

Cantatas for New Year's Day

Gethsemanekirche, Berlin

After the stirring start to the Pilgrimage, with three Christmas concerts in Weimar, came a brief turn-around in London, a belated exchange of family gifts, a partial change of team and two immensely demanding programmes to prepare for two consecutive feast days: New Year's Day, which this year fell on a Saturday, and the Sunday after New Year. Arriving in Berlin we headed straight for the Gethsemanekirche in Prenzlauer Berg, to the north-east of the city and centre of the cultural east. In October 1989 this church became the focus of protests by artists and intellectuals against the DDR that led to a prolonged siege. It retains a strong atmosphere, this big neo-Gothic theatre of a church scarcely a hundred years old, with its impressive jutting 'dress circle' gallery and a long reverberative acoustic, difficult to manage. We were here to usher in the new millennium, and what better way than with the music of Bach on the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his death? Everyone in the group seemed enthused and ready for this huge adventure.

On paper, however, the New Year's Day programme of cantatas risked being a damp squib. How could the trite year-end exordiums and prayers for 'Stadt und Land', 'Kirche und Schule' of Bach's anonymous librettists measure up to the momentous time-switch from the second to the third millennium? As it turned out, easily, aptly and – thanks to Bach's music – triumphantly. Even if the horrors of seventeenth- or eighteenth-century warfare could not compare in scale with those of the outgoing century, surely the bloodiest ever in human history, there is enough substance in some of these cantata texts to mull over, such as the 'thousandfold misfortune, terror, sadness, fear and sudden death, enemies littering the land, cares and even more distress' which 'other countries see – we, instead, a year of grace' (BWV 143 No.4). 1999 had

been the year of Kosovo, Chechnya and East Timor, whilst western Europe, in contrast, wallowed in a consumerist mudbath, to all intents and purposes unharmed and at peace. But with Bach's cantatas one is dealing with so much more than just 'settings' of religious texts. His music opens the door to all-encompassing moods which, in their way, are far more powerful and evocative than mere words, particularly as his textures are typically multi-layered and thus able to convey parallel, complementary and even contradictory *Affekte*. Words, as Mendelssohn put it, can be equivocal, slippery and 'so ambiguous, so vague, so easily misunderstood in comparison to genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too *indefinite* to be put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*'. With Bach comes music that seems to vault over all sectarian obstacles and provide both performer and listener with experiences that are salutary and deeply purifying, simultaneously specific and universal, and ones that seem to fit a particular need at this momentous time-switch.

It is all the more fascinating, therefore, to encounter and compare Bach's responses to the same liturgical occasion and the same biblical texts in different works composed at separate stages of his life and development. This will be the pattern for the whole year: a slice-wise comparison of cantatas written for successive feast-days. Superficially the four New Year's Day cantatas that we performed in Berlin could hardly be more different from one another. BWV 143 **Lobe den Herrn, meine Seele** has come down to us only in a manuscript copy of 1762. There are doubts aplenty about the authenticity of this little cantata and several problematical features. The first of these is the scoring, its unusual combination of three *corni da caccia* with timpani, bassoon and strings; then there is the key of B flat (is this *Kammerton* or *Chorton*?), the simplicity (*naïveté* even) of its construction and textures, and the mixture of biblical words, chorales and free verse, which suggests a

stylistic affinity with Bach's earliest cantatas, the ones composed during his year in Mühlhausen (BWV 106, 4, 71 and 131), albeit on a far humbler level of musical craftsmanship and invention. On the surface it most resembles the 1708 Council election cantata *Gott ist mein König*, BWV 71. The interjections by the brass in the bass aria (No.5) recall a similar procedure used in the alto aria of BWV 71, and even the arpeggiated melodic outline is identical to the latter's opening chorus. Then there is a passing similarity of mood in its best movement, the pastoral tenor aria (No.6) with its felicitous weaving of bassoon and cello continuo, with that of the enchanting 'turtledove' chorus (BWV 71 No.6). All this has tempted some scholars to see *Lobe den Herrn* as the lost version of the cantata Bach was supposed to have written for the following year's Council election in Mühlhausen, though to me it seems, if anything, like an earlier, more primitive shot at the same target. Plausible, too, is the idea that this was, at least in part, an apprentice piece written in Weimar under Bach's direct tutelage. If so, a certain exuberance and use of instrumental colour is either genuinely Bachian or else extremely good student pastiche, like the arabesques of the solo violin punctuated by a staccato 'death-knell' in the lower strings (No.4), which make partial amends for the often conventional melodic shapes and rhythmic patterns that typify the rest of the musical material.

With BWV 41 **Jesu, nun sei gepreiset** we are on much safer ground. This is a mature second-year Leipzig cantata of the highest quality. It is the type of cantata that reminds us how, in our increasingly urban society, we have lost close contact with the rhythms and patterns of the liturgical year, and perhaps even with perceptions of the basic cyclic round of life and death. Already one of the features that has begun to register with us as we set off through this year of cantatas is the idea of cyclic return, of a journey from a beginning to an ending, from Alpha to Omega. This will be the essential background against which to measure the various events of the coming year, in addition to

its changing seasons and turning points. One does not need to be a theologian or a number symbolist to discern Bach's ways of conveying the simple idea of a progression from beginning to end to new beginning. He makes his strategies wonderfully audible, as in the opening chorus of this cantata: a huge movement, in effect a chorale fantasia. Faced with the problem of structuring the fourteen lines of Johannes Herman's exceptionally long hymn stanza (evidently popular in Leipzig, as he uses it in three of his New Year cantatas) and the way its melody ends a step higher than it started out, Bach decides to repeat the last two lines to the music of lines one and two, so effecting a delayed reiteration of C major in a majestic concluding sweep. Beyond this, he braces his opening and closing cantata movements together, partly by setting the first and last strophes in their original form, partly by using the first two bars of his opening ritornello (themselves forming a miniature ABA pattern) as an interlude between the choral phrases of his final movement. In this way the miniaturised pattern and the entire cantata both end as they began – a satisfying closing of the circle. But it is the epic scope of Bach's vision for this opening movement which takes one's breath away. Besides these exultant brass fanfares, its 213 bars comprise stretches of dense vocal counterpoint, angelic dance-like gestures, and a moment of magic when the forward momentum comes to a sudden halt for the words 'dass wir in guter Stille das alt Jahr hab'n erfüllet' ('that we in prosperous peace have completed the old year'). Out of this erupts a motet-like fugue marked 'presto', an enthusiastic rededication to spiritual values ('Wir woll'n uns dir ergeben itzund und immerdar' – 'We would give ourselves to Thee now and evermore') that merges almost imperceptibly into a reprise of the initial fanfare music.

Praying that the year may end as it began, the soprano now adopts the swaying pastoral gestures of the three accompanying oboes (No.2), irregularly phrased as 3+4 and then, more conventionally, as 2+2+2+2, patterns that Bach continues to vary and extend as though

intoxicated by their beauty and loath to move on. In the ensuing recitative the alto, beginning in A minor, swerves off course to establish 'A und O' on a C octave in the listener's mind, resonating with a passage in Revelation where Jesus describes himself as 'the first and the last... alive for evermore... [having] the keys of hell and of death' (Revelation 1:17-18).

The jewel in this particular cantata, however, is the tenor aria 'Woferne du den edlen Frieden' (No.4). This is one of only nine cantata movements in which Bach calls for the beguiling, wide-ranging sonority of the *violoncello piccolo*, an instrument that seems to be linked in Bach's usage to the presence and person of Jesus, and in particular to his protective role as 'good shepherd'. Here it is the five-string model he calls for, with a range extending from its lowest string, C, right up to B natural three octaves above in the treble clef, as though to encompass the duality of earth and heaven, of body and soul, and to mirror God's control of human affairs both physical and spiritual. Another striking moment is the abrupt clamorous choral intervention in the ensuing recitative, voicing the whole congregation's New Year resolution, 'Den Satan unter unsre Füße [zu] treten' – 'to trample Satan beneath our feet'.

Outwardly Bach's New Year offering for 1726 is like Cantata 41 of the previous year in that its entire focus is on praise and thanksgiving, with no reference to the Gospel or Epistle readings. But there the similarity ends. Where Cantata 41 is expansive and majestic, BWV 16 **Herr Gott, dich loben wir** is concise and pithy, summed up in its opening chorus of just thirty-four bars. This is an ebullient setting of the first four lines of Luther's German *Te Deum*, with the melody assigned to the sopranos doubled by a *corno da caccia*. A lively counterpoint provided by the three other voices encompasses a fourth voice (first violin and oboe combined). Were it not for the fact that it lies a little too high for the human voice, this would form the upper line of a *five-voiced*

chorale motet with independent continuo. A *secco* recitative for bass justifies all this jubilation: 'Thy Zion beholds perfect peace... the temple rings with the sound of psaltery and harp'; hearts swell and a new song is called for ('Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied!' was the refrain for Bach's New Year cantata for 1724 – see SDG Vol 16). The soloist tees up for an explosive, rumbustious choral dialogue 'Let us rejoice, let us be glad' (No.3). Compared with the grand hymns of thanks that habitually open his more festive cantatas or parts of the *Christmas Oratorio* this is really no more than a miniature. But what a punch it packs in its seventy bars! No need here for an instrumental prelude; instead the combined basses lead off with a fanfare. Their whoops of delight are immediately answered by the other voices and a tantivy for the horn. In the middle section of this so-called 'aria' (in free da capo structure) the solo bass now steps forward like some Cantor exhorting the people in the Temple (the scene of Jesus' circumcision, which is also celebrated on this day) with a brilliant little figure for 'krönt'. To the eye on the page it is shaped exactly like a 'crown', while to the ear it gleams like a diadem. Then comes a preposterous, raucous trill on the horn, and back come the chorus with their arpeggiated jubilations and a return to the 'A' music before it burgeons into a short fugue.

Sobriety and order return with a solo for the alto (No.4) who calls for the protection of church and school (Bach's twin spheres of activity in Leipzig), the destruction of Satan's 'wicked guile', and then a whole wish-list of agricultural improvements: better irrigation, land reclamation and (divine) help with tillages. The penultimate movement is a heartfelt aria for tenor with oboe da caccia obbligato, with an intimate and particularly affecting conclusion to its 'B' section at the words, 'Yea, when the thread of life breaks, our spirit shall, content in God, still sing with fervent lips', and then a smooth transition back to the 'A' section – 'Beloved Jesu, Thou alone shalt be my soul's wealth' – and finally a solemn, communal plea for a peaceful forthcoming year.

Probably the last of the five (or six if we take BWV 143 as 'echt') surviving New Year cantatas by Bach is BWV 171 **Gott, wie dein Name, so ist auch dein Ruhm**, written for 1729 or perhaps a year or two later. Its first movement sets a line from the forty-eighth Psalm: 'According to Thy name, O God, so is Thy praise unto the ends of the earth'. With no instrumental prelude the tenors launch themselves into this choral fugue, the main feature of its theme a spirited upward leap of a fourth on 'So!' (Whittaker completely misses Bach's rhetorical point when he calls this 'a bad mis-accentuation') followed by a crotchet rest and then the jagged completion of the subject. Yet for all its exuberance, there is something old-fashioned and motet-like about the way the fugue unfolds with *colla parte* strings and oboes doubling. But then after twenty-three bars Bach brings in his first trumpet for a glittering restatement of the theme and the music suddenly acquires a new lustre and seems propelled forwards to a different era for this assertion of God's all-encompassing dominion and power. Neumann tells us that this music is probably not new – a longer and instrumentally conceived movement formed the common source of this chorus and of the later well-known adaptation of the same music to the words 'Patrem omnipotentem' in the Credo of the *B minor Mass*. Picander, Bach's most reliable supplier of cantata and Passion texts, is the author of the next four movements. The first aria, for tenor with two interlocking treble instruments (unspecified, but most probably violins), is structured like a quartet and conjures up a delightful image of 'white strips of cloud trailing across the heavens' (Schweitzer). Bach is not beyond setting a stern test of his singer's breath control, for the apt line 'everything that still draws breath'.

If the sermon originally came at this point the alto recitative now provides a link to the second aria, this time for soprano and solo violin (No.4), music 'parodied' a tone lower from one of Bach's secular cantatas (*Zerreiβet, zersprenget, zertrümmert die Gruft*, BWV 205). The

graceful, airborne gestures of the violin obbligato first used to describe the 'refreshing coolness' of Zephyr's 'musk-rich kiss' are now adapted to the praise of Jesus' name. Dürr approves: 'It is a bold transference which is nonetheless a convincing success'. But can the same really be said for the way the vocal line fits the new text? The long-held notes originally assigned to 'Kühlen' ('coolness') have much less expressive point now as 'Jahre' ('year'); then the soaring ascent to 'Höhen' ('heights') seems slightly contrived for the name of 'Jesus'; while the fancy isolated figure for 'Grosser König' (addressed to Aeolus) makes less sense as 'fort und fort' ('for ever and ever'). But one sees Bach's point: purely as music it was far too good to use just the once, and he was surely justified in adapting it, even if (no doubt pressed for time) the transfer was not altogether seamless.

Truly original, however, is the bass recitative which follows (No.5). Moving swiftly into triple time arioso for the words of Jesus ('Ask in my name, and Amen, it shall be given you!') it reverts to recitative for the prayers that follow, but this time accompanied by two oboes as well as continuo before a final return to arioso, 'We ask this, Lord, in Thy name; say yes! say Amen! Amen!'. For his closing chorale, Bach calls on all his instrumental forces – oboes and strings to bolster the choir, trumpets and drums to interject their own fanfares, just as they did in the first movement – in yet another example of 'Anfang und Ende', beginning and end. There is a further link here to the final chorale of BWV 41, only now a tone higher, a winning formula that cried out to be repeated, as well as a reminder to the congregation of what a profusion of the finest music Bach had laid at their feet back in 1724.

I found it not just rousing but its aspiration germane to our whole project: 'Let us complete this year in praise of Thy name'. Poignant, too, was the plea in the preceding movement, 'Behüt uns dieses Jahr für... Kriegsgefahr!' ('Protect us through this year from... the danger of war'). Coming after a sleepless New Year's night of riotous noise caused by

the perpetual hubbub of Berliners lobbing fireworks at each other (which in one's semi-conscious state translated as the thunder of the Russian army entering the city in 1945!), it seemed like an auspicious and much-needed prayer. The audience was full and gave the music rapt attention and us generous applause.

Cantatas for the Sunday after New Year **Gethsemanekirche, Berlin**

Even allowing for the fact that in this millennial year these two feasts follow one another on consecutive days, the change of prevailing mood is palpable, and comes as quite a jolt. Where the New Year's Day cantatas are festive, grateful and stock-taking, the texts for the year's first Sunday are pained and urgent. What could have happened in so short a time? Do we stand accused of breaking our New Year resolutions the day after making them? BWV 153 **Schau, lieber Gott, wie meine Feind** opens with an innocuous-looking four-part chorale (the first verse of a hymn by David Denicke of 1640) but one which suggests that it should be delivered as a collective shout or clamorous plea, upbraiding God: 'Behold, dear God, how my enemies with whom I must always battle, are so cunning and powerful that they can with ease subdue me. Lord, if Thy grace does not sustain me, the devil, flesh and world will plunge me into misery.' It feels as though we were missing some vital piece in the cosmic puzzle, and sure enough the Gospel for the day refers us to Herod's Massacre of the Innocents and the Flight into Egypt, prompting this more generalised outcry against persecution and suffering. It leads immediately to an alto recitative, 'Ah! help me, help this wretch! I dwell here among very lions and dragons, who wish through grim ferocity to destroy me without delay', and to the tenor

(No.4) yelling ‘God! my distress is known to Thee, the whole world becomes for me a den of torment; help, Helper, help! Save my soul!’ After two excruciated diminished fourths and a diminished third in the continuo, the singer is not even able to make it through to the final cadence. The tone of the next chorale strophe to the tune of the celebrated Passion chorale is, however, more conciliatory, but there is ‘no question of God retreating’. It has the effect of goading the tenor (No.6) to greater truculence in a King Lear-like way, daring the elements to rage and misfortune to ‘engulf me’. Bach uses the bravura gestures of the high French style – pounding dotted rhythms, rapid violin configuration and whirling sequential *tourbillons* – to depict the surging of the flood and to underline the tenor’s ‘sweep down!’ (‘wallt!’). It has something of the intensity and energetic protest of Peter’s aria of remorse ‘Ach, mein Sinn’ from the *St John Passion*, which Bach would present to his Leipzig congregation in just a few months’ time.

A much-needed sense of proportion is reached in the bass recitative (No.7), referring to the far greater affliction which the child Jesus, already a fugitive, had to face. It leads to a consoling arioso, ‘Christ shall bestow the kingdom of heaven on all who suffer here with Him’, and an aria for alto that is an out-and-out minuet, serving to describe the ‘blessed rapture and eternal joy’ of heaven. Bach is delightfully responsive to the change of metre (from trochaic to amphibrachic tetrameter) in the last couple of lines: accordingly he shifts gears and speeds up to allegro, so that his minuet now becomes a fast *passepied* in the penitent’s urgency to reach the pearly gates.

There is a very good practical reason why the choral contributions to this cantata are limited to just three straightforward four-part chorales: fatigue. The schedule of back-to-back cantata performances during Bach’s first Christmas in Leipzig in 1723 was unremitting: three cantatas for the three Christmas feast-days (BWV 63, 40 and 64), plus the *Magnificat* BWV 243a with its four seasonal antiphons, the *Sanctus*

BWV 238 and a massive New Year cantata the day before (BWV 190) – and still to come, just four days away, a new Epiphany cantata (BWV 65), one that opens with one of the most daring and challenging of Bach's choral movements. So, very shrewdly, he made life a lot easier for his choir on 2 January 1724, but not for his *concertisten* nor for his string players or continuo (and not for us, with four New Year cantatas the night before!); and most of all, not for himself, in having to compose and then rehearse and direct all this exceptionally demanding music.

The same consideration, to ease the workload of his musicians, exhausted by the festive demands of Christmas and New Year, most probably lay behind Bach's decision to score BWV 58 **Ach Gott, wie manches Herzeleid** as a *dialogus* for soprano and bass with simple string accompaniment. Almost certainly composed for 5 January 1727, it survives only in a revised version of 1733 or 1734 with a brand new central aria (No.3) and three oboes added to reinforce the strings in the outer movements. Perhaps by now his workload had eased, either through disenchantment or as a result of a debilitating stand-off with the Leipzig Consistory (or both). Like BWV 153 this cantata takes the Gospel reading as the basis for a description of the beleaguered Christian: the distressed, persecuted soul (soprano) in dialogue with a guardian angel or, by implication, Jesus (bass), who acknowledges that 'es ist eine böse Zeit' ('these are bad times'). The cantata is symmetrically arranged in five movements, with two extended duets cast as chorale fantasias. Though the soprano sings the chorale melody, it is the bass, responding with consoling words in free verse, who has the tune in both duets. Yet the character of these twin C major movements is very different. Dotted rhythms and a chromatically descending lament figure in response to the anguish of the soprano's chorale typify the first movement, while an upward triadic motif for the final, concerto-like choral fantasia is redolent of Bach's sunny E major violin concerto BWV 1042. Concerto-like, too, is the elaborate violin part

in the central aria, 'Ich bin vergnügt in meinem Leiden' ('I am content in my suffering'). If its purpose was a device to fix in the listener's mind a projected end to persecution and hatred in the world, then Bach's modulatory plan for this cantata could not be more explicit or detailed: first in a downward direction (No.2) starting with God's warning to Joseph in a dream (D minor), then evoking Herod's attempt to kill Jesus (C minor) and lower still (G minor) at the mention of drowning in the Flood, then back up again (F major) at the prospect of Jesus' comfort and thereafter in an upward trajectory (No.4) in the Soul's aspiration to 'behold my Eden' (F major to A minor).

In addition to these cantatas we performed parts IV and V of the *Christmas Oratorio*. Two out of three of the interviews I gave earlier in the day were characterised by a mixture of respect bordering on obsequiousness and a full-on directness: 'Why do we need you and your English musicians here in Berlin to "show us how to perform Bach?"' Answer: (a) you don't, but (b) we were invited to come here, and actually our group of twenty-seven musicians contains seventeen different nationalities, including four Germans, three Italian trumpeters and a Franco-Belgian oboe team, all led by an Israeli of Hungarian extraction. 'Why choose the Gethsemanekirche with its poor acoustics, where diction and proper balance suffer?' Answer: Berlin, alas, is not exactly spoilt for choice when it comes to viably-sized churches with good acoustics, and besides, I warm to its atmosphere of protest.

Will the whole of the year be like this? Clearly it's going to be tough going, but at least the project has a few things in its favour: the supreme quality of the music, overwhelmingly unfamiliar to most people, the determination and commitment of the musicians, and the epic scale and nature of this millennial celebration being quite unlike anything else that seems to be on offer or, come to that, anything any of us has ever experienced before. Just in case hubris should strike, there is a wonderful German proverb, one that Bach underlined in his copy of

Calov's Bible commentary and which caught my eye. It makes salutary reading: 'With one's own thoughts, as with a tightly held cloth, much slides off.' To this Calov adds, 'Thus stubborn or self-appointed projects seldom turn out well. Also, for me, things in my life have never gone according to my plans: I have set a certain plan for myself, but if it had not been God's word and deed which drew me to the project, the greater part was left unaccomplished.' There can be only one answer to that, the one Bach appended to his cantata autographs: S[oli] D[eo] G[loria]!

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