

## Cantatas for Christmas Day

### Herderkirche, Weimar

We arrived in Weimar to find the stalls of the Christmas market neatly laid out in the cobbled market square, encircling a ninety-foot Norway spruce. On one side was the painter Lucas Cranach's house; opposite it, the nineteenth-century granite *Rathaus*. At ninety degrees to the north there once stood the 'Red Castle' where Bach was employed as ducal organist; to the south the three hundred-year-old Elephant Hotel where we were staying. This was the habitual meeting place and watering hole of Bachs, Goethes and Schillers, with a balcony from which Hitler made rabble-rousing speeches. Just a few yards away there is a plaque on a wall commemorating Adam Weldig, a singer at the ducal court who was Bach's landlord at the time of the birth of his two eldest sons. This juxtaposition is typical of the painful contrasts you find in this compact little town in the heart of Thuringia, celebrated for its cultural heroes: at one moment heralding its reputation as a centre of civilisation, at the next leading you to despair at the depths of human depravity. For less than eight kilometres from the marketplace, up in the beech-clad hills where Franz Liszt liked to go for inspirational rambles, lies Buchenwald, the former concentration camp. It is one of the bleakest places imaginable, a place where no birds sing, as several us discovered when we visited it on the morning of Christmas Eve 1999.

On Christmas Day we gathered in the town church to launch our pilgrimage, united in believing Bach's music to be one of the touchstones of civilisation, to be treasured every time we hear or perform it. 'Etch this day in metal and marble!' is the injunction given at the start of **BWV 63 Christen, ätzet diesen Tag**. How could we fail to do so? Bach's music is overwhelming testimony to the strength and resilience of the human spirit, its refusal to be silenced or crushed. Our search for meaning, for answers to these glaring contradictions and

intractable puzzles, had drawn us here together in the first place and was implicit in the very act of performing his music. The mid-twentieth-century death camps were, according to George Steiner, ‘the transference of Hell from below the earth to its surface’. This alone makes it easier for us to comprehend the grim notion that mankind, in the words of Bach’s librettist, is ‘a fallen race... imprisoned and fettered by Satan’s slavish chains’.

It felt peculiarly apt to start our pilgrimage with this stirring work, most probably first performed in Weimar on Christmas Day 1714, re-rooting it in its place of origin. Festive it certainly is, though in a very different way from the *Christmas Oratorio* of twenty years later, which we were also performing here. The cantata contains none of the usual Nativity themes: no cradle song, no music for the shepherds or for the angels, not even the standard Christmas chorales. It is an enigmatic work, much revived by Bach in his Leipzig years, with a text thought to be by Johann Michael Heineccius, a leading pastor in Halle who took an active interest in luring Bach there in 1713. It was later to be used as part of Halle’s bicentennial celebrations of the Reformation in 1717. No autograph score survives, only a set of parts in the hand of Bach and his pupil Johann Martin Schubart. Its opulent scoring – three oboes and bassoon and no less than *four* trumpets plus timpani in addition to the string ensemble – shows this to have been one of a handful of large-scale works too big to be accommodated in the choir loft of the *Himmelsburg*, the ducal chapel where most of Bach’s Weimar cantatas were performed. From time to time the Duke, perhaps tiring of his court preacher, decided, it seems, to join the congregation in services held in the much larger town church of SS Peter and Paul. This allowed Bach to draw on the amalgamated forces of the ducal *Capelle* and the town musicians for grand ceremonial effects impossible within the chapel’s cramped gallery.

It is a symmetrical work: two imposing outer choruses that

balance secular dance (for instruments) and motet style (for voices) within a da capo framework flank twin *accompagnato* recitatives, one for alto and one for bass, two duets, the first with extended oboe obbligato, the second a triple rhythm dance-duet for alto and tenor, and a central recitative for tenor that tells us that ‘the lion from David’s line has appeared, His bow is drawn tight, His sword sharpened.’ The first *accompagnato* (No.2), a ravishing movement for alto with strings, passes imperceptibly from meditative arioso to declamation and back again in the course of its thirty-two bars. The evident care that Bach lavished on this movement is clear, firstly from the way, following a tortuous passage in which voice and continuo struggle to free themselves from ‘Satan’s slavish chains’, that Bach negotiates a heart-stopping transition from E minor to A major for the long-awaited balm of Jesus’ birth, and secondly from his use of a diminished third to effect a startling plummeting from A minor to F major illustrative of man’s fallen state (‘nach dem Verdienst zu Boden liegen’).

The final chorus is a superb mosaic of interlocking structures and moods. It begins pompously with a short fanfare for the four trumpets and drums announcing the arrival of some dignitary – the Duke himself, perhaps? – and can surprise those not expecting signs of humour in Bach’s church music. For it is followed by some irreverent tittering by the three oboes, passing from them, like Chinese whispers, to the strings. Was his wig askew? Great sweeping arcs of exuberant semiquaver scales precede the choir’s entry with the fanfare motif ‘Höchster, schau in Gnaden an’ before the first of two permutation fugues. Both fugal subjects are reminiscent of Bach’s double choir motets, *Der Geist hilft* (BWV 226) and *Fürchte dich nicht* (BWV 228), and both begin meditatively with voices alone and then expand via instrumental doubling to blazing trumpet-dominated climaxes. Just prior to the da capo comes a preposterous collective trill on the word *quälen*, to describe the futility of Satan’s attempt to ‘torment’ us. As Schweitzer

says, ‘the devil strongly appeals to the musician Bach’. And to Cranach, he might have added. For there he is in the magnificent painting that dominates the Herderkirche altar – twice, in fact: in the background chasing man into the fires of hell, but in the foreground trodden underfoot, his tongue pierced by the staff of Christ’s victory flag. In this Lutheran interpretation of the Crucifixion Christ, too, appears twice, once on the Cross, with a jet of blood from his pierced side falling on the head of Cranach himself (representing all believers), once as the risen Christ, trampling both death and the devil. It is almost an allegorical representation of the town’s chequered history, the never-ending struggle between the forces of good and evil, and it seemed the perfect backdrop to Bach’s vivid retelling of the story of Christ’s victory over the devil and the benefit of his birth for humanity, a theme that runs through all three of the Christmas cantatas he brought together for performance in Leipzig in 1723 (BWV 63, 40 and 64). But to the TV producer, filming our performances of the *Christmas Oratorio*, the Cranach painting was ‘inappropriate’ for a Christmas TV show: he even suggested that it be taken down or blanked out for the filming! Weimar’s scars are not so easily eradicated.

The song of the angels at the birth of Jesus comprises the main text from Luke 2:14 in the Latin Christmas music that has come down to us as **BWV 191 *Gloria in excelsis Deo***. The most likely occasion for its first performance was a special service of thanksgiving held in the University church in Leipzig on Christmas Day 1745 to celebrate the Peace of Dresden. The second Silesian war had just come to an end, the only time in his life that Bach had first hand experience of the horrors and suffering of war as Prussian troops occupied Leipzig and devastated its surroundings in the autumn of 1745. Three years later he still remembered it as ‘the time we had – alas! – the Prussian invasion’. Sandwiched between the early morning mass in St Thomas’s and the afternoon service in St Nicholas’s, this service was one of those rare

occasions when members of Bach's two best *Kantoreien* were available to perform together. This was an opportunity to allow his Leipzig audience to hear three movements (*Gloria – Domine Deus – Cum Sancto Spiritu*) from the prodigious five-voiced *Missa* (BWV 232i) composed for the Dresden Court in 1733, hastily reassembled and condensed into a new triptych. Whereas the *Gloria* remained virtually unchanged, the other two movements were adapted and furnished with new texts, not without a slight awkwardness. In addition, his six-voiced Christmas *Sanctus* of 1724 was almost certainly revived at the same time. Was this occasion, then, the single trigger that detonated Bach's creative energy, leading in due course to the completion of the work we know as the *B minor Mass*? The concluding doxology, *Sicut erat in principio* (originally *Cum sancto*), takes off with a tremendous jolt of action, rather like the way a big dipper deceptively inches its way up then suddenly hurtles off. This is the cue for celebration in dance as much as in song, the throbbing pulsation of a single note passing to the upper strings, to the trumpets and finally to the woodwind, with a mounting sense of forward propulsion and ebullience.

## **Cantatas for Epiphany**

### **Nikolaikirche, Leipzig**

Leipzig, for many the self-styled Mecca of the Bach tradition and religion, was always going to be a high point in our pilgrimage and one of the biggest challenges. Our first appearance there was on the 6 January, the Feast of Epiphany, in the thirteenth-century Nikolaikirche, the official church of the city in Bach's day, a place which during the 1980s became a focus of hope for change. It was here that the charismatic pastor Christian Führer presided, leading the Monday prayer meetings open to all. On 9 October 1989, at the height of the

GDR crackdown on dissidents and demonstrators, he was surprised to find his church pews filled with 1,000 party officials and Stasi members anticipating trouble and an invasion by the so-called ‘rowdies’. None materialised. Instead Pastor Führer recited to his Stasi congregation the Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. The gallery gradually filled with peace-abiding congregants, and eventually after the bishop’s blessing and urgent call for non-violence, 2,000 people left the church to be greeted by tens of thousands outside holding candles. As one member of the ruling party said, ‘We had planned everything. We were prepared for everything. But not for candles and prayers.’ Eleven years later Pastor Führer’s welcome to us could not have been warmer or more heartfelt. Luxury of luxuries, we had three days in this inspirational setting to prepare for this Epiphany concert, a programme comprising parts V and VI of the *Christmas Oratorio* flanking two of Bach’s most striking Leipzig cantatas, BWV 123 *Liebster Immanuel* and BWV 65 *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen*.

Bach never came up with anything more pageant-like and eastern in atmosphere than the opening chorus of **BWV 65 Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen** composed in 1724. He uses the high horns to convey majesty and antiquity, the recorders to represent the high pitches often associated with oriental music and the oboes da caccia (in tenor register) to evoke the shawm-like double-reed instruments (salamiya and zurna) of the Near East. The opening ritornello shows off the burnished sheen of his orchestra to perfection and concludes with a final unison statement of the theme spread over five octaves. Even before the voices enter in canonic order Bach parades before our eyes the stately procession of the three magi and the ‘multitude of camels’ (mentioned in the omitted verse from Isaiah) laden with gifts. This imposing chorale fantasia concludes with a restatement of the octave unison theme, this time by all the voices and instruments as the caravan comes to a halt in front of the manger. Now there is a sudden shift in

scale and mood, from the outward pomp of the royal procession to the intimacy of the simple stable and to the oblations offered to the child in the crib, as the choir intone the sober German version of the Latin ‘Puer natus in Bethlehem’, traditionally sung in Leipzig at this feast. There follows a secco recitative exemplary in its word setting, its arching melodies and rich chromatic harmonies, culminating in an affecting arioso. This leads in turn to an aria for bass (No.4) in which the two oboes da caccia engage in a triple canon with the continuo, evidently to portray the gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. A second recitative follows, this time for tenor: in exchange for ‘my heart that I humbly bring Thee... give Thyself to me as well’. To depict ‘the most abundant wealth’ that the Christian will inherit, Bach opts for the most opulent scoring in the entrancing triple-rhythm tenor aria (No.6). Pairs of recorders, violins, horns, and oboes da caccia operate independently and in consort, exchanging one-bar riffs in kaleidoscopic varieties of timbre. To English ears the main melody has more than a passing similarity to the nursery rhyme ‘Lavender’s blue’, while the fervent concluding chorale (verse 10 of Paul Gerhardt’s ‘Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn’), set to a secular French sixteenth-century melody, is familiar as the hymn ‘O God, our help in ages past’.

Just as fine, but in quite another way, is **BWV 123 Liebster Immanuel, Herzog der Frommen**, composed for the following year (1725). It opens with a graceful chorus in 9/8, a little reminiscent of a dance from the court of Elizabeth I, with paired transverse flutes, oboes and violins presented in alternation. The chorus’s interjections form a proto-Romantic love song that sticks in the mind days after the music has ended. But what comes next is still more memorable: a tenor aria (No.3) with two oboes d’amore, describing the ‘cross’s cruel journey’ to Calvary with heavy tread and almost unbearable pathos belying the words ‘[these] do not frighten me’. Four bars in a quicker tempo to evoke ‘when the tempests rage...’ dissolve in a tranquil return to the

'lente' tempo as 'Jesus sends me from heaven salvation and light'. This is followed by what is surely one of the loneliest arias Bach ever wrote, 'Lass, o Welt, mich aus Verachtung'. It is for bass with flute and a staccato basso continuo (No.5). The fragile vocal line, bleak in its isolation, is offset by the flute accompanying the singer like some consoling guardian angel and inspiring him with purpose and resolve. Even the 'B' section ('Jesus... shall stay with me for all my days') offers only a temporary reprieve because of the *da capo* return to the lean-textured 'A' section. The closing chorale, in triple rhythm bestriding the bar-lines, is one of the few that Bach specifically marks to end 'piano'. The stillness in the packed Nikolaikirche here and during the two preceding arias was palpable – the first sign to us of how the quality of listening in these East German audiences differs from what we are used to in the west. It is as though the listeners have a genuine desire to be there – the aged, the middle-aged and the young, apparently not (so far) TV-surfeited – and are almost grateful (manifestly so in certain cases) for our visit and the approach we bring to *their* music. We in turn are of course grateful for the privilege of visiting this most celebrated of Bach shrines at the outset of our pilgrimage, and the two attitudes feed off one another.

Pastor Führer told us he was thrilled that his church had been the scene of the *first* ('and possibly best' he wagered) of the Bach Year celebrations in Leipzig. Touchingly, he had lit the altar candles and set out clay figures of the magi and the Holy Family on a table in mid-aisle, little figurines of the same wise men we were evoking in 'Sie werden aus Saba'. It was, as Nicolas Robertson wrote at the time, 'as if (reversing the usual hierarchy) *he* were saying to us, this is no ordinary concert'. As I was bowing a lady moved forwards to give me flowers, with a prayer and blessing on all the musicians and our pilgrimage. The sheer intensity of the occasion – the synchronisation of date and venue, memories of the church's recent past, above all the power of Bach's

music – was overwhelming.

## **Cantatas for the First Sunday after Epiphany**

### **Hauptkirche St. Jacobi, Hamburg**

After the pressure-cooker atmosphere of Leipzig and the intensity of the Epiphany concert in the Nikolaikirche we really needed a long train journey to clear the air and provide a physical transition from our last destination to the next. In the process we retraced our steps through Berlin's suburbs (where we had seen in the new millennium with two programmes of Bach's New Year cantatas) and arrived in the plusher environs of Hamburg. We headed for the Jacobikirche where Bach might well have taken the post of organist in 1720 if, understandably, he had not rejected the terms of a contract whereby the organist is expected to subsidise the church choir out of his own pocket. One of Hamburg's five main churches, it was built in the fourteenth century, the Gothic interior with its austere white ribbed roof and warm brickwork largely surviving the bombs of World War II. We found the long reverberation of the empty church a little daunting at first, but with a full audience the acoustics started to clarify. You do not need to be an organ buff to appreciate Arp Schnitger's magnificent instrument (built in 1693 and restored exactly three hundred years later) with its sixty stops and 4,000 pipes, an instrument with which Bach was thoroughly familiar. The current organist, Rudolf Kelber, not only gave us a brilliant demonstration of its exceptional variety of timbre but sportingly agreed to play the piano for our one and only choir rehearsal and to transpose down a semitone to 'baroque' pitch.

As a teenager Bach made several trips on foot from Lüneburg to Hamburg, mainly, as his first biographer Forkel put it, 'to try, to do, to see, and to hear everything which, according to the ideas he then

entertained, could contribute towards his improvement'. It is generally assumed that this meant sitting at the feet of Johann Adam Reincken, the doyen of North German organists. But there is no reason to conclude that Bach confined his Hamburg visits to its churches, deliberately shunning its new *Theater am Gänsemarkt*, home to what one conservative churchman called 'the twisted serpent of opera'. To a budding musician of Bach's generation the Hamburg Opera stood as a beacon of opportunity and employment. To Johann Mattheson it was a 'musical university', a laboratory in which to experiment both as performer and composer. To Handel it was a springboard to fame abroad, the basis for a future career – risky, but with high rewards. With contacts like Reincken and Georg Böhm, both with close links to the Hamburg opera, the least we can surmise is that Bach's natural musical curiosity drew him as a listener into its orbit, even if, once in, an innate shyness held him back from the networking needed for success in this pressurised world geared to satisfying the vanity of its individual performers. But there is another way of looking at things: Bach dips his toe in these theatrical waters and recoils, not from any kind of Lutheran prudery but simply because the music he hears there leaves him cold. As a result he chooses to distance himself from a line of development that most composers of his generation seemed hell-bent on pursuing. At no stage was he insulated from, or unaware of, the 'stuff' of contemporary opera, let alone reluctant to make future use of such techniques within his own work whenever it suited his purposes. Bach possessed a natural penchant for 'operatic' expression, dramatic pacing and contrasts, revealed not just in the Passions but on so many pages of his cantatas, as we are discovering this year; qualities that were perhaps relished by many of his first listeners and that we appreciate today, but were frowned upon by the clergy of the time.

The variety and the degrees of dramatic expression are so great in Bach's cantatas that one gets the impression of things uniquely

expressed, things which could in fact be expressed in no other terms. Take the case of **BWV 124 Meinen Jesum lass ich nicht**, from his second Leipzig cycle. Outwardly this seems the natural sequel to BWV 123 *Liebster Immanuel* we gave last Sunday in Leipzig: the same overall structure, an opening chorale fantasia, a libretto in six movements, of which the first and last verses are preserved intact (melody included), the middle movements anonymously paraphrased, and recitatives of exceptional beauty. But there the similarities end. Setting Christian Keymann's hymn (1658), Bach opts for a gentle, almost naïve tone of voice to reflect the submissive character of the text. Only in the middle movement, an aria for tenor with oboe d'amore and strings (No.3), does he open his locker to unleash a torrent of dramatic effects to portray the 'fear and terror' that accompanies 'the cruel stroke of death': a pulsating staccato bass line, a persistent four-note drumming in the upper strings, a strongly dotted rhythmic outline to the vocal part, and in total contrast, a wide-arching melody for the oboe d'amore, an avowal that, come what may, the believer 'shall not forsake my Jesus'. The cantata's opening chorale fantasia is in E major in the style of a minuet but arranged in an unusual Ai - Aii - Aiii sequence, with orchestral ritornellos at the beginning, middle and end. Bach gives a prominent and highly virtuosic concertante role to an oboe d'amore. The way its rapid semiquaver figures seem to curl in on themselves suggests an attempt to convey what every country walker knows, the extraordinary snag-like persistence of burrs (the text tells of the Christian's duty to 'cling to Him like a burr') – that and the way the three lower voices hang on to a unison B for three bars on the word 'kleben' ('to cling').

Not least of Bach's skills revealed in the church cantatas is as a composer of recitatives that are often far more dramatic than those in the operas of his contemporaries. In the bass recitative (No.4) Bach forms a chain of seven successive notes of the chromatic scale in the

continuo line to emphasise the question, ‘Will not my sore-offended breast become a wilderness and den of suffering for the cruellest loss of Jesus?’. In sharp contrast, the ensuing A major duet for soprano and alto with continuo is constructed as a gigue with a joyful abandon (all those leaps of a tenth in the continuo) that celebrates release from all things worldly (‘Withdraw swiftly from the world, O heart’). The closing chorale harmonisation of a melody by Andreas Hammerschmidt (1658) has a recurrent turning figure in the continuo to underpin the significant words ‘Jesum’, ‘Christus’ and ‘selig’.

The next two cantatas exhibit far closer connections with the Gospel reading (Luke 2:41-52) that centres on the search for the twelve-year-old Jesus, eventually found in the temple in Jerusalem ‘sitting in the midst of the doctors, both hearing them, and asking them questions’. His reply to his mother’s reproaches, an arioso movement – not, as one might expect, for a treble but for an authoritative adult bass – occurs at the midpoint of **BWV 154 Mein liebster Jesus ist verloren**. Here the continuo is locked in imitation of the voice, symbolically just as Jesus strove to imitate his heavenly Father, while the repetitions of the question spun out over twenty-two bars reinforce the mood of reproach and tension. This number was added for the first Leipzig performance of this cantata in 1724, while three other movements (Nos 1, 4 & 7) seem to have originated in an earlier work from his Weimar years. The first movement is an impassioned aria in B minor for tenor and strings, a slow cousin to Peter’s aria of remorse at his denial (‘Ach mein Sinn’) in the *St John Passion*, but at a less frantic tempo, and yet another example of the fertile way Bach was able to put the highly dotted heroic style of the French overture to expressive use. At one point it contains a graphic evocation of ear drumming: ‘O thunderous word in my ears’ (‘O Donnerwort in meinen Ohren’). As Dürr says, ‘It is no longer Jesus’ parents, but rather man, imprisoned in sin, who has lost his Jesus, and despite anxious searching he is unable to find Him again.’ After a brief

recitative comes a straightforward harmonisation of a seventeenth-century chorale by Martin Jahn to the melody of ‘Werde munter, mein Gemüte’ by Johann Schop (1642), a prelude to a euphonious and touching 12/8 aria for alto with two oboes d’amore in A major (No.4). The high register continuo accompaniment, known as *bassettchen*, provided by unison violins, viola and harpsichord continuo, serves as a symbol of Jesus lost or hidden to the penitent, separated by the ‘dense clouds’ of his sins represented by the roulades exchanged between the two d’amores (perhaps they stand as well for the anxious searching for Jesus by his parents). Joy at having eventually found him fills the dance-like D major duet for alto and tenor, ‘Wohl mir, Jesus ist gefunden’ (No.7), which breaks into a fleet-footed canon in 3/8 time with clear thematic reminiscences of the roulade figure employed earlier in No.4, before a resumption of the introductory ritornello. Over a rolling bass line, the final chorale sets the sixth verse of the hymn by Christian Keymann (and to the same melody) that served as the basis of BWV 124.

First performed on 13 January 1726 in Leipzig to a text by Georg Christian Lehms printed in 1711, **BWV 32 Liebster Jesu, mein Verlangen** is cast as a ‘Concerto in Dialogo’. Although Lehms does not specify the two characters in this dialogue it soon becomes clear that it is not his anxious parents who are searching for Jesus (bass), but the Christian Soul (soprano), with whom we are expected to identify. It opens with an E minor aria in which the soprano engages with a solo oboe as her accomplice in spinning the most ravishing cantilena in the manner of one of Bach’s concerto slow movements. The upper strings provide a persistent accompaniment made up of three-quaver arpeggios marked *piano e spiccato*, to which the continuo adds its own faltering rhythm ‘as if the Christian were moving constantly about the world seeking for the Saviour’ (Whittaker). Here is none of the anguish we found in the tenor aria that opened the previous cantata. Always

intent in successive cantatas on giving a new slant to the same biblical incident or theme, Bach alights on the word ‘Verlangen’ (‘desire’) to unlock his reserves of improvisatory invention: the music makes it clear that the Soul will indeed find the Saviour and rest secure in his embrace. Jesus’ answer (again, it is a twelve-year child speaking, but with the grave voice of a grown man) is initially curt – four bars of recitative in place of the twenty-two in BWV 154 No.5 – but continues in much mellower tone in a B minor da capo aria (No.3). The violin obbligato encircles the voice with triplets and trills, benign in mood for the most part but clouding over as the voice veers towards the minor with the words ‘ein betrübter Geist’ (‘a troubled spirit’). One of the cantata’s most striking moments occurs in the dialogue recitative (No.4): in answer to Jesus’ admonition to ‘curse worldly trifles and enter this dwelling alone’ the Soul counters by quoting Psalm 84 with ‘Wie lieblich ist doch deine Wohnung’ (‘How amiable is Thy dwelling’) in an evocative arioso with a pulsating string accompaniment. Stylistically it reveals Bach as the midway point between Schütz and Brahms, both of whom left us memorable settings of this psalm. Before rounding things off in a chorale, the twelfth strophe of Paul Gerhardt’s hymn, ‘Weg, mein Herz, mit dein Gedenken’ (1647), and with Jesus and the Soul now joyfully reunited, Bach celebrates the event by combining their associated obbligato instruments (oboe and violin), so far heard only separately. It is one of those duets (another is the delicious ‘Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten’ from BWV 78) in which he seems to throw caution to the winds, rivalling the *lieto fine* conclusions to the operas of his day, but with far more skill, substance and even panache. The Hamburg audience showed their delight, so that it felt right to repeat the duet as an encore in this city where opera has always been such a magnet and an attraction.

From a journal written in the course of the  
Bach Cantata Pilgrimage