

THE CANTATAS OF JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

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Historical Background. Compared with England, France and Italy, the development of music in Germany started strikingly late. In the field of polyphonic music* especially it was not until the middle of the 15th century—when the great period of French music came to its close—that Germany came to the fore. However, from that time German music progressed in a continuous line which, even apart from its many outstanding summits, has maintained an exceptionally high level up to the present.

The 17th century found German composers active in practically all fields of vocal and instrumental music, and soon leading particularly in the various forms of church music: the Cantata, Passion, and organ composition. At the beginning of the century Samuel Scheidt (1586-1654) laid the foundation for the development of German organ music, and Heinrich Schütz (1585-1672) brought the Passion and Oratorio** to an artistic height comparable to that of J. S. Bach (1685-1750), in whose work the music in these fields was brought to a climax.

Many changes in German church music came with the Reformation, although in the early days Luther did not banish

*Polyphonic music combined several simultaneous voices (parts) of a more or less pronounced individuality, as opposed to monophonic music, which usually denotes that particular type of accompanied solo song which developed around 1600.

**The Passion is a musical setting of the text of the Passion of Christ from one of the Gospels. An Oratorio is an extended musical work of a religious or contemplative nature, often dramatic, using both solo voices and chorus. It is more elaborate than the Bach sacred cantata, and the Libretto is more narrative and continuous in character.

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the Mass from the service but retained it, omitting only the *offertorium* and substituting the sermon for it. This alteration did not affect the musical structure of the church service, since the great choral portions of the Mass still figured in the same place in both the Protestant and Catholic churches. Protestant composers wrote Masses exactly like the Catholics, and the Mass music of the Italian masters was performed in the Protestant churches. The distinction between music in the two Churches had not made its appearance in the early days of Bach.

While the *Kyrie*, *Gloria*, *Credo*, *Sanctus*, *Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* were always the same for every Sunday, the Introit and the Gradual changed each week, since the words of these had to be appropriate to each particular Sunday. Eventually the German hymns, in keeping with the German sermon, aimed at expressing the character of each Sunday. A hymnbook published in 1566 is entitled *Geistliche Lieder nach Ordnung der Jahreszeit ausgeteilt* ("Spiritual songs distributed according to the Order of the Season"). Musicians suddenly became conscious of a greater task before them than always writing fresh music to the statutory hymns of the Mass. Now there were new poems on the Gospel to be set to Music year by year. The effect of this freer church music was to make composers practically indifferent to the prescribed musical portion of the service. The same *Kyrie* or *Gloria* could be sung every Sunday as long as the motets bearing on the sermon were new and expressive. They took more pleasure in composing new motet-texts than in turning into music repeatedly the unmusical Nicene Creed. They would rather write a whole year's sermon-music than one complete Mass. Bach, in fact, composed five yearly series and only one complete Mass.

When he needed music for a Mass he borrowed from the Italians or from his own cantatas.

The Cantata. Shortly after 1600 the cantata appeared, replacing the 16th century madrigal as the third offspring of the monodic style (the other two being the opera and the oratorio). It consisted usually of a number of movements such as arias, recitatives, duets and choruses based on a continuous narrative text, which could be lyrical, dramatic or religious. The church cantata (*cantata da chiesa*), with religious subject matter, is particularly well known and defined. However, the secular cantata (*cantata da camera*) was not only the earlier, but also the more frequent type throughout the 17th century, especially in Italy.

The Chorale Cantata is a term used, usually with reference to Bach's cantatas, to denote those in which chorale texts (usually chorale melodies also) are used for movements other than the final one which is nearly always a harmonized chorale. The following types may be distinguished : those in which chorale texts are used for all movements ; those in which some of the chorale verses are recast in free poetry in order to allow for aria-like treatment ; and those in which chorale texts are used in some movements while the others are free recitatives or arias.

The cantatas of J. S. Bach. Bach probably wrote close to 300 cantatas, of which only 195 have been preserved. Of these, 165 were written during the early Leipzig period. Generally historians divide the cantatas into the following periods: Bach's early days in Arnstadt, Mülhausen, Weimar and Cöthen ; and the Leipzig period of 27 years when he was cantor at St. Thomas' Church (from 1723). This study will be confined to three church cantatas, two from the early period and one from

the early Leipzig period. Naturally no study of the cantatas is complete without an examination of the musical scores, but since that is not feasible here, this article must be confined to the general form and to the texts.

Mention has been made of the part played by Luther in providing not only the chorales on which much of Bach's cantata music was based, but also Luther's introducing into the service music with German texts in place of Latin. A third debt Bach owed to Luther for his translation of the Bible. In a discussion of "Luther and Bach's Cantata 50"* Scheide says, "Luther's poetic boldness as a Bible translator was largely responsible for one of Bach's most imposing creations. The composer's debt to the reformer does not end with the impulse which the latter gave to the chorale but extends to the Bible itself. For it was Biblical inspiration that, by and large, Bach found most congenial to his nature; and the Bible he read had been prepared by a man with an extraordinary ear for music and prosody. In his Bible translations, Luther became Bach's ablest librettist."

One of the early cantatas, and one of the first six to be printed, is No. 106, *Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit* (God's Time is Best). This cantata, inscribed by Bach "Actus tragicus", was composed during his early years as organist at Weimar (1708-1711). It is not known for whose death this mourning cantata was written, but it seems to have been for an old man, to whom the "Mid Fried' und Freud' fahr ich dahin" (from Simeon's song of praise) would be appropriate.

The text is as perfect as the music, and was probably compiled by Bach himself, Schweitzer thinks. It is composed of verses from the Bible in which the antithesis is worked out

*By William H. Scheide in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, Vol. IV, No. 1, page 36.

between the Old Testament fear of death and the New Testament joy in death. The opening movement is a sonatina written for two flutes, two viola da Gamba and Continuo. As in the case of a number of Bach's early cantatas, the movements follow one another continuously:

Chorus, from Acts 17: "For in Him we live, and move and have our being."

Tenor aria, from Psalm 90: "So teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom."

Bass aria, from Isaiah 38: "Thus saith the Lord, Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die and not live."

Chorus, from Ecclesiasticus 14: "All flesh waxeth old as a garment; for the covenant from the beginning is, Thou must perish."

The Soprano soloist sings along with this: "Come, Lord Jesus, come."

Alto aria, from Psalm 31: "Into thy hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of Truth."

Bass-alto duet, from Luke 23: "And Jesus saith unto him, Verily I say unto thee, this day shalt thou be with me in paradise."

Alto: "In peace and joy I now depart, in God confiding, His will with heart and soul obey, safe abiding, With Thee here I've naught to fear, eternal life awaits me."

Chorus: "All glory, praise and majesty to God the Father forever be, And to the Holy Spirit. The strife is done, the battle won, through Christ the Savior. Amen."

It will be noted that the words of this cantata, as in many, alternate between the subjective and objective. The dramatic life and the intimate union of words and music especially

endeared it to the early admirers of Bach. The cantata was first publicly revived by the Cecelia Society of Frankfort-on-the-Main in May 1833. "If it was the St. Matthew Passion that rescued Bach's music from its Babylonian captivity," said Schweitzer, "it was the *Actus tragicus* that prepared the path for its return and levelled the ground for it. Even when we know all the cantatas we always go back with pleasure to this work, written by Bach at the end of his twentieth year."

When Bach began to supply the regulation cantata for the church service at the Weimar Court, he decided in favor of a new style, and wrote his music to the free texts supplied by Salomo Franck and Erdmann Neumeister, the conversion beginning about 1712. In place of dramatic texts compiled from Biblical verses and stanzas from hymns, we now get inferior poems that are monotonously alike. The arioso is supplanted by the *da capo* aria and the *secco* recitative.* The plan is still further impoverished by the fact that the choir now recedes wholly into the background, figuring only at the beginning and at the end. There is none of the animated alternation between solo and chorus that we find in the *Actus tragicus*. Nor does the composer now try to cast the whole work into one mold. The cantata henceforth divides into separate numbers.

Cantata No. 18, *Gleichwie der Regen und Schnee* (Like as the raindrops and snow) was the first in which Bach set a text by Neumeister, the pastor for forty years at St. James Church in Hamburg. But in spite of the fact that Schweitzer thought little of the Neumeister texts, and feels the Weimar

**Da capo aria*: In this form, the first section (A) is repeated after the second section (B). The Arioso is a style midway between that of an aria and a recitative. *Secco* recitative: (from *secco*, dry) recitative with simple chordal accompaniment.

cantatas on the whole are inferior to earlier ones, he calls the recitative upon the long opening passage from Isaiah 55 "an incomparable masterpiece." He also calls "astoundingly effective" the declamation in the middle section, which is written in the form of a litany, with tenor and soprano recitatives followed each time by the choral response, "We so beseech thee, mighty God." And Schweitzer continues, "The nearly equal divisions of the original passage (verses 10 and 11) are gathered up by the music into one great unified phrase that resolves and obliterates, as if by magic, all the rigidities of the verbal passage, giving us the impression that the poetic thought has waited for centuries for this music in order to reveal it self in its true plastic outline." An abbreviated outline of the cantata follows:

Sinfonia, witten for 2 flutes, 4 violas, bassoon, cello and continuo. The theme shows the same structure as the ones Bach uses to express steadfast and confident faith later in the cantata. The opening is also remarkable in that it is in the style of a chaconne, the cello and continuo playing the same melody in low octaves throughout the sinfonia, while the flutes carry a different type of smoothly-flowing melody above.

Bass recitative: "Like as the raindrops and snow from heaven fall, and return not again thither, but water the earth here, and make it bring forth and flower that it give seed to the sower and bread to feed us; so too of my word which from out my mouth proceedeth; verily it will not come back to me without fruit, but shall bear that which shall please me, that whereto I send it, my word shall prosper."

Tenor recitative: "My God, who hast all my heart, to Thee

in Jesus' Name I gave it freely ; so strew Thy seed abundant, and rich fertility impart : My God, Thou who hast all my heart, let it bear fruit, its harvest richly nourish : O Lord, help, that it may grow and flourish :” Soprano : “Upon Thy Holy Word bestow Thy strength and spirit.” Chorus : “We so beseech Thee, mighty God.”

(This pattern repeated three times)

Soprano aria : “My soul's delight is God's command, other joys are mere delusions, vain confusions, nets that Satan sets to catch us, plots and schemes to overmatch us. Out with all the evil band, my soul's delight is God's command.”

Chorus : “With all my heart, O Lord, I pray that by Thy Word thou guide me, that I be never led astray, that naught from Thee divide me. My sins efface, and in Thy grace, be Thou my trusted Master ; Thy mercy sure makes me secure from death and all disaster.”

In comparing No. 106 with No. 18, the difference in the quality of the words can be noted even in translation, and also the difference in the importance of the choir.

The Easter cantata, No. 4, *Christ lag in Todesbanden* (Christ lay in death enshrouded), is one of the best known cantatas, and is practically the only one in which the same chorale melody appears in each movement. It is also the first in which Bach used as his libretto the original text of an entire hymn by Luther, based on I Cor. V, 7-8 (Christ, our Passover, is sacrificed for us) and Mark 16, 1-8 (the two Marys and Salome at the sepulcher on Easter morning). It is written to be accompanied by two violins, two violas, cello, double bass, continuo and three “trombones cornette”. It opens with a short Sinfonia of 14 measures, built around the

first two notes of the chorale.

Verse 1. Sopranos sing the chorale in long notes, while underneath the other three parts sing a slightly altered version in shorter notes, and a section of the orchestra, using the opening three notes as a figure, play in still shorter notes. It ends, as do all the remaining movements, in a Hallelujah Chorus.

“Christ lay by death enshrouded, from mortal sin to save us.

He is again arisen, eternal life He gave us;
So let us joyful be, and magnify Him thankfully, and sing Hallelujah!”

Verse 2, duet by sopranos and altos, with the chorale melody in the upper voice:

“O Death, none could lay thee low, no child of man subdue thee;

Our sin brought all this to pass, for there is no health in us.

Therefore soon came Death and threw over us his net
To hold us captive fast imprisoned. Hallelujah!”

Verse 3, tenor solo:

“Jesus Christ, our God’s own Son, for us to earth descended.

And all our sin has He atoned, and so Death’s rule has ended.

All Death’s power here below is now a vain, an empty show;

His sting is lost forever. Hallelujah!”

Verse 4, chorus, with the chorale melody in the alto voice:

“It was a wonderful array with Life and Death embattled,

For Life has won the victory, for Life is victor over
Death,

And Death is swallowed up in victory.

O Grave, where is now thy victory? Hallelujah!"

Verse 5, Bass solo: "For us the Easter Lamb was slain....
Hallelujah!"

Verse 6, duet by sopranos and tenors: "So let us keep
this holy feast....Hallelujah!"

Chorale, by full chorus and orchestra:

"We celebrate this Holy Feast in reverence united.

The evil leaven works no more, Thy Word its curse
has righted.

Christ Himself the Feast will be and nourish our souls
that we By Faith may gain salvation. Hallelujah!"

Conclusion. There are all degrees of technical difficulty in
the performance of the Bach cantatas, but there are many
which are possible for amateur groups. In fact, in Mendelssohn's
day these works were given in small circles, often with a
modest choir, with a piano accompaniment; and in this way
many came to learn and to love Bach.

Perhaps the finest feature of Bach's destiny, Schweitzer
says, is that, without his ever having dreamed of it, he has
provided the world with a spiritual domestic music. The
performances of the cantatas by a few singers with piano
accompaniment may be imperfect, but if the performers have
their hearts in their work they are fully conscious of the beauty
of the music, and their souls feel the consecration of it perhaps
more than in listening to the most perfect performance.

The reason for so few cantatas being given, especially
by small church groups, is sometimes financial. Bach's almost
invariable practice of writing for four soloists makes the

works costly to produce. This however need be no hindrance. Good performances of the cantatas can be given with only one or two soloists, since it is often possible for the solos and duets to be sung by all the sopranos, altos, tenors or basses. Of course there are some that should be produced intact, since they constitute complete religious "dramas of ideas", but it is also possible, since many of the cantatas are loosely constructed, to omit much of the solo work and combine chorus numbers from cantatas of the same spirit.

The composer Gevaert once wrote to Schweitzer,

"It is with Bach's music as with the Gospel: we know it only according to Matthew or Mark or Luke or John; the Evangelists deviate widely from each other, and yet they give us the 'Gospel'; anyone who seeks for this in them can find it, and can communicate it to others. So it is with Bach's works; the only thing is that we must seek Bach, not ourselves, in them, and have a reverent consciousness of offering mankind something precious not only for the artistic sense but for soul and spirit; then it is always the true Bach, no matter in how many different ways he sounds."

Bach's music does not depend upon perfection but upon the spirit of the performance. Mendelssohn, Schelble and Mosewius, who were the first to waken the Cantatas and Passions to new life, were able to do so because they were not only musicians but sincere men of deep feeling. "Only he who sinks himself in the emotional world of Bach, who lives and thinks with him, who is simple and modest as he, is in a position to perform him properly."

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