

Cantatas for the Second Sunday after Epiphany

Old Royal Naval College Chapel, Greenwich

This was the first cantata programme in this pilgrimage to take place on what was for many of us home soil. After three of the most intense weeks of music-making beginning at Christmas in Weimar, continuing in Berlin over New Year and in Leipzig and Hamburg at Epiphany, some of the group were concerned that the special atmosphere might have evaporated, and with it the extraordinary quality of listening that German audiences bring to this music. With the Royal Naval College at Greenwich packed to the rafters on two consecutive evenings we need not have worried.

At first glance one might have thought it a little odd that, for a Sunday in which the Collect is 'Unto us a child is born. Hallelujah!', Bach left us three cantatas with the titles 'My God, how long, ah! how long?' (BWV 155), 'Ah God, what deep affliction' (BWV 3) and 'My sighs, my tears' (BWV 13). Was this just a case of the Lutheran clergy making a fetish of the hair-shirt approach to life's woes? The texts of the cantatas inscribe a path from mourning to consolation – one illuminated by Bach's music – and, by varying degrees of emphasis on the Gospel for the day (the miracle of the turning of water into wine), they employ this as a symbol of the transformation of earthly troubles into heavenly bliss. They also point to the 'proper' time ('Mine hour is not yet come', Jesus said to his mother) at which the believers' long vigil of tribulation and doubt will finally end.

We gave the first of the cantatas for this Sunday, BWV 155 **Mein Gott, wie lang, ach lange?** (composed in Weimar in 1716), in its revised, Leipzig version (1724). It traces the progress of the individual soul from isolation and wretchedness (No.1), by means of encouragement and exhortation from fellow believers (No.2) and comfort in the word of God (No.3) to a secure and delighted trust in Christ (No.4). An initial D minor lunge of despair in the upper strings over a pulsating bass line launches the soprano into her heart-stopping arioso. An antithesis is soon established between her 'cup of tears' which is 'ever replenished' and the 'wine of joy' which has run out. This turned out to be a common thread in all three cantatas – the 'Weinen/Wein' (weeping/wine) metaphor serving to show that tribulation is unavoidable if faith is to grow. By

assigning the first and fourth movements of Salomo Franck's text to a soprano, Bach may have been buttressing the Lutheran scaled-down view of Mary: honoured as the mother of Jesus, yet an intensely human figure. He first presents her wringing her hands as the 'wine of joy' runs out at the Cana marriage feast, her confidence 'all but gone'; yet she speaks for all believers in progressing from intense anxiety (No.1) to a joyful acceptance of Christ's word at his chosen time (No.4).

Some time around his fiftieth birthday Bach was presented with a splendid crystal goblet – perhaps by two ex-pupils, the brothers Krebs – decorated with grapes and vine leaves. It bears an inscription partly in verse, partly in segments of a descending chromatic scale, a sure way of getting the master's attention. Was it perhaps a coded ploy by the donors, their way of shaking him out of his disaffection with composing new music for the church, of rekindling his zest by expressing 'hopes for life... that only you [Bach] can give them'? (The Krebs brothers – the name means 'crab' – can be read in the backward or crab-wise motion of the second segment.) One can picture Bach quaffing the wine from his goblet, fully alert to its engraved Lutheran admonishment – that to survive life's ordeals one needs to have faith and hopes for fulfilment in an afterlife – and recalling the felicitous way he had found of expressing this very thought some twenty years earlier, the soprano swirling up to a top G with the words 'the wine of joy' as the upper strings descend in parallel motion.

Traces of that bucolic mood survive in the wide-ranging, chuntering bassoon which acts as a genial decoration to the consoling message of the alto/tenor duet. Did this start life as music for one of those celebrated Bach family reunions? It persists in the bass's mention of 'the wine of comfort and joy' which lies in wait for those who have passed God's test of love and faith (No.3). I find the dancing exuberance of the last aria utterly irresistible – the way in which the soprano throws caution to the wind, herself into the loving embrace of the Highest and the text into all kinds of angular, but jaunty, contortions. The final chorale reveals that confidence has been restored: when God is most present he is often invisible to the human eye.

Next came BWV 3 **Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid**, composed as part of Bach's second Leipzig cycle in January 1725. The chorale melody of

the first movement is assigned on this occasion to the vocal bass-line supported by a trombone. Bach takes a simple device and a frequent symbol of grief in the tragic *chaconnes* of Baroque opera – six notes in chromatic descent – and makes it the melodic germ of his entire chorale fantasia: the introduction, each vocal entry, the instrumental interludes and the coda. His method is to work from the natural accentuation of the German text (and not the barlines!) and to underline this with a succession of appoggiaturas and chromatic harmonies which results in what Gillies Whittaker calls ‘a fascinating maze of cross-accents such as we find in Tudor choral music’. Even the effortfully ascending counter-subject reinforces the image of ‘the narrow path... full of sorrow’. It is only with the mention of going to Heaven (‘zum Himmel wandern’) that Bach offers us a glimmer of hope through a radiant ascent by the sopranos to a top A, re-establishing the home key, though by a circuitous route.

The chorale tune returns (No.2), this time harmonised without frills and in straightforward diatonic chordal form, each line separated by an ostinato motif in the continuo (derived from the chorale tune in diminution) and ‘troped’ by recitatives for each of the four solo voices in turn. The following bass aria is an uncomfortable, tortuous ride for both cello and singer, their lines constantly criss-crossing each other as it twists and turns to convey ‘Hell’s anguish and torment’ (the altar painting of St Paul and the viper on the back wall of the Naval College Chapel seemed to complement this image). This is only the first line of a six-line stanza, yet Bach extends its influence over all but eight of the sixty-two bars of the aria’s ‘A’ section – which even the mention of ‘a true delight in Heaven’ cannot completely dispel.

Bach reserves his most winning music for the E major duet (No.5) sung in free canon by the soprano and alto to a fugal accompaniment of violins and oboes d’amore in unison. His achievement here is to prove how, through joyful singing, one can win the battle to rid oneself of the cares that revolve within the troubled mind – his equivalent of ‘Singin’ in the Rain’, I suppose. It took me until the ‘B’ section to realise that the melodic outline of the entire duet (and the purposeful fugal exchanges between all four lines) is based not on some external musical whim but on aural symbols of the Cross to which the words refer (‘Jesus helps to bear my cross’), appearing both in the

melodic shapes inscribed across the staff and in the characteristic use of double sharps, symbolised by an x. It also refers us back to the sorrowful heaviness of the opening fantasia and its chromatic expressivity. This is finally purged in Bach's plain harmonisation of Martin Moller's hymn (No.6).

Alfred Dürr once wrote that Bach's setting of Georg Christian Lehms' text **Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen** (BWV 13) 'illustrates how the imagination of the Baroque musician is particularly fired by texts dealing with sighing and pain'. True; but the effect of Bach's music is hardly typical: read Lehms' text and you sense a self-indulgent, wallowing quality; listen to Bach's music and it is transforming, every sound pointing beyond itself to a state of heightened awareness.

Take the opening movement, a slow 12/8 lament for tenor, two recorders, oboe da caccia and continuo. Remove the oboe da caccia and the music, complete in itself, is unremitting lamentation. The effect of an added counter-melody, with decorative arabesques in the oboe da caccia with its flared brass bell, is to penetrate the anguished texture: to refine and soften the pain of the dissonances and overall despondency. Eventually the oboe da caccia takes over the foreground, its influence extending to the recorders, who with the voice entry abandon their mournful dialogue and play in unison. (In the sixth bar of the 'B' section there is an intriguing similarity to the theme of the opening chorus of the *St Matthew Passion* in the bass line – a conscious reference to that monumental *Klaglied*?) Then in the chorale (No.3), the imploring conclusion to the alto's prayer for comfort (No.2), Bach assigns confident diatonic harmonies to the strings' decorative surround to the plain chorale tune, the alto doubled by the three wind instruments from the opening aria. He thus ensures that an optimistic, wordless answer is implied (and understood by the listener) to the singer's rendering of a text full of uncertainty and questioning.

The fifth movement is surely one of the bleakest of all Bach's arias. I remember it from my childhood – from faltering attempts to accompany my mother's singing on the violin – but the 'halo' of two recorders playing above the violin was new to me. There is a hypnotic quality in the combination of violin obbligato doubled at the octave by the white, sepulchral sound of the recorders. Bach seems determined to rub the listener's nose in the full misery

and wretchedness of life here below, the idea he adumbrated in the first of these three cantatas but here raises to a different level of meditational intensity. Having up to this point taken the edge off Lehms' doleful words, he is now in a position to do the opposite: where the text postulates a 'beam of joy' as the culmination of all the 'groaning and piteous weeping [which] cannot ease sorrow's sickness' Bach, in his modified ABA da capo form, virtually ignores this step by step advance from gloom to confidence. He lifts the shroud of dissonant and angular harmony only in temporary and inconclusive imitation of the 'heavenward glance' (bars 51-52). This is but a prelude to a full-scale recapitulation of the first section in the sub-dominant, the music plunged again into darkness as though intent on exploring new agonies of mind and soul. With your pulse and mind slowed down, your senses sharpened, you becomes alert to each tiny detail. The aria is hugely demanding of the performers in its exceptional length, intensity of expression and degree of exposure (we were incredibly lucky that Gerry Finley was willing to step in at the last moment). It is even more harrowing than that other Epiphany aria for bass 'Lass, o Welt, mich aus Verachtung in betrübter Einsamkeit' (BWV 123/5), which we gave in Leipzig two weeks ago. Only the consoling beauty of Heinrich Isaak's tune to 'Innsbruck, ich muss dich lassen' – used so poignantly in the *St Matthew Passion* – could follow this in Bach's consummate harmonisation.

What a setting for Bach's music Nicholas Hawksmoor's design for the great chapel at Greenwich might have provided! Conceived in a fit of wild baroque experimentation around 1699 as the centrepiece of the grandest group of buildings to be built in early eighteenth-century England (to which he, Wren and Vanbrugh all contributed), the chapel project then went to sleep for three decades. It was eventually remodelled on a much more modest scale by James ('Athenian') Stuart in the 1780s. With its shallow vaults and facing galleries, it has the cool neo-classical elegance of a later generation – which by and large turned its back on the likes of Hawksmoor and Bach.

Cantatas for the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
Abbey Church of St Mary and St Ethelflaeda, Romsey

If asked what kind of opera composer Bach would have been, I would point immediately to BWV 81 **Jesus schläft, was soll ich hoffen?**. For it seems to me that nothing in his secular cantatas, despite their titles as *dramma per musica*, is remotely as vividly theatrical or indeed operatic as this amazing work, first performed in Leipzig on 30 January 1724. It is one of only a handful of cantatas in which Bach seizes on a dramatic incident from the Gospel of the day – here Matthew’s account of Jesus calming the violent storm on Lake Galilee which threatens to capsize the boat in which he and his disciples are sailing – and makes it the basis of a metaphor pertinent to the Christians of his day: life as a sea voyage.

Jesus’ sleep on board ship is the initial backdrop to an eerie meditation on the terrors of abandonment in a godless world – cue for a pair of old-fashioned recorders (so often associated in Bach’s music with contemplations of death as well as sleep) to be added to the string band. Nor is it a surprise that Bach gives this opening aria to an alto, the voice he regularly turned to for expressions of contrition, fear and lamenting. Here he challenges the singer with a serious technical (and symbolic) endurance test, to hold a low B flat without quavering for ten slow beats (twice!) and then to go on to evoke the gaping abyss of approaching death. There is also a balance problem to resolve: of blending the pair of fixed-volume recorders sounding an octave above the strings – which are, of course, dynamically flexible – while retaining maximum expressivity. Life without Jesus (his soporific silence lasts all the way through the first three numbers) causes his disciples and later generations acute anguish and a sense of alienation which comes to the surface in the tenor recitative (No.2) with dislocated, dissonant harmonies. One thinks of Psalm 13: ‘How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?’, and of the guiding star precious to all mariners and to the magi.

Suddenly the storm bursts. It is astonishing what a vivid *scena* Bach can create from a simple 3/8 allegro in G major just for strings. A continuous spume of violent demisemiquavers in the first violins set against a thudding pulsation in the other instruments reaches ear-splitting cracks on the 7/6/4/2 flat chords to convey the rage of ‘Belial’s waters’ beating against the tiny

vessel. The overall effect is similar to one of Handel's more powerful operatic 'rage' arias, demanding an equivalent virtuosity of rapid passagework by both tenor and violins but imbued with vastly more harmonic tension. Three times Bach halts the momentum mid-storm, as it were, for two-bar 'close-ups' of the storm-tossed mariner. Though intensely real, the tempest is also an emblem of the godless forces which threaten to engulf the lone Christian as he stands up to his taunters.

Jesus, now awake (how could he possibly have slept through all that racket?), rebukes his disciples for their lack of faith. In an *arioso* with straightforward continuo accompaniment (it is almost a two-part invention) the bass soloist assumes the role of *vox Christi*. After the colourful drama of the preceding *scena* the very spareness and repetitiveness of the music is striking. One wonders whether there is an element of dramatic realism here – of yawn-induced irritation and rebuke (all those repeated *warums*) – or even of mild satire: is this perhaps another of those occasions when Bach is having a bit of fun at the expense of his Leipzig theological task-masters?

There follows a second seascape, just as remarkable as the earlier tempest, in the form of an aria for bass, two oboes d'amore and strings. The strings in octaves evoke the pull of the tides, the undertow and the waves welling up only to be checked at the point of breaking by Jesus' commands 'Schweig! Schweig!' ('Be silent!') and 'Verstumme!' ('Be still!'). Neither Bach's autograph score nor the original parts contain any helpful indication of articulation (which of course does not necessarily preclude their introduction in his performances). We experimented with different slur-permutations and with localised *crescendi* aborted one beat earlier than their natural wave-crest. These seemed to work idiomatically and pictorially, as did the final ritornello played smoothly and softly, now obedient as it were to Christ's commands. The stilling of the storm is implicit both in the alto soloist's concluding recitative (No.6) and in the final chorale, the seventh verse of Johann Franck's hymn *Jesu, meine Freude* – a perfect conclusion to this extraordinary and genuine *dramma per musica*.

The land-locked Bach might never have witnessed an actual storm at sea, but one of his favourite authors, the seventeenth-century theologian Heinrich Müller, could certainly have done: he lived in Rostock on the Baltic

coast and commentated eloquently on this particular incident in Matthew's gospel. For the true believer to travel in 'Christ's little ship' is, metaphorically, to experience the buffetings of life and bad weather, but to come through unscathed: 'the paradox of total peace in the midst of turbulence'. A tropological interpretation of this biblical event was, one would have hoped, sufficient justification for Bach's brilliantly inventive and, yes, dramatic treatment, and a foretaste of his *St John Passion*, whose premiere lay just over two months away. But we can be sure that it would have ruffled the feathers of Leipzig councilmen like Dr Steger who, nine months earlier, had voted for Bach as Cantor with the implied proviso 'that he should make compositions that were not *theatrical*'.

There was no danger of bathos in Bach's sequel for the same Sunday the following year: it did not exist! Easter came so early in 1725 there was no Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, and it was not until ten years later, just after the first performance of his *Christmas Oratorio*, that Bach sat down to compose BWV 14 **Wär Gott nicht mit uns diese Zeit**. Here he reverts deliberately to the chorale-based structure of his second Leipzig cycle, taking as his starting point Luther's hymn (a paraphrase of Psalm 124) which, apparently, had been sung on this Sunday in Leipzig from time immemorial. But instead of opening with a chorale fantasia he sets himself a fresh challenge: to present each chorale line equally between the four vocal parts (doubled by strings), first in fugal exposition and immediately answered by its inversion, and then in augmentation by unison oboes and *corni di caccia*. This creates a complex polyphony in five real parts (six, when the continuo line peels off from doubling the vocal bass), and suggests an affinity in technique and even mood with the opening chorus of BWV 80 *Ein feste Burg*. It is a defiant, awe-inspiring riposte to the earlier *Jesus schläft*, one which presents a clear image of God's indispensable protection to the beleaguered community of believers – 'We who are such a tiny band' – by means of the dense web of supporting counterpoint. Both of the ensuing arias are considerably easier on the ear, though technically demanding. The one for soprano (No.2) with string textures reminiscent of Brandenburg No.3 features the horn in its highest register (referred to in the autograph part as *Corne. par force* and *tromba*), defiant in support of the singer's show of strength against

the enemy's 'tyranny'. Bach wisely did not attempt to emulate his prodigious seascapes from BWV 81 and here makes only passing reference to the storm in the angular tenor recitative (No.3) and a vigorous gavotte-derived aria for bass and two oboes (No.4) which focuses on God's rebuff to the 'violent waves' of enemies which 'rage against us'. The gentle lapping motion of unthreatening passing quavers in the final chorale is perhaps accidental, since the imagery has now switched to the soul's escape from the fowler's snare.

With comparatively little for the choir in these cantatas – both for Epiphany 2 and 4 – I decided to include the longest of Bach's motets, BWV 227 **Jesu, meine Freude** (which happens to be one of the set hymns for the feast) to both this and the Greenwich programmes. Even after countless attempts over many years to get to its heart, I still find it hugely – and rewardingly – challenging. One needs to ensure that there are none of 'those primordial collisions between song and words' (George Steiner), and to relish both its fruitful interleaving of St Paul's stern homilies to the Romans with Johann Franck's vivid and sometimes sugary hymn stanzas and the way Bach harmonises them with matchless ingenuity. Fashionable musicology would have it that the motet is a compilation, put together from the rump of 'Es ist nun nichts' (movement 2) and the central fugue 'Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich'. I find it difficult to believe that anyone but Bach could possibly have concocted the brilliant, chiasmic structure of this eleven-movement motet, and done so as the very first stage of its compositional planning.

With only two cantatas for Epiphany 4 there was room for another aquatic cantata, BWV 26 **Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig**, composed in November 1724, which would otherwise not have got a look-in during our cantata pilgrimage (with Easter coming so late, there was no twenty-fourth Sunday after Trinity in 2000). Like several of Bach's late Trinity season cantatas its central theme is the brevity of human life and the futility of earthly hopes. Bach bases his cantata on a paraphrase of the thirteen verses of a hymn by Michael Franck (1652), which was included in the Leipzig and Dresden hymn schedules for this Sunday. The instrumental ritornello to the opening chorale fantasia is a stupendous piece of musical confectionery. Long before the first statement of Franck's hymn (sopranos doubled by cornetto) Bach establishes the simile of man's life to a rising mist which will soon

disperse. Fleet-footed scales, crossing and recrossing, joining and dividing, create a mood of phantasmal vapour – a brilliant elaboration of an idea which first came to him in Weimar (1714/16) when he composed an organ chorale to a simplified version of Franck's hymn (BWV 644).

In his second stanza Franck compares the course of human life to 'rushing water' shooting down a mountainside before disappearing, an image dear to the Romantic poets. Could Goethe have known Franck's hymn when he wrote his marvellous 'Gesang der Geister über der Wassern' ('Song of the spirits over the waters') in Weimar some time in the 1780s? There seems to me to be a proto-Romantic gestalt to the way Bach sets Franck's verse for tenor, flute, violin and continuo (No.2), each musician required to keep changing functions – to respond, imitate, echo or double one another – while variously contributing to the insistent onwardness of the tumbling torrent. It is a technique Schubert might have admired when he came to set Goethe's poem to music for male voice choir – no less than four times. Life as misty vapour, then as a mountain torrent; now Bach has to deal with material breakdown, the moment when 'all things shatter and collapse in ruin' (No.4). He scores this *Totentanz* for three oboes and continuo supporting his bass soloist in a mock *bouffée*. Where one would expect this trinity of oboes to establish a mood of earthly (even evangelical) pomp, with the stirring entry of the singer their role becomes gradually more subversive and pictorial, firstly in the throbbing accompaniment which seems to undermine the fabric of those 'earthly pleasures' by which men are seduced, then through jagged figures to represent the tongues of flame which will soon reduce them to ashes, and finally in hurtling semiquaver scales of 6/4 chords for those 'surging waves' which will tear all worldly things apart. Perhaps most imaginative of all are the two brief *secco* recitatives in which Bach depicts fleeting human aspiration (No.3) and the way even the god-like eminence of the rich will one day be turned to dust (No.5). Both the declamation and the word-painting are superb. Each of them could stand alone, both as eschatology and as Bach's way of encapsulating the message in music of phenomenal economy and trenchancy.

The interior of Romsey Abbey is a revelation in the way it seems to combine uncluttered gracefulness with a beautifully proportioned

Romanesque sturdiness. It cries out for music. Founded as a nunnery by King Alfred's son Edward in 907, it was sacked by the Danes, rebuilt by the Saxons and then again by the Normans. It was saved from becoming a picturesque ruin at the time of the dissolution of the monasteries by an inspired decision of the citizens of Romsey in 1544 to buy it for £100 as their parish church. The nave is flanked by three decks of arcade, gallery and clerestory. As the eye moves westwards you realise that the last three arches, the two final bays of the gallery and almost the entire clerestory are early Gothic, not Norman. Then, one bay before the crossing, the rhythm changes: here, squattest of all, are a pair of giant cylindrical columns two storeys high. Everywhere there are signs of the twelfth and thirteenth-century masons experimenting with new styles and motifs from abroad – just as Bach did when he first encountered the Italian concerto. What did those stone-carved figures peering down at us from the projecting corbels make of all this?

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From a journal written in the course of the
Bach Cantata Pilgrimage