

Cantatas for the Third Sunday after Easter (Jubilate)
Schlosskirche, Altenburg

Lying some fifty kilometres south of Leipzig, and well off the beaten track for Bach pilgrims, it was touch and go whether Altenburg could be fitted into our itinerary. We approached it from Görlitz on the eastern frontier with Poland, crossing into southern Thuringia and a landscape pock-marked with slag heaps and the detritus of uranium mines. Winding our way through the old medieval town we climbed up to the ducal castle crowning a rocky outcrop. There, marvellously preserved, was the early fifteenth-century palace chapel, with an L-shaped kink to its nave (aligned so as not to drop off its rocky perch), the interior dominated by its celebrated organ squashed against the north wall. What must Duke Frederick II (whose main court and musical ensemble was situated at Gotha, 150 kilometres to the west) have been thinking when he commissioned this state-of-the-art 37-stop organ from Tobias Trost? Bach visited Altenburg about the time of its completion in 1739 and played this Baroque 'Mighty Wurlitzer' which, the experts say, probably came closest to his ideals about sound and tone.

Traces of Bach's own music-making are in some ways more vivid in places like this than in the more famous metropolitan shrines. Standing in the middle of the palace chapel, listening to the majestic sounds of the *Trost-Orgel* sounding out the concerto-like opening to BWV 146 and aware of the audience's rapt response to the way Bach's music unfolds, any lingering doubts about the logistical difficulties in coming to Altenburg for *Jubilate* Sunday just fell away.

All three of Bach's cantatas for *Jubilate* concern themselves with the sorrow surrounding Jesus' farewell to his followers, with the trials that await them in his absence, and with joyful thoughts of seeing him again. Each is a journey, a theological and musical progression. Two of the three begin in deepest gloom and anguish and end in celebration. Standing behind the Gospel for the day, 'Ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy', is a verse from Psalm 126, 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy', and memories of two extraordinary settings of these words by William Byrd and Heinrich Schütz came to mind during our drive through the cornfields of eastern Saxony, green and vigorous at this flag-leaf stage, promising a good harvest in a couple of months' time.

BWV 12 **Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen** was composed in Weimar just after Bach's promotion to *Konzertmeister* in 1714, and revived by him a decade later in his first season in Leipzig, and it was this version from 30 April 1724 which we performed in Altenburg. It begins with a ravishing sinfonia, descriptive, one imagines, of the tearful sowing of the winter corn. The oboe's plaintive *cantilena*, redolent of Marcello or Albinoni, sets the scene for the opening *tombeau*, one of the most impressive and deeply affecting cantata movements Bach can have composed to that point. Coming at it backwards, from long familiarity with the *Crucifixus* of the B minor Mass (which is what this movement later became), one is struck by its greater starkness and its searing pathos. In place of the four syllables *Cru-ci-fi-*

xus – four hammer blows nailing Christ's flesh to the wood of the cross – Bach inscribes the title of his cantata through four distinct vocal lines ('Weeping... wailing... fretting... fearing'). Each word, a heart-rending sob, is stretched over the bar-line and the four-bar *passacaglia* bass. These words, we learn in the motet-like sequel, are the 'signs of Jesus's suffering' with which the believer is branded. Even when conducting the *Crucifixus* version I cannot rid my mind of the thrice-articulated 'Angst... und... Not' (which later became 'passus est'). If this is the nadir, the point, according to the scholar Eric Chafe, 'where the individual has already been brought by consciousness of sin to extreme torment', then rarely, if ever, have these sentiments been so harrowingly portrayed in music. Our time in Weimar at the outset of the pilgrimage also brought home to me that this music was composed – and first performed – less than three kilometres' distance from the beech woods where Goethe and Liszt used to ramble, the site of what was later to become one of the bleakest places on earth, Buchenwald.

Into this bottomless pit Bach lowers an escape ladder. Its individual rungs are etched into the music, movement by movement, which ascends by intervals of a third, alternating a minor key with its relative major: f, A flat, C, E flat, g, B flat. The 'ladder' is manifest also in microcosm in the *accompagnato* (No.3) which sets the words of St Paul, 'Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal in das Reich Gottes eingehen' ('We must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God'). Whilst the continuo moves circuitously down the octave (c to C), the first violin rises through a diatonic C major scale, a contrary motion to link the (human) world of tribulation and the (divine) kingdom of God. The underlying theological dualism can be reduced to this: that we need to put up with a basin-full of trouble in this world while clinging to the hope of happiness in the next.

This dualism is explored further in the alto aria (No.4). Just as the unfathomable nature of God was apparently expressed in Judaic tradition by ascribing to him contradictory attributes such as shepherd and lamb, cornerstone and stumbling block, here Bach postulates a fusion of alliterative opposites, 'Kreuz und Krone' ('cross and crown'), 'Kampf und Kleinod' ('conflict and jewel'), as symbols of the way the present and future life are conjoined. It comes as a relief to move on to the cheery bass aria 'Ich folge Christo nach', an Italianate trio sonata movement which begins like the English Easter carol, 'This joyful Eastertide'. But there is more anguish to follow with the tenor aria, 'Sei getreu'. Even at this early stage in his development of cantata form, Bach is uncompromising in his search for hermeneutic truth, willing to sacrifice surface attraction and to substitute a tortuous melodic line in order to convey the immense difficulty of remaining 'steadfast' under provocation. A gritty experience is only made bearable by the presence of the hymn-tune *Jesu, meine Freude* intoned by a trumpet – like a hand outstretched to help the believer, on the last rung of the ladder, in his struggle to attain faith. A final chorale, 'Was Gott tut das ist wohlgetan', with trumpet descant, affirms Luther's goal for the

individual, who through faith can 'rise beyond Christ's heart to God's heart'.

Jubilate in Leipzig traditionally marked the start of the *Ostermesse*, the Easter trade fair when, for three weeks, a flood of visitors – craftsmen, international commercial travellers, book dealers, hawkers, street entertainers – swelled the resident population to some 30,000 citizens. Bach, who timed the publication of the four sets of his *Clavier-Übung* to coincide with these fairs, would have understood the need to produce special music during this period, as trading was not permitted on Sundays, and (as his predecessor Kuhnau pointed out) 'since visitors and distinguished gentlemen [would] certainly want to hear something fine in the principal churches.'

This they would have done on 22 April 1725 when Bach first presented BWV 103 **Ihr werdet weinen und heulen**. It opens with a glittering fantasia for a concertante violin doubling a 'sixth flute' – a soprano recorder in D. These are pitted against a pair of oboes d'amore and the string band, engaging in apparently festive dialogue. Only with the entry of the four vocal *concertisten* to an angular fugal theme (comprising an augmented second and an upwards seventh) do we realise that we have been caught unawares: the festive instrumental theme represents not the disciples' joy at Christ's resurrection but the sceptics' riotous laughter at their discomfort – hence the malicious cackles of the high recorder. A more conventional approach might have been to leave the antithesis of the two opening clauses intact with, say, a gloom-laden slow movement (as in BWV 12 and 146), followed by some form of chuckling scherzo. What Bach does is altogether more astonishing. Anticipating by a century the *Dankgesang* of Beethoven's A minor string quartet Op.132, his strategy is to superimpose these opposite moods, binding them in a mutually enlightening whole and emphasising that it is the same God who both dispenses and then ameliorates these conditions. Abruptly the music slows to *adagio e piano* while the bass soloist intones 'Ihr aber werdet traurig sein' ('And ye shall be sorrowful') while the recorder and violin contribute fragmentary arabesques. Just when joy seems most distant, it comes bounding back with a return of the fugal subject, with the earlier festive/mocking theme now turned to genuine delight.

This high level of invention is very nearly maintained in the following recitative/aria pairings, in which the antithesis between 'Schmerzen' (suffering) and 'Freuden' (joys) is pursued. The alto aria (No.3), with violin obbligato in F sharp minor, is an attempt to illustrate divine medical help dispensed to the repentant sinner. The tenor aria (No.5) features one of those hair-raising trumpet parts in which, amid the prevailing mood of exuberant relief, the player is expected to produce several non-harmonic (i.e. technically impossible) notes to match the singer's recall of 'betäubte Sinnen' ('troubled feelings').

Bach's third *Jubilate* cantata to have survived is BWV 146 **Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal**, dating from either 1726 or 1728. What started out as a (now lost) violin concerto and later emerged as the famous D minor harpsichord concerto (BWV 1052a) resurfaces here as the cantata's opening

two movements, both with organ obbligato, the second with a four-part chorus superimposed. The latter would be impressive enough as a piece of incredibly clever grafting, if that is what it was. We shall never know for certain whether Bach had seen this particular solution at the outset, or whether, with the flair of a Grand Master of chess, he was able subsequently to anticipate so many possible permutations of future moves – the way, for example, the four vocal lines were liable to intersect with one another at certain moments, and at the same time fit with the pre-existing violin (now organ) concerto *adagio* movement. Admittedly, the structure Bach provides – an ostinato bass line heard six times in the course of the movement – gives a wonderfully solid and satisfying grounding for the twin processes of invention and elaboration at which he excelled. This is all highly speculative; what is irrefutable is the enormous control and restraint required by both singers and players to sustain the hushed, other-worldly atmosphere of this movement over 87 slow bars – an effect we tried to capture in performance by placing the choir at the far end of the chapel.

Each of the subsequent movements is a gem. First comes an alto aria with a radiant violin obbligato, predicting the future schism between 'wicked Sodom, you and I', then an agonised *accompagnato* for soprano and strings in which every single beat of its nineteen bars has an expressive function. This is followed by a *galant*-style aria for soprano with flute, two oboes d'amore and continuo (No.5) in which the pall of gloom is lifted for the first time in this amazing cantata, to a text based on the psalm verse 'They that sow in tears shall reap in joy'. A fine tenor recitative leads to the rousing tenor/bass duet 'Wie will ich mich freuen' with oboes and strings, constructed as a *passepied* of the sort at which Bach excelled as a composer of secular music at Cöthen. It has a sturdy, irresistibly rhythmic élan which comes at precisely the right juncture in this journey's course from tribulation to joy and the anticipation of eternity.

The final chorale ends with the words 'He lives in that fortified town where God dwells; he has been led to that mansion which no calamity can touch'. It so happened that at this precise moment in the concert I exchanged glances with our young organist, Silas Standage. We both of us smiled. For just before embarking on the colossal organ solo at the start of this cantata (itself an allegory of worldly 'tribulation') poor Silas had discovered a cipher on the upper manual of the great Trost organ, and an intermittent hiss. We were forced to call for an intermission in an attempt to make running repairs. Tools and expert advice were proffered, and after much banging and hammering we were able to continue. I was reminded of a passage in Bach's private copy of Calov's Bible commentary which he chose to underline: 'Lord, I attend to my duties and do what you have commanded of me, and I will gladly labour and do whatever you will have me do. Only help me also to manage my home and to regulate my affairs, etc.'

Cantatas for the Fourth Sunday after Easter (Cantate)

St Mary's, Warwick

With those three astonishing *Jubilate* works still ringing in our ears, the plan was that we would then travel east from Altenburg; but a last minute hitch with the Polish promoter meant that instead of Warsaw we found ourselves in Warwick! In the event, St Mary's Collegiate Church – surely one of the most impressive parish churches in England – provided a beautiful and sympathetic setting for our programme. Founded by the Beauchamp family (the earls of Warwick) in the twelfth century, it was twice rebuilt after massive fires, one in 1394, the other exactly 300 years later.

After the pathos and emotional depth of last week's pieces, the two cantatas for Easter 4, BWV 166 and 108, seemed at first gentler and more intimate, as though depicted in subtle mezzotints. But that impression turned out to be only skin deep. The more you immerse yourself in these works the more you experience yet again the exceptional potency of Bach's post-Resurrection cantatas, which cover such a wide gamut of styles and moods. Bach is constantly challenging his listeners to consider what it is to be alive, using his music to tease new meanings out of the Gospel texts. In BWV 166 **Wo gehest du hin** he reminds us how ephemeral human life is, and what a potential mess we make of it and its opportunities; but how there are signposts to be read, props to lean on and compass bearings to bring us back on course, even at the times when we sense we are most alone – when God appears to have abandoned us to our own murky devices.

The Gospel for the day has Christ saying, 'But now I go my way to him that sent me; and none of you asketh me, Whither goest thou?' (John 16:5). Bach pares his opening down to the single question 'Where are you going?' and the implied sequel, 'And what happens to us now?' Beginning with a tentative series of rising fragments for oboe and strings, he seems to depict all eleven of the disciples trying to find the courage to voice the question preying on their minds. In the end it is the *vox Christi*, the bass soloist, who does it for them. With its shifting stresses within a triple metre, this opening arioso is an understated yet deeply affecting prelude to the cantata. A tenor aria with violin and oboe obbligato follows in serene meditation, balancing thoughts of heaven with worldly preoccupations. The B section turns the spotlight on that implied second question: 'Man, ah! man, where are you going?', and it becomes apparent that Christ's question may have carried a double meaning: 'You ask, Where am I going; I in turn ask you where you are going, O errant Christian'. This elicits a strong collective and committed response in the following soprano chorale, 'Let me at no time waver from this resolve', accompanied by a violin and viola unison figure – conceivably a cell-like foretaste of the *Christe eleison* in the B minor Mass. The bass, no longer the *vox Christi* but now the counsel of wisdom, pursues the theme of changeable fortune (No.4), and at the point where things risk becoming too overtly polemical, and in the same stern tone of voice, comes yet another warning at how capricious Lady Luck can be. Bach sidesteps the danger brilliantly. He constructs an orchestral minuet, but then interrupts each phrase-fragment with frivolous cascades of paired semiquavers, a foil for the *buffo* melismas given to the alto soloist. The

giggling is infectious: voice, oboe and the complete string band at one point erupt in gales of unison laughter.

It is in moments like these that we glimpse Bach refusing to be cowed by the solemnity of the liturgy, willing to look behind the curtain of religion and, like any practised man of the theatre, ready to use humour when it helps open his listeners to the realities of life, to the world and its ways. Yet he also knows exactly when to restore order. The concluding chorale, almost a prayer at the point of approaching death, is hauntingly set to one of his favourite chorale melodies, Georg Neumark's *Wer nun den lieben Gott lässt walten*, which we encountered earlier this year in Cantata 84 for Sexagesima. I feel it lends itself to quiet a *cappella* treatment: after the *buffonerie* of the alto aria it provides a means of focussing the listener on the import of words which, for a congregation, can easily lose their shine through repetition and over-familiarity.

By now we are so used to experiencing those astonishing contrasts of approach and imagery when we move from the first to the second of Bach's Leipzig cantata cycles, both based on identical doctrinal themes, that it comes as a shock to find him operating in the same structural groove twice in a row. I'm willing to bet that when he sat down to compose BWV 108 **Es ist euch gut, dass ich hingehe** in April 1725, there, propped up on his desk, was last year's *Wo gehest du hin*: the similarities between the two cantatas are just too close to be accidental. Both begin not with the usual chorus but with a bass solo (*vox Christi*), and reserve the chorus for the end (BWV 166) or the middle and the end (BWV 108). Neither cantata has a treble solo, but both have important tenor arias as their second movement, each with a highlit sustained note: 'stehe' in BWV 166, 'glaube' in BWV 108. Both works are constructed on a sort of arpeggiated tonal staircase of keys suggestive of the imminent descent of the holy spirit at Pentecost (leading downwards in BWV 166 from B flat to g, c, D, B flat, and g, and in BWV 108 from A to f sharp, D to b). It is significant that BWV 108 fleshes out the central issue dealt with more summarily in BWV 166. 'Whither goest thou?' carries with it an explanation, 'It is expedient for you that I go away', the following year.

The movements which made the deepest impression on me were, first, the tenor aria with violin obbligato, 'Mich kann kein Zweifel stören' (No.2) – a powerful number, rather convoluted but brilliantly worked out and a little reminiscent of Brahms in Hungarian gypsy mode. Then, the rigorous piece of choral polyphony, 'Wenn aber jener, der Geist der Wahrheit, kommen wird' (No.4) – three tersely arranged fugues in motet style. They look intractable on the page, but emerge persuasively spirited in performance. Finally, the exquisite 6/8 aria for alto and strings, 'Was mein Herz von dir begehrt' (No.5): with its broken melodic line and limpid first violin writing it conveys intense longing, a little like the psalmist's 'hart desiring the water brooks'.

Most impressive of all to me in this concert was the final cantata, BWV 117 **Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut**, written some time between 1728 and 1731. One of a group of works in which the hymn text is retained unaltered

per omnes versus, it has no specific liturgical designation but was surely composed for an especially important celebration or a service of thanksgiving. Yet with its assertion that 'The Lord is not and never was severed from His people' it seems to answer that feeling of insecurity experienced by the Christian community during the limbo period between the Resurrection and Whitsun, and as such it provided the perfect riposte to the earlier pair written for Easter 4. Each verse ends like a litany with the words 'Gebt unserm Gott die Ehre'. Typically Bach finds different formulae for each verse ending. The opening chorus, repeated with different words as the final (ninth) movement, is a swinging 6/8 choral dance in G major, with a flurry of semiquaver figuration in the continuo. The most ear-tickling verse is the seventh, an alto aria with flute and strings in an implied 9/8, 'Ich will dich all mein Leben lang'. It feels thoroughly French, and makes one realise how fruitful that initial contact with French dance forms and rhythms must have been for Bach when, as a schoolboy in Lüneburg, he first heard the Duke of Celle's French orchestra.

For a text which was in itself monotonous, Bach needed to be especially resourceful. According to Ruth Tatlow's theory, in structuring this work he therefore turned to number symbolism. As she points out, the central seven movements (Nos 2-8) contain 286 bars between them. 'Substituting numbers for letters (with the alphabet, A = 1 to Z = 24) the title of the cantata spells Sei = 32; Lob = 27; und = 37; Ehr = 30; dem = 21; höchsten = 93; Gut = 46, which together have a total of 286. This cantata was literally based on *Sei Lob und Ehr dem höchsten Gut*.' It also occurs to me that the number 286 can be reduced to 7 – the number of movements as well as the number of words in the title – by adding its digits: 2 + 8 + 6 = 16, and once more, 1 + 6 = 7. This in turn could explain why the opening and closing choruses are each 100 bars long: by the same process, 8 movements gives us 386 bars, a number which can be reduced to 8, and 9 movements total 486 bars, which can be reduced to 9. Whether one accepts that Bach began by formulating a mathematical grid to fill, I do not sense that the musical inspiration feels diminished or constrained as a result. I also find it a lot easier to imagine that, in a work in which the overriding mood is one of irresistible joy, Bach's compositional process was more mathematically intuitive than laboriously calculated.

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