

Cantatas for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity

San Lorenzo, Genoa

Leaving behind us the austerity of Wittenberg with its fiery celebrations of the Reformation festival, and with the pastor's parting words ('Carry the good work on to Rome!') still ringing in our ears, we were now headed for Italy, first to Genoa and then to Rome, seat of Luther's Antichrist. Pope John Paul II had recently published two papal bulls, one forbidding the performance of all non-sacred music in churches and, when that proved impossible to define, a second banning *all* church concerts. Fortunately there are still a few dissident music-loving Catholic priests and even cardinals who are prepared to soften this approach, with the happy result that we were to give two concerts, one in the cathedral of San Lorenzo in Genoa and one the following day in the basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome.

The Gospel reading for the Twentieth Sunday after Trinity is the parable of the royal wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14). It prompts many figurative references to the soul as bride, to travel, to clothing and to food, such as Jesus as the 'bread of life', and Bach came up with three settings all marked in their way by this imagery, each one creating a distinctive sensuous atmosphere by means of scoring, vocal writing, special sonority, or a mixture of all three.

First came a cantata composed for the Weimar court in 1716, revived, transposed and recopied in Leipzig in 1723. Salomo Franck's strongly worded libretto for BWV 162 **Ach! ich sehe, itzt, da ich zur Hochzeit gehe** compares life with a journey to a nuptial feast. The outcome – happiness or misery – depends partly on the company you keep and partly on whether as a wedding guest you prove worthy of the invitation. Franck has a love of poetic compounds and polar opposites, so in the opening bass aria we get references to 'Seelengift' (poison of the soul) and 'Lebensbrot' (bread of life), heaven and hell, life and

death, rays of heaven and fires of hell. This is some wedding: no wonder the last line is 'Jesus, help me to survive!' With its antiphonal violins and oboes (initially in canon) and an unusual part for a *corno da tirarsi* (played here by an alto trombone) Bach's music is solemn in mood, its structure of the *Fortspinnung* type based on a ritornello with sequential repetitions. The 'journey' continues in the soprano aria 'Jesu, Brunnquell aller Gnaden' (No.3), in which the refreshment of cooling wayside water is evoked in 12/8 metre and via the obbligato lines for flute and oboe d'amore reconstructed for us by Robert Levin. The placid mood and flowing lines are disturbed in the 'B' section by the agitated phrases allotted to the singer: 'Ich bin matt, schwach und beladen' / 'I am faint, weak and oppressed.' Bach helps one to sense in the semiquaver arabesques of the continuo that the soul's desire for refreshment will be granted – eventually. One could paraphrase the alto recitative (No.4) in contemporary jargon as, 'Oh my God, I've got nothing to wear!' were it not for the grim conclusion to the parable in Matthew's Gospel: the guest who arrives without a wedding garment (unprepared, in other words) shall be cast into outer darkness. Dressed appropriately in 'the robe of righteousness' the alto and tenor describe their joyful arrival at the feast (No.5) with long vocal melismas and passages, now in close canon, now in parallel thirds and sixths, and animated leaps in the striding continuo line.

BWV 49 **Ich geh und suche mit Verlangen** is a dialogue cantata dating from 1726 in which the obbligato organ performs a concerto-like *sinfonia* and has a highly decorated part in the opening bass aria and the final love duet between the soul (soprano) and its bridegroom, Christ (bass). All is geared towards creating an atmosphere depicting the beauty of the soul. The language is sensuous, reminiscent of the *Song of Songs*, its religious outer skin easily penetrated. The first duet section 'Komm, Schönste, komm' / 'Come, fairest, come' is, as Whittaker says, 'a frank love-duet which may well take a place on the boards of an

Italian opera-house', appropriately since we were about to perform it in Italy. The best movement is the fourth, an aria for soprano with oboe d'amore and violoncello piccolo, 'Ich bin herrlich, ich bin schön', a kind of early version of Bernstein's 'I feel pretty'. The religious-erotic mood continues in the long final duet with its highly decorated organ part. The soprano sings verse 7 of Nicolai's hymn 'Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern', ending with the phrase 'I wait for Thee with longing', to which the bass responds encouragingly, 'I have always loved you, and so I draw you to me. I'm coming soon. I stand before the door: open up, my abode!' None of the *double entendres* is troublesome, only the length of each movement, which slightly outlives its welcome.

Not so with BWV 180 **Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele**, even though the opening movement is very long – one of those relaxed 12/8 processional movements at which Bach excels. Here he combines sustained passages for the wind (two recorders, two oboes, one of them *da caccia*) with a theme for unison upper strings, then splits off the wind in pairs with cross-rhythmic exchanges over a fragmented (still unison) string figure. The chorale fantasia begins with a serene *cantus firmus* theme in the sopranos atop decorative lines for the three lower voices perfectly tailored to the idea of the soul dressing itself up in all its wedding finery. Initially it conveys an atmosphere of tenderness and expectation: the getting dressed and the journey to the wedding feast. Suddenly (at bar 71) the tension mounts: the bride has arrived (there is even a hint of her long wedding train in the sustained string chords), a pre-echo of an equivalent intensification in *Wachet auf* (BWV 140, No.1). Its sequel, an aria for tenor with flute obbligato (No.2), strongly redolent of the *Badinerie* from the B minor Orchestral Suite (BWV 1067) only at a slower tempo, suggests a mid-feast entertainment or a dance for pipe and tabor. But instead of the dancing girls comes the injunction to 'open the door of your heart' in response to Jesus' knocking (heard in the repeated quavers in the basso continuo). It is fresh, light-hearted

and captivating, and particularly in the Rome concert it inspired a show of spontaneous exuberance from our two keyboard players – boogie rhythms, funky counter-themes, scales, syncopated chords – to me in keeping with the mood of the piece and the occasion, but severely frowned upon by the resident style police.

The wedding feast imagery continues in the third movement, in which the solo soprano leads off in a decorated version of the chorale tune against a gently arpeggiated *moto perpetuo* for piccolo cello, painting the words ‘Ah, how my spirit hungers! Ah, how often I yearn for that food! Ah, how I thirst for the drink of the Prince of Life!’. Her second aria (No.5) is constructed as a *polonaise* divided into units of four and six bars, in which one of the two oboes and both of the recorders join with the first violins in shaping the radiant melody. Quite what Bach thought he was doing by adding the soprano to this charming self-contained music one can only wonder. All she does is to sing the same words over and over again (what would Johann Mattheson have had to say!) for twenty bars on end: ‘Sun of Life, Light of the senses, Lord, You who are my all!’ It is one of the few examples of Bach composing a cantata movement as though in his sleep, or at least of paying minimal attention to the word-setting.

The final chorale is a model of its kind, drawing all the strands of the previous movements together – the themes of the heavenly wedding feast, food for the soul and union with God. Johann Franck’s Eucharistic hymn is ineffably tender in Bach’s four-part harmonisation. As Whittaker says of this cantata, ‘It is one of the most constantly blissful in the series; there are no wars or rumours of wars, no disturbing demons or false prophets, no torture of mind, no thought of past sins, no fear of the hereafter; the soul surrenders herself in ecstasy to the Bridegroom and all things else are forgotten.’

It was fortuitously apt that we were performing these secular-imagined cantatas in two such colourful Italian churches. San Lorenzo in

Genoa is a splendid Gothic cathedral striped in polychrome marble like some ecclesiastical zebra. The mix of sacred and profane can hardly be more pronounced than in Rome's basilica of Santa Maria sopra Minerva, that grandiose thirteenth-century Gothic church squatting on the foundations of three pagan temples – to Isis, to Serapis, and the temple of Minerva built in about 50BC by Pompey the Great. It is a wonderful treasury and jumble of different styles. My favourite is the fifteenth-century tomb of Giovanni Alberini, where a fine Greek sarcophagus of the fifth century BC depicts Hercules fighting the Nemean lion, framed by two Renaissance angels and topped with the cardinal's full-length recumbent figure. It seems to sum up the stylistic heterogeneity of this magical church.

An estimated four thousand turned up to hear us perform three little-known Bach cantatas. People were sitting on balustrades, squatting in side-chapels, standing in all three aisles. I felt a little like a gladiator as I tried to make a path through to the orchestra. The temperature soared. The presence of so many people, so quiet for so long, so attentive and so appreciative, overwhelmed us all. I found it uplifting, conscious throughout of the overlapping layers of pagan and Christian worship and of the dazzling colours that so impressed Handel when he visited Rome. The French cardinal responsible for culture from the Vatican sat immediately behind me in his splendid throne surrounded by listeners. Stepping backwards at one point I inadvertently got a little closer to his lap than I intended, but he didn't seem to mind. I had been told that I would know when the concert was over by the fact that the cardinal would rise and address a few words to me. This he did in measured ecclesiastical French: 'Vous avez évoqué les anges par votre musique: ils sont venus avec leur bénédiction. Merci!' Afterwards somebody asked me why I hadn't kissed his ring. Now *what* would the Lutheran pastor of Wittenberg have made of that?

Cantatas for the Twenty-first Sunday after Trinity

Old Royal Naval College Chapel, Greenwich

Returning from Italy, and with an eagerly awaited eastern leg of the pilgrimage to the Baltic States cancelled, we found ourselves back in London and once more in the Old Royal Naval College Chapel, Greenwich, a perfect architectural and acoustic setting. Someone in the group had recently tuned into a German radio station in which a prominent Leipzig Bach scholar and theologian claimed that our BCP was 'suspect' on the grounds that Bach himself never performed his cantatas back to back on a single occasion, let alone 'in a concert'. To do so now, he said, was not merely inauthentic but a guarantee of repetitiousness, since there was an inevitable sameness to Bach's treatment of the set Gospel and Epistle texts for the same day.

That this is not so one need only turn to the music he wrote for this Sunday. Bach came up with no less than four outstanding works all based on the Gospel account of the healing of the nobleman's son (John 4:46-54), marvellously contrasted and subtly differentiated by mood and instrumentation. In the earliest of them, BWV 109 **Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben!**, he sets up a wonderful series of antitheses to articulate the inner conflict between belief and doubt, and the way that faith is granted only after a period of doubt. First, in the fascinating fabric of his opening chorus in D minor, a setting of words from St Mark's gospel ('Lord, I believe, help Thou mine unbelief'), he creates a *concerto grosso*-like division of forces, between *concertisten* and *ripienisten* in his terminology (the sources don't make this division hard and fast, but it emerged during rehearsal from trial-and-error). A mini-trio sonata texture for single violin and either one or two oboes with continuo, or between solo voice, violin and oboe, is juxtaposed with further interjections (marked *forte*) for the entire

concerto grosso forces. The 'solo' voices are given the first proposition, 'Ich glaube, lieber Herr' (an opening with a rising fourth, capped by the second voice's rising fifth), while the 'tutti' voices chip in with the second: isolated exclamations of 'hilf', and then the meandering, downward-tugging phrase 'hilf meinem Unglauben'. There is endless fascination here in the way these two propositions are articulated, juxtaposed and elaborated in the ever-intensifying exchange between the orchestra and the fugal tapestry woven by all four voices at once. Bach's setting emphasises the tension between belief and scepticism in such personal terms that one wonders whether it mirrors his own private struggles of faith.

Next come two powerfully intense movements, a recitative and aria for tenor in which this inner struggle is dramatised still further. In the recitative (No.2) Bach reinforces the dichotomy between faith and doubt by assigning two opposing 'voices' sung by the same singer, one marked *forte*, the other *piano*, alternating phrase by phrase and surely unique in Bach's recitatives. (How Schumann, would have loved this – he, the creator of Florestan and Eusebius, who hated to express himself in a single unified voice!) The basic struggle is one between B flat major and E minor, keys separated by a tritone. Bach piles on the agony by steering the phrases in these tonally opposite directions, the *piano* phrases (expressing fear) dragging downwards at first, while the loud protestations of belief tend upwards and sharp-wards. In the final phrase the Eusebian figure seems to lose patience and lets out a slow, ear-splitting cry, 'Ach Herr, wie lange?', rising to a top A in his despair (marked *forte* and in tempo *adagio*) as the continuo plunges down a twelfth to settle on a bottom E, a bleak presage of the aria to come. So far, then, there has been no resolution. God has not answered.

Bach proceeds to paint (No.3) the fearful quivering of the soul by means of jagged melodic shapes, unstable harmonies headed towards anguished second inversion chords, and persistent dotted rhythmic

figures. He plunders the tragic reserves of expression inherent in the Lullian French overture to devastating effect, suggesting that this could be interpreted as an early draft of Peter's aria of remorse from the *St John Passion*. Like 'Ach, mein Sinn' the mood is turbulent, desperate and full of torment. It dwindles in energy in its 'B' section, a masterly evocation of the words 'the wick of faith hardly burns, the almost broken reed now snaps, fear constantly creates fresh pain'. The instrumentation begins to thin, the harmonies veer off course in opposite directions, first to D minor then F sharp minor, away from the tonic E minor, and with an abrupt turning aside from the dominant (B minor) towards A minor just before the full *da capo*.

At this pivotal point in the cantata, as Eric Chafe maintains, Bach 'deliberately, I am sure – reverses the relative allegorical meanings of the sharps and flats from the recitative (sharp direction, positive; flat, negative) to the closed movements (flats as positive; sharps as negative)'. So, the next recitative for alto (No.4) turns back to D minor with words of trust in Jesus as a prelude to a sunny aria for alto and two oboes in F major. Constructed as a French *passepied*, despite the emphasis on the inner conflict between flesh and spirit, it brings with it the first welcome signs of assurance. Now in place of the usual four-part chorale harmonisation Bach concludes with an exuberant fantasia filled with a sense of relief and wellbeing. Beginning in D minor it heads towards A minor, a neutral key that 'seems to put all the foregoing keys in perspective, an analogue of how faith eventually overcomes doubt' (Chafe). Whether or not one is inclined to accept such a detailed allegorical interpretation, one thing is certain: Bach's awareness and sympathy for all the wobbles of belief that many of his listeners, then and now, experience. As Luther insisted, faith is sometimes 'granted openly, sometimes in secret'. By the end of this cantata you feel you have been well and truly put through the mill.

This theme of the hidden granting of faith recurs in the following

year's cantata, BWV 38 **Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir**, a chorale cantata from 1724 based on Luther's well-known hymn, in which a free version of Psalm 130 is sung to the ancient Phrygian tune. Luther described this psalm as a cry of a 'truly penitent heart that is most deeply moved in its distress. We are all in deep and great misery, but we do not feel our condition. Crying is nothing but a strong and earnest longing for God's grace, which does not arise in a person unless he sees in what depth he is lying.' Bach understands this perfectly. In an opening chorus only 140 bars long he gives a powerful evocation of this Lutheran crying-from-the-depths and the clamour of imploring voices. He opts for the severe *stilo antico* or motet-style with each line of the tune presented in long notes by the sopranos and preceded by imitative treatment in the lower voices. He doubles each of the four voices with a trombone – four trombones in a Bach cantata! (one thinks of Schütz and Bruckner). What they bring to the overall mood, besides their unique burnished sonority, is ritual and solemnity. Bach seems intent on pushing the frontiers of this motet movement almost out of stylistic reach through abrupt chromatic twists to this tune in Phrygian mode.

For the third movement, an aria in A minor for tenor with two oboes, Bach's setting of the lines 'I hear in the midst of suffering a word of comfort' takes its cue again from Luther's commentary which emphasises the 'blessing' of 'contradictory and disharmonious things, for hope and despair are opposites'. We must 'hope in despair', for 'hope which forms the new man, grows in the midst of fear that cuts down the old Adam'. Rarely does Bach write such continuously interwoven chromatic lines for oboes and with almost nowhere to breathe. It demands strong technique and a fearless delivery.

The last three movements are all exceptional, stern and uncompromising: first a soprano recitative marked *a battuta* over a continuo bass line thundering out the old tune ('you dare give in to doubts!', it seemed to be saying), a marvellous reversal of usual

practice and a *tour de force* of its kind, the soprano's weakened faith scarcely getting a look-in or time to express its frailty. Then a *terzetto*, twin of the one in BWV 116 we performed three Sundays ago in Leipzig – 'Though my despair, like chains, fetters one misfortune to the next, yet shall my Saviour free me suddenly from it all' – which goes on to describe the rise of the 'morning' of faith after the 'night' of trouble and sorrow. Chains of suspensions precipitate a downward cycle of fifths through the minor keys (d, g, c, f then B flat major), whereas the dawning of faith reverses the direction upwards until the idea of the 'night' of doubt and sorrow turns it back again. Different as they seem, these three movements flow from one to the next and seem to call for 'segue' treatment. The final low D of the aria is retained as the bass of the final chorale, beginning with an arresting 6/4 chord above it before establishing the new key of E – 'the D, symbol of *Trübsal* and *Nacht*, is given new meaning by the change' (Chafe). As with BWV 109, Bach's strategy delays the provision and granting of help until the last possible moment. With all the voices given full orchestral doubling (again, those four trombones!), this chorale is impressive, terrifying in its Lutheran zeal, especially its final Phrygian cadence with the bass trombone plummeting to bottom E.

Signs and wonders abound in this amazing work. The very word for signs, 'Zeichen', is given expressive, symbolic expression – a diminished seventh chord assigned to that word in the soprano recitative, formed by all three 'signs', one sharp (F sharp), one flat (E flat) and one natural (C). As Eric Chafe concludes, 'since St John's Gospel is known as the *Book of Signs*, and since the tonal plan of Bach's *St John Passion* appears to have been conceived as a form of play on the three musical signs (*ie* sharp, flat and natural key areas) this important detail in the plan of "Aus tiefer Not" perhaps possesses a wider significance, relating it to Bach's tonal-allegorical procedures in general.'

After all that accumulated intensity BWV 98 **Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan**, dating from November 1726, seems exceptionally genial. It is a considerably shorter and more intimate work than Bach's other two cantatas based on Samuel Rodigast's hymn (BWV 99 and 100). Although it opens like a chorale cantata it is without the typical *concertante* exchanges we associate with Bach's second cycle. Whereas the choral writing expresses confidence in God's will, taking its cue from the Epistle in which St Paul commands us to 'put on the whole armour of God' (Ephesians 6:10-17), the spotlight is on the first violins. Their melodic material suggests an almost speech-like inflection, a striking way to convey the human vacillations between doubt and trust in God, a technique he could have learnt from many examples of his cousin Johann Christoph Bach's oeuvre. Whittaker sums up the cantata's substance with exemplary concision: 'the tenor pleads for rescue from misery (No.2), the soprano bids her eyes cease from weeping (No.3), since God the Father lives, the alto breathes a message of solace (No.4) and the bass declares (No.5) that he will never leave Jesus.' Initial surprise that this cantata doesn't end with a simple chorale but an aria with a chirpy Handelian unison obbligato for the violins gives way to a smile once it becomes clear that the bass's words are in fact a lightly decorated variant of a chorale by Christian Keymann (1658) to the same words 'Meinem Jesum lass ich nicht'.

Last in the programme (and the last to be composed) came BWV 188 **Ich habe meine Zuversicht**, of 1728/9. The opening *sinfonia* derives from the third movement of the D minor harpsichord concerto BWV 1052, of which only the last 45 bars exist in the autograph score. Robert Levin reconstructed the lost 248 bars with characteristic panache. The result is hugely exhilarating. The opening aria is one of the most satisfying of all Bach's tenor arias: pastoral in mood in its 'A' section, with the emphasis on *Hoffnung* (hope), and aspiring to *Zuversicht* (trust or confidence in God) rather than asserting it, as the

vehement and dramatic 'B' section makes clear. It is also singer-friendly, a rarity in Bach's arias for tenor. A long and distinguished bass recitative, ending with a 6/8 arioso, separates this from the alto aria (No.4), presumably an instrumental movement given to organ obbligato with a voice part added. The final chorale, 'Auf meinen lieben Gott', has a tune secular in origin associated with Venus, goddess of love. In Bach's harmonisation it exudes confidence, trust and power.

The Old Royal Naval College Chapel provided a sympathetic setting for these cantatas, though since we were last here in January the Health and Safety people had got their claws into the place, creating unnecessary bureaucratic and physical obstacles, such as 'emergency pathways' for us to dodge around. The audience was genuinely appreciative, but oh-so-English, too shy or deferential to show any of the spontaneous exuberance or enthusiasm of their continental counterparts, their polite applause dropping short each time like a deflated balloon.

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