

Cantatas for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity

Allhelgonakyrkan, Lund

It was really hard to get last week's magnificent music – four superb cantatas (BWV 161, 27, 8 and 95), all concerned with grief and consolation – out of one's head and to move on. If at first the three cantatas for this Sunday seemed to be less than top drawer, each had at least one movement that made an immediate impression. With what is probably the earliest, BWV 148 **Bringet dem Herrn Ehre seines Namens**, it was the first chorus, which opens with an exceptionally long fanfare-like ritornello for solo trumpet and strings (and an implied doubling by the three oboes who figure prominently later in the cantata). This becomes the launchpad for the chorus to enter with a rousing homophonic delivery of the psalm verse, 'Give unto the Lord the glory due unto His name; worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness.'

Then the fun begins. By repeating the first three choral bars – this after ten intervening bars for orchestra alone – Bach disguises the fact that the first of his fugues is already under way! It is only when his upper two voices detach themselves from the rest that we cotton on to his strategy of presenting two consecutive fugal expositions, one for each clause of the psalm verse, both emanating from the instrumental material, both expanding from the four vocal lines to five parts by the addition of the independent clarino high above them. It is stirring stuff, and when Bach superimposes his choir over the reprise of the orchestral *sinfonia* it seems to be building to an imposing conclusion – but it then ends rather abruptly, two bars short of one's expectations. Perhaps Anna Magdalena had called from the kitchen that lunch was on the table and the soup was getting cold.

The first part of the Gospel for the day (Luke 14:1-11) deals with the legitimacy of healing on the Sabbath, but here the emphasis is on the need to observe its inviolability – always a bit of a poser for the

church musician, this being the busiest day of his week, and one that Bach skirts neatly in the tenor aria (No.2) by trumpeting not just the virtues of Sunday church attendance, where one may hear ‘the teachings of life’, but the propriety of his ‘joyous music... in praise of the Almighty’. In his day an estimated 9,000 Leipzig citizens (out of a population of under 30,000) headed for church on a Sunday morning. Bach depicts this joyful rush in the way the violin is kept going with little rest from start to finish, but you wonder whether he isn’t also alluding to his own breathless dash across town from St Thomas’s to St Nicholas’s (each with a seating capacity of around 2,500), or vice versa, each Sunday.

Far more poignant is the way he seems to identify with the plea for repose in the *accompagnato* for alto and strings (No.3), and in the long-held note conveying ‘mein Ruhebett’ ('my bed of rest') just before the reprise of the pastoral aria for alto (No.4). With its three accompanying oboes (two *d'amore*, one *da caccia*) this is an unusual piece, not least in the way the continuo (we chose bassoon and organ) often falls silent when the alto begins to sing – a symbol, perhaps, of the soul’s desire to escape the gravitational pull of the world (the bass line its literal emblem). In the B section the contours of the voice line are broken up with little rests or sighs, with a passing hint of that church-sanctioned eroticism we’ve encountered elsewhere in Bach’s dialogues between the soul-as-bride and Jesus-as-bridegroom. A further yearning for eternal union with God comes in the tenor recitative, ten brief but eloquent bars in which Bach redirects his pattern of modulation for this cantata, initially downward from D to B minor to G, now upwards from E minor to F sharp minor, in response to the evocation of the Holy Spirit.

The concluding hymn reaches us, sadly, without a text. Bach scholars have proposed different solutions, but since the melody is associated with a well-known hymn, ‘Auf meinen lieben Gott’, we decided to look no further than its opening verse with its appropriate

vow of submission to God's will. Even that peerless giver of new dates to Bach's cantata chronology, Alfred Dürr, cannot decide whether this work belongs to Bach's first Leipzig cycle, with a first performance on 19 September 1723, or whether it followed the publication two years later of Picander's libretto.

There are no such doubts surrounding BWV 114 **Ach, lieben Christen, seid getrost**, a chorale cantata from Bach's second Leipzig cycle that was first performed on 1 October 1724. What is immediately striking about its chorale fantasia opening, a 6/4 movement in G minor marked *vivace*, is that it has at its core the same stirring chorale melody by Justus Jonas used so memorably in BWV 178 *Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält*, yet treated here very differently. There (in A minor) it was belligerent, a superb diatribe against hypocrites and false prophets; here it is far more nuanced. Bach seizes on the opposition of moods in the first strophe of Johannes Gigas's hymn (1561), which serves as the basis of the entire cantata: two lines of proffered comfort – in effect, 'don't be so depressed' – followed by five suggesting 'you deserve to be punished'. This stark contrast is audible before a word has been sung. Bach presents two themes simultaneously, one assertive and admonitory, derived from the hymn tune and assigned to the two oboes and first violins, the other a friskier affair based on a *figura corta* pattern (vv–vv–vv–vv–) and played initially by the second violins and continuo. To these he then adds a string of repeated quavers for the first oboe and first violins, at first staccato and with main beat trills, but soon modified in the upper strings as pulsated bow-vibrated quavers (wow-wow-wow-wow-wow), a device that immediately conveys the jittery anxiety of the believer in contrast to the extended helping hand of God (by means of the *figura corta*). Once the choir is launched the sopranos, doubled by cornetto, intone the Jonas melody while the lower three voices engage in more active and varied exchanges, dividing up the lines first with vigorous homophonic declamation, then in contrapuntal

imitation, always inventive in their commentary and demanding the listener's attention, especially as they surge into the cadences.

The contrast between despondency and consolation persists in the second movement for tenor, obbligato flute and continuo. This is one in a series of bleak but hypnotic arias epitomising the beleaguered soul at which Bach excels. The predictable austerity of texture is offset by the strong gestural rhythms of a French overture in 3/4 time over slow, throbbing Ds marked *pianissimo* on the first two beats of each of the first five bars before moving off it as an appoggiatura. Bach screws up the tension by means of grinding dissonances and hemiola-style phrasing. The piece creates its own rapt atmosphere of pained dejection. A back-dotted or 'Lombard' figure for the flute with the continuo in close pursuit – in staccato quavers and a rising chain of first and second inversion chords – is the only glimmer of wordless optimism in this wintry landscape, one that must sufficiently have lodged itself in his mind for Bach to quote it years later in his organ chorale 'Vater unser im Himmelreich' (BWV 682). The question mark at the end of the recurring opening strophe – 'Where within this vale of sorrow / will my spirit find refuge?' – means that our disconsolate tenor-pilgrim never arrives on the tonic. After these variations of anguish throughout the A section a change of mood and metre is overdue, but I can't imagine anyone other than Bach switching to *vivace* for a 12/8 gigue at this point, however welcome, for a B section in which the words carry on in low-spirited resignation ('I have no other place to turn'). The way out of the Slough of Despond seems assured, but since this is a *da capo* aria, any reprieve can be only temporary.

Another outstanding movement is the chorale strophe (No.4) set to a post-harvest text ('the grain of wheat will bear no fruit / unless it fall into earth') – or, more correctly, a warning to the farmer to get his timing and seedbed spot on when drilling his winter cereals. The accompaniment consists entirely of a ten-note figure split by two quaver

rests and is assigned to continuo *unisono*. We took this to mean just the two keyboards together, and as such it sounded very striking and a plausible metaphor for the flick of the sower's wrist. It is followed by an aria for alto with oboe solo and strings, its theme similar to last week's four meditations on death, yet very different in mood and treatment: we are to overcome our fear of death by seeing it as a source of freedom enabling us to depart, like Simeon, in peace. Bach writes a rising chromatic sequence for the approach of death ('es muss ja so einmal gestorben sein'), the alto moving in sixths with the oboe over pulsating pedal Fs in the continuo. He then repeats it in the strings enriched by a Brahmsian series of dark, sustained contrapuntal lines with the oboe line descending in plaintive seventh chords. The effect is spooky and chilling – and in contrast to those entrancing bell-chimes of last week (see Vol.8), not in the slightest bit consoling.

Much the most consistently fine of these cantatas is BWV 47 **Wer sich selbst erhöhet, der soll erniedriget werden**, and this despite the fact that its three middle movements are based on a nugatory text from a cycle by Johann Friedrich Helbig, court official in Eisenach. At times it descends into pure doggerel; no wonder Bach (unlike Telemann) set Helbig's words to music only this once. It was first performed on 13 October 1726. It opens by quoting St Luke, and the concluding homily from the parable against pride in the second part of the Gospel reading, 'for whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted'. Whittaker claims that Bach wrote few choruses 'as mighty and monumental' as this opening movement, and one can hardly argue with that. It starts as a speeded up variant of the C minor organ prelude (BWV 546) transposed up a fifth, with curt antiphonal exchanges between the strings and the pair of oboes, but it is not until bar 186, when it is assigned to the chorus in block harmony, that you understand firstly how its initial shape responds to the natural stresses of the *Spruch*, and secondly how its continuation (in the oboes at bar

12) forms the core of a fugal subject that rises to fill the puffed-out chest of the man ‘who exalteth himself’ and will later descend at the moment of his come-uppance. The second clause (concerned with the humble) acts as a counter-subject and concludes with its own smoothly rising phrase (‘shall be exalted’). There are striking episodes, reversals of the voice entries in the twin expositions, homophonic ‘summings up’ and a final return to the elaborate opening ritornello with the addition of the choir in a restatement of the complete text. This may not be the most attractive or easily assimilated of Bach’s opening choral fugues, but it grows on one, and by the encore of the second concert it had registered its considerable power with all the performers and (one sensed) with the listeners.

The second movement is a soprano da capo aria in D minor with organ or, for a later revival, violin obbligato, and it was this version that we chose to perform, calling for extremes of poetic lyricism in the first part and bravura in the second. Its theme is a simple contrast between Christian humility and devilish pride. It is not certain that Bach included it at the cantata’s first outing in 1726. Perhaps he tried it out and discarded it at the eleventh hour when the performers fell short of its taxing demands. This might also explain why the subsequent movements appear to go over the same ground; indeed, you could remove this aria and the cantata’s narrative would still cohere. But what a loss that would be! The violin is assigned a fluttery, kite-like figure in the first section which seems at first to be purely decorative, but which acquires on greater acquaintance the elusive attributes of humility that Christians are required to follow. Then for the B section Bach writes staccato double-stopping for the violin to evoke devilish ‘Hoffart’ (haughtiness or arrogance) and ‘Stolz’ (pride). With these harsh, stubborn broken chords (v – –) we seem suddenly close to the violin concertos of Bartók or Khachaturian. Meantime the soprano is locked into furious imitative exchanges with the bass line (‘Gott pflegt alle die

zu hassen' / God is wont to hate all those [who do not abandon their stubbornness and arrogance]').

This is a vividly theatrical portrayal of the worst of the deadly sins, guaranteed, you would think, to jolt the complacent listener out of his seat. The aria makes blindingly good sense, for once, of da capo form, its long A section an exposition of the need for humility, its B section a tirade denouncing the vice of arrogance. Then, purposefully, comes the return to A, its theme of '*Demut*' drawing on all the self-abnegating qualities of the good chamber musician. The final play-out gives the most eloquent portrayal of humility imaginable, with harmony and figuration in creative symbiosis. How could the preacher compete with this?

Well, he – or rather Bach on his behalf – tries, hampered not just by the overpowering eloquence of the preceding number but by the banality of a text beginning 'Mankind is filth, stench, ash and earth'. Nevertheless this stentorian *accompagnato* for bass is one of Bach's most elaborate and subtle pieces of musical sermonising, so much so that one easily sidesteps the verbal crudity to admire the care Bach lavishes on the smallest detail of verbal inflection: his autograph score shows, for example, how he sharpened the rhythm of the word 'Teufelsbrut' ('devil's brood') to make its impact more abrupt and brutal. It is followed by an aria in E flat in which the same singer, now accompanied by violin and oboe obbligati, prays for humility 'that I may not forfeit my salvation like Lucifer'. You get the feeling that his recurrent struggles with pride are being soothed – mitigated, even – by the instrumental duo, except at three points when they join him in his abomination of pride.

Whittaker warns us not to make snap judgements condemning Bach for setting such 'offensive' texts. 'The battle that Luther waged against unscrupulous enemies was used as a model by himself and his followers when considering the opposing elements within their own

hearts, and the evil elements of the mixture of good and bad which is found in every one of us are addressed in the same terms as hostile powers, sacred or secular'. But is that the real point? What interests me more is the impact Bach's music can have – his skill in overcoming the sheer nastiness of the text by organising his musical material to articulate its emotional content (this you can analyse, but in the process it will disappear like water between your cupped hands). He appears to invite us non-Lutherans into his orbit and to elicit from us a sympathetic response to the underlying homily, and to the nuance his music gives it, that excessive pride is unacceptable under any circumstances, that there is dignity, not just worthiness, in humility. Hegel attributed to music an 'indeterminate content', but for Mendelssohn (who knew Hegel) 'it is not that music is too imprecise for words, but that it is too precise'. Bach seems to anticipate and substantiate Mendelssohn's belief that music can unleash the central core of meaning so often obfuscated by words.

We ended our programme with the most instrumentally conceived of Bach's double-choir motets, BWV 226 **Der Geist hilft unser Schwachheit auf**, incidentally the only one for which original doubling parts for winds and strings have survived. It was performed in October 1729 at the burial of J H Ernesti, the ageing headmaster (rector) of the Thomasschule, who may himself have compiled its stern Pauline-Lutheran text and whose musical tastes are perhaps reflected in Bach's hieratic treatment, softening only at the mention of the 'inexpressible groaning' of the spirit and for the ravishing a cappella chorale with which it ends.

The *Allhelgonakyrkan* (All Saints' Church) in Lund is a dark brown Gothic revival church with awkwardly reverberant acoustics. We were appearing there as part of '*Stemmer i 1000 år*', a Danish-Swedish *Vokalfestival*. All the delegates of this international choral directors' congress came to our concert before settling down to a typically Scandinavian slap-up banquet in the hotel where we were staying. This

was their annual bash, and even before the first course was over they had broken into lusty, good-natured singing of folksong arrangements in four parts. They were still at it several hours later when we came back from supper. It did not stop more than a hundred of them following us across the huge Øresund Bridge to Denmark the next day and attending our rehearsal and concert for a second time. This was in Copenhagen's baroque Garrison Church, packed to the rafters and with some of the delegates sitting cross-legged on the floor of the main aisle.

Cantatas for the Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity

Thomaskirche, Leipzig

How strange that the two main churches of Leipzig – for twenty-seven years the twin poles of Bach's musical activities – should differ so markedly in atmosphere. Was it like this in his day? True, we had been warned not to expect the same exceptionally warm official welcome that had been extended to us back in January at the Nikolaikirche, but I don't think any of us (and that included our two ex-*Thomaner* male soloists) expected to be lectured on how fortunate we were to have come to the Thomaskirche (this, of course, we knew already) which was described to us as 'the only place with a living, authentic tradition of Bach performance practice'. Hmm. There had already been some reluctance to meet our express wish to perform, not at the back of the church in the choir gallery (hidden to view for three-quarters of the audience), but close to the chancel steps. If authenticity were the issue here, surely one would need to allow for the fact that the current nineteenth-century gallery, long since stripped of its Baroque furnishings, is today very different in shape and size from the one Bach knew. Over the past century there has been a policy to accentuate the late Gothic style of this 'Hall Church', with an inevitable change in the

acoustic relationship between performers and listeners. In contrast to the benign rococo ambience of the Nikolaikirche, the unsettled and unsettling atmosphere we picked up here was manifest in the repertoire of distracting noises – telephones ringing, doors being slammed, scaffold poles dropped, the thud of an electric generator outside, even two people tinkering with the new organ – all the time we were trying to rehearse on the Saturday evening. Things were a bit quieter on the Sunday morning and beautiful shafts of autumn light came streaming in through the tall Gothic windows.

Our programme opened with BWV 96 **Herr Christ, der ein'ge Gottessohn**. The title of Bach's chorale cantata for this Sunday looks at first to be its chief link to the Gospel of the day, Matthew's account of Jesus' theological dispute with the Pharisees on the significance of the epithet 'Son of David' (Matthew 22:34-46). Far closer is its connection to a 200-year-old hymn by Elisabeth Cruciger (or Creutziger), a poet who came from an emigrant aristocratic Polish family. So close were she and her husband to Martin Luther that he placed her hymn at the head of his first *Gesangbuch*. In its praise of Christ as the Morning Star it seems better suited to the Epiphany season, and in fact it is not until halfway through the first recitative (No.2) – like all the four intermediate movements of the cantata, a paraphrase of Elisabeth Cruciger's hymn stanzas – that the Gospel connection is made, 'the mighty Son of God whom David of old worshipped in spirit as his Lord'.

Bach makes the connection with Epiphany immediately clear by adding a sopranino recorder in F high above his basic orchestra of two oboes, strings and continuo in his opening movement, a chorale fantasia of celestial beauty. The twinkling figuration suggests the radiant Morning Star guiding the Magi through a pastoral landscape admittedly more Saxon than Near Eastern. To make the most of Bach's delicate instrumental palette we experimented by placing Rachel Beckett at a slight distance – a third of the way down the nave in the pulpit, from

where her recorder glinted alluringly in the same way that a particular colour serves to make an individual line in an illuminated manuscript stand out. But we were told that the pulpit was out of bounds to visiting musicians. Nothing, however, could prevent the sudden, heart-stopping lift to E major that Bach engineers at the mention of the ‘Morgenstern’. Normally the most extreme of the sharp keys in the tonal spectrum of his cantatas, in the context of a movement rooted in F major this key symbolises mankind aroused by the dazzling vision of the Morning Star, whose ‘light stretches further than that of all the other stars’. Bach adds a *cornetto* (‘corno’ being a common abbreviation of ‘cornetto’) to bolster the *cantus firmus* he assigns on this occasion to the altos, their entry always preceding that of the other three voices in imitative counterpoint.

Two *secco* recitatives, one for alto (No.2), the other for soprano (No.4), are exemplary even by Bach’s standards in their economy of means and richness of expression, the first a meditation on the mystery of the Virgin birth, the second a prayer for guidance along life’s path. Bach requires his recorder player to switch to transverse flute for the tenor aria (No.3) that describes the timid advance of the soul. This is one in a series of twelve cantatas from the autumn of 1724 with prominent obbligato parts for flute, evidently devised by Bach to make the most of the skills of an exceptionally talented flautist whom some scholars have identified as the law student Friedrich Gottlieb Wild. One should not be fooled by the populist *galant* style of this aria: beneath its genial surface one senses Bach’s intention to make profound observations about the soul’s ardour and thirst for faith. This is evident in the way he introduces sighing dissonances and passing appoggiaturas approached by downward sixths and sevenths to portray the tug-of-war within the Christian soul, drawn on the one hand by ‘bonds of love’ and on the other by worldly counter-attractions.

The second aria (No.5) is for bass with an antiphonal accompaniment of oboes and contrasted strings. Here is a further

representation of the internal tussle expressed in the tenor aria, those vying pressures ‘now to the right, now to the left’ that dog the pilgrim’s steps as he stumbles along life’s journey. One is reminded of the accursed in Dante’s *Inferno*, lurching forwards blindly but with their heads twisted backwards. There is a hint of *cori spezzati* technique here, the practice of setting antiphonal choirs of voices or instruments in mutual combat, pioneered in late sixteenth-century Venice then emulated and brought back to Germany by visiting composers like Heinrich Schütz. It made one wish that the so-called *Stadtpfeiferemporen* had survived from the Thomaskirche of Bach’s day – those raised, twin-facing galleries on which he used to deploy his winds and strings either side of his singers, and which would have given added aural and visual sense to his use of antiphonal contrast here (and in the sinfonia of BWV 169). The way that the dotted rhythms are hoisted up and then dragged downwards in a succession of first and second inversion chords suggests another stylistic provenance, Bach’s encounter in his late teens with the pompous gestures of the French heroic style he first heard perhaps at the Hamburg opera or played by the Duke of Celle’s band in Lüneburg. With the third line (‘Gehe doch, mein Heiland, mit’ – ‘Go with me, my Saviour’) Bach irons them out completely, like a plane emerging into a clear airstream after turbulence, so that what we experience is the soul’s new-found sense of direction under Jesus’ skilful piloting. But the reprieve is only provisional, with a lunging return of the dotted chromaticism and a plea not to be engulfed by dangers (‘in Gefahr nicht sinken’).

Next came BWV 169 **Gott soll allein mein Herze haben**, the last and, to my mind, the most consistently beautiful of Bach’s cantatas for solo alto. Like BWV 35 of six weeks ago, it incorporates movements from an earlier instrumental concerto arranged for obbligato organ. Here it is the prelude and the second aria (No.5) which originated in the lost work, possibly for oboe, flute or oboe d’amore, that Bach later reworked

as the familiar E major harpsichord concerto, BWV 1053 (it may also have resurfaced as a genuine organ concerto with Bach as soloist, written to inaugurate the new Silbermann organ installed in Dresden's Sophienkirche in 1725). The extended opening sinfonia that includes three new, partly independent, parts for oboes, gives added weight to the cantata. The writing for obbligato organ is here so much more assured and convincing than in, say, *Vergnügte Ruh*, BWV 170. So far it has eluded scholars whether Bach actively sought out cantata librettos that he deemed suited to solo vocal treatment for the six cantatas for solo voice he composed in the run-up to Advent 1726, and to what extent he might have intervened in their construction, or whether their texts were clerically imposed on him and, with their emphasis on individual piety, left him no option but to treat them as solo works. In its devotional lucidity and outward simplicity the first vocal *arioso* must have appealed to even the most hair-shirted Pietist in Leipzig. It opens with a motto in the basso continuo that is then passed to the alto and acts like a rondo motif, framing the anonymous libretto's extrapolation of the Sunday Gospel concerned with the love of God, and recurring in a freely inverted form at the start of the first aria (No.3), with its ornate organ obbligato continuing in minuet rhythm and in mainly diatonic tonality. A close collaboration between Bach and his librettist in the formulation of this motto, Dürr suggests, is the basis for creating an overarching unity flowing from a single, rhetorically-derived idea (*propositio*) that permits an implied dialogue between this figure – the repeated 'God alone shall have my heart' – and a gloss (*confirmatio*) given to it in recitative. It is a perfect example of Bach's skill in following admonitions by contemporary music theorists to 'grasp the sense of the text' (Mauritius Vogt, 1719) with the goal of 'refined and text-related musical expression... the true purpose of music' (Johann David Heinichen, 1711). Its mood of gentle, insistent piety based on the observation of Christ's twin commandments is in extreme contrast to

Bach's stern and unforgettably imposing laying down of these laws three years earlier in *Du sollt Gott, deinen Herren, lieben*, BWV 77.

Hugely impressive, too, is the way Bach adds a brand new vocal line to his pre-existing *siciliano* for strings (No.5), the slow movement of his former oboe-or-organ-or-harpsichord concerto. With its theme of farewell to worldly life, its irregular prosody and rhyme scheme, it lends weight to David Schulenberg's contention that the text 'must have been written, or at least adapted, specifically for use in the present *contrafactum*'. It is almost as skilful, and every bit as felicitous, as his similar grafting of four new vocal lines onto the rootstock of his D minor harpsichord concerto in *Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal*, BWV 146. This richly extended rejection of worldly temptations in favour of God's love is followed by a brief reminder of the second commandment ('Treat your neighbour well!') in recitative (No.6), included almost as an afterthought and offering a prelude to a congregational prayer on the same topic, the third verse of Luther's 'Nun bitten wir den Heiligen Geist' (1524).

In Bach's day the Lutheran church calendar served as an organising principle for collections of cantatas, the liturgical year being governed by the two feasts of Easter (moveable) and Christmas (fixed). The Trinity season needed to finish a clear four weeks before Christmas, so that in a year such as 1724 when Easter fell late there were only twenty-five out of a possible twenty-seven Sundays after Trinity before the beginning of the *tempus clausum*, the period between Advent Sunday and Christmas Eve in which no cantatas or concerted music could be performed. In 2000 it meant that we too needed somehow to fit Bach's six surviving cantatas for the end of the Trinity season into our earlier programmes. So here, for our concert in Leipzig, was a chance to include that superb chorale cantata BWV 116 **Du Friedfürst, Herr Jesu Christ**, first performed on 26 November 1724 as the final cantata of the Trinity season in Bach's second year. Lutheran theological themes in this tail end to the liturgical year

frequently deal with Armageddon, with the Second Coming or with the promised ‘abomination of desolation’. Though the text of Jakob Ebert’s seven-verse hymn (1601), retained literally for the two outer movements but paraphrased for the four inner ones, focuses on human misdemeanour and refers to ‘a land that suffers horribly’, its opening movement speaks of Jesus as the Prince of Peace to whom humankind turns ‘in need, in life and in death’. This is in line with a rubric that appears above the melody in hymn collections of the time: ‘in time of distress’ (‘in allgemeine Not’), and in particular a plea ‘for peace in time of war’ (‘zur Zeit des Krieges um Frieden zu bitten’). The orchestral *ritornello* for strings with two oboes d’amore has the feel of a modified concerto movement in A major to it: curiously positive, assured and lively, an impression confirmed by the block harmonies of the opening choral lines against independent instrumental material. It is not until the penultimate line of the *Abgesang* (the ‘B’ part of a so-called ‘Bar-form’ structure: AAB) that there is a hint of the Last Judgement in the way the lower three voices respond to the *cantus firmus* (soprano and cornetto) with nervous, broken, homophonic commentary in imitative cahoots with the instrumental lines.

Such dread as experienced by the terrified soul summoned to judgement is more palpable in the alto aria with its tortuous oboe d’amore obbligato (No.2). Voice and oboe interlock thematically as in a true duet, with the expressive word-underlay constantly implied in the oboe line, the perfect riposte to Beaumarchais’ quip that ‘that which isn’t worth the trouble of being said, is sung’. Some people, admittedly those more familiar with his keyboard works than with his cantatas, and who accuse Bach of (or applaud him for) an austere nobility in the controlled formality of his compositions, might be surprised by the sheer intensity of this passionate cry of anguish. It is utterly of its time in the way it makes full use of the newly invented oboe d’amore’s chromatic range and in its exploration of wildly unstable tonal centres such as G sharp

minor that leave one guessing where the modulation is headed, yet it also harks back to those freely experimental modes of expression explored by Bach's older cousin Johann Christoph.

A reminder of the centrality of this hymn by Ebert occurs in the continuo introduction to the tenor recitative (No.3), invoking Jesus as 'Prince of Peace'. In place of a second aria, Bach sets this confession of human guilt as a vocal trio (a relative rarity in his cantatas) with continuo for support, just as he did four weeks earlier in *Aus tiefer Not*, BWV 38. In both trios he seems to have set himself deliberately knotty compositional challenges, in the earlier one to forge a reciprocal and wholly unlikely connective link between tribulation (Trübsal) and comfort (Trost), here to mine the thematic potential of his opening *ritornello* motif and to explore its modulatory permutations through a circle of falling fifths, guiding the listener through rich subterranean tunnels, the point of exit always uncertain. Having achieved normality of a kind by ending his 'B' section in the relative minor (C sharp), he leads us to expect a modified *da capo* of the 'A' section, but then gives it in unaltered form to which he appends a truncated repeat of the 'B' section, leading us back to where we began, the home key of E major. Perhaps a clue to these convolutions, and to these pronounced ascent/descent patterns that Eric Chafe calls 'tonal allegory', lies in the words of the middle section, 'Did not Thy merciful heart break when the anguish of fallen man drove Thee to us into the world?', set by Bach with exceptional pathos. He brings back his string ensemble for the penultimate movement, the alto's plea for peace leading us, now with a glimmer of hope, back to the serenity of A major and to a collective prayer for illumination and enlightenment.

It seemed fitting to conclude our concert by retreating to the choir of this great church, the very crucible where for the last twenty-seven years of his life Bach worked, rejoiced and suffered, and to form a horseshoe around his final resting place, flanked by the portraits of

theologians in their long black robes and white lace ruffs, including perhaps his erstwhile clerical tormentors. From there we sang *a cappella* what reverential legend has identified as his very last piece, the so-called **Deathbed Chorale** BWV 668. This four-part chorale, F W Marpurg tells us in his posthumous second edition to the *Art of Fugue* (1752), Bach ‘dictated in his blindness to the pen of one of his friends’. This romantic account is dented by the existence of at least two earlier versions of a chorale prelude (BWV 641 and BWV 668a). Proof that Bach was occupied with unfinished works during his final illness exists, so that it is possible that he did ‘dictate’ at least the imitative passages in the three-voice sections (absent in BWV 641), the excision of some of the filigree ornamentation in the treble line, and a few smaller refinements including the exquisite concluding coda. Whatever the factual basis, nothing can diminish the heart-stopping beauty of this two-verses *envoi*, its original words ‘Wenn wir in höchsten Nöten sein’ changed to the more apt ‘Vor deinen Thron tret’ ich hiermit’, to which the melody was also habitually linked. That has the ring of truth about it: the man whose entire creative life had been devoted towards achieving musical perfection, here making final corrections and adjustments during his last moments of consciousness spent preparing for his own characteristically Lutheran ‘good’ death. It epitomises that ‘unearthly serenity’ which Edward Said identified as the hallmark of late style and last works.

With the final cadence hovering in the air, the total stillness that followed was extraordinary: no applause, no mad rushing for the exits, just silence. It was as if the audience tacitly understood that this was our collective homage to the genius whose music has been the *Morgenstern* guiding the steps of our pilgrimage for the best part of a year. Finally the clapping began and people came forward with their thanks, visibly moved and loath to leave. It really felt as if the tutelary gremlins had been put to flight during the concert, that Luther’s ‘alter

böse Feind' had been given a sharp kick in the slats and run off with his tail between his legs.

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