

Cantatas for the Sunday after Christmas

St Bartholomew's, New York

Manhattan was magical in the first serious snowfall it had experienced in five years. It was New Year's Eve and the festively lit trees in Park Avenue were weighed down with snow. Bach's great double-choir motet **Singet dem Herrn** (BWV 225), with which we began our 59th and final programme of the pilgrimage, refers to the cutting wind which can wither grass and cut off life, and the temperature outside the church had fallen to minus 10 degrees. But then this is the time of year when vegetative growth habitually comes to a standstill. There is a direct parallel here in the way religious (and not just Christian) belief sees this darkest moment of mid-winter as a period of suspended animation and so an auspicious time to reflect on the fundamental mysteries of existence. Bach captures that mood most poignantly in the contemplative middle section of his motet. The atmosphere in St Bart's was exceptional, the packed audience rapt and mercifully cough-free. The mood of the choir and orchestra was a strange mixture of fragility and elation, as though the huge effort of reaching the finishing post had brought all the pent-up emotion to the surface. It found release in the joyous, spirited singing of the outer sections of *Singet dem Herrn* with strong emphasis on 'ein NEUES Lied'. The engagement, zest and sense of complicity amongst both the singers and players was palpable, a climax to a year-long venture in which new friendships had been formed and cemented through collective experience. Edward Said said to me afterwards that the performance of the motet was for him the high point of the evening.

For others, though, it may have been the first cantata we performed, BWV 152 **Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn**. It really is a minor miracle, this intimate chamber piece for just two singers (soprano and bass) and six instruments (recorder, oboe, viola d'amore and viola da gamba, with cello

and organ continuo), to which we added a seventh (a harpsichord) in the final movements. The Lutheran liturgy for the Sunday after Christmas distances itself from the mood of the incarnation and anticipates Christ's coming Passion, crucifixion and death. Salomo Franck's libretto is based on the contrast of opposites: it focuses on the image of the stone, the cornerstone of faith set by God in Jesus' incarnation, but also the stumbling block to human inclination. Bach's setting makes much play of this duality, humanity's initial fall and the need for spiritual abasement on the one hand, the triumph of faith and the soul's attainment of the crown as the terminus of the 'Glaubensbahn' on the other. Right from the off, in the four slow introductory bars leading to one of the most spirited and purely instrumental of fugues (a rarity in Bach's cantatas), one senses Bach's purpose in pitting four such distinctive instruments against each other and the pleasure he takes in the mixing and blending of colours. All his youthful fantasy, his eagerness to experiment, as well as an already formidable command of counterpoint, are brought into play here. Bach shapes his cantata as a spiritual and musical journey. First, we are urged by the bass soloist to step onto the path of faith (No.2); then along the way, either side of the soprano's aria which venerates the stone of faith (No.4), we are given stern admonitions, a warning of the fate of the 'wicked world' as it 'stumbles over it into hell' (No.3), and a denunciation of worldly wisdom (No.5). In the face of faith, reason has no persuasive power or strength. The heart needs to turn towards holy unity, symbolised by Bach in the convergence of his four chosen instruments as a foil to the dialogue between Jesus and the Soul.

Achieving a convincing balance between the forward-moving, gigue-like melody of the four instruments and the space needed by the vocal lines to encompass the text is just one of the interpretative challenges of this intriguing cantata, a gem along with those other precious survivors of

Bach's later Weimar years (1714-17). Yet who really knew these new works in Bach's day outside the immediate court circle? To his peers and contemporaries he was recognised primarily as a virtuoso organist and then as a composer of instrumental music. *What* were they missing, and how many other vocal works from these years have been lost to us – perhaps more than 50%? The most likely explanation is that they were impounded by Weimar's cantankerous duke when he locked the door to the organ loft where Bach kept his scores, and threw him into jail a month before his departure.

BWV 122 **Das neugeborne Kindelein**, a chorale cantata composed in 1724 as part of Bach's second mini-Christmas cycle for Leipzig, is surely about as close as he ever got to the traditional Christmas carol-like image of the infant Jesus. And yet the anonymous librettist bypasses the set readings for the day, and in following closely to a hymn by Cyriakus Schneegass (1597) sticks to an old tradition which conflates the celebrations for Christmas and the New Year. Bach opens with the gentlest imaginable chorale fantasia, a lyrical tune by Melchior Vulpius, the hymn text just four lines long, divided by a delicate *ritornello* for three oboes and strings in the form of a pastoral lullaby, yet very different from the ones we are used to in Part II of the *Christmas Oratorio*. What this does is to make the eruption of the cello continuo and organ all the more dramatic as a prelude to the bass singer's exhortation, 'Mortals, you who sin each day, you should share the angels' gladness'. Where the low pitch and dark tone colour of the bass soloist in dialogue with the *basso continuo* emphasises a mortal, earthly perspective, the soprano (whose first vocal entry mirrors that of the bass) then describes that of the angels, initially recoiling from accursed humanity. But at her words 'erfüllen nun die Luft' ('now throng the air'), three recorders, the highest instruments available to Bach, begin to harmonise Vulpius's tune. Bach's purpose is clear: to show that the

opposing realms of men and angels can and will now be reconciled. It put me in mind of Botticelli's 'Mystic Nativity' in London's National Gallery, surely one of his most inspired compositions. There, right in the foreground, are angels embracing men. Just a few years before Botticelli put brush to this canvas in 1500, Savonarola had berated the Florentines very much like Bach's bass soloist: 'Repent of what you have done, repent of your sins, distance yourself from the Demon, let yourself be won over by the angels, the only ones who can bring you to the Saviour'. It may be that Botticelli's painting was intended to serve as an illustration of Savonarola's sermon, just as Bach's cantata could be interpreted as an aural representation of Botticelli's painting. The Schneegass hymn returns as the filling in the sandwich of the following trio: soprano and tenor singing the text of the 'aria', the altos that of the chorale doubled at the octave by violins and violas. 'This is a day the Lord Himself has made' declares the bass (No.5), rousing the choir to celebrate 'the true year of jubilation... now is the time to SING!'.

A similar injunction to render thanks to God for all the good things experienced in the course of the year lies at the heart of the cantata Bach composed a year later as part of his third Leipzig cycle: BWV 28 **Gottlob! nun geht das Jahr zu Ende**, a fitting title to sum up the parallel sense of loss and fulfilment, relief and regret within the group at the very end of a year-long life-changing experience. The cantata begins as a spirited concerto-like movement with an antiphonal deployment of oboes and upper strings providing a backcloth to the soprano's dance-like call for a song of thanks. That song of thanks ('Danklied') is none other than the motet 'Nun lob, mein Seel, den Herren', which I had first learnt as a seven-year-old treble at a German summer school directed by a once-famous German choral conductor, Georg Götsch, then very frail. We sang it every day for a week, and I think I was profoundly bored; but half a century later I

found myself galvanised by its *stile antico* sobriety and complexity, its buried treasures and subtleties, especially those that occur in its last fifty bars, in which you sense some immense cosmic struggle being played out. I fear the choir, too, may have been bored during rehearsal; but in performance, with the vocal lines doubled by strings, oboes, cornetto and sackbuts, they rose to the occasion in this penultimate *Te Deum laudamus* of the Pilgrimage. I found it immensely stirring. After that great chorus the remaining movements inevitably come as a bit of an anticlimax. Fine though the tenor *accompagnato* (No.4) and imitative duet for alto and tenor (No.5) undoubtedly are, it is the concluding chorale which makes the strongest impression. Paul Eber's New Year hymn 'Helft mir Gotts Güte preisen' has cropped up several times in the course of the year, but never so powerfully or so movingly as in Bach's harmonisation of this prayer for protection and sustenance in the year to come.

In many ways it felt appropriate to be ending our Pilgrimage here in New York in the snow and on the cusp of the turning year. Anywhere in Germany it might have felt repetitive, inviting comparison with Weimar from where we had set out the previous Christmas. Anywhere in Britain people might have been inclined to sit at home around the Christmas tree or in front of the telly. Here, on the other hand, was a new audience won over for Bach's prodigious cantatas, and a challenge met by this hand-picked, travel-hardened team of pilgrims, who through an intensive, year-long exposure to this music had made such impressive individual and collective strides. The music we had spent a year grappling with is technically challenging: it is often a high-wire act demanding phenomenal precision, flexibility and virtuosity, as well as a responsiveness to your fellow musicians. It requires you to soak yourself in the idiom, and you need 'Bach miles' on the clock before you feel able to interpret these cantatas with relative ease and full conviction.

Nowhere was this more apparent than in the final cantata of the tour. BWV 190 **Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied!**, composed for New Year's Day 1724, has come down to us in fragmentary form, at least as regards its first two movements, of which only the voice lines and the two violin parts have survived. All the remaining orchestral parts have to be reconstructed. Various attempts have been proposed and printed, none of them wholly convincing and some not very idiomatic. At least it is possible to extrapolate Bach's intended instrumentation for the opening movement from the extant scoring of the final chorale. Everyone got to work, our two brilliant keyboard players, Howard Moody and Silas Standage, taking the lead filling in the missing figured bass lines with minimal fuss. Right up to the last moment in rehearsal we were adjusting new instrumental lines for the three oboes, three trumpets and timpani. With more time and skill we might have made a better job of it, but when it came to the performance all the singers and players seemed intent on capturing the infectious joy and festiveness of this ebullient New Year piece. And of course the psalm text being almost identical to that of the motet we had sung at the start of the programme gave it added spice. Between the psalm verses Bach inserts two lines from Luther's vernacular version of the *Te Deum* (1529). These he assigns to the traditional liturgical plainchant delivered in long notes by the choir in octaves, a technique of musical relief of which he was a master – and which is hugely imposing in performance.

Luther's clauses return, this time harmonised, in the litany-like second movement with 'troped' recitative interpolations for the three lower soloists. There is a dance-like aria in triple time for alto (No.3), to which we added the three oboes to double the homophonic string lines prompted by the plausibly secular origin of this fandango-like movement. But the pick of all the movements is the tender duet for tenor and bass 'Jesus soll mein Alles sein' ('Jesus shall be my all'). Here again there is a problem: the

sources offer no clue as to what instrument Bach intended for the ravishing obbligato, one which shares only the opening phrase, heard no less than six times, with the voice parts; for the rest it is made up of chains of wistful, gestural arabesques bouncing off a silent main beat. We experimented with oboe d'amore and then violin and found that it lay uncomfortably low for both instruments. Then remembering the viola d'amore called for in BWV 152, I asked Katherine McGillivray whether she would be willing to try it out. At first she demurred: her instrument was tuned to A=392 and it would entail either playing in E flat major (with no open strings) or of tuning up. But when it came to the concert, and accompanied by her sister Alison on cello, Katherine brought just the right meditative and elegiac mood to this touching duet, sung with amazing restraint and control by James Gilchrist and Peter Harvey. In the end I had no hesitation in choosing this movement as our (second) encore. So the very last notes of the Cantata Pilgrimage, with everyone choked and fighting back the tears, were of Katherine's hauntingly beautiful viola d'amore.

With the Gospel reading (Luke 2:21) for New Year's Day focussing on the circumcision and naming of Jesus, every line of this duet begins with the word 'Jesus'. Bach's intent is clear: to call attention to the believer's eschatological hopes of ending his life, as he begins and ends the year, with the name 'Jesus' on his lips. Just as he does in many of his cantatas written for other pivotal moments in the church year – Annunciation (BWV 1), Easter (BWV 31) and the beginning (BWV 75, 76 and 20) and ending (BWV 60 and 70) of the Trinity season – Bach gives particular emphasis, here at the turning of the year, to the cyclic course of life, the inevitable progression from beginning to end. In the duet this is what lies behind the reference to Christ's forthcoming Passion, 'Jesus helps me through His blood', a shadow passing across the music and clearing only for the last line, 'Jesus makes my ending good'.

As Eric Chafe has noted, acceptance of the cycle of life and death was and is the most natural and inevitable of human responses to existence. By beginning and ending his New Year cantata in the key of D major Bach seizes on the most readily audible symbol to establish a solid framework against which the listener can measure the bumpy happenings and disturbances of the year gone by and the one about to begin. No doubt this was also his reason (as with two of his other New Year's Day cantatas) for ending with a verse of Johannes Herman's chorale, 'Jesu, nun sei gepreiset'. With its fourteen-line strophes this hymn is the perfect symbol of the span from Alpha to Omega, the journey from beginning to end and its resumption at the moment of the year's turning.

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