

Cantatas for Whit Tuesday

Holy Trinity, Blythburgh

For the third day of Pentecost we crossed Suffolk diagonally northeast from Long Melford and fetched up in Holy Trinity, Blythburgh, the 'Cathedral of the Marshes' on the estuary of the river Blyth. I remember coming here in the 1960s with my parents to hear concerts at the Aldeburgh Festival, including a magical performance of Schumann's *Scenes from Faust* conducted by Benjamin Britten. Quite how he managed to squish in a whole symphony orchestra, plus soloists and chorus, is utterly baffling, given that there is less than three and a half metres between the rood screen and the front pews. Even with our far more modest forces we had difficulty fitting everyone in for our concert.

With only two cantatas to have survived for Whit Tuesday, we decided to open our programme with Brandenburg Concerto No.3, the original of the opening sinfonia of BWV 174 which we performed the day before in Melford (see SDG Vol.26). At some stage, though not necessarily at the point of its inception, it is clear that Bach saw Trinitarian associations with this magnificent concerto composed on unusually democratic lines for a trinity of trinities: three violins, three violas and three cellos, giving each of them the chance to share the limelight.

Pressed for time at the end of a busy Whit weekend during his first year in Leipzig, Bach based BWV 184 **Erwünschtes Freudenlicht** on a hasty revision of a lost Cöthen secular cantata, of which only a few instrumental parts survive from the new (1724) Leipzig material, scored for two transverse flutes and strings. Bach and his anonymous librettist neatly combine ideas from the Epistle – the visitation of the Holy Spirit in Samaria (Acts 8:14-17) – and the Gospel – Jesus as the good shepherd (John 10:1-10). The long opening *accompagnato* for tenor has paired flutes playing an enchanting lilting triplet rhythm in thirds

over the simple basso continuo. The string band joins the two flutes for a soprano/alto duet, 'Gesegnete Christen', cast as a pastoral minuet (and very possibly danced to when first given in secular form in Cöthen) despite scurrying, demisemi-quaver scales (gambolling lambs or blessed spirits?) in which the two voices are fused in euphonious thirds and sixths. One might momentarily mistake it as the origin of the celebrated duet from *Lakmé*, before considering the long odds of Delibes ever having clapped eyes on this obscure piece. The extended secco recitative (No.3) for tenor, after drawing a parallel with the hero of Judah (King David) and the effective way he deals with the enemy, culminates in an arioso twinning of voice and continuo to portray the 'perfect joy of heaven' ('vollkommene Himmelsfreude') that is available even to sinners. It is appropriate that the tenor should then develop the theme of Jesus as bringer of the 'golden age' in the ensuing aria (No.4), in minuet form with violin obbligato. Coming at this point the four-part chorale 'Herr, ich hoff je' (No.5) gives us a brief reminder that this is after all a church cantata, before it reverts for its final movement to a deliciously bucolic gavotte, a soprano/bass duet expanded to include the chorus in its rondo-like refrains.

The pastoral mood continues a year later in BWV 175 **Er rufet seinen Schafen mit Namen** (1725), this time three recorders displacing the flutes. This is a more elaborate work, the eighth of the nine consecutive texts Bach set by Christiane Mariane von Ziegler, the foremost bluestocking in Leipzig who, aged twenty-nine, had recently opened a literary salon which Bach is said to have frequented. She cast this cantata as a mini-oratorio, spreading the Gospel words through all seven of its movements and deriving her poetic commentary from the parable of the sheep called by name but fleeing from the stranger. The trio of recorders establish a stylised pastoral setting and a mood of benign trust both in the four introductory bars that set the scene (No.1) and in the alto aria (No.2) which describes a yearning for green

pastures ('Komm, leite mich, es sehnet sich mein Geist auf grüner Weide!'). The mood remains personal and intimate throughout this portrait of ovine contentment (in E minor and with continuous 12/8 figuration). From time to time anguished expressive gestures conveyed by means of chromatic sighing figures depict the believer's (or the sheep's) need for reassurance from the good shepherd.

This anguish comes to the surface in the dramatic six-bar recitative for tenor (No.3): 'Where can I find Thee? Ah, where art Thou hidden?' Six of the ten chords Bach uses here are dissonant. Now to convey the joyful anticipation of the shepherd's return Bach calls for a five-string violoncello piccolo to accompany the tenor aria (No.4). As with BWV 173 the previous day Bach rifles through the Cöthen birthday cantata he wrote a few years back for Duke Leopold (BWV 173a), with music far too good to be heard only once. Here he extracts an extended da capo bourrée, with the ordinary cello part now transposed up a minor third for the piccolo model. He takes the unusual step of fitting lines 3 and 4 of the new text to a repetition of the first section of the original aria, which entailed making several changes to the original, but no great harm is done in the process. As Dürr drily observes, evidently Bach's decision to parody an existing secular movement had not been discussed with Frau von Ziegler in advance.

A second narrative recitative (No.5) opens this time with the alto as evangelist ('But they understood not what things they were which he spake unto them'); the bass then presents Ziegler's commentary accompanied by strings, with paired semiquaver movement in the violins (who have hardly figured till now) in the same idiom as the pastoral recorders to indicate the gentle voice of Christ. In this unusual dual recitative Ziegler and Bach conspire to give a topical gloss to the incomprehension of Jesus's listeners, both in his day and in theirs, one that is only tangentially implied in the Gospel. It is 'deluded reason' that makes us deaf to Jesus's words. As in other instances this year where

we have come across pejorative references to 'reason', this is one way (Dürr calls it the contemporary Lutheran way) to 'ward off the incipient Age of Enlightenment and the atheism that followed in its train.'

Unusual in the extreme is the bass aria with two D trumpets (No.6) which follows: 'Öffnet euch, ihr beiden Ohren', in 6/8. How are we supposed to react to these majestic instruments in the context of a gentle pastoral cantata? The answer must surely lie in the text: 'dass er Teufel, Tod erlegt' ('that He hath laid low death and the devil'); in other words, a celebration of Christ's descent into hell and his victory over the grave which calls for heroic and martial instruments. The trumpet writing is peculiar, the second player sometimes acting almost as continuo to his colleague and section principal, and their joined fanfare motif sounding strangely bare without the expected drums. Finally, a G major presentation of the Pentecostal hymn we've heard a total of four times in the past three days, which with the return of the three recorders re-establishes the pastoral atmosphere of the opening two movements uniting in one person the shepherd (Gospel) and the Holy Spirit (Epistle).

Just before the concert I climbed up the five ladders that lead onto the roof of the church tower. Spectacular views opened up to the east over the Blyth estuary, to Southwold and the sea, and to the west over idyllic, pastoral landscapes with unnumbered sheep grazing green pastures in typically English June weather. Several writers have tried to describe the particular atmosphere and beauty of this church. There is something dignified and satisfying in the simple proportions of the nave with its seven regular Gothic arches, the openness of the space, the whitewashed clerestory walls and the light streaming through the clear glass of its windows. Then there is the great span of the tie-beam wooden roof, unbroken from nave to chancel by any arch, with its back-to-back angels, once gaudily painted in red, green, gold and white, now elegantly faded and fashionably 'distressed'. These wooden angels

seem to have faced many trials. Apparently the church was struck by lightning in 1577 when the spire collapsed, and legend has it that the angels were shot at by Puritan soldiers in 1644; or were they simply peppered with grapeshot in attempts to get rid of jackdaws in the roof? Most of them (the angels, that is) have survived and are partly responsible for the air of peace and solemnity you experience as soon as you enter this beautiful church.

Cantatas for Trinity Sunday

St Magnus Cathedral, Kirkwall

Trinity Sunday does not register today as one of the more exciting of the church's festivals. Yet in Bach's day, it had a climactic importance: it marked the end of the *Temporale*, the first half of the liturgical year which celebrates the events in the life of Jesus. For Bach personally it signified the completion of the annual cantata cycles he composed in Leipzig (his first official cantata as Thomascantor in 1723 happening to be the first Sunday after Trinity), and not surprisingly drew from him works of summary significance: cantatas that were challenging even by his standards. For us in 2000 it was a half-way point, and thus a milestone to look forward to, especially as we were due to travel to the most northerly point on our pilgrimage route, to Kirkwall in Orkney.

June 17 was the only really hot day of summer and we spent it, all fifty of us, not as planned, travelling to Orkney, nor rehearsing productively in a cool studio, but kicking our heels at Stansted. The air traffic controllers' central computer near Heathrow had crashed, effectively paralysing all of London's airports. After a six-hour wait, it seemed as though we might finally be off. We hurried to board our charter plane and buckled up, only to be told that Kirkwall airport would close for the night at 7pm – ten minutes before we were due to land.

Disconsolately we dispersed, some trekking back to London, others in pursuit of a dwindling number of local B&Bs. Not only had we lost a vital rehearsal for our concert programme the next day, but gone was any realistic chance for us to get properly acquainted with Orkney.

At 7am the next day we reconvened and boarded the charter, an old propellor craft known in the trade as a crop-sprayer. Arriving travel-stained at Kirkwall three hours later we were given a welcome buzz by the bracing air and crystal-clear light, and made straight for the cathedral. The pink and ochre sandstone put me in mind of Durham. With its disproportionately chunky pillars and narrow nave, it gives the impression of having been carved rather than built. I was relieved to find that for all its beauty and historical importance as a shrine, tourism had not flattened its batteries: it seemed to me a magical uncluttered place, well suited to meditation and worship – and, hopefully, to music.

We rehearsed for four hours in the cathedral, being obliged to concertina a normal rehearsal on the day in a brand-new venue with the forfeited ‘tutti’ rehearsal from the day before. There were four cantatas to prepare. Trinity Sunday is a watershed in the Lutheran liturgical year, a time when the ‘themes of the week’ shift to the several concerns of Christian life and conduct. Taking his cue from the set readings, Bach confronts the listener (and the performer!) with a range of knotty subjects, questions of doctrine and faith, challenging enough in themselves, but doubly so in his hands, though beautified by extraordinary multi-layered music.

His first cantata for Trinity Sunday, BWV 165 **O heiliges Geist- und Wasserbad**, was composed in 1715 in Weimar, to a text by Salomo Franck. It is a true sermon-in-music, based on the Gospel account of Jesus’ night-time conversation with Nicodemus on the subject of ‘new life’, emphasising the spiritual importance of baptism. The plentiful references to water in this cantata seemed wonderfully apt to our geographical situation – ‘except a man be born of water and of

the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God'. Even on the briefest visit to Orkney you cannot escape the sense of layered history in this sea-dominated archipelago – Neolithic, Pictish and Norse - clear to the few of us who had made a rushed visit, sandwich in hand, to the Ring of Brodgar. The thing that struck me most about the opening aria for soprano entitled 'Concerto' was the 'impossibility' of some of its harmonies: there is a passage in the fugal play-out which, if you play it below a certain speed, sounds plain wrong - like Stravinsky in neo-baroque style, or even Webern. Those incongruities simply disappear when played at the 'correct' faster tempo, flowing by like stream water across and around rocks.

Another striking feature is the dramatic fade-out at the end of the long, impressive bass *accompagnato* (No.4), in which two types of serpent are contrasted: the 'ancient' serpent of sin, and the 'fiery' or blood-red serpent raised on a pole by Moses and later 'exalted on the cross'. For the words 'wenn alle Kraft vergehet' ('when all my strength has faded') Bach weaves contrary-motion lines in the upper strings played *pianissimo*, soft to the point of extinction, leaving the final 'G' to the bassoon and bass line '*senza accomp.*' – bleak and alone. Bach's imagination, stirred here by the dual image of the serpent, prompts shock tactics, forcing his listeners into a realisation that they daily break the pledge made on their behalf at baptism and therefore constantly need renewed forgiveness. To clinch the argument he follows this with an aria for tenor in which Christ is again referred to as the serpent. As Whittaker describes it, 'the whole of the obbligato for violins in unison is constructed out of the image of the bending, writhing, twisting reptile, usually a symbol of horror, but in Bach's musical speech a thing of pellucid beauty'. The closing chorale is a setting of Ludwig Helmbold's 'Nun lasst uns Gott dem Herren'.

A grand French-style overture heralds the start of BWV 194 **Höchsterwünschtes Freudenfest**. The cantata seems to have begun

life as a secular Cöthen piece some time between 1717 and 1723, and was then adapted for the dedication of the new organ at Störmthal (2 November 1723) and revived the following summer for Trinity Sunday as the culmination of Bach's first Leipzig cycle (it was revived again for two further Trinity Sundays in 1726 and 1731). There is one huge problem: that of pitch. Evidently the Störmthal organ must have been tuned to 'tiefer Cammerton' (A= +/-390), considerably lower than that of the Leipzig organs. How else would the trebles have coped with the top Cs in the opening chorus (unique in Bach) or the bass soloist with the multiple F sharp and Gs in his opening recitative? But then, why did Bach not transpose it down for his Leipzig revivals, as we were obliged to do? All he seems to have done is to transpose a few of the bass soloist's highest notes downwards, thereby side-stepping the overall problem.

Of its original twelve movements Bach retained just the first six for use on Trinity Sunday. Just as in his adaptation of the overture to the Orchestral Suite No.4 for the Christmas cantata BWV 110, Bach holds back the entry of the chorus until the quick triple-time middle section. Then, instead of repeating the festive *entrée* – reeds first (three oboes and bassoon), strings next – he reverses the process, assigning the cascade of semiquavers to the oboe band before bringing the chorus back for a festive concluding flourish. Of the two arias, the first is for bass, one of those spacious, pastoral 12/8 movements (for oboe and strings) which Bach devised from time to time to convey the reassurance of God's protective care (here it is his 'light'); the other for soprano, a spirited gavotte for strings to celebrate the purifying effects of Pentecostal fire.

Bach's second Leipzig cantata cycle culminates with the last in the mini-cycle of nine cantatas to texts by Christiane Mariane von Ziegler, BWV 176 **Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding**. This translates as 'There is something stubborn (or defiant or wilful) and fainthearted

(or disheartened or despairing) about the human heart'. Each permutation of these variant adjectives applies to Bach's setting. By interpreting the story of Nicodemus' furtive night-time visit as a general human tendency (hence the quote from Jeremiah) Ziegler had given Bach a chance to set up a dramatic antithesis between headstrong aggression and lily-livered frailty. Bach opens with a defiant, indignant presentation of this *Spruch*, a terse, four-part choral fugue set against a string fanfare reminiscent of Brandenburg No.5. That applies to the first half only, with a rushing melisma up to the minor ninth on 'trotzig' and then, at its peak, a melting and sighing figure over sustained strings to underscore the 'verzagt' side of things. This ascending and descending contour persists throughout the fugue, two and a half expositions without ritornellos, the voices doubled by the three oboes while the strings alternate between the vigorous Brandenburg 5 motif and plaintive, sustained counterpoint. I wonder whether this arresting comment on the human condition reflected Bach's own views, particularly as regards the intractable attitude of the Leipzig Consistory? As with his other collaborations with Ziegler there is evidence of a productive dialogue between him and his librettist (often sadly lacking when he was confronted with a set text). Her printed versions differ sometimes in details, sometimes quite strikingly from those that Bach actually set to music.

The exploration of these twin facets of human behaviour continues all the way through this cantata: the juxtaposition of Nicodemus (night) and Jesus (day) presented in the alto recitative (No.2) is implied in the soprano aria-as-gavotte in B flat (No.3), in which the timid, hesitant yet happy believer is singled out in contrast to the rebellious mind portrayed in the opening chorus. Nicodemus is personified in the bass recitative (No.4), to which Bach adds the words 'for whosoever believes in Thee, shall not perish' to Ziegler's text and sets them as an extended arioso to underline their significance. A trinity

of oboes in symbolic unison accompany the alto in the final aria 'Ermuntert euch, furchtsam und schüchterne Sinne' ('Have courage, fearful, timorous spirits'). The ascent/descent shaping persists even in the final chorale, with a melodic curve over the first four of its five phrases. Just when the unwary might imagine Bach is going to end right there on the subdominant, he breaks the symmetry by adding two more bars. With this dénouement at a far higher pitch, he asserts the essence of the Trinity, 'ein Wesen, drei Personen', and the remoteness of God from his relationship to humankind. He signs off his second Leipzig cycle with this cantata crammed with provocative thoughts and musical exegesis.

A year later, Bach's preference for Trinity Sunday was for an uncomplicatedly jubilant text. For BWV 129 **Gelobet sei der Herr, mein Gott** he chose five strophes from Johann Olearius' chorale of 1665, four of the five beginning with the title words. There are no recitatives or da capo arias; yet there is a plenty of variety, from the stirring chorale fantasia that opens the work, with flute, two oboes, three trumpets and drums added to the string band, to the three arias: one ritornello aria for bass with continuo in praise of the Son, a soprano aria with flute and low-lying violin obbligati addressed to the Holy Spirit and, the pick of the bunch, a pastoral dance for alto and oboe d'amore, inspired, perhaps in its imagery, by the concept of 'den alles lobet, was in allen Lüften schwebet' ('praised by all things that move in the air'). No composer ever got more out of a tune than Bach when he chose, and this is one of the most glorious melodies he ever wrote (and one that has been a life-long companion ever since I first heard my mother sing it during my childhood). The cantata ends with a chorale setting such as the one that closes the *Christmas Oratorio*, punctuated by brass and orchestral fanfares.

It is a genial, uplifting work, and our performance of it was spirited. Yet the St Magnus Festival audience – and even the cathedral

choir who joined with us in the chorales – seemed a little resistant to the music's charms, or even to those of our sopranos, deployed in a single row right in front of the orchestra in order to project their low-lying cantus firmus in the final work. Perhaps the fault lay with us travel-affected pilgrims, or perhaps with those blessed ATC computers in London, but certainly not with Bach.

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