support materials for our recording of

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH

TRAUERODE

Liebster Gott, wann werd ich sterben, BWV 8
Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe, BWV 156
Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl, BWV 198

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PROGRAM NOTES
by John Butt

Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe, BWV 156
Cantata for the Third Sunday after Epiphany

Cantata 156, first performed on January 23, 1729, comes from the third cycle of Leipzig cantatas, works which often have a particularly intimate quality with smaller performing forces. The Gospel for the day, Christ's healing of the sick, is taken as the inspiration for a text on the mortality of man and resignation to the will of God. Of the two arias the first emphasizes the inescapable sickness of the human condition, the halting steps admirably depicted in the syncopated bass line, while the chorale sung by the sopranos restores the rhythmic certainty with its supplication to God. The reliance on God's will forms the basis of the joyful affect of the second aria. Here the euphonious counterpoint of oboe, violin, alto and basso continuo reflect the confidence of the believer. Only a few musical points show the darker side of suffering (as if to counterbalance the first aria where the chorale shows the brighter side of death): the minor twist just at the end of the fundamental ritornello; the central part of the text “In der Freude, in dem Leide, im Sterben...”

Given the comparative shortness of the cantata text, Bach opened the work with a purely instrumental sinfonia, later to be used in a harpsichord concerto, but almost certainly originating in an oboe concerto which is now lost. Like many of Bach's slow concerto movements in a major key, the movement has an ambivalent affect: a serene and vocal melodic line, but also gestures which point to a more melancholy message. Despite its “second hand” status, this movement aptly prepares us for the bitter-sweet message of the cantata as a whole.

Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl, BWV 198
Trauerode

When the Electress of Saxony, Christiane Eberhardine, died in 1727, the state mourned no ordinary Queen. For, when in the closing years of the previous century, her husband had converted to Catholicism in order to gain the throne of Poland, she remained true to the indigenous Lutheran faith, something which won her the hearts of all Saxony. An enterprising student, Carl von Kirchbach commissioned two of the most eminent men in Leipzig, the poet, J.C.Gottsched and J.S.Bach the cantor and composer, to write an ode of mourning.

The occasion was not without its problems: the performance was to take place in the University Church (Pauliner-Kirche) and the director of music there, J.G.Görner, complained of the infringement of his prerogative. Kirchbach refused to change the terms of his commission and Bach refused to sign a document stating that his activity in the Pauliner-Kirche was “purely a favor and not to set any precedent.” In the event the performance went smoothly, attended by many important town and university officials: “there was shortly to be heard the mourning music which Kapellmeister Johann Sebastian Bach had composed in Italian style, with harpsichord, which Herr Bach himself played, organ, violas da gamba, lutes, violins, recorders, flutes etc, half sounding before, half after the oration of praise and sorrow.” [from a report, “Das thränende Leipzig,” 1727]

Gottsched was not only a notable poet in the locality of Leipzig, he was one of the greatest reformers of the German language of all time, someone who was of seminal influence in establishing German as a respectable literary language. His ode consisted of nine stanzas each with eight lines, all symmetrically balanced and ordered with an ear to the sounding and sequence of syllables. Bach's choice of what was observed as “Italian style”—i.e. a sequence of choruses, arias and recitatives—patently ignored the ode-structure of Gottsched; furthermore, the stanzas were spread over the divisions of the musical movements. This, and the fact that Bach apparently changed some of the words themselves to create a more pictorial text, shows clearly that the composer was thinking entirely of the musical potentialities of the text; he shows no respect for the literary style per se, indeed he probably had little conception of Gottsched's importance as a poet. It is not surprising that a protege of Gottsched, J.A. Scheibe should have written one of the most stinging rebukes of the composer, since by the aesthetic standards of the day his vocal writing was essentially turgid and confused.

As the report on the occasion recorded, Bach employed an unusually extensive instrumentarium for the “Trauerode”: the violas da gamba are typical in Bach's settings of mournful texts (e.g. the “Actus Tragicus,” Cantata 106, and the two Passions), but it is highly unusual to find him employing two lutes as well. While he ignored much of the structural integrity of Gottsched's verses, Bach devised his
own system in structuring the music: the solo recitatives and arias are set for all four voices, beginning with the soprano and proceeding down to bass; each instrumental family is represented in the scoring of each aria. He includes most of the idioms appropriate to the "Italian style": the dense concerted texture of the opening movement, the accompanied recitative, the final secco recitative, the astonishingly pictorial recitative depicting the funeral bells, the fugue which appropriately depicts the Queen as the “example for great women,” and the closing dance-like movement for chorus.

It is clear that Bach gave as much care in planning and writing this work as he did in his passion settings. Doubtless the heroic Lutheran queen was a figure who inspired strong sentiments in Bach the man and composer. The opening chorus contains echoes of the final chorus of the St. Matthew Passion which Bach had performed for the first time earlier the same year; indeed he reused this and movement seven in a cantata mourning the death of Leopold I of Köthen in 1729, a piece which is essentially a contrafactum of the St. Matthew Passion. He also took the harmonic outline of the initial vocal lines as the opening for the Kyrie of the Mass in B Minor, which he presented to Christiane’s son, August II of Saxony. Most of the other movements he reused in the now lost St. Mark Passion, something which confirms the passion-like nature of this work, a piece which should perhaps be appreciated on equal terms with the two surviving passions.

Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben, BWV 8
Cantata for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity

Cantata 8 dates from the chorale-cycle of cantatas and was first performed on September 24, 1724. Taking as its starting point the Gospel for the day (Christ’s resurrection of the young man at Nain), the chorale text centers on the inevitable death of the individual, the sinful state of whom is redeemed by Jesus and God’s truth. Particularly unusual among the corpus of Bach’s chorale cantatas is the chorale melody itself, a relatively recent one written by a Leipzig organist and quite different from the traditional Lutheran chorales which so often betray the vestiges of the modal system. This melody is unequivocally tonal and specifically ‘tuneful,’ thus typical of the large repertory of ‘sacred songs’ engendered by the Pietist movement which cultivated personal devotion at the expense of formalized public worship. Although Bach almost certainly disapproved of the pietist attitude to worship, eschewing as it did complex and demanding music, he sometimes entered into the spirit of its devotional songs, such as with his harmonizations for Schmelli’s song book during the 1730s. His setting of the final verse of the chorale in Cantata 8 is certainly unusual, playing on the lightness of the ‘catchy’ melody, yet at the same time curiously elevated stylistically with the frequent imitation of the opening of each line.

The cantata opens with a graphic portrayal of the question of the hour of death, a mesmerizing texture which seems from the first to be itself a question (particularly with the immediate flattened seventh degree of the scale); the imagery of bells may also be perceived in the strings and trembling fear in the high flute. The first aria employs the characteristic leap of a minor sixth (familiar in ‘Erbarme dich’ from the St. Matthew Passion or the opening of Cantata 82, ‘Ich habe genug’) and several further awkward leaps which together point to the fear of the soul at the hour of death. Bach is particularly adept at writing lines which would conventionally be considered unvocal, perhaps just to evoke the agony the individual should experience. There are also often secondary images embedded in the music, such as the striking of the hour of death in a sequence of staccato notes in the vocal part. The alto recitative extends both the questioning nature of the first two movements and the extreme anxiety of the text; this provides a bridge to the second, far more optimistic, section of the cantata. Using the imagery of a new morning succeeding the night, all is saved by the grace of Christ. Interestingly Bach uses secular imagery here: the courtly and fashionable flute in an energetic obbligato; the rhythm and idiom of the gigue, that most lively of secular dances. Bach clearly believed that religious music should take the best of what current idioms could offer, regardless of the origins or conventions of a particular style.
Ich steh mit einem Fuß im Grabe
BWV 156
Countertenor, Tenor, Bass, Chorus, Oboe, Strings and Basso Continuo

1. SINFONIA (Oboe, Strings, Bc.)

2. ARIA and CHORALE (Tenor, Sopranos, Strings, Bc.)

3. RECITATIVE (Bass, Bc.)

4. ARIA (Countertenor, Oboe, Violin, Bc.)

5. RECITATIVE (Bass, Bc.)

6. CHORALE (Tutti)

And if thou wish me not to suffer, to thee I’ll be sincerely thankful; however, grant to me as well that also in my lively body my soul may be free from sickness and evermore continue in health. Tend it with the Holy Ghost and word, for this is my true health, and if my soul and body fail, yet thou art, God, my strength, the portion of my heart!
Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl (Trauerode)
BWV 198
Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass, Chorus, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes d’amore, 2 Violas da gamba, Strings, 2 Lutes, and Basso Continuo

First Part

7 1. CHORUS (Tutti)

Laß, Fürstin, laß noch einen Strahl
Aus Salem’s Sterngewölben schießen.
Und sieh, mit wieviel Tränengüssen
Umringen wir dein Ehrenmal.

Let, Princess, let still one more glance
Shoot forth from Salem’s starry heavens.
And see how many tearful offerings
We pour around thy monument.

8 2. RECITATIVE (Soprano, Strings, Bc.)

Dein Sachsen, dein bestürztes Meißen
Erstarrt bei deiner Königsgruft;
Das Auge tränt, die Zunge ruft:
Mein Schmerz kann unbeschreiblich heißen!

Thy Saxons, like thy saddened Meissen,
Stand numb beside thy royal tomb;
The eye doth weep, the tongue cries out:
My pain must be without description!

9 3. ARIA (Soprano, Strings, Bc.)

Verstummt, verstummt, ihr holden Saiten!
Kein Ton vermag der Länder Not
Bei ihrer teuren Mutter Tod,
O Schmerzenswort! recht anzudeuten.

Be still, be still, ye lovely lyres!
No sound could to the nations’ woe
At their dear cherished mother’s death,
O painful word!, give meet expression.

10 4. RECITATIVE (Alto, Tutti instruments)

Der Glocken bebendes Getön
Soll unsrer trüben Seelen Schrecken
Durch ihr geschwungnes Erze wecken
Und uns durch Mark und Adern gehn.
O, könne nur dies bange Klöngen, 
Davon das Ohr uns täglich gellt,

The tolling of the trembling bells
Shall our lamenting souls’ great terror
Through their rebounding bronze awaken
And pierce us to the very core.

Oh, would that now this anxious peeling,
Which on our ears each day doth shrill,
To all the European world
A witness of our grief might render!

5 5. ARIA (Alto, 2 Violas da gamba, Lutes, Bc.)

Wie starb die Heldin so vergnügt!
Wie mutig hat ihr Geist gerungen,
Da sie des Todes Arm bezwungen,
Noch eh er ihre Brust besiegt.

How died our Lady so content!
How valiantly her spirit struggled,
For her the arm of death did vanquish
Before it did her breast subdue.

12 6. RECITATIVE (Tenor, 2 Oboes d’amore, Bc.)

Ihr Leben ließ die Kunst zu sterben
In unverrückter Übung sehn;
Unmöglich konnt es denn geschehn,
Sich vor dem Tode zu entfärben.

Her living let the art of dying
With ever steadfast skill be seen;
It would have been impossible
Before her death that she grow pallid.

An dir, du Fürbild großer Frauen,
An dir, erhabne Königin,
An dir, du Glaubenspflegerin,
War dieser Großmut Bild zu schauen.

In thee, thou model of great women,
In thee, illustrious royal queen,
In thee, thou keeper of the faith,
The form of kindness was to witness.
8. ARIA (Tenor, Flute, Oboe d’amore, 2 Violins, Viola da gamba, Lutes, Bc.)

Der Ewigkeit saphirnes Haus
Zieht, Füstin, deine heitern Blicke
Von unserer Niedrigkeit zurücke
Und tilgt der Erden Dreckbild aus.
Ein starker Glanz von hundert Sonnen,
Der unsern Tag zur Mitternacht
Und unsere Sonne finster macht,
Hat dein verklärtes Haupt umsponnen.

Eternity’s sapphiric house,
O Princess, these thy cheerful glances
From our own low estate now draweth
And blots out earth’s corrupted form.
A brilliant light made by a hundred suns,
Which doth our day to midnight
And doth our sun to darkness turn,
Hath thy transfigured head surrounded.

9. RECITATIVE - ARIOSO - RECITATIVE (Bass, 2 Flutes, 2 Oboes d’amore, Bc.)

Was Wunder ist’s? Du bist es wert,
Du Fürbild aller Königinnen!
Du mußtest allen Schmuck gewinnen,
Der deine Scheitel itzt verklärt.
Nun trägst du vor des Lammes Throne
Anstatt des Purpurs Eitelkeit
Ein perlenreines Unschuldskleid
Und spottest der verlaßnen Krone.

What wonder this? This thou hast earned,
Thou model of all queens forever!
For thou wast meant to win the glory
Which hath transfigured now thy head.
Before the lamb’s own throne thou wearest
Instead of purple’s vanity
A pearl-white robe of purity
And scornest now the crown forsaken.

10. CHORUS (Tutti)

Doch, Königin! du stirbest nicht,
Mann weiß, was man an dir besessen;
Die Nachwelt wird dich nicht vergessen,
Bis dieser Weltbau einst zerbricht.
Ihr Dichter, schreibt! wir wollen’s lesen:
Sie ist der Tugend Eigentum,
Der Untertanen Lust und Ruhm,
Der Königinnen Preis gewesen.

No, royal queen! Thou shalt not die;
We see in thee our great possession;
Posterity shall not forget thee,
Till all this universe shall fall.
Ye poets, write! For we would read it:
She hath been virtue’s property,
Her loyal subjects joy and fame
Of royal queens the crown and glory.

11. CHORUS (Tutti)

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12. CHORUS (Tutti)

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13. CHORUS (Tutti)

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Der Untertanen Lust und Ruhm,
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She hath been virtue’s property,
Her loyal subjects joy and fame
Of royal queens the crown and glory.
3. RECITATIVE (Counter-tenor, Strings, Bc.)

Zwar fühlt mein schwaches Herz
Furcht, Sorge, Schmerz:
Wo wird mein Leib die Ruhe finden?
Wer wird die Seele doch
Vom aufgelegten Sündenjoch
Befreien und entbinden?
Das Meine wird zerstreut,
Und wohin werden meine Lieben
In ihrer Traurigkeit
Zertrennt, vertrieben?

Indeed my weak heart feels fear, worry, pain: where will my body discover rest? Who will that day exonerate and loose my soul from its confining yoke of sin. My goods will be dispersed, and whither will all my loved ones then, in their own wretched grief, be cast and banished?

4. ARIA (Bass, Flute, Strings, Bc.)

Doch weichet, ihr tollen, vergeblichen Sorgen!
Mich rufet mein Jesus: wer sollte nicht gehn?
Nichts, was mir gefällt,
Besitzet die Welt.
Erscheine mir, seliger, fröhlicher Morgen,
Verkläret und herrlich vor Jesu zu stehn.

So yield now, ye foolish and purposeless sorrows! My Jesus doth call me: who would then not go? This world possesses nothing which I desire. Appear to me, blessed, exuberant morning, transfigured in glory to Jesus I’ll come.

5. RECITATIVE (Soprano, Bc.)

Behalte nur, o Welt, das Meine!
Du nimmst ja selbst mein Fleisch und mein Geheime,
So nimm auch meine Armut hin;
Genug, daß mir aus Gottes Überflüß
Das höchste Gut noch werden muß,
Genug, daß ich dort reich und selig bin.
Was aber ist von mir zu erben,
Als meines Gottes Vatertreu?
Die wird ja alle Morgen neu
Und kann nicht sterben.

Then seize, O world, all my possessions! You take even my flesh and this my body, so take as well my poverty; enough, that there I shall be rich and blest. However, what shall I inherit except God’s paternal love? It is every morning new and cannot perish.

6. CHORALE (Tutti)

Herrscher über Tod und Leben,
Mach einmal mein Ende gut,
Lehre mich den Geist aufgeben
Mit recht wohlgefaßtem Mut.
Hilf, daß ich ein ehrlich Grab
Neben frommen Christen hab
Und auch endlich in der Erde
Nimmermehr zuschanden werde!

Ruler over death and living, let at last my ending be good; teach me how to yield my spirit with a courage firm and sure. Help me earn an honest grave next to godly Christian men, and at last though covered by earth may I never suffer ruin!

THE INSTRUMENTS

ARCHLUTE - Reid Galbraith; after J. C. Hoffmann circa 1714.


CORNETTO - Treble cornett by Christopher Monk, 1970.


HARPSICHORD - Glenn Hardy, San Francisco, 1979; Flemish.

LUTE - Andreas Holst, Austria, 1986; copy of Tieffenbruchar, Venice, 1607.

OBEO - Phil Levin, New Jersey USA; after Saxon models. H. A. Vas Dias, Georgia; after Thomas Stanesby, Sr.


