

## **Cantatas for the First Sunday after Easter (Quasimodogeniti)**

### **Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Kirche, Arnstadt**

After the uplifting experience of celebrating the Easter Festival in Eisenach, Bach's birthplace, we moved on some thirty miles southeast through the Thuringian forest to Arnstadt. Said to be the oldest town in Thuringia, this was once the 'nerve-centre of the Bach family', the 'major hub' of their musical activities since the 1640s (Christoph Wolff). It was also the seat of a small principality ruled at the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Count Anton Günther of Schwarzburg, who, ever since the death in 1693 of Johann Christoph, Bach's uncle and court and town musician, had been on the look-out for another available family member; 'for he should and must have a Bach again'. It took him eight years to find his man.

One day in June 1703, a private coach drew up outside the ducal castle in Weimar to escort the eighteen-year-old Johann Sebastian Bach, then a minor court servant (officially registered as 'the lackey Bach') to Arnstadt. His task was to inspect and evaluate the new organ in the rebuilt Saint Boniface's or New Church, where we were due to perform on Low Sunday. Had the 800 florins paid by the Council to the organ builder J F Wender been good value for money? For the next couple of days Bach needed to draw on his impressive, precocious technical know-how: measuring wind-pressure, the thickness and quality of the pipes (had Wender cheated by substituting lead for tin in those that were out of sight, for example?), the voicing of the reeds, including the three big 16' stops, the touch and rebound of the depressed keys and so on. No-one put organs to the test 'so severely and yet so honestly as he', asserted CPE Bach much later, after his father's death. 'The first thing he would do in trying an organ was this: he would say, in jest, "Above all I must know

whether the organ has good lungs”, and, to find out, he would draw out every speaking stop, and play in the fullest and richest possible texture. At this the organ builders would often grow quite pale with fright.’

They need not have worried: the young examiner seemed satisfied, Wender got his certificate and the Burgomaster promptly asked Bach whether he would mind staying on till Sunday to inaugurate the new organ ‘in public assembly’, a thinly-disguised audition for the post of organist. Bach duly played his inaugural recital on St John the Baptist’s Day, very likely featuring his ebullient and showy D minor Toccata and Fugue (BWV 565) as its centrepiece – and received his full fee and expenses out of the city’s tax on beer. A few weeks later and he was confirmed as organist of the *Neue Kirche* with a salary twice that which his father had received as town piper of Eisenach. Count Schwarzburg had got his Bach – for the time being...

We arrived to find the *Neue Kirche* (now the *Johann-Sebastian-Bach-Kirche*) aglow with fresh white paint and gold trimmings. With its three tiers of galleries it seemed even more theatre-like than St George’s in Eisenach. Tucked under the vaulted roof was Wender’s newly-restored 23-stop organ. Opposite it and centrally above the altar was the pulpit. You could pick out the initials ‘SDG’, so closely associated with Bach’s spirit.

It seemed fitting to open with BWV 150 **Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich**, now generally accepted to be Bach’s very first church cantata and composed here very possibly for this church at some stage during his time as organist, but for no known occasion. It is an astonishing piece. Forget the occasional technical lapse; you have to admire how Bach skilfully alternates the anonymous text with verses from Psalm 25, his already theologically astute emphasis on the need to hold on to faith amid the doubts that assail us, a theme this cantata shares, interestingly, with the cantatas composed specifically for this Sunday. Viewed one way, it is a

portfolio of what he had assimilated and achieved thus far, and the perfect riposte to the members of the Arnstadt Consistory who had complained of his failure to provide 'figural' music hitherto (though his contract as organist stipulated no such obligation). To them he seemed to be saying, 'Here, then, I'm offering you an opening *sonata da chiesa* – variations on a descending chromatic bass – followed by a chorus of the kind I learnt from Buxtehude in Lübeck (sorry, by the way, that I stayed away four months and not the four weeks you sanctioned). Next, a fetching little aria for soprano with violin obbligato (the very piece, by the way, I was rehearsing in the choir loft with the only competent singer I could find here – the so-called 'unauthorised maiden' – actually my cousin and fiancée, Maria Barbara). You'll also find a multi-sectioned chorus (No.4), beginning in the bass and climbing through all four voices and from them to the two violins, in which, perhaps, you might detect a play on words – 'Leite' ('lead') sounding similar to 'Leiter' ('ladder'): in effect I've portrayed man's aspirations to attain God's truth by means of twenty-six separate rungs of a tonal ladder. To this I've added a trio with a *moto perpetuo* cello line and a *fagotto* part which will stretch the technique of Herr Geyersbach, that "Zippel Fagottist" (plausibly translated as 'a prick of a bassoonist') who attacked me unawares with his cronies in the Market Square and then sneaked off to complain to you. There's a permutation fugue and a finale in which I've solved the problem of how to turn an instrumental *chaconne* into a choral peroration over a ground bass: a diatonic stepwise ascent of a fifth which inverts the shape of the chromatic tetrachord I used in my opening *sinfonia*. You can see that it is an allegory in music of human spite and of my own struggles here, with God's help, to "daily win the battle".

But this cantata is more than just a clever piece of self-advertisement (Brahms, for one, was sufficiently impressed with this *chaconne* to use it as the basis of the *passacaglia* in the finale of his fourth

symphony). There is a distinctive voice to the music, a more than embryonic feeling for biblical mood-evocation and a delight in textural permutations. It shows both a willingness to experiment and a grasp of what was achievable with an unruly choir of disaffected mature students (the Cantor of the Upper Church having creamed off the best singers for his own choir). The patina of the music holds your attention long after the cantata has ended.

Twenty years down the road, with BWV 67 **Halt im Gedächtnis Jesum Christ** we enter a different world. From the superb opening chorale fantasia with *corno da tirarsi*, flute and two oboes d'amore, the music vibrates with a pulsating rhythmic energy and a wealth of invention. Evidently much thought went into the planning of this impressive cantata, the first in a sequence of five leading up to Whit Sunday – almost a mini-cycle within Bach's first annual Leipzig *Jahrgang* of 1723/4, no doubt assembled in haste following the huge creative outpouring of the *St John Passion*. His purpose is to depict the perplexed and vacillating feelings of Christ's disciples, their hopes dashed after the Crucifixion, and to maintain the tension between Thomas' legitimate doubts and the paramount need to keep faith (the *corno* blasts this out as a sustained single note in the opening chorus, an injunction to 'hold' ('halt') Jesus in remembrance). The way even a poised and chirpy gavotte for tenor, oboe d'amore and strings (No.2) splinters already in its second bar – 'But what affrights me still?' – is indicative of Bach's purpose in juxtaposing these contrary *Affekts*, one sceptical, the other affirming the Resurrection. He captures the jittery mind-frame of the beleaguered Christian in a triptych of recitative-chorale-recitative (Nos 3, 4 and 5), the alto soloist exhorting the choir to keep their spirits up by singing the iconic Easter hymn 'Erschienen ist der herrlich Tag'. Now, as the culmination of the cantata, comes a dramatic *scena* in which the strings work up a storm to illustrate the raging of the soul's

enemies. Using a trick like a cinematic dissolve, Bach melts this into a slower, gently dotted triple-rhythm sequence for the three woodwind instruments. Jesus suddenly appears to his disciples gathered together in a locked room 'for fear of the Jews'. Two opposed moods and textures alternate. The upper three-voiced choir of stricken disciples is sucked in by the *furioso* strings to convey the sense of alienation of the Christian community in the here and now. Three times their anguish is quelled by Jesus' beatific utterance 'Peace be unto you' ('Friede sei mit euch'). At its fourth and final appearance, the strings symbolically abandon their storm-rousing function and ease into the woodwind's gently lulling rhythms. In this way the *scena* ends peacefully. A concluding chorale, Jakob Ebert's 'Du Friedefürst, Herr Jesu Christ', acknowledges the Prince of Peace as 'a strong helper in need, in life and in death'.

The following year, 1725, Bach came up with a very different solution. For the opening of BWV 42 **Am Abend aber desselbigen Sabbats** he assigns the first verse of the Gospel text not to his exhausted choir but to a tenor, as Evangelist. This is preceded by an extended Sinfonia cast as a kind of *concerto a due cori* with strings versus woodwinds (two oboes and bassoon). Tempting as it is to see an illustrative, theological purpose behind Bach's choice of an instrumental overture – Eric Chafe, for example, considers that it 'invites interpretation' as the appearance of the risen Christ in the midst of His apprehensive disciples – it is in fact lifted from a lost birthday serenata for Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen (BWV 66a). As another of those instances where Bach is parodying pre-existent secular material, you wonder whether he allowed for its dual purpose at the moment of its inception or, as a result of his unique penetrative insight into the manifold yet apt re-use of material, fished it out of the bottom drawer as the thought flashed across his brain when he sat down to compose this cantata. However, abstract instrumental

music is one thing: any subjective interpretation can neither be proven nor repudiated. Texted music is another matter altogether. I could not detect any signs of 'Jesus "in the midst" of an agitated world' (Chafe again) in the alto aria (No.3), and would not have expected to do so in music whose original text (also from the Cöthen serenata) opens: 'Fortunate land of sweet calm and quiet, / in your breast flows but a sea of joys'. Yet as with some of Rameau's pastoral music, I found it almost unbearably pained and sad at our first performance and far more serene and consoling at the second. Perhaps there is less of a contradiction between these two subjective impressions than may at first appear. Could it be that Bach's own accumulated experiences of grief and disappointment lie at the heart of the calm acceptance of the power of prayer and forgiveness 'where two or three are gathered together' and (as in the B section) 'that which occurs out of love or need does not contravene the Highest's order'?

Bach inserts a 'chorale' in the centre of this cantata, to intensify the vulnerability of his 'little flock' in a hostile world, but disguises it almost completely in the instrumental (and occasionally vocal) lines. C H Terry once suggested that the curiously bucolic bassoon obbligato was intended to accompany a chorale melody 'never actually sounded', which might lead one to suppose that it is a device to convey the 'hiddenness' of the church in the world. This seems to be confirmed in the bass recitative (No.5), which describes Jesus' sudden appearance to His disciples 'to prove that He would protect His church'. Bach switches to '*animoso*' for the last couple of bars, in which his entire continuo group (cello, violone, bassoon, harpsichord and organ) seem intent on booting the raging enemy into the bottomless pit – and continue to do so for much of the final A major aria (No.6). The bass soloist meanwhile celebrates the power of light to overcome darkness: Jesus, by shielding His persecuted followers, guarantees that 'for them the sun must shine'. Whittaker refers to the

violins 'gleaming in thirds' by way of illustrating the golden superscription, which made me glance up at the gold-emblazoned 'SDG' on the pulpit. Bach's scoring here is for twin violin parts, specifically apportioned between the four first violins, two per part. Outwardly this seemed so implausible that we tried it as a straightforward trio sonata (two per part being much harder to blend than one or three). It sounded well but nothing more; so we experimented with three per part, antiphonally arranged. Finally we reverted to the two per part apportionment exactly as Bach instructs, and of course it proves that he knew exactly what he wanted. The final chorale is Luther's version of *Da pacem, Domine* cleverly stitched on to Johann Walther's prayer for good governance and peace.

The final piece in our programme is sometimes considered an oddity, a composite work, even a fragment. Presented in its present form some time during the late 1720s for Easter Tuesday, BWV 158 **Der Friede sei mit dir** is a fine addition to Bach's two celebrated cantatas for solo bass (BWV 56 and 82). It condenses and at the same time refines the mood of the bass aria in BWV 67, Jesus' words 'Peace be unto you' this time addressed not to the disciples but to the 'troubled conscience'. The ravishing, world-weary aria with high violin obbligato and a superimposed chorale (No.2) seems an entirely appropriate accompaniment to the distribution of the Eucharist, the function of Part II of all Bach's double-decker cantatas. It ends with the fifth verse of Luther's great Easter hymn 'Christ lag in Todesbanden'.

Five concerts in eight days over the Easter festival in two towns so closely associated with Bach's life and family, a total of ten cantatas, several of them rooted in the Thuringian landscape, had drawn us close to the rhythms of Bach's work schedule and to the operation of his creative imagination. Not for him the pencil-sucking inspiration of country walks, the daydreaming next to a babbling stream of the Romantics in search of self-

expression: instead, a more mundane, disciplined rhythm of composing to order on a Monday or Tuesday to underpin the following Sunday's sermon. One is dumbfounded by the peerless craftsmanship of this weekly and seasonal output; but still more by the limitless invention, the subtlety and complexity of these unsurpassed flights of creative fantasy.

### **Cantatas for the Second Sunday after Easter (Misericordias Domini) Basilique St Willibrord, Echternach**

What must once have been a splendid eleventh-century Benedictine Abbey, bombed late in the Second World War, is now a garish reconstructed modern church. The marble floor and pebbledash walls make for a harsh acoustical response but with a long reverberation, fortunately reduced to manageable – even agreeable – proportions when filled for our concert with a thousand listeners. This was the opening concert of the *Festival International Echternach* in the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, an attractively sleepy French-style provincial town in a valley bottom, where the people speak 'luxembourgish', a strange Franconian dialect peppered with the odd French word. One of the priests, apparently disapproving of our musical presence in his church, provided strong counter-attractions – loud door-slamming and 'happy-clappy' children's services.

Hard on the heels of Bach's magnificent cantatas for Low Sunday came three pastoral cantatas all inspired by the twenty-third Psalm. I feared a certain monotony of mood and *Affekt*. How wrong this proved! One should have guessed that Bach was capable of more than a single pastoral idiom, and as so often there is an enthralling quality to his inventive and sensitive responses to the same seminal Gospel ideas

present in these three cantatas. It is worth remembering that in a predominantly agrarian society like eighteenth-century Saxony there was a much closer linking of the seasons to the preoccupations of Christianity than there is today, as well as an unselfconscious transfer of rural imagery to contemplative religious texts. So there would have been nothing quaint or folksy even to Bach's townish audience in hearing pastoral music as a metaphor for their own Lutheran community watched over by Jesus as the good shepherd, a world away from the contemporaneous French vogue for *bergeries* and urban aristocrats, like second-home owners today, indulging in an idealised, wholly unrealistic image of rural life – one thinks of Marie Antoinette and her perfumed sheep.

BWV 104 **Du Hirte Israel, höre**, from Bach's first Leipzig cycle, displays the clearest of aspiring, upward tonal designs (known as *anabasis*) moving from G major (the opening chorus), through B minor (tenor recitative and aria) and D major (bass recitative and aria) to A major (a chorale paraphrase of Psalm 23) as the faithful are led towards the 'meadow of heaven' by Christ the shepherd. It opens with the first verse of Psalm 80 set as a gentle choral dance. The overall mood is benign, suffused with a tender lyricism, and if it doesn't 'ache' quite in the way that Rameau's pastoral dances pull on your heartstrings, it evokes the image of pastoral care and comfort to a tee. This is no banal or literal idyll of a shepherd with his flock trotting obediently behind him. The emphasis is placed firmly on the allegorical purpose: an appeal to Jesus by the community of believers to 'shine forth' and 'give ear'. Quite early on, after the voices have peeled off in pairs, Bach provides a clever musical parallel between the unruly sheep and wayward believers, both hesitant and prone to scatter. Seeing how closely the baroque oboe is associated with shepherds' music and how Bach (like Telemann in this regard) relishes the special sonority of three of them in tandem, it is strange to discover that

they were added to the string parts only as an afterthought. In fact this opening chorus may have been 'parodied' from a lost university graduation cantata, 'Siehe, der Hüter Israel' (BWV Anh.I, 15). It is quite a challenge to pace and balance this subtle chorus. Giving a gentle, unhurried *gigue*-like lilt to the 9/8 triplet quavers is perhaps the key, and then digging out the fugal entries so that an overlapping voice in a higher register does not mask each new entry.

The first of two arias is for tenor with a pair of oboes d'amore, evoking the image of a lost soul in search of the 'hidden' shepherd. There is a strange chromatic passage midway suggesting the fear and disorientation of the solitary pilgrim lost in the wilderness. Finer still is the bass aria 'Beglückte Herde' (No.5), describing how the shepherd gathers his flock and thereby guides the believer towards a glimpse of heaven. A sequence of four initial phrases in 12/8 metre, the first three just a bar long, the fourth three bars long with rich writing for the inner voices, creates its own potent alchemy. So when in the 'B' section Bach describes 'death's gentle slumber' as the 'reward' for faith, the listener is cushioned into fearless security by the calm of this lilting pastoral dance. There is a miraculously beautiful passage when the voice sinks, settling first on an unexpected C natural ('Todesschlaf') before gently levitating and alighting this time on a B natural. This is balanced by upward motion coming to rest on an A and then a C sharp for the word 'hoffet' – the 'hope' for faith's reward. It is hard to say which contributes more to the creation of this soothing atmosphere, the glorious undulating melody, the rhythmic pulse and pedal points and variations of emphasis, or the cunning part-writing, with the violas dipping in and out of the texture, a crucial component in the rich harmonic weave of the music with its plentiful sixths and flattened sevenths.

Bach's *bête noire*, his ex-pupil and chief critic Johann Adolph Scheibe, maintained [*Critischer Musikus*, Leipzig 1745] that one should avoid all excesses and 'let nature (as it were) creep into the stillness and let no turgid or strange progressions and inventions distance us from the peace, innocence and tenderness of such pieces'. But as Laurence Dreyfus comments, 'from a later historical vantage point, of course, it is precisely those turgid progressions, those momentary incursions of suffering into the innocence and tenderness that characterise what is so very remarkable about Bach [and, I would add, Rameau] and his music'. His willingness, in other words, to drop the mask and to allow the intensity of his own emotions to seep into his music is what makes these pastoral cantatas so moving to us.

Bach and Rameau, so different in character and virtually contemporaries, though they never met, were equally committed, each after his own fashion, to render the *Affekt* implied in a text or given situation with complete truth and intensity. While Rameau employs a similar harmonic language to Bach's in his pastoral dances, loading them with equally expressive inner dissonances, the results are utterly different. With Rameau the effect of his pastorals is elegiac, languorous, indolent even, where with Bach it is restful and consoling. What Girdlestone calls Rameau's 'sceptical nostalgia' is felt at its keenest in his slower pastoral music (*musettes* and the like), suggestive of a 'profound and simple longing for something out of reach and beyond belief and known to be so'. With Bach, of course, it is usually the opposite. Belief is the motor for this music, his exegetical purpose to demonstrate that, with Christ's help, the 'meadow of heaven' is not a lost Arcadia but a realistically attainable destination.

Bach approaches the same pastoral field by a different route in 1725. BWV 85 **Ich bin ein guter Hirt** is the third of three cantatas on

consecutive feast days (the others are BWV 6 and 42) that form a coherent sequence, each a fresh response to the increasing anxiety of the disciples, then and now, at life in the world without Jesus' physical presence. All three feature Johannine themes in contemporary texts, possibly by a single author, compiled the year before and intended by Bach for his first Leipzig *Jahrgang* of 1723/4. This had to be put on hold, perhaps as a result of the colossal effort which went into the completion of the *St John Passion* for Good Friday 1724, obliging him to turn to pre-existing material for some of the cantatas in that post-Resurrection season. Cantata 85 is the culmination of this sub-group, focussing on the image of Jesus as good shepherd, melding the power of the protector with the gentleness of the friend. St John's famous quote, 'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth His life for the sheep' is set as an opening arioso for bass. Its forty-four bars constitute an intriguing expansion of two thematic germs heard together in the very first bar, the one burgeoning into a wistful, lyrically moulded oboe melody, the other appearing first in the continuo and later as the singer's first phrase. The way the oboe's held note turns in on itself and then blossoms, inviting an answer by the violins, suggests an affinity both in melodic shape and in key with the slow movement of Bach's C minor Double Concerto BWV 1060. The prevalent mood is contemplative rather than genuinely bucolic, more a musical equivalent to a gentle 'Umarmung' or embrace, yet tinged with sadness.

As a meditation on Christ the good shepherd the choice of cello piccolo as obbligato instrument for the ensuing alto aria in G minor (No.2) is inspired. One would so like to know whether Bach was reacting to the chance availability of this particular, smaller cello (with E as its top string), and/or to a particularly talented exponent of it, or being proactive in seeking it out as central to his poetic and interpretative approach to the sequence of cantatas in the spring of 1725 (he uses it five times within the

'great fifty days' between Easter and Whitsun). Whatever the truth, it seems that this particular instrument with its plangent, tenor sonority tugs on the listener's heartstrings as only two other of Bach's favourite instruments, the viola d'amore and the oboe da caccia, can in not dissimilar situations. You sense that with this mantra-like sound, any 'lamb' would feel confidently armed against the sheep-rustler – wolf, fox or human. As in BWV 6, heard thirteen days earlier, Bach uses the four-string version of the cello piccolo with its extra 'glow' to mediate between the vocal soloist and the continuo, both in range and in harmonic function. In these two cantatas the instrument seems theologically associated with the believer's personal relationship to Jesus, providing an element of stability in a world of increasing darkness (BWV 6) and as an emblem for the loving, protecting 'arm' of the good shepherd (BWV 85).

Next comes a chorale setting of the twenty-third Psalm in Cornelius Becker's translation, with two oboes weaving an elaborate two-part invention – in effect a trio sonata texture, since it encompasses the continuo around the soprano's delicate ornamented melody. In the cantata's only recitative (No.4) the tenor refers to Jesus as head shepherd, forced to step in, as the hirelings sleep on, to rescue his flock – the cue for abrupt string arpeggios in contrary motion as the 'Höllenvolf' ('the wolf of Hell', or Satan) threatens to break in. It anticipates the recitative in the *St Matthew Passion* where Christ, having arrived with his disciples at the Mount of Olives, reminds them of the prophecy that the shepherd will be slain and the sheep will scatter.

The cantata's most inspired movement is the ensuing tenor aria in E flat, 'Seht, was die Liebe tut', again a pre-echo of the *St Matthew Passion* and the sublime alto aria 'Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand' in the same key which epitomises the pastoral love emanating from the cross, Jesus' outstretched arms offering a haven to the sinner and gathering in the

faithful like 'lost chicks'. With its rich, flowing melody and gently rocking rhythm the cantata aria presents a complementary image of sheep safely penned and folded, watched over by the good shepherd who, when hanging on the cross, 'shed... his precious blood for them', the first four syllables 'nailed' with a single repeated note by the singer. These thematic links to the *St Matthew Passion* are too close to be accidental: its music, though not completed in time for Good Friday, was never far from Bach's thoughts in the run-up to Easter 1725, his original plan being to insert it as the central jewel in his second *Jahrgang* of cantatas, so as to complement and balance the *St John Passion* of the previous year.

Bach had something quite different in mind when he composed the third cantata for this Sunday, BWV 112 **Der Herr ist mein getreuer Hirt**, in 1731. A late addition to his chorale-cantata cycle of 1724/5, it features all five strophes of a metrical paraphrase of Psalm 23 this time by Wolfgang Meuslin, but to the same hymn-tune by Nikolaus Decius ('Allein Gott in der Höh sei Ehr') used in the two earlier works. It gives a fresh twist to the stock-in-trade of German pastoral music adapted for church use: characteristically soothing and peaceful in mood, as with the two earlier cantatas – manifestations of solace, or gestures that transform death into a welcome release from the pains of living. The opening chorale fantasy is a masterpiece of compression. The presence of two horns, both crooked in G, one stratospherically high (and given no moment to breathe), the other given arresting reiterated three-note calls, reveals a much more regal portrait of the good shepherd than we have previously met. What Bach has done here is to combine several quasi-independent elements into one astonishing, polychromatic whole. To the calm ascent of the soprano hymn-tune he has added a burnished sheen (the first horn), serenity fused with majesty, as it were. The counter-subject (first violins and first oboes d'amore) is vigorous and *mouvementé*, representing gambolling lambs

headed pasture-wards, or a busy crowd on the move, or perhaps both. Apart from this arresting contrast (and there are several others including those between the successive, imitative voice entries underpinning the soprano/horn melody), is the irregular structural mosaic of prelude, strophes, intermezzo etc. in the following pattern of bars:

11 : 5 : 1 : 5 : 9 : 5 : 1 : 5 : 1 : 5 : 2 : 5 : 3 : 5 : 10 = 73

Was he reproducing some arcane numerological template here – and if so, what does it signify?

Verse 2 is an exquisite and outwardly pastoral aria for alto with oboe d'amore obbligato, replete with complex cross-rhythms against which the voice tries to insist on the 'proper path'. Verse 3 begins with an arioso, the imposing basso continuo in its lower register preceding the bass voice as he bravely enters 'the valley of darkness'. The upper strings arriving late give expressive chromatic force to the words inserted within the psalm text, a mere eight bars which evoke the horrors attendant on life's journey via a modulatory descent of A flat – g – f and then, as 'Thy rod and Thy staff comfort me', to the serenity of E major, finally coming to rest in G major. Verse 4 is a soprano/tenor duet in the form of an irrepressible *bourrée* for strings, and considerably easier for the two singers to dance than to sing!

All five verses of this superb cantata are tailored to the expression of the text, the music imaginatively and cunningly conceived, an example of Bach drawing on his experience and skill to articulate his religious convictions and to exhort, stimulate and charm his listeners. But did he succeed?

Just when 'we are beginning to understand the shape and content of the music', as our principal oboe Marcel Ponsele put it, 'we have to stop' – and proceed to the next week's instalment.

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