

Cantatas for the Third Day of Christmas

St Bartholomew's, New York

Find yourself cornered by an organist, pedalling along on his tracker-action hobbyhorse and holding forth on the innate superiority of Bach's organ works to all the rest of his *oeuvre*, and one need only point to BWV 64 **Sehet, welch eine Liebe** to stun said organist into silence. It is true that there is nothing in its opening movement, constructed as a four-voiced motet over an independent continuo line, that would not sound perfectly respectable and effective on the organ. But flesh the work out in Bach's rather un-Christmassy instrumentation – a trombone choir added to the regular string band to double (but not cover) the vocal lines – and then allow the words to animate and vivify the counterpoint with all its cross-rhythms and extended melismas, and suddenly this 'theologically important but affectively neutral statement of doctrine' (Daniel Melamed) springs to life. We can savour the pleasure Bach holds in store for his listeners being called the children of God at Christmas time.

Like the previous day's *Dazu ist erschienen* (BWV 40), with which it is thematically closely connected, and even with the much earlier Christmas Day cantata *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag* (BWV 63), there is a strong emphasis throughout this cantata on St John's depiction of Jesus as *Christus victor*. Profiting from the fact that December 27 is also the Feast of St John, his favourite evangelist, Bach permits himself to develop the characteristic Johannine view of the Incarnation further than the set readings would normally have allowed. This is at the root of his presentation of a vertical division between a world 'above' (full of truth and light) and 'below' (full of darkness, sin and incomprehension). God thus *descends* in human form to save man from sin and from his constant problem with the Devil, while man's aspiration is to *ascend* to where he can be included as one of God's children. Bach implements

this basic antithesis most obviously in terms of overall style, adopting an old-sounding idiom with archaic trombone colouring to establish the immutable foundations of God's love in the listener's mind in the opening chorus and its sequel, a tender setting of Luther's hymn 'Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ', then switching to more modern and worldly dance-inflected patterns in all the subsequent movements.

It is quite unusual for the first recitative of a Bach cantata to be the most dramatic movement thus far, but that is certainly the case here (No.3). It features vigorous scales both up and down in the continuo to represent the alto soloist's snub to the world – he will have no truck with Christmas trinkets. Without a break, the choir then launch into 'Was frag ich nach der Welt?' (the first verse of Pfefferkorn's hymn of 1667) in full endorsement, over a now regular but purposeful bass-line, concluding 'Jesus... Thou art my delight' ('Jesus... Du bist meine Lust'). The soprano steps forward and the strings strike up a rather stylised courtly gavotte (with its characteristic double upbeat). But from its third bar the solo violin loosens its starchy formality by means of a wind-borne figuration reminiscent of the scale passages in the alto recitative and soon, with the soprano's entry, to be explained as worldly things dispersing like smoke. The solid alternative – Jesus' gift to the believer – is winningly conveyed in the 'B' section, musically the 'pearl beyond price'. The continuo initially falls silent. This technique, known as *bassetchen*, is one that we have come across several times in the course of the year and Bach uses it, always with purpose, as a symbol of Jesus' innocence of sin and love of humankind (most famously in 'Aus Liebe', the seraphic soprano aria from the *St Matthew Passion*). The longer the soprano sustains the key words 'bleibet *fest* und ewig *stehen*' ('remains *firm* for *ever*'), the more contrasting opportunities present themselves – for unstable exploratory modulations and for the worldly gavotte theme to fragment, along with the solo violin's plume of smoke.

The bass recitative conveys the world- and travel-weariness of the pilgrim (No.6) – very aptly for us, seeing that this was our penultimate concert of the Pilgrimage. In final renunciation of earthly things, and with his sights now firmly on the gift of Heaven, the alto launches into an aria of intrinsic melodic beauty (No.7). There is felicity of word-setting and a catchy play on the ambiguity of its swinging rhythms: successively, units of 3/4 time against the basic 6/8 pulse, then 6/8 with 3/4 syncopations, then unequivocal 3/4 bars in both top and bottom lines with the odd 3/8 bar sometimes left to take care of itself. Curiously, the overall impression is not of disjointedness but of pleasure in the exchanges between oboe d'amore, alto and continuo and, from time to time, of an ecstatic lyricism, the voice rising to a held top D in its longing for Heaven. Another composer might so easily have made heavy weather of this pious text, but not Bach. There is humour and delight in the solutions he finds for conveying the baubles of materialism being tossed aside and the final goodnight said to the 'Lasterleben' ('sinful way of life') in the closing chorale.

Bach has many ways of celebrating the Christmas season in music. Completely new to me was this most intimate and beguiling of cantatas, BWV 151 **Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kömmt** from 1725, with a text by Georg Christian Lehms. It opens as a G major aria in 12/8 marked *molto adagio* for soprano, obbligato flute and strings, with the oboe d'amore doubling the first violins. It is hauntingly beautiful. Is this the Virgin Mother herself singing a lullaby to her newborn child, or is it simply solace offered to the fragile believer through Jesus' arrival on earth? Though unmistakably Bach-like and ineffably peaceful in mood, there are musical pre-echoes of both Gluck and Brahms, while the arabesques of the solo flute suggest something authentically Levantine or even Basque in origin. Any literal association with the musing Madonna is quickly dispatched the moment the 'B' section bursts out in an ecstatic *alla breve* dance of joy, part gavotte, part gigue – 'Heart and

soul rejoice'. Flute, soprano and the first violins (momentarily) exult in elegant triplet *fioriture* – similar in style and mood to the kind of music Handel wrote as a young man when he first encountered the works of Scarlatti and Steffani in Italy – before the return of the opening cradle song. Inevitably this inspirational aria overshadows the sequel. A pair of *secco* recitatives (Nos 2 and 4) frame an alto aria 'In Jesu Demut' ('In Jesus' meekness'), with a pair of oboes d'amore doubling violins and viola in praise of the spiritual richness to be found in Jesus' physical poverty. The 'garlands of blessing' (Segenskränze) alluded to in the 'B' section seem to be the image which prompted Bach's imaginative response to the entire aria, including its head motif – the handicraft of weaving melodic threads on the 'loom' of the regular bass line. The eighth strophe of Nikolaus Herman's chorale 'Lobt Gott, ihr Christen allzugleich' (1560) with which the cantata ends is frankly solid. A little like Hymns Ancient and Modern, it needs an extra dose of festive spirit to come alive, a measure of brandy to set the Christmas pudding aflame.

Lehms also had a hand as author of BWV 57 **Selig ist der Mann**, first heard on Boxing Day 1725. The concept of a spiritual dialogue between Jesus and the Soul seems to make some commentators uncomfortable, particularly at this time of year. But that may be to misunderstand Bach's intentions, which are to draw attention to the fact that the second day of Christmas is also the Feast of St Stephen the Martyr. Bach's response to Lehms' words is highly personal. It is sparing - not in expressive force, but in the modest deployment of its forces: just the two solo voices, except for the final four-part chorale, and the fusion of strings and reeds (three oboes doubling violins one, two and viola) we have already encountered in the early summer cantatas for the same year (BWV 175 and 176). All four of its arias are in triple time, three in minor keys. The first, really more an extended arioso than an aria, is for the bass as *Vox domini*, a flowing G minor

sarabande to the words 'Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life' (James 1:12). It begins with a weaving quaver motif after a silent beat which is passed between the top three instrumental lines and then appears in inverted form to the continuo, one detached quaver then the next four under a slur suggesting a second beat emphasis. It recurs in one voice or another in almost every bar, often in association with a heart-wrenching falling chromatic figure strongly suggestive of the physical affliction of the martyr over a pedal point representing his unflinching faith in God's support. At one point Bach silences his instruments to reveal the martyr pursuing his solitary course in a measured rising scale, despite his persecutors and on the way to receiving the 'crown of life'.

Now we are offered another chance to savour Bach, with never an opera to his name, as the best writer of dramatic declamation (recitative in other words) since Monteverdi. The soul (soprano) responds to Jesus' words via extravagant harmonic progressions and with mixed emotion: relief at the comfort He offers, then identification with the martyr ('endless suffering in pain... [my heart] writhes like a worm in its blood') giving way to vulnerability, pathos and trepidation ('I must live like a sheep among a thousand savage wolves'). She introduces her own aria, but allows the string ensemble to convey her thoughts: a plea for death sooner than the withdrawal of Jesus' love. It is cast as a dance in C minor, even slower and more sarabande-like than the preceding bass aria, and is one of those tragic triple-time dances at which Bach excelled (one has only to think of the closing choruses of both Passions). So closely woven are the clusters of expressive motifs shared between the upper three parts that it is sometimes quite hard to identify the individual lines. These are the gestures of genuinely tragic utterance and show a passing affinity to Handel's writing in the same vein.

Behind Lehms' words is the implied polarity between life (Jesus'

love) and death (rejection), but Bach concentrates exclusively on the latter, holding back the soul's acceptance of Jesus' 'pledge of love' ('Liebespfand') until the short duet-recitative (No.4). It must have come as a relief to the Leipzig burghers, intent on celebrating Christmas, to hear the music change mood so drastically in the following bass aria. If still not exactly festive, it is a show-stopping battle cry, reminiscent of the fifth Brandenburg Concerto (first movement) in the way the first violins' repeated semiquavers propel the action forwards purposefully. These pass to the continuo as Jesus refers to the soul's enemies 'who always accuse you before me', and Bach finds magnificent sword-slashing gestures for the upper strings to make: downward-chopping sixths and sevenths in the violins, upward-cutting diminished chords in the bass line.

The rapturous aria (No.7) which ends this fine cantata calls for a singer with considerable acrobatic agility. It is an allegro movement in 3/8 in G minor with a fiery gypsy air for the violin obbligato, celebrating the soul's yearning to leave earthly life by means of wild gestures of abandonment – three-fold octave drops, syncopations and profligate melodic invention. The aria ends abruptly with no forewarning, no *da capo* and no closing ritornello, just a plain question ending with a rise of a sixth, the soul asking Jesus, 'What dost Thou give me?'. It is like a child demanding to know 'Where is my Christmas present?' – yet without petulance. Jesus' response is given indirectly by the chorus in a plain harmonisation of the bracing tune known to Anglicans as 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of Creation', with hemiolas bestriding silent beats. It is also in triple time – was Bach perhaps overdoing the Trinitarian symbolism in this cantata?

I find it hard to imagine music that conveys more persuasively the essence, the exuberance and the sheer exhilaration of Christmas than the opening chorus of BWV 133 **Ich freue mich in dir**. First performed on 27 December 1724, it is constructed as an Italianate concerto-like

movement of infectious rhythmic *élan*. An anonymous melody evidently new to Bach (he sketched it in at the foot of the score of the *Sanctus*, also composed for Christmas in 1724 and eventually incorporated into the B minor Mass) is fitted to Kaspar Ziegler's hymn. Eight lines of text are interpolated between the spirited ritornelli in which, unusually, the second violin and violas are strengthened by the two oboes d'amore, leaving the first violins unaided to shine above the rest. One senses that during this hectic period Bach needed to take into account the cumulative fatigue and reliability of his ensemble. It was probably wise of him to confine the choir to a mostly straightforward chorale harmonisation - line by line and expanding into simple polyphony at the mention of 'Der große Gottessohn'. So with little or no rehearsal, he could rely on his string players to give the necessary zip to this extended concertante dance of joy. The 'süßer Ton' is suggested both by the bell-like crotchets in the first two bars and later by the magical interlacing of sustained inner parts as soon as the choir mention these 'sweet sounds'.

It was rare for us to have the luxury of performing a cantata we had given only two years before. It meant that things like the little bendings of the four upbeats to this instrumental fugue, the bell chimes of the repeated crotchets and a tiny 'gather' before launching into those brilliant and emphatic chains of thirds – all these features, so slight in themselves, but making all the difference to the conviction of an interpretation – came so much more naturally this time around. Some of the energy and brilliance of the opening movement spills into its sequel, an A major aria in which both the alto soloist and the pair of accompanying oboes d'amore are called upon to give a firecracker delivery to the opening word 'Getrost!' ('Be of good cheer') before bursting into cascades of semiquavers. Then comes a more reflective circling figure marked *piano* (the same as was played loudly by the continuo in the first bar) which is handed to the alto for the parenthesis

‘Wie wohl ist mir geschehen’ (‘How blessed am I’), eventually given three times in rising progression to convey the delight at seeing God face to face.

A brief recitative for tenor twice breaks into solo arioso allusions to the chorale. The key idea of the opening movement’s ‘sweet sound’ is now revealed. It is the announcement ‘My Jesus has been born’ in the soprano aria (No.4), to which Bach assigns a melodic phrase that sounds as if it had been lifted from a chorale or plainsong. The bells ringing in her ears to which the soprano refers are suggested by the violin *barriolage* of alternating open and stopped strings and a solo flourish in the first violin. A different-sounding bell is tolled in the slow pastoral ‘B’ section by unison violas and second violins, over which the solo violin and soprano soar in a lyrical meditation on the name of Jesus. Only the chromatic twists allude to the stony heart which refuses to acknowledge it.

All in all this was a festive, heart-warming programme, a cross-section of Bach’s most engaging but little known Christmas music. We ended the concert aware that we had only one more programme to prepare, for the following Sunday, New Year’s Eve, and then it would all be over – one hundred and eighty-six cantatas, sixty-two concerts, all squeezed into one astonishing year.

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