

Program Notes – Christmas Oratorio

The Christmas of 1734-35 must have been a very busy one for the musicians of Leipzig. In that year they first performed Johann Sebastian Bach's *Weinachts-Oratorium* (Christmas Oratorio). It is an unconventional oratorio for rather than following the pattern of Italian oratorios, as he did for his Easter Oratorio, Bach follows the tradition of the Lutheran *historia* and the oratorio Passion by using an Evangelist to sing the Biblical story of the birth of Jesus from the books of St. Luke and St. Matthew. Furthermore, rather than composing it as a work to be performed in one sitting, he composed it as six separate cantatas that were to be performed over the twelve days of Christmas. A copy of the title page of original printed libretto still exists informing us that Parts I, II and III were to be performed at the worship services on December 25, 26, and 27 at both the Nikolaikirche and the Thomaskirche (one in the morning and one in the afternoon). Part IV was to be performed on New Year's Day for the Feast of the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus, Part V on the following day for the First Sunday in the New Year, and Part VI on January 6 for the Feast of the Epiphany. Probably for practical reasons, Bach ended up borrowing a lot of his own music when composing the Christmas Oratorio reworking three previous secular cantatas that had been composed for the Elector of Saxony and his family and fitting them with new words appropriate for the celebration of the coming of Jesus Christ. Remarkably, even with this borrowing, Bach ended up with a work that surpassed the music from which it came and is incredibly unified in its conception and construction.

Unbridled joy is the hallmarks of the Christmas Oratorio. The jubilation of season is evident in the opening chorus as the timpani leads the orchestra into an opening flourish that begins with the flutes, the oboes, and finally the strings which lead to an exultant fanfare by the trumpets accompanied by cascading strings. Part I, "Jauchzet, frohlocket, auf, preiset die Tage" ("Shout! Rejoice! Rise up! Praise These Days!") tells of the birth of Christ. After the joyfulness of the opening chorus, the cantata picks up an Advent theme of preparation for the coming of the Savior with a recitative and aria for Alto. The aria by the Bass, featuring a florid and triumphant trumpet solo, reminds us that this baby is also our King. Part I ends with the choir emphasizing this point by singing a stanza from the hymn "From Heaven Above to Earth I Come" accompanied by majestic trumpet fanfares.

Part II, "Und es waren Hirten in derselben Gegend" ("And in the Same Region There Were Shepherds"), continues the story by switching scenes to a group of shepherds in the field. It begins with a beautiful pastorella for orchestra often called the "Pastoral Symphony" that was written especially for this work. Meanwhile, Mary sings a lullaby to the child with the aria "Schlafe, mein Liebster, genieße der Ruh" ("Sleep, my beloved, enjoy Your rest!"). This peacefulness is broken as the angel appears to the shepherds and then is joined by the heavenly host singing "Ehre sei Gott in der Höhe" ("Glory to God in the Highest"). The Bass then with a short recitative enjoins us all to sing along with the angels and the chorus responds in kind.

In Part III, "Herrscher des Himmels, erhöre das Lallen" ("Ruler of Heaven, Hear Our Stammerings") the shepherds run to Bethlehem to see this child for themselves. Part III concludes with several hymn stanza that expound on the joy that the shepherds and all people of faith have in this momentous event after which the first chorus is repeated.

Part IV, "Fallt mit Danken, fallt mit Loben" ("Fall in Gratitude, Fall in Praise"), was written for New Year's Day, a week after Christmas Day and therefore the day on which Jesus would have been circumcised. There is only one verse of Scripture in this cantata, Luke 2:21, which refers to his circumcision and his official reception of the name Jesus according to the angel's instructions to

Mary. Most of the texts in this cantata expound upon the theme of the name of Jesus bringing joy and strength.

At least three of the movements are based on movements of Cantata No. 213, "Hercules at the Crossroads," a congratulatory cantata written to celebrate the eleventh birthday of the Crown Prince Friedrich of Saxony. The texts to both cantatas were written by Christian Friedrich Henrici (known as Picander), indicating that Bach wrote the secular one-event cantata fully intending to use its music again as church repertoire. Bach was never afraid of hard work, but it was difficult for him to let good music fade away if he could find another use for it.

The instrumentation, slightly different in each of the six cantatas, features two high horns (we are using flugelhorns), two oboes, and strings. Two movements employ the bass soloist elaborating upon the chorale text sung by the soprano soloist about the joy of serving Jesus. The soprano aria "Flößt, mein Heiland, dein Namen" ("O My Savior, Does Your Name Instill") includes a part for another soprano, hidden somewhere in the church, echoing the words "Yes!" and "No!", offering evidence of the fun-loving side of Bach.

Part V, "Ehre sei dir, Gott, gesungen" ("Let Honor Be Sung to You, O God"), was written for the Sunday after New Year's Day, and includes six verses from the second chapter of the Gospel of Matthew concerning the wise men from the east arriving in Jerusalem to look for the Messiah, having seen his star in the heavens and being told to look in Jerusalem. The poetic texts and chorale verses all speak of Jesus bringing light into the world and into human hearts.

Most of the music seems to be original rather than adapted from other cantatas. Scoring is for two oboes d'amore and strings. The opening chorus must surely be one of the most energetic choruses Bach ever wrote, with the oboes, strings, and voices seemingly all competing in a game to see who can offer the most exuberant praise. A bass aria, a trio for soprano, alto, and tenor, two alto recitatives, and two chorales all further the theme of divine light dispelling the world's darkness.

Part VI, "Herr, wenn die stolzen Feinde schnauben" ("Lord, When Our Proud Enemies Snarl") was written for Epiphany, traditionally the day that the wise men visited Jesus and thus Jesus was manifest to the Gentiles. The text is based on Matthew 2:7-12, in which Herod tells the sages to locate Jesus in Bethlehem so that he, too, can come and worship the new king. They present their gifts to the Christ child but leave for home by a different route after God commands them in a dream not to return to Herod, whose intentions are murderous. The theme is God's victory over all enemies, including evil rulers and death itself.

Bach took the music for Part VI almost entirely from an existing cantata, now lost, with few musical changes to fit the new texts; it seems that Bach ran out of time and could not be so careful with the adaptation process. But the cantata is nevertheless remarkable and serves as a fitting close to the series. The opening chorus and the closing chorale both feature trumpets and timpani in all their majesty and power. In the opening chorus we hear totally unexpected harmonic shifts that seem to underline the thought of "escaping the sharp claws of the enemy." The soprano in her aria, "Nur ein Wink von seinen Händen," ("Just a Wave of His Hands"), sings that God can destroy the pride of his enemies with a mere word; the music, basically a minuet in $\frac{3}{4}$ time, is full of shifting accents, confusing the listener as to where exactly is the downbeat. The final chorale is once again charged with energy and exuberance, with trumpet fanfares proclaiming the final rout of death, devil, sin and hell.

Martin Dicke and John Jost