

AMERICAN
BACH
SOLOISTS



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support materials for our recording of

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH
CANTATAS FROM MÜHLHAUSEN & WEIMAR

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit, BWV 106
Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn, BWV 152
Komm, du süße Todesstunde, BWV 161

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Jeffrey Thomas, tenor - William Sharp, baritone

PROGRAM NOTES

by John Butt

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit, BWV 106
Funeral Cantata

We know of no definite date for the “*Actus tragicus*,” but its style seems to suggest the very beginning of Bach’s career as a composer of vocal music, the time when he was organist of the Blasiuskirche in Mühlhausen 1707-8. Here he did not compose vocal music as a regular weekly or monthly cycle; rather the works were necessitated by specific occasions (in this case, almost certainly a funeral). The text is an amalgam of free poetry, much biblical verse (notably from the Psalms, Isaiah, Luke and Revelation) and two Lutheran chorales. Despite the early date, the work is a masterpiece of the seventeenth century style of text-setting; the music is intimately crafted to the succession of the words without a hint of the newer Italian styles of recitative and da capo aria. Ironically, the direct influence of “modern” Italian operatic forms renders Bach’s later cantatas less immediately dramatic.

The first half of the cantata is concerned with the inevitability of death while the latter section shows that the “new” Christian message cancels the old covenant: death leads to union with Jesus and eternal life. Incidentally, it is only in the second part that we hear chorales, symbolic as they are of the new, Christian, covenant and—to stretch the point slightly—of the new Lutheran confession superseding the older Catholic order. It is in the central (g minor) movement that the curious alchemy takes place. First we hear a severe fugal section “*Es ist der alte Bund*” (“it is the ancient law”), something which by its very style points to the past; then the soprano enters with a completely new theme (“*Ja, komm, Herr Jesu*”), a monodic and thus more modern music, which introduces the first reference to the New Testament. The recorders soon join in with a Lutheran chorale melody “*Ich hab’ mein’ Sach’ Gott heimgestellt*” which, like a textless mnemonic, reminds any listener familiar with the chorale of its message: one should place one’s entire trust in God.

The outer parts of the cantata work around this central axis of symmetry. Turning to the opening first, we first hear a serene instrumental sinfonia, a justly famous funeral piece for viols and recorders. Perhaps the most subtle aspect is the scoring of the recorder parts: the second part

sometimes dovetails with the first, but often doubles its line in unison to provide a delicacy of shading which is not normally possible with recorders. The singers introduce the main theme of the cantata in a delightful three-movement tableau: first an affirmation that God’s time is the very best time, then the acknowledgment that we live in Him (in a lively triple dance-like meter) and ending with the admission that we also die in Him (in a much slower tempo, in the minor mode, with much chromatic movement). Two short arias (tenor and bass) lead to the central, axial movement.

The central movement and the subsequent aria both introduce the two higher solo voices, something which again is symbolic of the change to the new covenant. The alto aria, like the matching tenor aria from the first half, is based on ostinato patterns; here, though, the bass joins in with the chorale “*Mit Fried’ und Freud’*.” The opening choral tableau is matched by a closing doxology, a chorale followed by a lively fugue. In all, this is one of the most compact and subtle of Bach’s sacred works, one which has fascinated scholars for over a century and one which seems ever ripe for multi-layered symbolic interpretation.

Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn, BWV 152
Cantata for the Sunday after Christmas

Bach composed this work for the first Sunday of Christmas 1714. At this time he was court organist in Weimar, and in March 1714 he acquired the additional title of Konzertmeister; this gave him the opportunity to write a cantata every month for the Duke’s small chapel, performing with a select band of musicians in an organ loft, high up above the chapel’s lower ceiling. To the Duke and his court sitting in the main part of the chapel below the central opening in the ceiling, this music must have sounded strangely muffled. Bach’s Weimar cantatas are extremely intimate affairs, sharing something of the detail and small-scale dramatic effects of the Mühlhausen works (such as Cantata 106). However, the individual movements tend to be larger and more musically rounded; and of course the recitative, drawn directly from Italian opera, was a very recent innovation in German church music.

Bach’s librettist, Salomon Franck, was the court poet at Weimar. He based his text on the Gospel for the day (Luke 2: 33-40), Simeon’s words following the Nunc dimittis concerning Christ’s future as the agent of the falling and rising

of many in Israel. Franck—always a colorful poet—links this with two Old Testament prophecies concerning the stone against which many will tumble (Isaiah) and the stone which, having been rejected by the builders, becomes the cornerstone (Psalm 118).

Bach's setting begins with a *sinfonia* which immediately introduces the small but piquant instrumentarium; the centerpiece is a dance-like fugue built on the permutation principle (typical of Bach's Weimar works). Each instrument enters with the main subject but, on each successive entry, proceeds with new material which is subsequently taken up by the following instruments: thus virtually all the lines working with the subject are interchangeable. The music gains an integrity and cohesion which is well suited to a cantata concerned with Christ as the Rock of Faith; the main subject is the cornerstone around which all the other lines are built. The idea of close imitation between parts is taken up later in the concluding duet, where the questions of the soul (Soprano) are quickly answered by Jesus (Bass); again, the music is very dance-like (cf. the Forlane from the first orchestral suite), played by all the melody instruments in unison. In other words, Bach was able to integrate courtly dance music into the religious devotion. While such a decidedly secular allusion might seem contradictory in the context of a religion which eschewed worldly things, Bach may have seen this as a sign of the intermediate power of the aristocracy, their domain, heritage and customs functioning as a stepping-stone to the higher court of heaven.

The first aria introduces the bass, imploring the believer to follow the way of faith; here again imitation between voice and instruments points to the idea of following a pathway, prepared especially for the believer's heart. The soprano aria, affirming Christ as the Rock of Ages and fortress against all evil, is remarkably delicately scored (recorder and viola d'amore) for such a robust text. However, as ever, the music is tightly crafted, the notated ornamentation seeming, miraculously, to be the substance rather than the mere decoration of the fabric; clearly, Bach believed that God lives in the details. The recitatives—among Bach's earliest—are typically vivid, retaining something of the rhetorical force of the pre-Weimar music (even though the *secco* recitative itself was not then an option). In all, they are more pictorial than is the norm in cantatas of the Leipzig era.

Komm, du süße Todesstunde, BWV 161
Cantata for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

This Weimar cantata was first performed on 6 October 1715, a commentary on the Gospel for the sixteenth Sunday of Trinity (Luke 7: 11-17), the resurrection of the youth at Nain. The exceptionally vivid text, by Salomon Franck, plays on the bitter-sweet dichotomy of death; the loss of the world's brief joys is compensated by the ultimate resurrection. Thus we are encouraged to picture life as a gloomy night, death as a rosy morning. And if the text is not enough to reverse our natural inclination to fear the hour of our death, the music plays a yet more subtle role, for instance, picturing worldly joy with the seductive minuet of the tenor aria "*Mein Verlangen*." We seem almost to enjoy the worldly delusion as the tenor expresses his desire to forsake it; the music also seems to turn both ways, moving continually from minor to major modes. The clock imagery of the second recitative, pointing towards the striking of the hour of death, is perhaps the most delightful and painless movement in the cantata. The ensuing ensemble aria, where the believer expresses happy acceptance of death, is a gigue-like dance, which by its very worldliness seems to encapsulate the cathartic role of this cantata. Thus worldly joy—although to be abandoned—can also be a sign of the eternal joy to come.

The opening aria, too, seems in one sense to point to the sorrow of death with its sighing figures and chromatic cadences. At the same time though, the music is delightfully elegant and light, something to which the Duke at Weimar would doubtlessly have been accustomed to dance and eat. Only the wordless organ line, the melody that is so familiar to us in the (later) St. Matthew Passion, sounds a sterner note. It was probably no accident that Bach chose two instrument types—organ and recorders—that are so difficult to tune to one another, in order to give yet another angle on the central dichotomy of the cantata. Another subtlety is the way the opening leap and subsequent fall of the choral melody seems to pervade the opening gestures of all three arias, constantly reminding the listener of the inevitability of death even in the most luscious, even sensuous, of musical experiences. As if to balance this "darkening" of the lighter music, the stern final chorale is accompanied by florid, almost irrelevant, recorder lines; perhaps Bach, taking his cue from the text, wished to show that even the worms devouring our flesh are making light and happy work out of decay.

Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit (Actus Tragicus)
BWV 106

Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, 2 Recorders, 2 Violas da gamba,
Basso continuo

1 1. SONATINA (Recorders, Violas da gamba, Bc.)

2 2a. CHORUS (Tutti)

*Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit,
In ihm leben, weben und sind wir, solange er will. In ihm sterben
wir zur rechten Zeit, wenn er will.*

God's own time is the very best of times. In him we live,
move, and exist, as long as he wills. In him shall we
die at the right time, when he wills.

2b. ARIOSO (Tenor, Recorders, Violas da gamba, Bc.)

*Ach, Herr, lehre uns bedenken, daß wir sterben müssen, auf daß
wir klug werden.*

Ah, Lord, teach us to remember that our death is certain, so
that we might gain wisdom.

2c. ARIA (Bass, Recorders, Bc.)

*Bestelle dein Haus; denn du wirst sterben und nicht lebendig
bleiben!*

Set ready thine house; for thou shalt perish and not
continue living!

2d. CHORUS and ARIOSO with instrumental chorale
(Tutti)

*Es ist der alte Bund: Mensch, du mußt sterben!
Ja, komm, Herr Jesu!*

This is the ancient law: man, thou must perish!
Yes, come, Lord Jesus!

3 3a. ARIA (Alto, Bc.)

*In deine Hände befehl ich meinen Geist; du hast mich erlöst,
Herr, du getreuer Gott.*

Into thine hands do I commit my soul; thou hast redeemed
me, Lord, thou my faithful God.

3b. ARIOSO and CHORALE (Bass, Alto, Violas da
gamba, Bc.)

Heute wirst du mit mir im Paradies sein.

*Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin
In Gottes Willen,
Getrost ist mir mein Herz und Sinn,
Sanft und stille.
Wie Gott mir verheißen hat:*

Der Tod ist mein Schlaf worden.

This day thou shalt be in paradise with me.

In peace and joy I depart, as God wills it; consoled am I in
heart and mind, calm and quiet. As God gave me his
promise: my death is changed to slumber.

4 4. CHORUS [CHORALE] (Tutti)

*Glorie, Lob, Ehr und Herrlichkeit
Sei dir, Gott Vater und Sohn bereit',
Dem Heiligen Geist mit Namen!
Die göttlich Kraft
Macht uns sieghaft
Durch Jesum Christum, Amen.*

Glory, laud, praise and majesty to thee, God, Father, and
Son, be given, the Holy Ghost with these names! May
godly strength make us triumph through Jesus Christ,
Amen.

Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn
BWV 152

Soprano, Bass, Recorder, Oboe, Viola d'amore, Viola da
gamba, Basso continuo

5 1. SINFONIA (Recorder, Oboe, Viola d'amore, Viola da
gamba, Bc.)

6 2. ARIA (Bass, Oboe, Bc.)

*Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn,
Gott hat den Stein gelegt,
Der Zion hält und trüget,
Mensch, stoße dich nicht dran!
Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn!*

Walk on the road of faith, God hath the stone established
which holds and bears up Zion; man, stumble not
thereon! Walk on the road of faith!

7 3. RECITATIVE (Bass, Bc.)

*Der Heiland ist gesetzt
In Israel zum Fall und Auferstehen.
Der edle Stein ist sonder Schuld,
Wenn sich die böse Welt
So hart an ihm verletzt,
Ja, über ihn zur Hölle fällt,
Weil sie boshaftig an ihn rennet
Und Gottes Huld
Und Gnade nicht erkennen!
Doch selig ist
Ein auserwählter Christ,
Der seinen Glaubensgrund auf diesen Eckstein leget,
Weil er dadurch Heil und Erlösung findet.*

The Savior rules in Israel over fall and resurrection. The noble stone bears no fault whenever the wicked world so hard on it is dashed, yea, over it falls to hell. For it runs into it with spite and God's grace and mercy won't acknowledge! But blessed is the chosen man of Christ, who lays his faith's foundation on this cornerstone, for he thereby finds health and redemption.

8 4. ARIA (Soprano, Recorder, Viola d'amore, Bc.)

*Stein, der über alle Schätze,
Hilf, daß ich zu aller Zeit
Durch den Glauben auf dich setze
Meinen Grund der Seligkeit
Und mich nicht an dir verletze,
Stein, der über alle Schätze!*

Stone surpassing every treasure, help that I for all time, through my faith, upon thee may establish my foundation for true grace, and may not on thee be wounded, stone surpassing every treasure!

9 5. RECITATIVE (Bass, Bc.)

*Es ärgre sich die kluge Welt,
Daß Gottes Sohn
Verläßt den hohen Ehrentron,
Daß der in Fleisch und Blut sich kleidet
Und in der Menschheit leidet.
Die größte Weisheit dieser Erden
Muß vor des Höchsten Rat
Zur größten Torheit werden.
Was Gott beschlossen hat,
Kann die Vernunft doch nicht ergründen;
Die blinde Leiterin verführt die geistlich Blinden.*

Now angry be the clever world that God's own Son has left his lofty throne of praise, has appeared himself in flesh and blood, and suffers as a mortal. The greatest wisdom of this earth must seem now the greatest folly before the will of God. For merest reason can never fathom what God has decreed; the blind seductress misleads the blind in spirit.

10 6. DUET (Tutti)

*(Seele:) Wie soll ich dich, Liebster der Seelen, umfassen?
(Jesus:) Du mußt dich verleugnen und alles verlassen!
(Seele:) Wie soll ich erkennen das ewige Licht?
(Jesus:) Erkenne mich gläubig und ärgre dich nicht!
(Seele:) Komm, lehre mich, Heiland die Erde verschmähen!
(Jesus:) Komm, Seele, durch Leiden zur Freude zu gehen!
(Seele:) Ach, ziehe mich, Liebster, so folg ich dir nach!
(Jesus:) Dir schenk ich die Krone nach Trübsal und Schmach.*

*(Soul:) How shall I, O lover of souls, now embrace thee?
(Jesus:) Thou must deny thyself and abandon all!
(Soul:) How shall I perceive then the eternal light?
(Jesus:) Perceive me with faith and yield not unto spite!
(Soul:) Come, teach me, O Savior, to be scornful of earth!*

*(Jesus:) Come, spirit, through sadness to gladness walk.
(Soul:) Ah, draw me, beloved, I'll follow thee hence!
(Jesus:) I'll give thee the crown midst grief and offense!*

**Komm, du süße Todesstunde
BWV 161**

Alto, Tenor, Chorus, 2 Recorders, Organ obligato, Strings, Basso continuo

11 1. ARIA and CHORALE (Alto, Recorders, obligato Organ, Bc.)

*Komm, du süße Todesstunde,
Da mein Geist
Honig speist
Aus des Löwen Munde;
Mache meinen Abschied süße,
Säume nicht,
Letztes Licht,
Daß ich meinen Heiland küsse.*

Come, O death, thou sweetest hour, when my soul takes honey from the mouth of lions; make sweet now my departure, tarry not, final light, that I may embrace my Savior.

12 2. RECITATIVE (Tenor, Bc.)

*Welt, deine Lust ist Last,
Dein Zucker ist mir als ein Gift verhaßt,
Dein Freudenlicht
Ist mein Komete,
Und wo man deine Rosen bricht,
Sind Dornen ohne Zahl
Zu meiner Seele Qual.
Der blasse Tod ist meine Morgenröte,
Mit solcher geht mir auf die Sonne
Der Herrlichkeit und Himmelswonne.
Drum seufz ich recht von Herzensgrunde
Nur nach der letzten Todesstunde.
Ich habe Lust, bei Christo bald zu weiden,
Ich habe Lust, von dieser Welt zu scheiden.*

World, thy delights are weights, thy sweetness is to me loathed as poison, thy joyful light is my dire omen, and where one picks your roses are thorns of countless toll to torment this my soul. Now pallid death has become my rosy morning, with it rises for me the sunlight of splendor and of heavenly pleasure. I sigh then from the bottom of my heart for my final hour of dying. It is my wish now soon to pasture with Christ, it is my wish to leave this world behind me.

13 3. ARIA (Tenor, Strings, Bc.)

*Mein Verlangen
Ist, den Heiland zu umfassen
Und bei Christo bald zu sein.*

*Ob ich sterblich' Asch und Erde
Durch den Tod zermalmet werde,
Wird der Seele reiner Schein
Dennoch gleich den Engeln prangen.*

My desire is to now embrace my Savior and to be soon
with Christ. Though as mortal earth and ashes I be
ground to ruin by death, will my soul's pure luster
shine even like the angels' glory.

14 4. RECITATIVE (Alto, Recorders, Strings, Bc.)

*Der Schluß ist schon gemacht,
Welt, gute Nacht!
Und kann ich nur den Trost erwerben,
In Jesu Armen bald zu sterben:
Er ist mein sanfter Schlaf.
Das kühle Grab wird mich mit Rosen decken,
Bis Jesus mich wird auferwecken,
Bis er sein Schaf
Führt auf die süße Lebensweide,
Daß mich der Tod von ihm nicht scheide.
So brich herein, du froher Todestag,
So schlage doch, du letzter Stundenschlag!*

Now firm is my resolve, world, fare thee well! And I have
only this for comfort, to die within the arms of Jesus:
he is my gentle sleep. The cooling grave will cover me
with roses till Jesus shall re-awaken me, till he shall
lead forth his sheep to life's sweetest pasture, that there
even death shall not keep me from him. So now break
forth, thou happy day of death, so strike then, the final
hour's stroke!

15 5. CHORUS (Tutti)

*Wenn es meines Gottes Wille,
Wünsch ich, daß des Leibes Last
Heute noch die Erde fülle,
Und der Geist, des Leibes Gast,
Mit Unsterblichkeit sich kleide
In der süßen Himmelsfreude.
Jesu, komm und nimm mich fort!
Dieses sei mein letztes Wort.*

If it is my God's intention, I wish that my body's weight
might today make the earth fuller, and my ghost, my
body's guest, take life immortal for raiment in the
sweet delight of heaven. Jesus, come and take me
hence! May this be my final word.

16 6. CHORALE (Tutti)

*Der Leib zwar in der Erden
Von Würmen wird verzehrt,
Doch auferweckt soll werden,
Durch Christum schön verklärt,
Wird leuchten als die Sonne
Und leben ohne Not
In himml'scher Freud und Wonne.
Was schadt mir denn der Tod?*

The flesh in earth now lying by worms shall be consumed,
yet shall it be awakened, through Christ be glorified,
and shine bright as the sunlight and live without
distress in heav'nly joy and pleasure. What harm to
me, then, death?

THE INSTRUMENTS

ARCHLUTE - Reid Galbraith; after J. C. Hoffmann circa 1714.

HARPSICHORD - Frank Hubbard, Boston, MA, 1974; after late
18th century French.

OBOE D'AMORE - Sand Dalton, Washington USA; after
Eichentopf, Leipzig Germany, 1725.

ORGAN - Jürgen Ahrend, Germany, 1975. Frobenius,
Copenhagen, Denmark, 1989.

RECORDER - David Coomber, Utrecht, Netherlands, 1983; copy
of J. C. Denner, Musikhistorisk Museum Copenhagen, 1720.
Henri Gohin, Boissy l'aillerie, France, 1987; copy of P. Bressan,
London, circa 1710. David Ohannesian, Seattle, Washington,
1992; after P. Bressan, London, circa 1715. Tom Prescott, Melrose,

MA, 1976; copy of J. C. Denner, private collection of Hans Ulrich
Staeps, 18th century.

VIOLA D'AMORE - Mittenwald school, 1972 (courtesy of William
Monical).

VIOLA DA GAMBA - Thomas Cole, 1678, London, England. Dan
Foster, Blacksburg VA, 1979; after C. Pierray, Paris, circa 1720.

VIOLIN - Rowland Ross, 1982; copy of Stradivarius, 1688.
Johannes Cuypers, The Hague, 1789. Jacob Steiner, Germany, 17th
Century

VIOLONCELLO - Benjamin Banks, Salisbury, England, 1776.

VIOLONE - John Pringle, Chapel Hill NC, 1992; after Ernst Busch,
Nuremberg, circa 1640. Hammond Ashley Luthiers, Washington,
1977; after 17th century models.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE AT:

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