

Cantatas for the Fourteenth Sunday after Trinity

Abbaye d'Ambronay

You sometimes get the feeling that Bach would have understood Beethoven's inner turmoil, even if the musical language in which it came to be expressed would have seemed partially (and at that time terribly) foreign to him. For the fact is that Bach too experienced, and became expert in expressing, the gladiatorial struggles within the human breast between good and evil, spirit and flesh. His music tells us this and so do the private jottings and underlinings he made in his copy of Calov's Bible commentary. All through this Trinity season he has been offering us example after example of the stark moral choices that face us every day of our lives. Since his terms of reference and the set texts of these Trinitarian cantatas are of course unequivocally Lutheran, we have quickly got used to the way the human actor is positioned in scenarios of faith and the Fall, sin and Satan. But this does not in any way diminish the humanism of Bach's basic approach on the one hand, or the audacity of his musical response on the other.

Take these three cantatas for Trinity 14, which are all based directly or more loosely on the Gospel reading of the day, the story of Jesus' healing of ten lepers (Luke 17:11-19). In his first attempt, BWV 25 **Es ist nicht Gesundes an meinem Leibe**, first performed on 29 August 1723, Bach and his anonymous librettist treat the leper theme as an allegory for humankind in general, in language of graphic extremes: Adam's Fall 'has defiled us all and infected us with leprous sin' – the whole world 'is but a hospital' for the terminally ill. The solution? 'Thou alone, O Jesus Christ, my physician, knowest the best cure for my soul' (No.3). So, characteristically, as in so many cantatas, a spiritual journey is planned for the individual sinner, sick of heart; a path is signposted and the painful process of healing can begin. Some may find the words and the whole concept difficult to stomach, but as

ever, we can turn to Bach's music and find that it goes a long way towards purging the worst of the verbal excesses.

Indeed, what gives a particular twist to this cantata is the role given to music in the healing process. The second aria (No.5) voices the hopes of the sinner/composer to have his 'poor songs' graciously adjudged, and it is entirely possible that there were underlying personal associations here for Bach, who chooses to juxtapose two instrumental 'choirs', one terrestrial (oboes and strings), the other celestial (three recorders) in anticipation of the moment when his song of thanks 'shall sound better' – as sung by the angelic choir. It is a triple time dance of joy and provides a welcome respite and palliative to what has come before. Yet, with unintentional irony, it is in those earlier movements that this particular musician shows his paces.

In the opening chorus an acute awareness of human sickness through sin, and a horror of it, stands behind the notes and each line of Bach's contrapuntal weave. It informs the way, for example, that he superimposes his second theme ('und ist kein Friede in meinen Gebeinen') over a restless basso continuo line made up of a chain of paired semiquavers, as potent a symbol of a troubled mind as you could envisage. Even more striking is the way he brings in a whole new orchestra of three recorders, three trombones and a cornetto on top of the standard strings-plus-oboe apparatus to reinforce the Passion chorale *Herzlich tut mich verlangen*, which has already been intoned in long notes by the continuo section. As the bass of the chorale the bass trombone sometimes coincides with the basso continuo, but at other times goes his own way. He stands for the rock upon which twelve separate lines can be built and elaborated, a *tour de force* of contrapuntal mastery even by Bach's standards. (This is also a rare occasion when Bach uses trombones in this way, wholly independent of vocal lines – and in anticipation of the finale to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.)

After this opulent opening chorus, the next three movements are confined to continuo accompaniment, as though to underscore the patient's need for private spiritual healing. There is no concession here to the listener's delicacy of feeling or potential queasiness. Sickness, raging fever, leprous boils and the 'odious stench' of sin are described in detail, building up to an impassioned appeal to Christ as the 'healer and helper of all' to cure and show mercy. One might suppose that Bach's explorative use of tonal modulation to give allegorical expression to the idea of a spiritual journey, particularly in the tenor's opening recitative (No.2), would guarantee the attention of his listeners; for as his obituary reads, 'if ever a musician employed the most hidden secrets of harmony with the most skilled artistry, it was certainly our Bach'.

The pick of the cantatas for this Sunday is undoubtedly the chorale cantata BWV 78 **Jesu, der du meine Seele**, one in which an exceptional level of inspiration is maintained through all its movements. It is one of the few I remember getting to know as a child, even singing as a treble the wonderful second movement, the duet 'Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten'. BWV 78 opens with an immense choral lament in G minor, a musical frieze on a par with the preludes to both the surviving Passions for scale, intensity and power of expression. It is cast as a *passacaglia* on a chromatically descending ostinato. How characteristic of Bach to take a dance form such as the *passacaglia* – which has heroic and tragic connotations in music we know but he probably didn't, in the music of Purcell (Dido's lament) and Rameau, to name but two great exponents of it – and to turn it to theological/rhetorical purposes. We have encountered it already twice before this year in the early Easter cantata *Christ lag in Todesbanden* BWV 4, and two Sundays later in *Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen* BWV 12. Here the persistence of the chromatic ground is even more pronounced, sung by the basses at every appearance of the chorale.

One of dozens of original but unobtrusive features is the way the ground acts as a counter-balance to the *cantus firmus* traditionally linked to Johann Rist's hymn of 1641, weaving all manner of contrapuntal lines around and into it. It gives powerful emphasis to the line describing the way Jesus has 'most forcefully wrested' the Christian soul 'from the devil's dark cavern and from oppressive anguish'. Just where you might expect the three lower voices to give respectful accompaniment to the *cantus firmus*, Bach gives them an unusual prominence: mediating between *passacaglia* and chorale, preparing and interpreting the chorale text in the way that the preacher of the sermon might do. Indeed such is the power of exegesis here, one questions whether Bach was yet again stealing the preacher's thunder (inadvertently?) by the brilliance of his musical oratory. At all events it is one of those opening cantata movements in which you hang on every beat of every bar in a concentrated, almost desperate attempt to dig out every last morsel of musical value from the notes as they unfold.

Not in one's wildest dreams could one envisage a more abrupt contrast than that between this noble opening chorus and the delicious, almost irreverently frivolous soprano/alto duet that follows. With its *moto perpetuo* cello obbligato there are echoes of Purcell ('Hark the echoing air') and pre-echoes of Rossini. Bach's wizardry obliges you to nod in assent – or tap your foot – to the plea 'may Thy gracious countenance smile upon us'. He never wrote more smile-inducing music!

The reprieve is only temporary. With the tenor's recitative, unusually marked to begin *piano*, we are reintroduced to the concept of 'leprous sin'. The vocal line is angular, the expression pained and the word-setting exemplary: almost an extension of Peter's remorse in the *St John Passion*, which Bach had introduced to his audience six months earlier. Redemption lies through the shedding of Christ's blood, and, in the aria with flute obbligato (No.4), the tenor claims confidently that though 'all hell should call me to the fight, Jesus will stand beside me

that I may take heart and win the day'. We might expect a trumpet, or at the very least the full string band, to evoke this battle with hell, but Bach is in subtle mode here. What interests him more is the capacity of the flute's graceful figuration to 'erase' ('durchstrichen') man's guilt, and by adopting a catchy dance-like tune, to paint the way faith can cleanse the soul and make 'the heart feel light again'.

The last pair of movements, prior to the final chorale, are for bass. First there is an *accompagnato* which begins as a meditation on the agony of the Cross and, as it develops and changes speed, on submission to Christ's will as a result of his redemptive sacrifice. For the *vivace* section ('When a terrible judge lays a curse upon the damned') the bass is instructed to sing *con ardore* – with passion. (For this is passion music with both a small and a capital P, strikingly similar in technique, mood and expressivity to the *St John Passion* and to that other inimitable setting of the words 'Es ist vollbracht' from Cantata 159). Passion in a Bach performance is a rare commodity in today's climate of clean musicological respectfulness and textual fidelity, but by its absence it jars with the miracle of Bach drawing on all his technical expertise, his mastery of structure, harmony and counterpoint and imbuing them with such vehemence, meaning and – exactly that – passion.

The final aria in C minor feels like a movement drawn from an oboe concerto, but manages to integrate voice and oboe perfectly, celebrating the way Christ's word offers hope to the unquiet conscience. It is intriguing how Bach's alternation of tutti and solo and a recurrent pattern of irregular bar structures – 1–2¹/₂–1–2¹/₂–1 – still add up to the statutory eight! The straightforward harmonisation of Rist's chorale hymn as a conclusion to the cantata makes one doubly aware of the unique combination of skill, fantasy and intellectual grasp with which he treated it in the opening movement.

The outstanding feature of BWV 17 **Wer Dank opfert, der preiset mich**, composed in 1726, is not its multi-sectional opening choral fugue, exhilarating and florid though it be. Nor is it the soprano aria with two violin obbligati in E major, nor yet even the *bourrée*-like concluding tenor aria, which follows a narrative recitative that sounds as though it could have been lifted straight from a Passion oratorio. It is rather the extended final chorale 'Wie sich ein Vat'r erbarmet', the third verse of Johann Gramann's hymn *Nun lob, mein Seel den Herren*. This is a triple-time version of the central movement of the great double-choir motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied* BWV 225 and is every bit as poignant here as in the motet (which is nowadays thought to date from around this same period, of 1726/7), with wonderful word-painting for the 'flower and fallen leaves' and 'the wind [which] only has to pass over it'. We did it softly and *a cappella*, the music spreading like a delicate scent through the vaulted abbey.

Though St Bernard founded it at the start of the ninth century, Ambronay only developed its current architectural form during the fifteenth century, since when it has had a stormy history of pillage and destruction. It has a dazzling white luminosity that suits this music well, and made one yearn to undertake a tour of more of France's southern abbeys, priories and cathedrals.

Cantatas for the Feast of St Michael and All Angels Unser lieben Frauen, Bremen

One only has to think of the *Sanctus* in the *B minor Mass* to realise that Bach took the Book of Revelation and the concept of the angelic hosts very seriously. Accordingly he believed in a cosmos charged with an invisible presence made of pure spirit, just beyond the reach of our normal faculties. As incorporeal beings, angels had their rightful place in the hierarchy of existence: humanity is ranked 'a little lower than the angels' in Psalm 8. The concept of a heavenly choir of angels was implanted in Bach as a schoolboy in Eisenach, when even the hymn books and psalters of the day gave graphic emblematic portrayal of this idea; the role of angels, he was instructed, was to praise God in song

and dance, to act as messengers to human beings, to come to their aid, and to fight on God's side in the cosmic battle against evil. Probably no composer before or since has written such a profusion of celestial music for mortals to sing and play. From the initial planning of the pilgrimage year I had marked September 29 as a red-letter day, and one to look forward to. A dazzling cluster of cantata-movements composed to honour the archangel Michael have survived from the most productive years of Bach's cantata composition, the 1720s.

Michael the archangel (the name means 'Who is like God?') is one of the few figures to appear in the Old and New Testaments, the Apocrypha and the Koran. He appears as protector of the children of Israel (Daniel 12:1), inspiring courage and strength, and was venerated both as the guardian angel of Christ's earthly kingdom and as patron saint of knights in medieval lore, and, significantly, as the being responsible for ensuring a safe passage into heaven for souls due to be presented before God (hence the Offertory prayer in the Catholic requiem mass: 'sed signifer sanctus Michael repraesentet eas in lucem sanctam' - 'may the holy standard-bearer Michael bring them into the holy light'). Since it was first established under the Roman Empire some time in the fifth century, Michaelmas (*Michaelisfest*) had become an important church feast, coinciding with one of the traditional quarter days on which rents are levied and agreed in northern Europe, the start for many of the new agricultural year, and in Leipzig, with one of its three annual trade fairs. When Lucifer, highest of the Seraphim, led a mutiny against God, he became transmogrified into the Devil, appearing either as a serpent or a ten-headed dragon; Michael, at the head of God's army in the great eschatological battle against the forces of darkness, was the key figure in his rout.

And there was war in heaven: Michael and his angels fought against the dragon; and the dragon fought and his angels, and prevailed not; neither was their place found any more in heaven. And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him. And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. (Revelation 12:7-10)

In BWV 50 **Nun ist das Heil und die Kraft** Bach quotes the last of these verses from the Epistle for St Michael's day and makes it his text for one of his most impressive – actually breath-taking – works. Crammed into less than three and a quarter minutes, *Nun ist das Heil* draws on two vocal and three instrumental choirs (of trumpets, oboes and strings) to encapsulate the victory celebrations of the forces of Light. With no space for free episodes such as occur elsewhere in Bach's instrumental fugues, this is a 'permutation' fugue. It has just two

consecutive expositions, each sixty-eight bars long, the first with eight permutations and an eight-bar epilogue, the second with seven permutations and a twelve-bar epilogue. The subject is given simultaneously 'direct' and in inverted form, with the counterpoint thickened by being presented in chords – one whole choir pitted against the rest. But then everything is exceptional about this 'torso' – for it is surely not a proper cantata, but perhaps the opening or closing movement to one that is otherwise lost. This, and the fact that no autograph score has survived, is just the kind of thing to get musicologists excited. Typically they latch onto the outward features, the anomalies of its size, scoring, structure, voice-leading and so on. So, it is probably not by Bach at all (Rifkin), or it must have started out as a five-voiced original (Scheide) that was later tampered with and anonymously expanded into the eight-voiced piece we now know. Only Klaus Stein (*Bach Jahrbuch* 1999) takes the novel view that the unusual features might best be explained as products of Bach's imaginative response to the text, the words from Revelation being spoken by a 'loud voice... in Heaven' and Bach returning them from Earth in echoing assent. For who other than Bach amongst his German contemporaries could have come up with such an extreme compression of ideas, at the same time giving the impression of colossal spatial breadth and majesty?

BWV 130 **Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir**, from Bach's second Leipzig cycle, is based squarely on one of the set hymns for the day, Paul Eber's paraphrase of Melancthon's *Dicimus gratias tibi* (1539), and opens with a song of praise and gratitude to God for creating the angelic host. Using instrumental forces identical to those in BWV 50, Bach begins by presenting a tableau of the angels on parade: these are celestial military manoeuvres, some of them even danced, rather than the battle itself. That is reserved for the centrepiece of the cantata, a C major bass aria scored exceptionally for three trumpets, drums and continuo. The battle is presented not as a past event, but as an ongoing danger from 'the ancient dragon [who] burns with envy and constantly devises new pain' intended to break up Christ's 'little flock'. Though there is brilliance aplenty in the steely glint of Michael's sword (fifty-eight consecutive semiquavers for the principal trumpet to negotiate – twice!), this is not an episode in a *Blitzkrieg*. Bach is more concerned to evoke two superpowers squaring up to one another, the one vigilant and poised to protect the 'kleine Häuflein' against assault (cue the *tremulant* throbbing of all three trumpets in linked quavers), the other wily and deceitful (one wonders whether the kettledrums and continuo are perhaps intended to be on the dragon's side?). The secure protection God offers the believer through His guardian angels is portrayed in a soothing duet for soprano and tenor with reference to past successes – Daniel in the lions' den and the three men in the fiery furnace. Gratitude for the services the angels provide is now expressed as a gavotte, with

an aria for tenor and virtuosic flute symbolising perhaps the fleetness of angelic transport 'on Elijah's chariot'. Human and angelic praise are combined in the final chorale, with God's elect borne aloft by the angelic trumpets.

All Bach's music written for St Michael's day is immense in concept and sustained bravura. One senses that he was spurred on, inspired even, by the presence of a virtuosic group of trumpeters, the municipal *Stadtpeifer* of Leipzig under their 'Capo' Gottfried Reiche, just as Berlioz was a century or so later by the newly-available *cornets à pistons* and saxhorns. In BWV 19 **Es erhub sich ein Streit** Bach uses his brass instruments in highly contrasted ways: at one extreme obliging the listener to experience the scale and significance of these apocalyptic encounters in the opening chorus, at the other, in the E minor tenor aria (No.5), evoking the ever-watchful protection afforded by the guardian angels wheeling around in the stratosphere. Alfred Dürr explains that when they heard the trumpet play the chorale melody of 'Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, O Herr' 'the church-goers of Bach's day, familiar as they were with the text, could be in no doubt that the third verse of the hymn was intended: "Ah Lord, at the end of my life let Your dear angel carry my soul into Abraham's bosom"'. With unobtrusive skill Bach introduces this melody in counterpoint to the *siciliano* rhythms and the singer's tender plea 'Bleibt, ihr Engel, bleibt bei mir!' ('Stay, ye angels, stay by me!').

Like *Nun ist das Heil*, BWV 19 opens without instrumental preamble. But here it is the 'war in heaven' itself which is described, not the victory celebration, and it is constructed as a monumental choral fugue with the singers as the main combatants. They lead the doubling instruments (strings and three oboes) into the fray with a ferocious confrontational swagger and impel the trumpets to follow in their wake. It is only when they pause for the first time in thirty-seven bars that the instruments really find their voice (in a four-bar *Nachspiel*). But that is only the 'A' section of an immense *da capo* structure. The 'B' section starts out with the advantage tilted in favour of the 'raging serpent, the infernal dragon' – another seventeen bars of 'furious vengeance' dominated by the choir. As the singers catch their breath again, the orchestra advances the story, ending with a tell-tale hemiola revealing this to be the turning-point in the battle. Back come the choir, on their own now and in block harmony while the continuo rumbles on, to announce Michael's victory. But it doesn't end there: for the next twenty-five bars Bach shakes his kaleidoscope to give us a gleeful account of the final moments of the battle, the repulse of Satan's last attack by Michael's inner guard and a lurid portrayal of Satan's cruelty – a slow, screeching chromatic descent in the sopranos – before the whole battle is relived again from the beginning.

The fact that Picander had a hand in the text of both this cantata and the last which Bach composed for this day, BWV 149 **Man singet**

mit Freuden vom Sieg, accounts for certain similarities, particularly in the inner movements. The reference to God sending 'horse and chariot' as well as providing a host of supportive angels occurs in both the soprano aria with two oboes d'amore in BWV 19 and in the alto recitative of BWV 149. Even if the soprano aria BWV 149 No.4 is no match for the ravishing tenor aria in BWV 19 with its imploring gestures, describing the watchfulness of the guardian angels, the underlying idea is basically the same. What separates *Man singet mit Freuden vom Sieg* from the other cantatas for St Michael's day is its tone of voice. For example, its opening chorus is festive rather than combative, while using the same apparatus of trumpets, drums, oboes and strings as all the others. This is as we might expect in a movement cleverly recycled by Bach from the closing chorus of his 'Hunt' cantata (BWV 208) composed in 1713, his first 'modern' cantata in that it employed both recitatives and *da capo* arias. Furthermore, the emphasis here is on the guardian angels as 'holy watchmen', which could explain the robust bassoon obbligato added to the alto/tenor duet (No.6), as well as the opening chorus where the bassoon is required to function in dialogue with the principal trumpet, and (by implication at least) its appearance in the bass aria (No.2) to reinforce the image of that visionary 'great voice' referred to in Revelation, which now announces the Lamb 'that has defeated and banished Satan'.

Traditionally Michaelmas is a time of stocktaking as well as celebration. By performing these four cantatas both in Bremen and a couple of days later in the huge Mariendom at Neviges, a Catholic pilgrimage shrine near Düsseldorf, we were able to test the potency of Bach's music as it was transmitted to two very different audiences in two contrasted buildings in two very different atmospheres. The Neviges concert ended with 'Nun ist das Heil' to an almost pop-concert-like roar from the audience – something that poor old Bach never got from his stuffy greengrocers and disaffected clerics in Leipzig.

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