

Cantatas for the First Sunday in Advent

St. Maria im Kapitol, Cologne

None of Bach's identifiable cantata cycles actually begins at Advent or coincides with the start of the liturgical year. Only the fact that his appointment as *Thomascantor* occurred in the summer of 1723 explains why his first two Leipzig cycles start with the second half of the liturgical year, the Trinity season, with its theological emphasis on how Christians should cope in the actual world, and then move on to the first half, which traces the principal events of Christ's life on earth. But that does not diminish the exceptional significance Bach attached to Advent Sunday, as is immediately clear from his three surviving cantatas for this red-letter day. All three (BWV 61, 62 and 36) are based in one way or another on the favourite Advent chorale of the time, 'Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland', Luther's 1524 transformation of the Ambrosian Advent hymn 'Veni redemptor gentium'. It has a dark, imposing character, one that Bach reinforces – or softens – through his inventive variety of treatments.

In the earliest of the three, BWV 61 composed in Weimar in 1714, Bach superimposes the old medieval chant on top of the most avant-garde music he then knew, the French overture of Louis XIV's monopolistic court composer, Lully, and thereby brings just the right flavour of majesty, awe and expectation to this first day in the liturgical calendar. A decade later in Leipzig his model for BWV 62 is now Italian, a violin concerto movement full of Vivaldian rhythmic bounce and gesture – italianate, too, in the way it conjures up a vision of an airborne angelic orchestra, like a Filippino Lippi fresco. Against this festive instrumental backcloth the eight tones of the iconic hymn tune boom out in the bass line, then migrate upwards to the oboes and thence to the voices, first in diminution, then achieving full plumage when declaimed by the sopranos (doubled by cornetto). Seven years later in 1731 Bach

finds new ways to incorporate the chorale in BWV 36: firstly in all three strands of the soprano/alto duet, with its elaborate continuo line, then stated in long notes by the tenors as it threads its way through a trio sonata texture for two oboes d'amore and continuo (No.6), and finally in the four-part harmonisation of the seventh strophe of Luther's hymn (No.8).

Besides the festive allure they have in common, all three of these contrasted works display a sense of excitement at the onset of the Advent season. This can be traced back both to qualities inherent in the chorale tune itself, and to the central place Bach gives to Luther's words. By treating it with so much flair and fantasy was he consciously responding to local tradition and people's attachment to a favourite hymn? Advent Sunday offered the last chance to his Leipzig congregation to hear figural music in church before Christmas, and therefore inaugurated a time of anticipation and waiting. One imagines too how welcome it must have been for both the Weimar and Leipzig congregations to turn away from all those self-absorbed feelings of guilt, fear, damnation and hellfire that dominated the final Sundays of the Trinity season. This sense of having at last turned a corner is summed up in the radiantly benign *accompagnato* for soprano and alto 'Wir ehren diese Herrlichkeit', the penultimate movement of BWV 62. The two voices move serenely together in pairs of fourths and sixths in rhythmic unison, with just a momentary discord to evoke the midwinter darkness which no longer holds any threats for the believer.

The successive stages of Advent and the differing perspectives these give on Jesus' incarnation are perhaps most clearly marked in Bach's early version of **Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland**, BWV 61. Following the slow-quick-slow pattern of the typical French overture, Bach's grand invocation of the opening chorus changes to a skittish *stretto* fugue (marked 'gai'), Louis XIV's tittering courtiers transformed into 'all the world' marvelling at the imminent birth of the Saviour, before

a slow reaffirmation of God's design in this miracle. The tenor *concertist* now celebrates the colossal benefits to humankind of Jesus taking on human flesh, first in recitative and in arioso, through imitative intertwining with the continuo (No.2), and then in a lyrical 9/8 aria with a three-part meshing of voice, continuo and upper strings, entreating Jesus to enter His church and to instigate a 'blessed New Year'.

At the midway point of this cantata there is a switch from the external properties of Advent (Christ's arrival on earth) to the internal (His entering into the soul of the individual believer via the sacrament). Christ stands at the door of the soul and knocks (No.4). Measured pizzicato chords create a mysterious and hugely evocative backdrop to Christ's request to be admitted to the believer's dwelling and to share his evening meal. Bach's evocation of the scene at Emmaus in BWV 6, and of Christ's post-Resurrection appearance to the disciples in BWV 67, even the entry of the Commendatore in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* – all these flash through one's mind, but most of all the way so many of Bach's fertile uses of instrumental motifs in his later church music can trace their origins back to this little ten-bar *accompagnato* for bass as the *Vox Domini*. The pattern of increasing intimacy with God, the internalisation of the Word via the sacrament (*Kanzel – Altar – Abendmahl*), is mirrored by Bach in a pattern of decreasing instrumentation, so that the soprano's touching response to Jesus' words in No.5 is confined to just *basso continuo*. By this economy of means, in his interlacing of the simplest three-note ascent by continuo and then voice ('Öffne dich') beginning on the second beat of a 3/4 bar and expanding into a 3/2 hemiola for 'Jesus kommt und ziehet ein', and not least in the beatific ecstasy of 'O wie selig' in the slower B section, Bach reveals his debt to that other great miniaturist, his older cousin Johann Christoph, the one Bach ancestor he singled out as a 'profound' composer. The cantata ends rather abruptly, not with a four-part chorale harmonisation but with the final stanza of Philipp Nicolai's hymn 'Wie

schön leuchtet der Morgenstern'. In its fourteen bars Bach requires the violins to climb three octaves to convey the extent of the soul's longing ('Verlangen') for the joys of a future life and the prospect of Jesus returning at the end of time. The reference here to the 'beautiful crown of peace' can perhaps be linked in Bach's iconography with the way his own initials are intertwined with their mirror image and surmounted by a crown in the famous monogram that appears on the beautiful glass goblet that was presented to him in the mid-1730s.

Bach's second setting of **Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland**, BWV 62, is bound to suffer a little in comparison with the fresh delights and perfectly captured sequence of Advent moods of his Weimar cantata. Yet its charm resides in its very differences: not just in the perfect euphony of the soprano/alto duet (No.5) and the captivating swing of the opening chorale fantasia, but in two characterful *da capo* arias. The first, for tenor and strings with two doubling oboes, is based on a graceful *passepied*, asking the listener to marvel at the great mystery of Christ's appearance on earth, bringing with him all the delights of heaven, godly food and a wondrous purity. The second, for bass and a unison continuo for all the strings (No.4), may strike a slightly Handelian note in its pompous, combative character, but it feels to me more like a preliminary sketch for 'Großer Herr', the rousing bass aria in Part I of the *Christmas Oratorio*, and admirable in the way Bach overcomes conventional form and mood by his skill at varying the phrase lengths and inflections of the text. He was sufficiently pleased with this cantata to revive it on Advent Sunday 1736, this time with a new part for *violone* in all six movements copied out by Anna Magdalena, no doubt intended to make the most of a 'grosse Violon' ('ein sechzehnfüssiges bassirendes Instrument' – CPE Bach's description of what his father normally used in Leipzig) the *Thomasschule* had acquired at auction in 1735.

There is a certain logic to recycling a particularly fine secular

birthday cantata to serve as the opening cantata of the liturgical year – and that is just what Bach did in BWV 36 **Schwingt freudig euch empor**, first as a five-movement work and then in this double-decker form in eight movements, first performed on 2 December 1731. Its opening movement is best described, perhaps, as a spiritual madrigal – capricious, light-textured and deeply satisfying once all its virtuosic technical demands have been met: those tricky runs, divisions and chromatic intervals in all voices, and the chains of triplet figuration in the unison oboes d’amore and first violins. Gone is the cosseting of his trebles as in the chorale cantatas of 1724-1725, a year in which their principal function was to intone the simple, slow-moving *cantus firmus* of his opening chorale fantasias, so that either he had an exceptionally improved intake of trebles in 1731 or he was prepared this once to throw caution to the winds in assigning such acrobatic lines to them. At least the individual phrases are short or separated by singer-friendly rests, and the whole movement is a marvel of deftly rhythmicised motifs, imitated voice by voice, contrasted with an equally sprung homophonic delivery of the text. The little ‘Haltet ein!’ figures in the B section recall the repeated ‘Wohin?’s in the bass aria ‘Eilt, eilt’ from the *St John Passion* (BWV 245/24).

In its final state this much-revised cantata is structurally unusual in the way its opening chorus and three fine arias are separated not by recitatives but by chorale stanzas. The first is a duet for soprano and alto doubled by oboes d’amore, with continuo. It is paragraphed in overlapping sequences of ten bars (twice), then eleven bars, then sixteen bars reserved for the most important clause, ‘Gott solch Geburt ihm bestellt’, followed by a three-and-a-half bar closing ritornello. The gentle, triple-time aria for tenor with oboe d’amore obbligato (No.3) makes play with the popular conceit of the soul (bride) and Jesus (bridegroom), and the delight of the one at the appearance of the other, clinched by the rousing four-part harmonisation of Nicolai’s

'Morgenstern' hymn to conclude Part 1.

One might have expected Bach to assign the next aria to a soprano, since he pursues the theme of the soul as bride, but he has other ideas. It is the bass soloist who gets this spirited aria (No.5) with its echoes of the first movement and its highly sophisticated (but totally un-pedantic) elaboration and avoidance of a regular *da capo* structure. Luther's sixth stanza, dealing with the sins of the flesh and Christ's mission to redeem humankind, is embedded in a flurry of semiquavers marked *molt' allegro*, in effect a trio sonata movement for the two oboes d'amore with continuo. In a *berceuse* of pure enchantment, the final aria (No.7) is for soprano proclaiming the way God's majesty can be celebrated even with 'subdued, weak voices', and is accompanied, appropriately, by a muted violin. If it were not for a passing similarity to the echo aria 'Flößt, mein Heiland' from the *Christmas Oratorio*, one would be tempted to describe this aria as unique in Bach's cantata output, not least in its tender lyricism, its confidential exchanges and playful interweaving of violin and voice, a technique that springs from much older dialoguing, Michael Praetorius' *Zwiegesängen*. The final chorale is the eighth of Luther's stanzas, a sturdy public proclamation of praise.

The Romanesque basilica of St Maria im Kapitol was badly destroyed during the Second World War and has since been rebuilt. We were deployed in such a way as to connect with the audience seated in all three apsidal areas. Considering its great size and its unusual layout (a bit like a stylised tree drawn by a child) with a rood screen at the end of the nave, it was astonishing how intimate and reverential an atmosphere was created during the concert. The themes of light and darkness that run through these cantatas felt very much at home here.

Cantatas for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Michaeliskirche, Lüneburg

On this the final European leg of our year-long pilgrimage we were faced with the interpretative challenges of three of Bach's most gripping church cantatas straddling the limits of the liturgical year. All three can be traced back to Advent cantatas composed by Bach after his promotion to *Konzertmeister* in Weimar in 1715, and all three have libretti by the court poet, librarian and numismatist, Salomo Franck. The period between Advent Sunday and Christmas at the Weimar court was not, as it was in Leipzig, a *tempus clausum* in which no figural music might be performed. On the contrary, the mood of pre-Christmas anticipation is palpable in all three cantatas, not only in BWV 132 and 147, originally performed in Weimar on the fourth Sunday in Advent in successive years (1715 and 1716), but also in BWV 70, which was initially designed for the second Sunday in Advent 1716 and deals, perhaps surprisingly in the run-up to Christmas, with Jesus' second coming as judge of the world. All three works reveal just what an astonishingly creative and seminal period this was for Bach, now turned thirty, in terms of cantata composition – his coming to terms with a rich seam of stylistic influences, Italian, French and native German, adjusting to and yet, with his reverence for his roots and the musical past, refusing to be circumscribed by the new 'Neumeister type' of cantata with its characteristic pattern of recitative and aria. The music is electric with invention, exuberant and dramatic in response to Franck's texts, and contrary to what some scholars might claim, unmistakably original and distinct from the cantatas of any of his contemporaries. It makes one howl with regret that many (no-one can say exactly how many) of Bach's other cantatas from these years (1713-7) are lost, perhaps burnt or impounded by his employer, the umbrage-taking Duke Wilhelm Ernst, depriving us on the one hand of the means to assess his vocal output against the succession of matchless keyboard

masterpieces of these years (including the *Orgelbüchlein*), and on the other of a corpus of cantatas of sufficient weight and number to compare with the great Leipzig cycles of the mid-1720s.

Our programme in Lüneburg began with BWV 70 **Wachet! betet! betet! wachet!** in the musical form in which this cantata has survived – the expansion that Bach made for performance in Leipzig on 21 November 1723 (the Twenty-sixth Sunday after Trinity) of the shorter, six-movement Advent piece composed seven years earlier in Weimar (BWV 70a), of which only three upper string parts survive. No damage was done in the process to Franck's libretto since the underlying theme of both Sundays (the coming of Christ and the Last Judgement) is virtually the same at this pivotal point in the year, the 'old' year referring to the time of Israel and the 'new' to the time of Christ's life on earth. Franck postulates a progression from the time associated with 'Egypt' (the period of Israel's captivity) to that of 'Eden' – from worldly torment to heavenly joy – which Bach mirrors in an upward modulatory trajectory by rising thirds (a – C – e – G). Beyond this, Franck and Bach together lay great emphasis on the juxtaposition between linear, human time and God's eternal, immutable time. Through the addition of a second chorale and four recitatives (two *secco*, two *accompagnato*) paraphrasing the Gospel (Matthew 25:31-46), their original cantata now becomes a two-part work concerned with the opposition between destruction and restoration. Bach attempts the impossible: to overcome the sequential way in which musical (and therefore human) time unfolds by suggesting ways in which it is subordinate to, and subsumed within, God's eternal time. Here and there he leaves hints of his preference for the latter, just as he does in his *Actus tragicus* and *St Matthew Passion*, not just in simplistic pictorial ways such as the sustaining of key words like 'bestehen' (literally to survive, metaphorically to remain steadfast) in the soprano aria (No.5), but by the boundless – in fact time-less – ways he sets about mining all the inventive possibilities contained within a

succession of musical ideas.

The result is a unique fusion of prodigious music from two of his most fertile periods of cantata composition, those groundbreaking bursts he made in 1716 and 1723. One could pretend to notice the stylistic joins between the two versions and styles, but that would be disingenuous. In fact what is so impressive here is the convincing and dramatic way the first *accompagnato* (No.2, Leipzig) erupts out of the opening chorus (Weimar) and how the equally dramatic proclamation of the Last Judgement (No.9, Leipzig) is stitched so seamlessly on to the soothing aria (No.10, Weimar). Joshua Rifkin suggests that the trumpet part was added to the first chorus and last aria only for the Leipzig revival and that the oboe adds nothing substantial to the musical fabric of the first movement, even concluding that it sounds better with just strings, and that the dialogue between trumpet and voice in the tenth movement (bars 36-7) was just a lucky coincidence. Yes, well... Even allowing for the difficulties wind-players (probably playing at French *Kammerton* with A=392 Hz) may have had in adapting to the organ pitch in Weimar, both trumpet and oboe play a crucial, jousting role in the opening movement and in Bach's experimental alternations between orchestra alone, choir alone, then choir with accompanying orchestra and finally with voices incorporated within the repeat of the orchestral *sinfonia*. This technique (*Choreinbau*) is integral to Bach's success in conjuring up before our eyes the terrifying moment (taken from Peter's Epistle for the day) when 'the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat'. That is before those of a numerological disposition begin to count up the recurrences of the up-and-down arpeggio figure in the trumpet line – a kind of *veille* urging on the calls of '*Wachet!*' – and find them to be fourteen, the symbolic number that stands for Alpha and Omega, a metaphor (derived from the Book of Revelation) for Jesus as the beginning and ending of existence.

What strikes me most about the following *accompagnato* (No.2) for bass soloist, strings, oboe and trumpet, and its twin (No.9), is the operatic punch they both pack. Beginning with repeated semiquavers hammered out in Monteverdi's *stilo concitato* (literally the 'excited style'), they anticipate by many years the supremely operatic outbursts of two of Handel's most formidable heroines, Dejanira the unhinged wife in *Hercules* (1745) ('Where shall I fly?') and Storge the outraged mother in *Jephtah* (1752) ('First perish thou!'). But it is not merely their full-throttle openings that link these great *scenas* to Bach's cantata: Bach is a match here for Handel in his powerful vocal declamation, the fine gradations of mood and the vividly supportive orchestral accompaniment he invents to portray the cataclysmic destruction of the world and, finally, the seraphic transition (from recitative to the bass aria, No. 10) as Jesus guides the believer to complete 'stillness, to that place of abundant joy' ('zur Stille, an den Ort, da Lust die Fülle'.) Even those Leipzig congregants most opposed to operatic music in church must have been stirred when they picked out the Advent chorale melody intoned by the lone trumpet above the mayhem of Armageddon – 'Es ist gewisslich an der Zeit', a hymn tune that became a talisman, a kind of *Dies irae*, during the Thirty Years' War.

Bach's earlier Advent collaboration with Franck, drawn from Franck's *Evangelisches Andachts-Opffer* of 1715, was BWV 132 **Bereitet die Wege, bereitet die Bahn!**, an intimate work scored for four voices, oboe, bassoon, strings and continuo consisting of two recitatives, three arias and a final chorale. For those familiar with another work based more directly on Isaiah 40:3 it is difficult to rid the mind of the opening *accompagnato* from Handel's *Messiah*. Yet in preparing the way of the Lord, Bach's soprano has a much tougher task in her opening aria than Handel's tenor, being expected to negotiate melismas of first 60 and then 84 continuous semiquavers that lead on to five further sustained beats, all with the insouciant grace and fleet-

footed buoyancy befitting a slowish *gigue* or a French *loure*. The interpretative challenges extend also to the soprano's duet partner, the oboe. As we have seen, the fact that the organ in the ducal chapel in Weimar was tuned in high *Chorton* – probably a whole tone above the regular pitch – meant that Bach could count on his string players, but not his wind players, tuning up to the organ pitch. The autograph score shows the oboe line notated with a double clef, a soprano clef (C1) in the key of A, followed by a violin clef (G2) with no key signature, from which we can deduce that the oboe was tuned in low *Kammerton* playing in C major alongside the strings and organ tuned in high *Chorton* and playing in A major. To avoid these complications and inconvenient changes of pitch within a single programme we postulated what Bach might have done had he revived the piece in Leipzig: retaining the key of A major and assigning the oboe to the newly invented *d'amore* model, which is pitched a minor third lower than the normal oboe. For why indeed wouldn't he have performed such a beautiful piece in Leipzig? It seems that it was performed in Zerbst in 1725, so perhaps it should be counted amongst those lost cantatas, revived and adapted for a different Sunday.

When setting Franck's verse Bach seems to judge perfectly the moments to glide from *secco* recitative into *arioso* and back again – to heighten the expressive force of 'the Christian's crown and glory' ('der Christen Kron und Ehre') and to 'roll back the heavy stones of sin' ('Wälz ab die schweren Sündensteine'), the tenor and continuo symbolically locked here in imitative exchange, then fusing momentarily to suggest Saviour and sinner 'united... in faith' ('im Glauben sich vereine'). Franck adapts the priests' interrogation of John the Baptist in the Gospel reading – 'Wer bist du?' – to Christ probing the depths of the Christian's conscience, which explains why Bach assigned the second aria (No.3) to his bass soloist, his lines criss-crossing with those of the bass instruments – cello, bassoon, violone and organ. There is nothing

especially euphonious about such low-pitched tonal clusters, but one's attention is held by Bach's determination to express all that the text implies: the vigorous, declamatory denunciation of sin and hypocrisy and the insistent use of a questioning four-note *figura corta* (a device that pervades his early organ and clavier music), from which only the cello figuration manages to break away. Bach then calls on his string ensemble to underpin the rueful, penitential gestures of his alto soloist in an extended *accompagnato*, and then an obbligato violin (which he himself may have played) to convey the cleansing effect of baptismal water in a meditative aria, also for alto. The autograph score concludes here, with no music for the final chorale. Franck's libretto gives the text of the fifth verse of Elisabeth Creutziger's hymn, 'Herr Christ, der einig Gotts Sohn' (1524), for which Bach provided a fitting harmonisation in BWV 164.

The best known of Bach's reworkings of an earlier Weimar cantata is BWV 147 **Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben**. Salomo Franck's virtues of lyricism, theological point making and a fondness for isolating individual words (four of them in the opening chorus alone) are here on display. In the process of Bach's expansion of a six-movement original for the Fourth Sunday in Advent (BWV 147a) to a ten-movement work for the feast of the Visitation (2 July 1723) the chief casualty is Franck's concise exposition of the Advent message through the progression of its four back-to-back arias: repentance, faith, preparation and conversion. In the new version the arias are retained but reshuffled, with some verbal alterations and a completely different text (not by Franck) for the bass aria (No.9). On the other hand the Leipzig version of the cantata gains in richness and variety through the addition of three linking recitatives, one string-accompanied (No.2), one *secco* but breaking into dramatic *arioso* (No.4), reminiscent in mood and technique of the first cantata, BWV 70, and one with twin oboes da caccia (No.8) that looks forward to the two great Passion settings. But most of all it is

the addition of the musically identical chorales, pastoral in character, which close both parts of the cantata (Nos 6 & 10), that exert the strongest appeal. In music of such mellifluous beauty and apparent naturalness it is easy to overlook the fact that the *melos* of the celebrated eight-bar ritornello – the very tracery with which Bach surrounds the simple chorale melody (Johann Schop's 'Werde munter, mein Gemüte') – grows directly out of the rootstock it embellishes.

By his injunction to the Christian to 'give witness of Christ' ('von Christo Zeugnis geben'), as John the Baptist did in preparation for Jesus' arrival, Franck bestowed no favours on Bach with the text for his opening chorus – and yet what a success Bach made of it! Still more than in the opening chorus of BWV 70, which originally came two weeks earlier, he finds ways to synthesise the old and the new: to create a mosaic out of (a) purely instrumental *ritornelli*, which in turn generate the material for (b) up-to-the-minute fugal expositions (voices with doubling instruments), (c) marvellously elastic vocal episodes (full of cross-rhythms bestriding the bar lines) with just the continuo in support of the choir in the older motet style (partly homophonic, partly responsorial) that he had been developing ever since he first embarked on cantata composition, and (d) further *ritornelli*, now enriched by the presence of the voices operating in pairs. This last feature is just one in a series of little duet exchanges that begin in bar one (between trumpet and bassoon) and pass to and fro across the whole colour spectrum of his vocal and instrumental ensemble. He even has time to incorporate a double echo (*f-p-pp*) into this taut overall structure.

The first aria, in effect a trio for alto, oboe d'amore and continuo (No.3), is an appeal to the believer, shaming him not to wriggle out of recognising his Saviour. It would be entirely in character, as well as appropriate in expression, if the idea for its irregular rhythmic pattern grew in Bach's mind out of those bold hemiola references to fear and hypocrisy he placed in his opening chorus. Another trio, this time for

soprano, violin and continuo (No.5), deals with the preparing of the way, though without the lung-bursting exertions of the opening aria of BWV 132 composed for the same Sunday a year earlier. In fact the arabesques of the violin grow in response to the head-motive, just as they did in the alto aria of that cantata (BWV 132 No.5) in contagious delight at the singer's invitation to Jesus to enter the prepared way ('Bahn') of her heart. Another of Franck's distinctive verbal mottos, 'Hilf, Jesu, hilf', launches the tenor aria (No.7) to open what is now Part II of the cantata, with its continuo accompaniment of cello and violone unusually decorated by the organ with chains of triplets. But the most imposing of the four arias is the last (No.9), for bass with the same trumpet-dominated full orchestra used in the opening movement. It would be easy to attribute the fiery *concertante* writing as Bach's response to the mention of 'the might of holy fire', until we remember that the aria was originally set to totally different words (by Franck) that call on the voice of John the Baptist to help the process of conversion 'from darkness and gloom to the true Light' ('von Finsternis und Dunkelheit zum wahren Lichte mich bekehren').

Our two successive concerts were given to capacity audiences in the atmospheric Michaeliskirche where Bach, aged fifteen, sang as a member of the small specialist 'Mattins Choir'. We all used the old choir-room to change in, treading the same boards that Bach trod when attending choir practice. The church, which was begun in 1376, is unusual and slightly uneven, its wonky slender pillars set at an angle. It is built over salt mines: Lüneburg was an important *Hansestadt* in the sixteenth century and controlled the extraction of salt and its supply to northern Germany. With the collapse of the Hanseatic League the city's fortunes declined, with the result that the remarkable *Rathaus* was not modernised and exists in a pristine state of preservation – as does the whole old town, which was spared the bombing of the Second World War and later occupied by the British army.

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