

## **Cantatas for Easter Sunday, Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday Georgenkirche, Eisenach**

Pastor Robscheit of St George's welcomed us warmly. We should have come here ten years ago, he said; for then, during GDR times, there was so little contact with the outside and wider world of Bach performance practice that the only way Eisenach citizens could pick up hints of a more cosmopolitan approach to Bach was via the radio or CDs smuggled in by grandma after brief visits to the west. But it was good that we had chosen to stop here on our pilgrimage, as Eisenach is *the* place where 'Bach meets Luther', Bach having spent the first ten years of his life here and been a chorister of this church; Luther also having sung here and having penned his German translations of the New Testament while confined in the Wartburg castle which overlooks the town.

The pastor pointed to the font where Bach was baptised, set centre stage in front of the raised chancel steps – the most prominent physical symbol in the church. Yet it was almost submerged by rostra as we encircled it for our three consecutive concerts on Easter Sunday, Monday and Tuesday, orchestra and choir deployed centrally. Earlier on Easter Sunday morning we had been placed high up at the back of the church in the organ gallery, from where we were invited to lead the singing in the main Lutheran mass commemorating both St George's Day and Easter Sunday. A packed congregation made up of local parishioners and extended Thuringians, as well as Bach pilgrims (some of whom had flown out from England and elsewhere, others who had bicycled all the way from Holland) filled the church to capacity. Like so many Thuringian churches, the *Georgenkirche* is arranged like a baroque theatre (or a three-decker galleon) with tiers of galleries and boxes for the *Prominenten*, everyone able to see and hear the preacher clearly. From our position in the choir loft, with the organ vibrant and

loud behind us, we had an unimpeded view of Bach's font and of the pulpit close to it from which Luther preached in 1521. Very likely both men once stood exactly where we were now standing, as boy choristers. The hymns we were to sing, *Christ ist erstanden* and *Christ lag in Todesbanden*, were as old as the church itself, reworked by Luther in his sturdy German prose and given a further twist by Bach through his stupendous four-part harmonisations, transforming their melodies in ways that enable us to sense the words' significance to himself and redoubling their appeal to us as listeners or worshippers.

The sense of Easter as the pivotal feast of the Lutheran liturgical year was inescapable here – the accumulated layers of pagan spring sacrifice, Passover, and the feast of Unleavened Bread, that ancient Canaanite agricultural festival adopted by the Hebrews after their settlement in the Promised Land and later re-rooted by the Lutherans in this little-changed, wooded landscape. In the reverence of the ceremony one caught a glimpse of the way Luther regarded the Eucharist: as a ritual in which the believer is called upon to become a character in the play of redemption, casting aside his doubts and meeting the ephemeral Christ in tangible form. Here, then, was evidence of a perceptible synergy between Luther and Bach. Our image of them has been conditioned by musicologists and historians who write as though both men can be reduced to their most cerebral output – in Luther's case to his driest theological writings, devoid of wit or metaphor, in Bach's to his more intractable keyboard works. This is to turn one's back on an essential characteristic of both men – their temperament: the fire in the belly that gave Luther the courage to break with Rome and Bach the tenacity to devote four years of his life (1723-1727) to composing year-long cantata cycles which chart the stages of doubt and fear, faith and disbelief in life's pilgrimage with unprecedented inventiveness.

It was not hard to imagine the young Bach in this place, one of the cradles of Lutheranism, and on this occasion outwardly so little

changed. Enrolled in Eisenach's *Lateinschule* from the age of seven, just as Luther had been, he sang in the regular services in St George's under its Cantor, Andreas Christian Dedekind. From seven until the age of ten he received an early grounding in the rudiments of music from his father Ambrosius, court trumpeter, director of the town's music and a versatile exponent of several instruments, from Cantor Dedekind and from Johann Christoph, his father's first cousin, organist of St George's and the most influential figure in Bach's musical upbringing.

At the core of Bach's early exposure to music and theology were the German chorales which were to play a central role in his church cantatas – those very hymns we sang on Easter morning, refashioned by Luther. In his preface to Babst's *Gesangbuch* (1545) Luther maintained that 'God has gladdened our heart and conscience by sending his beloved Son to redeem us from sin, death and the devil. Those among us who earnestly believe this are of good cheer and wish to sing happily for everyone to hear and take heed.' This was the core of Luther's evangelical message and an early lesson for Bach, for whom daily singing must have seemed an utterly natural activity from the time he was first required to attend choir practice four days a week.

But this cheerfulness comes at a price: the resolution of that emotional tension between fear and hope, despair and trust, and the acceptance that we have to fulfil our baptism in our struggle with and conquest of death. Nowhere is this more clearly articulated than in Luther's magisterial **Christ lag in Todesbanden**, at its heart a battle between the forces of life and death from which the risen Christ emerges as victor. Did Bach first hear this hymn in this church and at this time? If so, he could have found no clearer formulation of the way in which Luther's faith sprang from early Christian roots – the Old Testament reference to Christ as the Easter Lamb, which reinforces the notion that Christ is the essence of life and that the preservation of life comes with light (the sun) and food (bread, or the Word).

Bach's setting of Luther's hymn (BWV 4) is one of his earliest cantatas, composed for his probationary audition at Mühlhausen in 1707 and a bold, innovative piece of musical drama which sets all seven of Luther's verses, each beginning and ending in the same key of E minor. I suppose that having performed it more often than any other cantata I feel very much at home with it – and it never palls. But the feeling of Bach drawing on medieval musical roots (the hymn tune derives from the eleventh-century plainsong *Victimae paschali laudes*) and of his total identification with the spirit and letter of Luther's fiery, dramatic hymn was never so strong or so moving as here in our Eisenach performance.

First published in 1524, Luther's hymn brings the events of Christ's Passion and Resurrection vividly to life, depicting both the physical and the spiritual ordeals Christ needed to undergo in order to bring about man's release from the burden of sin. The narrative begins with a backward glance at Christ in the shackles of death, and ends with his jubilant victory and the feast of the Paschal Lamb, and the way Luther unfolds this gripping story has something of the folk or tribal saga about it, full of colour and incident. In this, his first-known attempt at painting narrative in music, Bach shows himself equal to the task of matching music to words, alert to every nuance, scriptural allusion, symbol and mood. Not content merely to mirror the text, one senses him striving to bring to it an extra dimension, following Luther's own ideal in which music brings the text to life, and in doing so, drawing on a whole reservoir of learning to date: music learnt by heart as a boy, the family's rich archive of in-house motets and *Stücken*, music put before him as a chorister in Lüneburg as well as works that he had studied or copied under the aegis of his various mentors, his elder brother Johann Christian, Boehm, Reincken and Buxtehude.

Bach begins by uprooting the very first two notes of the chorale-tune from their Dorian mode, sharpening the interval of a fourth and

creating a falling half-step, a musical motif that readily expresses sorrow. This becomes the seminal melodic interval of his entire composition. It was a radical move – provocative even – for a young composer to make, daring to alter the melodic contours of this age-old tune, hallowed by Luther’s famous treatment of it. Bach’s strategy is to embed this chorale-tune deeply into the fabric of his composition, giving particular emphasis to its (altered) first two notes, the falling semitone which recurs hauntingly. Already in the third bar of the sombre opening Sinfonia he detaches these two notes – a wordless ‘Christ lag... Christ lag...’ – and only at the third attempt do we recognise this as the first full line of the hymn, giving weight to the retrospective re-enactment of Christ’s death and entombment.

With the entry of the choir in verse one the hymn tune is chiselled out of the dense contrapuntal heartwood of this imposing chorale fantasia. The violins exchange the breathless type of figure known as *suspiratio* – sighs aptly interposed here to reflect Christ’s suffering in the grip of death. Soon these give way to chains of dactyls and anapaests, generating an appropriate rhythmic vitality to convey how Christ’s rising again has ‘brought us life’. The fantasia finally erupts into an *alla breve* conclusion, a fleet-footed canon based on the simplest of tunes: five descending notes, shaped as a syncopated riff, and one that, for Gillies Whittaker, ‘almost overwhelms the bounds of church decorum in its breathless, whirling excited exhilaration’.

That mood of unbridled joy is short-lived. Abruptly Luther reminds us of the time when death held humanity captive, a grim tableau every bit as graphic as those late medieval Dance of Death friezes painted on the church walls of many plague-visited German towns. It puts me in mind of the allegorical chess game in Ingmar Bergman’s film *The Seventh Seal*. Twin time frames overlap here: pre-regenerate Man on one hand, contemporaneous Thuringians of both Luther’s and Bach’s day on the other, marked by their regular brushes with pestilential

death. Bach uses his falling semitone in two-note fragments – segmented and desolate, exchanged between soprano and alto in a grief-laden, rocking motion, over the basso continuo (which plays the same two-note interval obsessively, but with octave jumps and in diminution). Bach finds spell-binding music to convey humanity helpless and paralysed as it awaits God's judgement against sin – what Luther called the 'most serious and most horrible' penalty of death.

Onto this bleak stage the skeletal personification of death now makes a stealthy approach, seizing mortals in his bony hands. Twice Bach freezes the frame, the music sticking first on the words 'den Tod / der Tod', tossed back and forth four times, then again on the word 'gefangen' (imprisoned), where soprano and alto are locked in a simultaneous E/F sharp dissonance. The surprising word 'Halleluja' follows, as it does at the end of every stanza. But here its mood is unremittingly sad, apart from a brief flicker of promise near the end, before the music sinks back in resignation.

A stark contrast of mood, and verse 3 is launched by the violins pealing out an Italianate concerto-like variant of the chorale in unison. The tenors herald the coming of Christ: sin is overthrown and death's sting is plucked out. Bach uses the violins like a flail to depict the way Christ slashes at the enemy. The continuo line is dispatched, spinning down to a bottom E in an appropriate and 'Miltonic thrusting below of the rebellious angel' (Whittaker again). Death's power is snapped in two. The music comes to a complete stop on 'nichts': 'naught remained...' – the tenors slowly resume – 'but Death's mere form', now a pale shadow of itself. Here Bach has the violins etch the four-note outline of the cross with great deliberation, before continuing their concerto, now a festive display of prowess, a victory tattoo to which the tenors add their 'Hallelujas' in a gleeful chortle.

The central stanza reenacts the crucial contest between life and death: 'It was an awesome war when death and life struggled'. Bach

seizes on the physicality of the contest: only the continuo provides instrumental support as groups of onlookers describe their reactions to the seminal bout which will determine their fate. Yet they know the outcome already – for it was ‘foretold by the scriptures... how one death gobbled up the other’. For this Bosch-like scene Bach sets three of his four voice parts in hot pursuit of one another, a fugal *stretto* with entries just a beat apart, while the fourth voice (altos) trumpets out the familiar melody in deliberate tones. One by one the voices peter out, devoured and silenced: death has been turned into a joke. Back comes the falling semitone, still the emblem of death, but spat out now with derision by the crowd. All four voices round off the scene with its Halleluja refrain, the basses descending through nearly two octaves before coming to a point of rest as the commentators file off stage.

Now returning as High Priests in the ritual Easter Mass, the basses intone the fifth stanza over a descending chromatic bass line reminiscent of Purcell (‘Dido’s Lament’) – for Bach in future a recurrent image of the Crucifixion. A mystical link has been established between the Paschal Lamb foretold by the prophets and Christ’s sacrificial death. Emblems proliferate, principally that of the cross which Bach isolates and evokes by halting the harmonic movement for a single bar while each of its four points is inscribed, each instrumental voice symbolically pausing on a sharp (in German, ‘Kreuz’). To help us focus on the mysterious way ‘blood marks our door [to release]’ he gives three attempted starts at that particular line (continuo, voice, violin), before the basses and then the violins seem to paint and re-paint the cross, the very symbol to which faith clings up to the point of death. At this moment of profound anguish Bach forces the basses to plunge downwards by a diminished twelfth to a low E sharp. Now comes an unprepared and totally unprecedented clarion call as they sound out a top D, holding it for nearly ten beats to represent ‘the strangler... who can no longer harm us’. It is magnificent, a gauntlet thrown down to the

singers (yes, plural, for he never wrote like this for a solo voice) to sustain that D at full force until the air gradually drains from their lungs. Now the ritual unfolding of the chorale resumes serenely in the string choir. But, instead of following suit, the basses launch into a series of exultant 'Hallelujas', culminating with a monster victory shout spanning two octaves.

That, to all intents and purposes, concludes the drama, though not the musical delights. For the penultimate verse, set as a duet for soprano and tenor with continuo, Bach gives us a tripping dance of unalloyed joy. The word 'Wonne' or Joy is expressed in Purcellian roulades, the concluding 'Hallelujas' exchanged in alternating triplets and duplets between the voices. His original four-part harmonisation for the final verse has not survived, but the one he substituted eighteen years later in Leipzig is rich compensation: superbly rousing and, aptly, his seventh illustration of how to sing 'Halleluja' – each time with a subtly differentiated expressive twist.

A spiritual voyage of a different kind is charted in Bach's second surviving cantata for Easter Day, composed at the ducal court in Weimar when he had just turned thirty. Beginning with a festive sonata for three instrumental 'choirs' of brass, reeds and strings, BWV 31 **Der Himmel lacht! Die Erde jubilieret** bursts out into a chorus evoking celestial laughter and worldly jubilation at Christ's Resurrection. The five-part choral texture, the dance-propelled rhythms and the trumpet-edged brilliance look forward to the 'Gloria' from the *B minor Mass*, even to the slowing down of tempo and silencing of the brass when the words speak of Christ's release from the tomb. This is one of a handful of Weimar cantatas (the others are BWV 21, 63 and 172) which by their scale and scoring suggest an alternative original performance space to the diminutive music gallery in the court chapel known as the Himmelsburg ('Castle of Heaven'), best suited to its core ensemble of



eight singers and five instrumentalists. Evidently the ducal family chose from time to time to attend the afternoon services in the town church of Saints Peter and Paul (for reasons of politics, preacher-preference, or merely variety?). The organist at the *Stadtkirche* was Bach's half-cousin Johann Gottfried Walther, and the possibility such festive occasions afforded of joining forces with the town musicians, perhaps in the outer movements of this fine cantata, must have appealed to Bach, allowing for a two-tiered performance with only the court *Capelle* taking charge of the three *intimiste* arias. These culminate with the valedictory lullaby 'Letzte Stunde', for soprano and oboe d'amore, while the upper strings wordlessly intone Nikolaus Herman's death-bed chorale, 'Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist'. The listener is led to contemplate in turn the firmament rejoicing (Nos 1 and 2), the injunction to participate in Christ's resurrection (No.3), the victory of the cross (No.4), the need for the new man to emerge free from the grip of sin (No.5) and for Adam to 'decay within us' (No.6), the projected union with Jesus (No.7) and, in anticipation of the final hour, the prayer 'to be like the angels' (No.8) which re-emerges as the final chorale (No.9) with soaring trumpet descant, in a transcendent setting.

Some scholars have claimed that in his first years in Leipzig Bach was so spent by the effort of producing his *St John* and *St Matthew Passions* that he had no creative energy left to expend on new compositions for Easter. But that misses the point. Easter is such a central festivity in the Lutheran year and a time for such jubilant celebrations that it was only natural for him – as well as highly appropriate – that besides revising the earlier *Christ lag in Todesbanden* and *Der Himmel lacht*, he should now turn to music composed in Cöthen for secular festivities and recycle it for Eastertide. The exuberant BWV 66 **Erfreut euch, ihr Herzen**, for Easter Monday 1724, is a skilful adaptation of a lost birthday serenata for Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, in which the allegorical Happiness and Fame are

transformed into Hope and Fear. Its opening chorus, with violins scurrying up to a top A and bassoons chortling in a tenor register, has more than a passing similarity to some of the operatic choruses and storm scenes of Bach's French contemporary Jean-Philippe Rameau.

Probably the most joyous of all these ex-Cöthen pieces is BWV 134 **Ein Herz, das seinen Jesum lebend weiß**, for Easter Tuesday of the same year, formerly a secular New Year piece (BWV 134a) composed for 1 January 1719, which has two extended triple rhythm passepied-like movements: the opening tenor aria 'Auf, Gläubige' and the final chorus 'Erschallet, ihr Himmel'. The latter has an affinity with the opening of BWV 66 in that it alternates two solo voices (each exchanging short opening phrases) with the full choir. Mid-cantata is the irresistible duet 'Wir danken und preisen' (No.4), which has a true Brandenburg-like swagger and rhythmical élan. Those years in Cöthen seem to have been the happiest in Bach's life; it shows in this rumbustious and irrepressible dance-derived music which suits the post-Resurrection festivities and seems to hark back to pre-Christian rites of spring. The two Cöthen movements (Nos 1 and 3) of BWV 145 **Ich lebe, mein Herze, zu deinem Ergötzen**, a dialogue cantata also based on a lost secular work, reveal a similar exuberance and uncomplicated delight in music-making.

You sense that Bach had the final chorus of his *St John Passion*, if not on his writing desk, then still ringing in his ears when he sat down to compose his 'Emmaus' cantata, a new work for Easter Monday 1725. The opening chorus of BWV 6 **Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden** shares both the *sarabande*-like gestures of 'Ruht wohl' and its key of C minor, with its characteristic sweet-sad sonority. But where the Passion epilogue is elegiac and consolatory, the 'Emmaus' cantata, tinged with the sadness of bereavement, opens with tender pleadings which become ever more gestural and urgent for enlightenment in a darkening world from which Jesus' presence has been removed. It

manages to be both narrative (evoking the grieving disciples' journey to Emmaus as darkness falls) and universal at the same time (the basic fear of being left alone in the dark, literally and metaphorically). If the overall mood and pattern is one of descent, Bach, as one might expect, introduces a counter-balance, subtly weaving in a theological message to the faithful – to hold on to the Word and sacrament, those mainstays of Christian life in the world after Jesus' physical departure. He finds a way of musically 'painting' these two ideas: by juxtaposing the curve of descent (via downward modulatory sequences) with the injunction to remain steadfast (by threading 25 Gs then 35 B flats played in unison by violins and violas through the surrounding dissonance). This is linked to the reiterated pleas to Christ to remain, intoned nine times during the ensuing choral fugue.

The collision of these two ideas, lending poignancy to this opening chorus, suggested to me an affinity with Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (his first version, dated 1601). Beyond the obvious parallel of contrasted planes of light and darkness is the further dichotomy, between serenity on the one hand (Christ in the act of blessing the meal, affirming his identity and presence, seems to stretch forward his hand of comfort beyond the canvas towards the viewer) and urgency on the other, the impulsive theatrical gestures of the two disciples painted from real life directly onto canvas. This is religious drama presented as contemporary quotidian life, rather as Bach was seeking to capture, both here and in the next two movements, the disciples' despondency in the Saxon twilight he observed outside his study window. The other, entirely personal, memory I have of this fine cantata came flooding back to me tinged with fear: the terror of having been set an impossible assignment by my octogenarian teacher Nadia Boulanger to prepare and conduct this work with the rag, tag and bobtail of conservatory students at Fontainebleau on a hot August afternoon in 1968, and the

blessed relief of realising that she had slept through the entire performance.

As we filed out of the *Georgenkirche* at the end of the mass on Easter morning, the pastor invited a few of us to visit what remains today of the old Dominican monastery and of Bach's former school. We walked with him past the old town wall to the cemetery known as the *Gottesacker*. Somewhere here are the unmarked graves of Bach's parents. Graham Greene once wrote: 'There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in' - and here it was, for Bach, in 1694. Tragedy struck when he was in his tenth year: within a matter of months he lost first his mother and then his father. With the death of both parents, the family home in Eisenach was broken up. No trace of it exists today, and the *Bachhaus* visited by countless pilgrims is, sadly, a fake. Johann Sebastian was taken in by his much older brother, Johann Christian, in Ohrdruf, thirty miles to the south east. The door to the future had been rudely thrown open.

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