

AMERICAN
BACH
SOLOISTS



JEFFREY THOMAS
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support materials for our recording of

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750): TRANSCRIPTIONS OF ITALIAN MUSIC

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Concerto in A Minor for Four Harpsichords, BWV 1065

In the spring of 1729 Bach was offered, and took, the directorship of one of Leipzig's two *collegia*—semi-professional musical performance societies—thus beginning an association that was to last until 1741. This group, which could be adapted to the performance of anything secular from chamber music to small-orchestral/choral works, had been founded in 1702 by the redoubtable Telemann, and was a fixture of the lively middle-class musical life in Leipzig, frequently hiring out to city and Court functions, and maintaining a schedule of weekly meetings, open to the public, at Zimmermann's coffee house. Bach's concerti for various numbers of harpsichords were produced around 1730 for this venue. The soloists were Bach and (depending on the number of harpsichordists required) his sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emmanuel; in the solitary case of the concerto for four harpsichords, the remaining seat may have been filled by Bach's pupil Johann Ludwig Krebs.

"Produced" is a safer word than "written" in the case of this music, for all but one of the harpsichord concerti are Bach's adaptations or re-workings of concerti for other instruments. The four-harpsichord concerto uses not himself but Vivaldi as a model, namely the Concerto for Four Violins, op. 3 no. 10. Bach leaves Vivaldi alone as far as structure and material, confining his alterations to a key change (from B minor to A minor) and some redistribution and thickening of the solo parts. The effect is one of heightening the work's already lively textures sometimes to the point of a kind of cheerful freneticism, like a quadruple continuo gone mad, as in the middle section of the slow movement, or the appealing cross-rhythms of the last.

Psalms 51: Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden

Bach's adaptation of Pergolesi's Stabat Mater is one of the more interesting appropriations in musical history, largely by virtue of its sheer unlikelihood. For the much older master to have extended himself in the direction of a work by a young Italian, a Catholic at that, and one whose first fame had come with a work whose every impulse ran directly counter to Bach's aesthetics, morals, and musical training—the famous *La Serva Padrona*—well, this is odd. Why would Bach choose such a project?

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi had died at the age of 26 in 1736, about a decade before Bach made his arrangement of the Stabat Mater, which was probably Pergolesi's last work. In the six or so years of his professional career, Pergolesi wrote quantities of music for both church and stage, and managed what most composers (including Bach) do not in a life three times as long: real, huge, blockbuster success, in not one but two works, each in a different genre. *La Serva Padrona*, scarcely an opera, more an extended *scena*, in the new, spare, sardonic Italian style, was still enormously, controversially popular thirty years after its composer's death; the Stabat Mater is thought to have had more printings than any other single piece of eighteenth-century music (not to mention its many incarnations in arrangements and re-textings, of which Bach's is only one.) Pergolesi's genius is amply manifest in his deft, sweet-natured music; but it also clearly lay in his uncanny ability to sense the "next wave," what people wanted, craved in fact, to hear. Taste was shifting away from the painstaking, the profound, the monumental; in sacred music, the "antique style" based in the austerities of 16th-century was increasingly felt to express only the more remote and institutional qualities of religion. The Stabat Mater provided a link to something more personal, more (as Hiller, one of its admirers and adapters, put it) "sensitive." It does this by incorporating the overtly emotional gestures and formulas of the new Italian opera into an overtly traditional framework, comprised of a thirteenth-century liturgical poem, and a certain amount of contrapuntal writing (or at least, contrapuntal-sounding: Pergolesi manages to give a remarkable *Gestalt* of the 16th century without actually burdening himself or us with any real fugues or extended imitation.) The combination, predictably, offended conservatives, who found it vulgar or irreverent; but the publication and performance history of the work attests to just how much of a minority those conservatives were becoming, and to just how expertly Pergolesi's work had "hit the spot."

Copies of the Stabat Mater probably reached Bach's environs in the early 1740s; they would have been preceded by its reputation. As a lifelong composer of sacred music, and a lifelong negotiator of its inherent conflicts between personal and impersonal, sensual and austere, human and divine, Bach seems to have found this notorious new work, and the compromise it represented, more intriguing than off-putting, despite his own staunch conservatism. What better way to really get to know it than to adapt it for use at home?

The motet Bach made out of the Stabat Mater is his sole essay into appropriating music so unlike his own in every way (save in its capacity for aesthetic ingenuity.) His handling of Pergolesi's work is wonderfully circumspect, basically amounting to a replacement of the original tear-soaked Latin poem, about the sorrows and compassion of Mary at the foot of the cross, with an equally tear-soaked German one about the sorrow and contrition of an unworthy sinner. The two poems are a remarkably good match on a movement-by-movement basis. A good deal of the original word-painting carries over into its new text (particularly satisfying examples can be heard in movement 3, at "Missetäten," and in movement 12, at "Herz und Geist, voll Angst und Grämen"); this might support the theory that Bach himself made the German adaptation of the psalm.

Most of the musical alterations consist of Bach's substitution of texted, active lines for Pergolesi's melismas and long *messe di voce* for the singers; these most explicitly operatic qualities are exchanged for something a little more instrumental, a little less flagrant. The final "Amen" is repeated in the major mode (an odd and slightly clunky amendment), and movements 12 and 13 are reversed from Pergolesi's ordering; the most extensive alteration, however, is a subtle one to the ear. Bach liberates the viola from its Italian role as a reinforcement of the bass and gives it an independent part—

indeed, a gloriously active one, that enriches the texture of the whole ensemble and ups the contrapuntal ante by some few degrees. The addition of a new part to an already complete composition, without doublings or redundancies, is an old and formidable contrapuntal exercise, which Bach accomplishes here almost as an afterthought, or as if he simply could not resist.

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PERFORMANCE NOTES

Borrowing from performance practice of some Italian orchestral music, we use what would have been for Bach a rather large orchestra in our performance of the Psalm 51. Among the relatively recently discovered parts for this work are ones marked "Violino Primo," "Violino Primo Ripieno," "Violino Secondo," and "Violino Secondo Ripieno," suggesting that Bach was pleased with the idea of adding additional instruments to facilitate a fuller sound. As in the case of some of the cantatas, separate parts for harpsichord and organ exist, once again supporting the notion of dual accompaniment. And although the lowest part is indicated as "Violon," we use 'cellos and Italianate doublebasses.

- Jeffrey Thomas

Psalm 51: Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden
Soprano, Alto, Violins, Viola, Basso continuo

[4] Largo - Verse 1 (soprano, alto)

*Tilge, Höchster, meine Sünden,
deinen Eifer laß verschwinden,
laß mich deine Huld erfreun.*

Blot out, O God, my sins, let your zeal disappear, and let me rejoice in your grace.

[5] Andante - Verse 2 (soprano)

*Ist mein Herz in Missetaten
und in große Schuld geraten,
wasch es selber, mach es rein.*

And when my heart is filled with transgressions and burdened with great guilt, wash it yourself and make it pure.

[6] Larghetto - Verse 3 (soprano, alto)

*Missetaten, die mich drücken,
muß ich mir itzt selbst aufrücken;
Vater, ich bin nicht gerecht.*

I must always think of my transgressions and they weigh on me. Father I am unjust.

[7] Andante - Verse 4 (alto)

*Dich erzürnt mein Tun und Lassen,
meinen Wandel muß du hassen,
weil die Sünde mich geschwächt.*

My deeds and actions anger you and you hate my conduct, for my sins have weakened me.

[8] Largo - Verses 5 and 6 - (soprano, alto)

*Wer wird seine Schuld verneinen
oder gar gerecht erscheinen?
Ich bin doch ein Südenknecht.*

*Wer wird, Herr, dein Urteil mindern,
oder deinen Ausspruch hindern?
Du bist recht, dein Wort ist recht.*

Who denies his guilt or pretends to be righteous? I certainly am a slave of sin.

Who will, Lord, lessen your judgement or prevent your pronouncements? You are just, your word is just.

[9] Verse 7 (soprano, alto)

*Sieh! Ich bin in Sünd empfangen,
Sünde wurde ja begangen,
da wo ich erzeugt ward.*

See, I was conceived in sin, and wrong was done where I was begotten.

10 Verse 8 (soprano)

*Sieh, du willst die Wahrheit haben,
die geheimen Weisheitsgaben
hast du selbst mir offenbart.*

See, you want the truth, and you yourself revealed to me the secrets of wisdom.

11 Verse 9 (alto)

*Wasche mich doch rein von Sünden,
daß kein Makel mehr zu finden,
wenn der Isop mich besprengt.*

Do wash me pure from sins, so that no more blemish can be found when I am splashed with hyssop.

12 Allabreve - Verse 10 (soprano, alto)

*Laß mich Freud und Wonne spüren,
daß die Gebeine triumphieren,
da dein Kreuz mich hart gedrängt.*

Your cross pressed hard on me; now let me feel joy and bliss and let the body triumph.

13 Andante - Verses 11-15 (soprano, alto)

*Schaue nicht auf meine Sünden,
tilge sie, laß sie verschwinden,
Geist und Herze mache neu.*

*Stoß mich nicht von deinen Augen
und soll fort mein Wandel taugen,
o, so steh dein Geist mir bei.*

*Gib, o Höchster, Trost ins Herze,
heile wieder nach dem Schmerze.
Es enthalte mich dein Geist.*

*Denn ich will die Sünder lehren,
daß sie sich zu dir bekehren
und nicht tun, was Sünde heißt.*

*Laß, o Tilger, meiner Sünden,
alle Blutschuld gar verschwinden,
daß mein Loblied, Herr, dich ehrt.*

Do not look on my sins, blot them out, let them vanish; make spirit and heart new.

Do not cast me from your eyes, and stand by me to help my conduct be good.

Give, O God, comfort to my heart, heal again after suffering. Let me be part of your spirit.

Because I want to teach the sinners to convert themselves to you, and not to do as sin teaches

Let, redeemer, all my sins and blood-guilt be gone forever, so that my songs of praise honor you, Lord.

14 Adagio spiritoso - Verse 16 (alto)

*Öffne Lippen, Mund und Seele,
daß ich deinen Ruhm erzähle,
der alleine dir gehört.*

Open lips, mouth and soul, that I tell of glory which is yours alone.

15 Largo - Verses 17 and 18 (soprano, alto)

*Denn du willst kein Opfer haben,
sonsten brächt ich meine Gaben,
Rauch und Brand gefällt dir nicht.*

*Herz und Geist, voll Angst und Grämen,
wirst du, Höchster, nicht beschämen,
weil dir das dein Herze bricht.*

You want no offering, or I would bring my gifts. You do not like smoke or burning

Heart and soul, in anguish and grieving, you, O God, will not put to shame, because that would break your heart.

16 Allegro (Vivace) - Verses 19 and 20 (soprano, alto)

*Laß dein Zion blühend dauern,
baue die verfallnen Mauern,
alsdann opfern wir erfreut,*

*Alsdann soll dein Ruhm erschallen,
alsdann werden dir gefallen
Opfer der Gerechtigkeit.*

Let Zion continue to blossom, rebuild the walls that have gone to ruins, then we will offer with joy.

And then shall all your glory resound, and then you will be pleased with the offerings of righteousness.

17 Allabreve - (soprano, alto)

Amen.

Amen.

(Translation: Vera Lucia Calabria)

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