, as this symmetrical structure creates a cross. Examples can be found in *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, the *St John Passion* and the motet *Jesu Meine Freude*.

In the case of BWV 63, however, the structure seems to be related to the text of the opening chorus, rather than a reference to the crucifixion. The librettist, J.M. Heineccius, pastor of the church Liebfrauenkirche in Halle, uses the metaphor of a monument, calling the congregation to "etch this day in bronze and marble". By using such an architectural form, Bach makes the entire cantata a monument to Christmas Day. Bach composed this work in Weimar in 1714-15, but it probably was not performed there. He thought highly enough of the work, however, to use it for his first Christmas Day in Leipzig in 1723.

In the form of an Italian concerto, with much dialogue between different "choirs" of instruments and the singers, the opening movement uses a large amount of text painting. The buoyant opening theme illustrates the physical process of etching or chiselling marble. When the singers invite the congregation to join them at the manger, the orchestra draws out, creating a

hushed excitement. The octave leaps at the words "der Strahl" become those rays of light.

The closing chorus is similarly in concerto style, opening with a particularly florid ritornello. This movement is notable for its different sections, shifting quickly from a triumphant trumpet-based opening vocal melody to a pleading double fugue which sets a supplicant's prayer for grace and mercy. After a return to the opening material, Bach writes a second double fugue, this time using a slippery chromatic subject to represent Satan. In this section, the choir prays that God not allow Satan to torment us. By returning to the opening A section in a *da capo*, Bach's faith in the outcome is clear.

In the pair of *accompagnato* recitatives, the alto and bass reprise their roles from BWV 100: the alto grapples with the complexity of incarnation theology, and the bass calls the congregation to praise. In typical Lutheran fashion, Satan is never far behind in the alto recitative, but the baby in the manger is God's "incomprehensible but blessed" vehicle for victory.

The two duets stand in stark contrast to one another. The soprano-bass duet is accompanied by an achingly beautiful *adagio* oboe melody full of descending sighing figures, representing God's descent in the incarnation. The B section, in which man "builds on God's grace" uses ascending figures, reaching heavenward. There is no introspection to the alto-tenor duet, however: this is a joyful minuet-style dance accompanied by strings, set to words of thanks and praise.

The pivot movement in any of Bach's cruciform structures (in this case, the *secco* recitative) will always provide the key to the overall meaning of the work. In this case, the short tenor recitative portrays the baby in the manger as the victorious Lion of Judah. Bach carefully places the word "Gnade" (grace) at the very centre of this recitative, which is in turn the centre of the Lutheran Christmas celebration.

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