

Cantatas for the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity
Unser Lieben Frauen, Bremen

With two feasts occurring so close together in 2000 – St Michael Archangel (29 September) and Trinity 15 (1 October) – and our pilgrimage finances ever more strained, we took advantage of an offer of two concerts from the Bremen Musikfest. Bremen, the once wealthy trading port in northwestern Germany, had been the scene of a prolonged and bloody stand-off between the two ill-tempered forms of Protestantism in the sixteenth century – mainly merchant class Calvinists and aristocrat-led Lutherans. For us the offer meant that we were able to perform (and record) our two concerts in a single venue (the church of Unser Lieben Frauen), then repeat the two programmes in the Franciscan abbey of Neviges and, on Trinity 15 itself, in Bonn's Münster-Basilika.

Some of Bach's cantata music contains more darkness than light; but in the case of those cantatas that he composed for Trinity 15 it is a deep, rich darkness with shafts of light that are both subtle and brilliant. BWV 138 **Warum betrübst du dich** is a case in point: a poignant work from Bach's first Leipzig cycle, it charts the beleaguered Christian's journey from profound distress of mind and soul, punctuated by (choral) injunctions to hold fast, to an eventual solidity of faith. The cantata's structure has come in for some harsh criticism: Philipp Spitta (1881) found it unintelligible that 'two chorale movements treated in various ways [should] follow consecutively' (but why not?), while Albert Schweitzer (1911) felt 'that Bach had set to work on it without any very clear plan'. I found that these strictures largely disappear in performance. There is no question that BWV 138 is a highly original, experimental work, one that is simultaneously archaic, especially in the motet-like writing in Nos 1 and 2 (which put one in mind of his early Mülhausen and Weimar pieces), and modern in Bach's way of grappling with three successive stanzas of a sixteenth-century chorale, in anticipation of the chorale-based cantatas of his second Leipzig cycle. It is a clever device which allows him to pile on the tension between anxiety (the solo recitative interjections) and belief (the choral delivery of the hymn stanzas). The cantata's turning-point occurs midway – a dawning realisation that God *will* come to the believer's rescue (in No.3), with an outspoken declaration of trust in His providential care (in No.4). The elaborate fantasia in 6/8 for the final chorale is a perfect – and well-planned – counterbalance to the gloom and distress of the opening movements.

Jauchzet Gott BWV 51, one of the very few genuinely popular of Bach's surviving cantatas, seems never to lose its glitter and charm – provided, of course, that there is a soprano and a trumpeter equal to its ferocious technical demands (which was certainly the case here with the two Swedes, Malin Hartelius and Niklas Eklund). For all the brilliance of the outer trumpet-centred movements, I find that it is the inner movements which have the greater musical appeal – the *accompagnato* (No.2) and the heavenly 12/8 'Höchster, mache deine Güte'. Is it too fanciful to discern Bach's tender feelings for his second wife Anna Magdalena in this music? She was an

extremely accomplished *Kammersängerin*, with whom he may have performed this work at the Weissenfels court some time in the 1730s.

Although they have successive BWV numbers, Bach's first and third settings of Samuel Rodigast's hymn **Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan** are separated by at least a decade, and their points of difference are as intriguing as their shared material (for example, the addition of two *corni da caccia* and timpani in BWV 100 to the string band with flute and oboe d'amore in BWV 99). In the earlier version, Bach provides just a single aria (No.3), for tenor with flute obbligato. It describes the bitter taste of the 'cross's cup' and how God 'can pour no fatal poison for you even though its sweetness lies concealed'. A chromatic ascent in both flute and voice suggests the bitter-tasting liquid (you can almost sense it gurgling through the veins) and then the balm provided by God 'the wise physician'. It is followed by a quintet (No.5) for soprano and alto with flute, oboe d'amore and continuo depicting the heavy tread to Calvary. In performance it seemed like a return to those woebegone Epiphany and Lenten themes – the 'bitter sorrows of the cross' struggling with the weakness of the flesh. You cannot but sense the 'unerträglich' (unbearable) enormity of the weight of the cross and the hollow victory of those who give up midway. It is a salutary piece of musical sermonising, but still a bitter pill to swallow amid the cheerier admonitions of the opening chorus and closing chorale.

In his third version (BWV 100), which was first performed in Leipzig in 1734, Bach continues the words of the opening chorale unaltered through all six verses while managing never to repeat himself musically nor to allow the hymn tune to outlive its welcome. You sense Bach either responding to criticism ('Why do you make your cantatas so complicated? Couldn't you restrict them to a single theological theme?') or setting himself a new challenge, to provide maximum variety within the constraints of the verse form. The four middle movements are hugely challenging and gripping, without a single recitative to break up the pattern. An alto/tenor duet (No.2), demanding giant lungs and firm control of coloratura, is followed by a *siciliano* for soprano and flute obbligato (No.3) – probably the most technically challenging of all Bach's flute obbligati, with its *roulades* of twenty-four successive demisemiquavers per bar. Then comes a jaunty bass aria accompanied by full strings with lilting syncopations (No.4), and a glorious 12/8 aria for alto with oboe d'amore (No.5) – lyrical and soothing. Bach rounds off the cantata with a repeat (No.6) of the setting we first performed on Trinity 1 (BWV 75), but this time with added horns and timpani.

Cantatas for the Sixteenth Sunday after Trinity **Santo Domingo de Bonaval, Santiago de Compostela**

Northern Galicia was bathed in warm autumn sunshine with cloudless skies as we flew in to the most famous pilgrimage site of all. The four cantatas for Trinity 16 draw their inspiration from the Gospel story of the raising of the widow of Nain's son. All four – BWV 161, 27, 8 and 95 – articulate the

Lutheran yearning for death, and all but one feature the 'Leichen-Glocken', the tolling of funerary bells. Yet for all their unity of theme, there is immense diversity of texture, structure and mood, and together they make a satisfying and deeply moving quartet – music that is both healing and uplifting.

It was a delight to be able to revive BWV 161 **Komm, du süße Todesstunde**, that astonishing cantata from Bach's Weimar years, barely two and a half months after we had given it in Iona Abbey on Bach's death-day (28 July). Whereas there it had been the pastoral textures that had made the strongest impression, no doubt because of the way they fitted so perfectly with the island landscape, here it was the heart-tugging beauty of the tenor aria 'Mein Verlangen' (No.3), with its sensual string textures, which was most moving, especially as sung by Mark Padmore.¹

With two of its movements in triple time (Nos.3 and 5), BWV 161 seems to be setting a pattern for Bach's later cantatas dealing with the call of death – or is this quite by chance? Could this be a deliberate device to lull and soothe the grieving heart? Three of the four main movements in BWV 95 are in triple metre. So too is the magical opening chorus of BWV 27 **Wer weiß, wie nahe mir mein Ende**, an elegiac lament into which Bach has woven the modal tune linked to Georg Neumark's hymn 'Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten', which seemed to make such a deep impression on performers and listeners alike every time it surfaced along our pilgrimage route. The passage of time is suggested here by the slow pendulum strokes in the bass of the orchestra; against this the downward falling figure in the upper strings and a poignant broken theme in the oboes provide the backcloth for the haunting chorale melody, interlaced with contemplative recitative. Even the harpsichord obbligato and continuo line of the chirpy alto aria (No.3) seem to be imbued with the spirit of measured time (heard here in the percussive articulation of the harpsichord keys), a recurrent feature in these death-knell cantatas. The bass aria in G minor (No.5) shows a strong kinship with Peter's aria of denial 'Ach mein Sinn' in Bach's *St John Passion*, at least in its valedictory opening bars. Then it erupts in animated imitation of the 'world's turmoil', which the departing soul will gladly leave behind. The vigorous writing for strings here, an updating of Monteverdi's *stilo concitato*, is not Bach's only nod to the past. For the closing chorale (No.6), most unusually, he quotes almost unaltered a predecessor's composition, Johann Rosenmüller's five-part 'Welt, ade! ich bin dein müde', which was first printed in Leipzig in 1652. It feels utterly appropriate. Perhaps Bach, matchless as he was at setting chorales, felt that on this occasion there was nothing here that could be bettered.

The opening movement of BWV 8 **Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?** is an extraordinary tableau in sound. It consists of almost continuous semiquaver movement in 12/8 in E major for the two oboes d'amore over a muted staccato quaver accompaniment by the upper strings, pizzicato in the bass. Soaring above this is the high chiming of the flute, playing out of its normal range.² There is something Brahmsian in the oboe-writing, but something too of Berlioz and *L'Enfance du Christ* in the instrumentation and

some of the harmonic progressions, while the entry of the hymn-tune sung by the sopranos (doubled by cornetto) has an almost fairground swing. There is an elegiac and iridescent tenderness to this whole movement which gives it its special allure. The funeral bells return (at least by inference) in the detached quavers of the tenor aria (No.2) with the words 'wenn meine letzte Stunde schlä-ä-ä-ä-ä-gt', and in the pizzicato continuo. This is beautifully balanced by the bass aria (No.4), an optimistic affirmation of trust in Jesus' summons to a better life. Here Bach provides singer, flute and strings with unabashed dance music, a 12/8 *gigue* in A major with some of the swagger and ebullience of the finale from the sixth Brandenburg concerto.

I was so pleased to be performing BWV 95 **Christus, der ist mein Leben** at last, a cantata I first heard in the late 60s in a Karl Richter performance. I had been struck then and since by the fascinating and utterly original combination of 'corno' (which some scholars think to mean 'cornetto') and oboes. In the second part of the opening chorus Bach locks them together in a combative tussle to introduce Luther's paraphrase of the *Nunc Dimittis*. Jazz trumpets, I'd thought then, and there is indeed something of a jam session feel to this passage, but in fact we have no idea precisely what instrument Bach intended here. When performed on the archaic cornetto it involves the player in elaborate and treacherous cross-fingerings, which inhibits the projection of sound. So, bravely, Mike Harrison brought along his German *ventiltrompette* in C as an alternative, if anachronistic, solution. It sounded fabulous. Ultimately it is not the form, make or date of the instrument that guarantees conviction, but the skill and imagination of the player, and Mike managed to make it sound credibly cornetto-like in timbre. There was a real frisson to his dialogue with the oboes in the Santiago performance, in which one could sense the final struggle between the forces of life and death before the soul at last reaches its longed-for destination. It put me in mind of the climax of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* when Christian 'passed over, and the trumpets sounded for him on the other side'.

You cannot avoid being struck in this cantata by Bach's most unusual use of four successive funeral hymns as the supporting pillars of his structure, giving encouragement to the (tenor) believer as he contemplates his death. The rather muscular Christianity of the syncopated opening exchanges between paired oboes and violins, pulsating with vitality, paves the way for the first triple-rhythm chorale which dissolves at the word 'Sterben' (to die), a voice-by-voice entry building up a diminished seventh chord, coming to a rest, before re-exploding with '...ist mein Gewinn' (is my reward). This culminates with the line 'mit Freud fahr ich dahin' as the connecting link to the next chorale, Luther's paraphrase of the *Nunc Dimittis*. Linking the two chorale statements is a triple metre arioso for tenor, 'Mit Freuden, ja, mit Herzenslust will ich von hinnen scheiden'. This breaks up into segments of free rhythm – and here Bach is highly experimental in the way he holds them in check by interjecting fragments of the opening syncopated motif: you gain the impression of a succession of 7/4

bars. At its climax the tenor sings unaccompanied 'Mein Sterbelied ist schon gemacht...' – silence – '...ach dürft' ich's' (sung with astonishing pathos by Mark Padmore), 'ach dürft' ich's heute singen!'. With no break whatsoever the dialogue between 'corno' and oboes mentioned above now introduces the second chorale, Luther's ebullient 'Mit Fried und Freud'. At its conclusion the soprano soloist rushes in with the exclamation, 'Nun, falsche Welt! nun hab ich weiter nichts mit dir zu tun' which leads, also without a break, into a captivating arched melody, 'Valet will ich dir geben, du arge, falsche Welt', and then, via a *secco* recitative for tenor, to the only true aria in this cantata, the mesmerising 'Ach, schlage doch bald' with its pizzicato 'Leichen-Glocken'.

After the concert there was big dissension in the hotel bar as to the meaning and imagery suggested by the 'Leichen-Glocken'. Some insisted that the high-repeated quavers of the flute in BWV 161 (No.4) and in BWV 8 (No.1) symbolise the high pitched funeral bells associated with infant death. One member of our team was convinced that the music in BWV 95 (No.5) represents the workings of a clock, the tenor waiting for the chiming of his final hour while the strings imitate the clock's mechanical ticking. The oboes imitate the wheel mechanism which on the stroke of twelve grinds to a halt – just as time seems to do when you are impatient. The second oboe's echo (in bar 4) nudges the clock around by pulling on the counter-weight thus setting the clock in motion once more. Ingenious and plausible...

One cannot help wondering whether the vivid memory of a recent death in the family guided Bach while he was composing these pieces. Was it possibly an inner preparation for the likely death of a frail child that inspired in him this succession of compositions based on faith and trust, so child-like in their simplicity? His daughter Christiane Sophia (b.1723) was indeed weakly and was to die on 29 June 1726 – just a few months before he sat down to compose BWV 27.

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

1. In Iona we performed the cantata in its original Weimar version of 1715/6 with the strings playing in C, but tuned at A=466 (almost a tone higher than what is considered to be standard Leipzig pitch of A=415) and recorders reading in E flat at low French pitch (*Tief-Kammerton* in German) to sound in C at the high Weimar pitch (*Chorton*). Here in Santiago, since it was being performed cheek-by-jowl with four Leipzig cantatas, we opted to reconstruct Bach's Leipzig version (some time between 1737 and 1746), performing it in D major at A=415.

2. Although when Bach revived the cantata in 1746-7 he transposed it down a tone in D, well within the range of the transverse flute, in this earlier version we felt the most likely and appropriate instrument was a 'sixth flute' – a recorder written in D but sounding in E.