

## **Cantatas for Quinquagesima**

### **King's College Chapel, Cambridge**

This concert was significant in several ways. Firstly, it contained Bach's two 'test' pieces for the cantors at St Thomas's in Leipzig, BWV 22 and BWV 23, designed to be performed either side of the sermon on 7 February 1723. Then Quinquagesima being the last Sunday before Lent, it was accordingly the final opportunity Leipzigers had of hearing music in church before the statutory *tempus clausum* that lasted until Vespers on Good Friday, and Bach seemed determined to leave them with music – four cantatas – that they wouldn't easily forget. Thirdly, by coincidence, in 2000 Quinquagesima fell on 5 March, thirty-six years to the day since I first conducted Monteverdi's *Vespers of 1610* in King's College Chapel as an undergraduate. The Monteverdi Choir was born that night. I was pleased to be returning to King's for this anniversary, and to invite the four collegiate choirs from which I had recruited the original Monteverdians to join with us in the singing of the chorales at the start of the concert. Of these, the choirs of Clare and Trinity Colleges responded positively. King's Chapel seemed to work its unique Gothic alchemy on the music, though, as ever, one needed to be on one's guard against the insidious 'tail' of its long acoustic which can turn even the most robust music-making into mush.

St Luke's Gospel for Quinquagesima recounts two distinct episodes, of Jesus telling the disciples of his coming Passion and of sight restored to a blind man begging near Jericho. Bach deals with the first episode in BWV 22 **Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe**, which, judging by the autograph score, looks as though it were composed at speed in Leipzig itself; and the second in BWV 23 **Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn**, which shows signs of having been pre-composed in Cöthen. BWV 22 incorporates dance rhythms and in its final chorale movement – an elegantly flowing *moto perpetuo* – pays stylistic homage to Johann Kuhnau, the previous Cantor of St Thomas's. It begins with a fluid *arioso* for tenor (*qua evangelist*) and bass (*qua vox Christi*) with oboe and strings, and then breaks into a skittish fugal chorus to point up the disciples' incomprehension

in the memorable words 'and they understood none of these things, neither knew they the things which were spoken'. One could read into this an ironic prophecy of the way Bach's new Leipzig audience would react to his creative outpourings over the next twenty-six years – in the absence, that is, of any tangible or proven signs of appreciation: neither wild enthusiasm, deep understanding nor overt dissatisfaction. Two dance-based arias follow: a grief-laden *gigue* in 9/8 for alto with oboe obbligato (No.2), a gentle plea to be allowed to accompany the Saviour on his spiritual journey to Jerusalem, and a *passepied* for tenor and strings (No.4), a prayer for courage and help in denying the flesh. The cantata concludes with a *piacevole* chorale setting over a 'walking' bass as a symbol of the disciples' journey to fulfilment – nothing to arouse any suspicions here, nor to ruffle any congregational feathers. Compared to some of the flowery words and unappetising imagery that Bach went on to set in his first year in office, this libretto is refreshingly straightforward and well-crafted – perhaps a 'set text' assigned to him by his clerical examiners?

BWV 23 is an altogether more solemn affair, and was written to be performed after the sermon and the distribution of communion. It has the feel of Passion music and indeed its concluding movement, a setting of the German *Agnus Dei*, seems to have been tacked on to a pre-existing cantata once Bach arrived in Leipzig for his audition (it had earlier belonged to his lost Weimar Passion setting and would be recycled for the hasty revival of his *St John Passion* in 1725). The cantata emphasises the way in which Jesus actively sought out the sick and handicapped – and therefore social outcasts – and healed them. Bach's opening movement is a slow duet in C minor for soprano and alto with twin oboe obbligati (there are two blind men in St Matthew's account, 20:30-34). It is a long aria with a poignant appeal for compassion in the midst of misery, its chamber-like textures characteristic of Bach's Cöthen period – ornate and dense, and no easy listen for Bach's critical assessors. It is followed by an *accompagnato* for tenor and strings with the oboe/first violin playing the Lutheran *Agnus Dei* wordlessly. The original ending of this cantata was the swinging, rondo-like chorus 'Aller Augen warten, Herr, auf dich' (No.3), in which

the blind men's prayer, now given to tenor and bass soloists, is interspersed with the seven-fold appearance of the text from Psalm 145, all upon a bass line tracing the contours of the opening melodic phrase of the *Agnus Dei*, now in G minor. Bach's decision to append his earlier Passion setting of the *Agnus Dei* as a slow, mostly homophonic chorale was surely strategically sound: it instantly displayed the breadth of his stylistic and exegetical scope to his future employers.

A press report, by a 'special correspondent', appeared in the Hamburg *Relationencourier*: 'On the past Sunday in the forenoon the prince-appointed Capellmeister of Cöthen, Mr Bach, gave an audition here in the Church of St Thomas in respect of the still vacant post of the Cantor, and the music he made on that occasion was highly praised by all those who judge such things.' Peter Williams has made the spicy suggestion that the 'special correspondent' could have been Bach himself – an early example of 'spin' and self-aggrandisement. *How* one would like to know from 'those who judge such things' whether they responded more favourably to the more conventional (utilitarian, even) BWV 22, reminiscent of Kuhnau, or the more ingenious and sophisticated BWV 23, with its Neumeister-style verse divided initially, like an Italian sonata, into three movements dictated by compositional requirements and design rather than by the text.

If Bach's examiners had any lingering doubts as to the complexity of his music, or the charge of its being 'bombastic and confused' (as J A Scheibe was famously to describe it), what would they make of the later pair of cantatas composed for this same Sunday two and six years later, in 1725 (BWV 127) and 1729 (BWV 159)? What Laurence Dreyfus calls Bach's 'indomitable inventive spirit' led him during the course of the next few years – as we are discovering with each fresh instalment of weekly cantatas – to come up with a succession of works, each characterised by a colossally fertile musical brain and a prodigious musical imagination and capacity for invention, all held in check by an unparalleled technical mastery of the component parts; yet containing at the same time music that could appeal to the senses and nourish the spirit.

The opening movement of BWV 127 **Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott** is a case in point, an elegiac chorale fantasia in which Bach combines Paul Eber's hymn of 1562 with a text-less presentation of the Lutheran *Agnus Dei* and, in case that were not enough, several references in the basso continuo to the Passion chorale 'Herzlich tut mich verlangen'. There is nothing remotely bombastic or confused in Bach's composition of this movement; nor academic, smart-arsed or tendentious. It is arresting in its musical presentation of the dualism of God and man and the relationship of the individual believer to Christ's cross and Passion. I took the radical step of asking the Clare and Trinity choirs to join in by adding the appropriate German words to the *Agnus Dei* strophes, since that reference would be lost on a contemporary non-Lutheran audience. With undergraduate sopranos and altos on opposite wings of the centrally arrayed Monteverdi Choir, the whole movement acquired the proportions of a choral triptych (or a mini 'Three Choirs Festival'); it sounded vibrant and stirring, and gave an inkling of how the *St Matthew Passion* might have sounded in the 1730s, its double chorus augmented by a third choir singing from the 'swallow's nest' gallery in St Thomas's. (For those who prefer their Bach untampered with, we have included the original version as an additional track, recorded at our final rehearsal.)

The following recitative for tenor links the individual's thoughts on death to the path prepared by Jesus' own patient journey towards his crucifixion and acts as a bridge from the F major chorus to the extended C minor 'sleep aria' (No.3). This is for soprano with oboe obbligato – plus staccato quaver reiterations by two recorders and a pizzicato bass line, the second occasion this year in which we have encountered Bach's use of pizzicato strings to represent funeral bells. Then just in case anyone happened to have nodded off in this mesmeric and ravishing aria, Bach calls for a trumpet to add to the full string band in a grand, tableau-like evocation of the Last Judgement (No.4), replete with triple occurrences of a wild 6/8 section when all hell is let loose in true Monteverdian *concitato* ('excited') manner. Theologically and musically this is highly complex, sophisticated and innovative. It is also against the run of play of Bach's second Leipzig cycle, where

several factors combine to limit the available opportunities of experimentation with new forms: (a) the more uniform character of his libretti compared with the Biblical compilations of his earlier cantatas; (b) the self-imposed task of composing new church music each week and maintaining that rhythm well into the second year; (c) the standardisation of cantata form caused by the popularity of the Neumeister type (chorus – recitative – aria – chorus); and (d) the frequent lack of imagination shown by several of his librettists. Later on, of course he *did* experiment, or, as Gillies Whittaker puts it, ‘we find examples where he seems to be reaching out to those plastic and connected groups of movements with which Mozart achieved such miracles in his operatic finales.’

The seven sub-sections of BWV 127 No.4 are a good example: in essence this pairing of accompanied recitative and aria is made up of three alternating sections. First, there is an opening restless *accompagnato* with no discernible tonal centre, for trumpet and strings, painting the Day of Judgment. Next, an *arioso* in G minor (‘Fürwahr, fürwahr’) quoting the choral melody on which the cantata is founded, and finally the 6/8 section with scurrying strings and trumpet fanfares to illustrate man’s rescue from the violent bonds of death. It is in this last section that Bach quotes – or pre-echoes – the spectacular double chorus ‘Sind Blitze, sind Donner’ from the *St Matthew Passion*. Now, if the chorus predates the bass aria, that has fascinating implications for re-dating the *St Matthew*, which until 1975 was thought to have been composed for Good Friday 1729, but since then has been brought forward by two years. Was Bach already composing the *St Matthew* in 1724/1725, during the time he was engaged in composing his second *Jahrgang* of chorale cantatas? If so, it raises the possibility that he conceived the *St Matthew* as a kind of ‘chorale Passion’, and certainly he makes rather more extensive use of four-part chorales in the *St Matthew* than in the *St John*, as well as writing extensive chorale movements to open and close Part I. But regardless of when precisely he began the *St Matthew*, it looks as if Bach’s initial intentions at Leipzig were even more grandiose than scholars have hitherto supposed, and that at his appointment he set himself the task of presenting his *own* music, mostly newly-composed, some of it re-cast from his Weimar years,

for at least the first two *Jahrgänge*, each cycle culminating with a Passion setting: highly controversial in the case of the *St John* in 1724, and in the case of the *St Matthew*, ground-breaking and far more time-consuming than he had expected, and needing therefore to be deferred for a further two years.

Last in this Quinquagesima programme was BWV 159 **Sehet! Wir gehn hinauf gen Jerusalem**, a five movement *Stück* to a text by Picander first performed on 27 February 1729. It opens *in medias res*, as it were, with a dialogue for Jesus (the bass soloist) proclaiming the words in St Luke (18:31) 'Behold, we go up to Jerusalem', and the Christian soul (alto) imploring the Saviour to avoid the fate before him ('the cross is already prepared... the fetters await Thee'). The alto is accompanied by all the strings, while the bass's words are given over a disjointed 'walking' bass which stops after the drop of a seventh as though Jesus pauses on his journey, turns to his disciples and tries to alert them to his approaching trial and death. Again one senses an instant affinity with the *St Matthew Passion* – the same Magdalene-like outpouring of grief and outrage ('Ach Golgatha, unsel'ges Golgatha!'), the same librettist and the same elevated tone and intensity of expression.

The similarities continue with the second movement, a flowing 6/8 aria for alto and continuo with the sixth verse of the celebrated Passion chorale 'O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden' by Paul Gerhardt (1656) sung above it by the sopranos. The fourth movement opens with the words 'Es ist vollbracht' – that Bach should have set these words twice, first in the *St John Passion* and then in this cantata, both so memorably and each time with such overwhelming but distinctive pathos, is something to marvel at. In this cantata version in B flat, for oboe, strings and bass soloist, time seems almost to stand still – even when the singer's words are 'Now shall I hasten' – radiating a solemn peace achieved through Christ's resignation to his fate. This may be partly a function of the exceptional richness of Bach's harmonic language – a frequent stressing of the subdominant key, even the subdominant of the subdominant! The final chorale sets a stanza of Paul Stockmann's Passiontide poem 'Jesu Leiden, Pein und Tod' (1633) to Vulpinus' tender melody, with wonderfully satisfying chromatic harmonies over a

lyrical bass line.

## **Cantatas for the Annunciation, Palm Sunday and Oculi Walpole St Peter, Norfolk**

An isolated concert – the third Sunday in Lent (March 26 this year), for which we must be content with a single cantata, the near-coincidence with the Feast of the Annunciation (March 25), and a remote fenland church, perhaps one of the most perfect early perpendicular churches in England: there was always something special about this concert, even in its planning. Exactly two years ago, as guests of The Prince of Wales at Sandringham, we had been given a guided tour of his favourite Norfolk churches. The one that took my eye was Walpole St Peter, the ‘Queen of the Marshlands’, with its elegant pointed arcades and slender columns, its pale oak box-pews and raised chancel, and the choir stalls with their beautifully carved poppy-heads. I felt instinctively that it was the right venue for this particular trio of Lenten cantatas. But how could His Royal Highness have known when he chose to be the sponsor of BWV 1, not only that it was written for the Feast of the Annunciation but that he himself would be in residence at Sandringham that very weekend, and would therefore ask to attend our concert in person?

We assembled on the Saturday afternoon to rehearse the three cantatas (BWV 182, 54 and 1) in this ravishing but ice-cold church, the rain beating down on the roof and the bleak agricultural prairie land that is this corner of East Anglia. The sun came out on the Sunday and provided the magical ‘play of light on stone and wood’ which merited the five stars in Simon Jenkins’ book of *England’s Thousand Best Churches*. The Prince duly arrived and we greeted him with Thomas Arne’s Drury Lane arrangement of *God Save the King* (1745), played not in the usual ponderous and lugubrious way, but as an airy, light-footed *passepied*. It was a fitting prelude to the elegant Sonata with which Bach introduces BWV 182 **Himmelskönig, sei willkommen**, composed in 1714 when

Palm Sunday coincided with the festival of the Annunciation. In effect the Sonata is a miniature French overture for solo violin and recorder in dialogue with a pizzicato accompaniment, faintly evocative of Christ's donkey-ride to Jerusalem. With the magical moment when the strings play an *arco* swell for the first time, you sense yet again the *coup de foudre* of Bach's first encounter with the music of his Italian contemporaries – Corelli, Vivaldi and others.

A madrigal-like welcome song for chorus (No.2) – and, as I see it, the idiomatic use of *concertisten*, with *ripienisten* joining as the strings and recorder enter – suggests a growing throng come to salute Christ as God's representative on earth. Seldom is Bach so freshly light-hearted. The music's chamber proportions, gaiety and airiness seemed perfectly attuned to the building. There is only one recitative (No.3), and that is more like an *arioso*, yet three successive and contrasting arias which treat Christ's forthcoming Passion as a source of spiritual inspiration, the bass (No.4) and tenor (No.6) addressing Christ directly, the alto (No.5) exhorting all Christians to come out to meet the Saviour as the Gospel relates, spreading 'their garments in the way' while 'others cut down branches from the trees and strewed them in the way'.

Bach pits a solitary recorder against the alto soloist for this slow and extended *da capo* aria (with a slightly quicker 'B' section), its curving, descending phrases suggesting the bending of branches and prostration before the Saviour. To me it felt like a musical *Pietà*, the alto Mary figure cradling the Saviour in her arms – and there in the northwest corner of the church we found a rare English example of *Pietà* statuary. The tenor aria, with an active and sometimes tortured continuo line (C sharp minor in this transposed Leipzig version!), suggests a later Passion-tide mood. Several abrupt stops and restarts presage Jesus' stumbling under the burden of the Cross while reflecting his disciples' failure to follow him all the way 'through weal and woe'.

The cantata ends with a pair of choruses, the first a motet-like chorale fantasia built around Vulpius' fine melody (1609) to the authorised hymn of Palm Sunday, the second a sprightly choral dance that could have stepped straight out of a comic opera of the period (and, come to that, would not seem totally out of



place in Act I of Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin*). It needs the poise of a trapeze artist with the agility of a madrigalian gymnast – and is altogether captivating. With a church packed with such a variety of listeners – the Prince, his equerry, his detective and his house-party of thespians, Bach 'pilgrims' from London and Oxford, even one from Japan – one sensed even more forcibly than before the mystery of live performances of Bach's music which evidently nourishes both performer and listener. You could *feel* the exhilaration.

Next came BWV 54 **Widerstehe doch der Sünde**, a twin-aria solo cantata for a deep-voiced alto (perfect for the amazing Nathalie Stutzmann), written possibly in the same year as *Himmelskönig* for the Third Sunday in Lent (Oculi), or a year later. It is scored for a five-part string ensemble with divided violas, and is based by Bach's librettist Georg Christian Lehms on the Epistle to James: 'Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you'. The first aria is spellbinding. Twice within the space of a year we find Bach opening a movement with a harsh dissonance, a dominant seventh chord over a tonic pedal point (the other occasion comes in the Advent cantata BWV 61 *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland*). It is a deliberate shock tactic to rouse his listeners to the need to 'stand firm against all sinning, or its poison will possess you'. Was it also, one wonders, his way of announcing himself, two days after his appointment, as *Concertmeister* at the Weimar court? Bach creates a mood of urgent, unflinching resistance to the seductive, tenacious powers of evil. These he evokes in lyrically entwined violin lines which writhe and twist, then teeter for a whole bar in suspense before tumbling down to an apparent repose, a clear symbol of the reprieve available to those who stand firm against sin. A deadly curse (illustrated by two abrupt re-entries of the violas on the same dominant seventh) awaits those who lose the will to resist. And just in case anyone was not paying attention, he maintains the strong and stubborn chord pulsation throughout. Of the thirty-two quavers of the opening four bars only four are consonances, all the rest being dissonances, twelve of them five-note chords!

The recitative which follows strips the masks from sin, which on closer inspection turns out to be 'but an empty shadow'. It is also a 'sharpened sword

that pierces us through body and soul'. The second aria is cast as a four-part fugue, with an insinuating chromatic theme and a long, contorted counter-subject to portray the wily shackles of the devil. Did the piece really end there or have we lost a chorale somewhere along the line, if not at the very end then, perhaps, as a missing *cantus firmus*, a musical superscription to the fugue? It occurs to me that Bach uses precisely such a device (strophes of Paul Gerhardt's hymn 'Warum sollt' ich mich denn grämen') in his double-choir motet BWV 228 *Fürchte dich nicht*, very likely written around this time. Both fugues begin, intriguingly, with a descending chromatic figure. More striking still is the resemblance of the counter-subject to the theme in the last movement of BWV 63 *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag*, written for Christmas Day in Weimar in 1714. Suppose for a moment that *Widerstehe* was written the following year (and here, even the great Alfred Dürr sits on the fence); could it be that Bach was re-invoking his Christmas-tide appeal for grace ('Almighty God, gaze graciously on the fervour of these humble souls!') in the Lenten cantata, to nullify the tempting beauty of sin ('outwardly wonderful') which the devil has invented?

The climax of this concert was the Annunciation cantata BWV 1 **Wie schön leuchtet des Morgenstern**, first performed in Leipzig in 1725, a year in which the Feast of the Annunciation and Palm Sunday coincided. It does not need much imagination to gauge the importance of this dual celebration, coming as it did towards the end of the fasting period of Lent during which no music would have been heard in church. Bach's second *Jahrgang* closed with this jubilant spring-time cantata (and might have been followed the next Friday by the first performance of the *St Matthew Passion* if only it had been completed on time). It was also the first cantata to be published in volume I (out of 45) of the Bach-Gesellschaft edition in 1850. One wonders what subscriber-composers like Schumann and Brahms must have made of the inventive and masterly way Bach wove his contrapuntal textures around one of the most stirring and best-known Lutheran hymns. The scoring is opulent, regal and 'eastern', redolent of the Epiphany cantata BWV 65 *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen* which we performed in Leipzig a couple of months ago, both in instrumentation – horns,

oboes da caccia and strings (but no recorders this time) – and in metre – a dignified 12/8 ceremonial in F major for the opening chorale fantasia. It begins as an intimate Annunciation tableau, a gentle solo for the second violin answered by the whole band, then echoed in the dominant by both violins and thereafter by pairs of horns, oboes and violins, leading to a most unceremonious ‘knees-up’: a one-and-a-half bar dance, then a rhapsodic display for the whole band over a pulsating series of octave F’s in the bass line before the grand choral proclamation of Nicolai’s tune is given out in long notes by the sopranos and (sometimes) the first horn.

As with BWV 182, the crowd’s greeting is stirring and jubilant, especially at the movement’s climax, ‘highly and most splendidly sublime’, only here the accent is on majesty and opulence, as in the three-fold repetition of ‘reich von Gaben’ (‘rich in gifts’). I got the feeling that there was enough audience familiarity with the Nicolai hymn tune (in English it is known as ‘How brightly shines the morning star’) to elicit that ‘invisible circle of human effort’, as Yo Yo Ma describes it, when performers and listeners alike are engaged in a collective or communal act. It was a feeling that returned to me twenty-four hours later during a rock concert in the Royal Albert Hall in which Sting exchanged snatches of familiar songs with his adoring audience in a kind of litany. It is in moments like this, when there is a particularly strong bond between musicians and their listeners, that one gets a whiff of how these cantatas might have been received in Leipzig at their creation – or at least of how Bach *intended* them to be received.

The festive mood of this cantata persists, buoyant with dance rhythms: dignified ceremonial ones in this opening fantasia, flame-flickering ones in the first aria (for soprano with oboe da caccia), jubilant triple-time ones in the richly ornamented second aria (for tenor and, appropriately, ‘the sound of strings’), and finally in a rousing four-part harmonisation of another of Nicolai’s verses, this time with an outrageous descant for the second horn. Ear-tingling and eye-pricking stuff, especially with shafts of spring sunlight piercing the clear glass windows of the church on cue for the appearance of the ‘morning star’.

© John Eliot Gardiner 2006

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