Cantatas for the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity Erlöserkirche, Potsdam

Bach was 62 when he made the long trip from Leipzig to Potsdam in the spring of 1747 to visit his second son Carl Philipp Emanuel, then principal harpsichordist in Prussia's royal *capelle*. After the shock of being summoned before Frederick the Great whilst still in his travel-stained clothes, he was subjected to a very public test of his improvisatory skills (some think that the fiendish 'royal theme' on which he was invited to extemporise a fugue was a trap set by the sadistic king or, perhaps, by the resentful son to embarrass his father). The next day he was given a tour of Potsdam and required to play and assess its various church organs. The *Erlöserkirche*, the church of the Redeemer, a neo-Gothic building in the Wilhelmine style where we were due to play, was built many years after Bach's visit.

Now that we are approaching the end of the Trinity season, the thematic emphasis is on the thorny and intractable issues of belief and doubt. With autumn giving way to winter the character of the appointed texts for each Sunday becomes steadily grimmer, underlining the rejection of the world by the faithful and the prospect of eventual union with God – or the horror of exclusion. From week to week this dichotomy appears to grow harsher. For the Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity the Epistle, from Ephesians, focuses on St Paul's uncompromising juxtaposition of a clean mind and a corrupt body, while the Gospel, taken from St Matthew like so many in this late Trinity season, recounts the miracle of the man 'sick of the palsy' healed by Jesus for his faith. As on so many previous occasions throughout the church year, Bach both softens and humanises the severity of the words while in no way diminishing their impact: he has an unfailing knack of being able to vivify the doctrinal message and, when appropriate, of delivering it with a hard dramatic kick, yet balancing this with music of an emollient tenderness.

We began with BWV 48 **Ich elender Mensch, wer wird mich erlösen**, from Bach's first Leipzig cycle. It opens with a lament in G minor, a chorus constructed as a slow minuet with the flavour of a proto-Romantic tone poem. The 12-bar opening orchestral prelude gives wordless expression to Paul's cry of anguish 'who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' (Romans 7:24) through a sequence of ascending two-bar phrases in the first violins. More than this, it gives structure to the entire movement by linking the various choral interjections, not via a predictable or systematised pattern but by frequently anticipating and overlapping the successive voice entries, their order constantly reshuffled. The sopranos begin in strict canon with the altos, a fourth apart and at a distance of two bars. Simultaneously Bach superimposes a second canon for trumpet and two oboes, distinct yet woven into the vocal texture and bearing with it a wordless 'answer'. To the imploring questions of the pauline text Bach offers his listeners the solace of Johann Heermann's hymn 'Herr Jesu Christ, ich schrei zu dir', specified for this Sunday in the *Dresdner Gesangbuch* of 1725/36 and rich in associations of comfort. The scheme sounds simple, but its working out over the course of 138 bars entails the layering of chorale tune (in canon) over the constantly

changing fabric of choral voices (also in canon) and, further, the inexorable restatements of the string ritornello, now discrete, now synchronising with the other instruments and voices. I found it poignant and deeply affecting.

Bach then clarifies the association of the suffering believer with Matthew's palsied man. A sombre, string-accompanied recitative (No.2) for alto with unstable chromatic harmonies modulates through a sequence of flat keys from E flat to B flat minor, then via an enharmonic swing to sharp keys before returning to B flat (major). This sudden presence of sharps, which in Lutheran symbolism represent the Cross (*Kreuz* = sharp), in a cantata in which all seven movements have key signatures of two or three flats, is arresting, particularly the appearance of E major at the moment when 'the soul perceives the most lethal poison with which it is infected'. E major is usually a key associated with serenity and salvation in Bach's church music, but here it seems closer to Johann Mattheson's characterisation — engendering 'a quite deathly sadness, full of doubt... a fatal separation of body and soul'. The four-part chorale setting which follows is the perfect sequel, expressing that 'brünstig Seufzen' (fervent sigh) with which the alto concluded the previous number.

With the palsied man healed and the errant believer 'renewed in the spirit of his mind', the second half of the cantata is much easier on the ear. An aria for alto in close dialogue with obbligato oboe gives the impression of an intimate conversation between the believer and God. Any passing reference to the earlier sickness is dispelled through the healing power of the Saviour in the aria for tenor and strings (No.6) – in modified da capo form, one of those beguiling and ticklish triple-time arias which Bach relishes. Here, after setting up an apparently regular pattern of alternating 3/4 and 3/2 bars, he suddenly adds a whole chain of additional hemiolas – perhaps a sign of health restored, a celebration of soundness in body and soul? – the inflections of speech seeming to determine, or at least strongly influence, the unusual rhythmic patterns. After this the straightforward but richly harmonised version of the chorale melody announced first in the opening movement is pure balm.

Quite a different hymn by Johann Heerman, but also specified for this Sunday in the *Dresdner Gesangbuch*, provides the anchor as well as the title for Bach's cantata for the following year, BWV 5 **Wo soll ich fliehen hin**. In its exegetical unfolding it corresponds to the pattern of 'Ich elender Mensch', establishing a correlation between the palsied man and the sin-burdened soul in its first three movements, and describing the extension of Christ's forgiveness to believers in the last four numbers. But there the similarity ends. Heermann's hymn and its associated melody 'Auf meinen lieben Gott' governs both the shape and the musical substance of the opening fantasia: even the instrumental prelude, an imitative dialogue for pairs of oboes and violins, is based on the hymn tune in diminution, as are the lower three voice lines. The individual phrases of the big-boned melody stand out from the instrumental backcloth composed of little fragmentary exchanges indicative of the timorous soul.

Where in the previous year's cantata Bach dealt with bodily torment and the poison of sin, here he is concerned with the healing, purgative power of holy blood, one drop of which 'performs such wonders [that it] cleanses me from all my blemishes' (No.2). (It immediately made me think of those miraculous preparations used in biodynamic agriculture: a concentration of five grams per sixty litres of water can fertilise one hectare of field crops.) This spiritual alchemy is given vivid expression in the entrancing tenor aria with viola obbligato depicting the gushing, curative effect of the divine spring. Every one of the vocal entries takes its cue from the tumbling liquid gestures of the viola – the cleansing motions of some prototype baroque washing machine.

In the pivotal fourth movement Bach re-introduces the tune of Heermann's hymn in counterpoint to the alto's measured recitation. It is assigned to an oboe; but just as in the opening chorus of BWV 48, no words would have been needed to trigger the apt association in the contemporary listener's mind so that, for example, the singer's claim that 'fear and torment need no longer bring danger' could be registered against the hymn's 'He can at all times save me from sadness, fear and affliction.' This assertion of liberation and triumph is the cue for one of Bach's most robust, declamatory bass arias (No.5), with trumpet (a ferociously demanding obbligato) set against the rest of the orchestra to defy the 'Höllenheer', the hordes of hell. But if, as was apparently often the case, the more fashionable members of the congregation decided that this was the point to arrive in the four-hour service, just in time to hear the sermon, then the repeated injunctions 'Verstumme! Verstumme!' ('Be silent!') might have checked them momentarily in their pew-finding and social greetings.

Easter coming so late this year (2000), we were running out of post-Trinity Sundays in which to accommodate Bach's music for the very end of the liturgical year, and needed to find suitable lots for their inclusion. The magnificently theatrical and terse D minor cantata BWV 90 Es reißet euch ein schrecklich Ende, for the Twenty-fifth Sunday after Trinity, provided a strong contrast to the sequence of three cantatas, all turning on G minor, composed for Trinity 19. Its theme is eschatological, its subject matter the polarity between the 'schrecklich Ende', the terrifying outcome awaiting all sinners at the Last Judgement given graphic articulation in the tenor and bass arias, and the genial protection God gives to His elect described in the final recitative and chorale. It opens with fire and brimstone, the tenor/preacher predicting the fate of the unrepentant, a fury aria which, in its use of tirades (flourishes of fourteen consecutive demisemiquavers), curtailed phrase-endings, big jumps in tessitura and dramatic pauses mid-word ('schreck...lich'), is as brilliant and theatrical as anything in Handel. Bach seems, in fact, to be taking on his entire generation of Italian opera composers and beating them at their own game. The unflagging energy of his melodic invention and rhythmic propulsion is always directed towards giving truthful expression to the text, and here it is as matchless as it is exciting. In this vein, only Rameau, two or more decades later, is a serious competitor to Bach. The second (bass) aria for B flat trumpet and strings is in some respects still more impressive, a chilling portrayal of 'the avenging judge', zealously extinguishing 'the lamp of His Word' as punishment. There is a military tread to the

pervasive dactylic rhythm which turns especially sinister at the point when the trumpet persists with low Ds against the violins' A major arpeggio.

Dazed by the seeming intensity of these twin tableaux one can easily overlook the felicitous and intelligent word-setting in the two recitatives, proof, if needed, that Bach was the best composer of secco recitatives since Monteverdi, and the astonishing beauty of the final chorale, a versification of the Lord's Prayer. It feels like the thanksgiving of a community chastened by some colossal natural disaster – a hurricane or earthquake – and even after repeated hearings I found myself still startled by the sudden lurch to the flattened tonic at the mention of the 'sel'ges Stündelein', the 'blessed hour' when the faithful are ushered into the divine presence.

A great deal more familiar to modern audiences than the other works in this programme, BWV 56 **Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen** is a cantata for solo bass. For this, his third cantata for Trinity 19, composed in 1726, Bach takes his lead from the first verse of the Gospel for the day, 'And he entered into a ship, and passed over, and came into his own city.' Following a medieval tradition, Bach treats the course of human life allegorically as a sea voyage, a nautical Pilgrim's Progress.

No stranger himself to life's tribulations, Bach has left us several memorable evocations of adversity, yet none more poignant than this cantata. The opening aria introduces a pun on the word 'Kreuzstab' (cross-staff) – raised to a sharpened seventh. What lifts it from the commonplace is the very modern, or at least Romantic, word-painting: the successive changes in mood and adjustments to the melodic outline, from its initial upward climb via an excruciating arpeggio to the benign 'es kommt von Gottes lieber Hand' and the more measured 'der führet mich...'. Bach reserves the biggest change for the B section, switching to triplet rhythm in the voice part in a kind of arioso as the pilgrim lowers all his griefs into his own grave: 'Then shall my Saviour wipe the tears from my eyes'.

The idea of life as a sea voyage comes first in the arioso (No.2) with cello arpeggiation to depict the lapping waves while the voice-line describes 'the sorrow, affliction and distress [which] engulf me'. Where the first movement was forward-looking, this arioso seems to hark back to the music of Bach's forebears, the music he learnt as a child. One can pick up hints of an early reliance on God's protection in the whispered comfort of 'Ich bin bei dir' – with the death of both of his parents when he was only nine years old, there was no human substitute on whom he could wholly depend. As the waves die down and the cello comes to rest on a bottom D, the voice of the pilgrim continues in secco recitative with the Bunyan-like words: 'So I step from my ship into my own city, which is the kingdom of heaven, where I with all the righteous shall enter out of so great tribulation.'

The metaphor of the oboe as guardian angel celebrating with the now jubilant pilgrim comes to mind in the extended da capo aria 'Endlich, endlich wird mein Joch'. Again, the biggest surprise is reserved for the B section where the pilgrim's desire to fly up into the stratosphere like an eagle can hold no bounds, 'Let it happen today!' he exclaims, the emphasis shifting from 'O!' to 'gescheh' to 'heute' and finally to 'noch'.

The cantata ends serenely. An *accompagnato* leads to a return of the words and tripletised rhythms of the opening aria, now slowed to *adagio* and transposed to F minor, and from there by means of melisma floating effortlessly upwards, for the first time, to C major. The final four-voiced chorale is Bach's only setting of Johann Crüger's melody, here set to the sixth verse of Johann Franck's hymn 'Du, o schönes Weltgebäude'. His harmonisation belongs to the late seventeenth century sound-world of his elder cousin, Johann Christoph Bach, organist in Eisenach, possibly his first keyboard teacher and mentor – the one he called a 'profound composer'.

Cantatas for the Feast of the Reformation Schlosskirche, Wittenberg

Approach Wittenberg from the south across the Elbe and the first thing you notice is the imposing silhouette of the tall cylindrical tower which acts as a link between the palace and its church. Together palace and church dominate the landscape and town just as they did in Luther's day, though precious little is now left of Frederick the Wise's original structures. But one can still sense that 'a mighty fortress' had been built here, perfectly capable of defending itself. And sure enough, as you get closer, there in huge capitals on the collar of the tower is the inscription 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott', for all to read – the true battle-song of the German Reformation. You have arrived in the otherwise inconspicuous little town from which this seismic movement erupted in 1517. No matter that the old doors of the castle church to which, according to legend, Luther nailed his ninety-five theses have long since disappeared. We were here on the appointed day, 483 years later, to rehearse and perform Bach's three cantatas for the *Reformationsfest*, a red-letter day in the Lutheran calendar.

Entering the sombre *Schlosskirche* – sadly unrecognisable in its neo-Gothic splendour from the simple stone-vaulted university church where Luther preached – we arranged ourselves just east of two bronze memorial slabs raised on plinths: Luther's on the right, his main ally Melancthon's on the left. We started to rehearse the cantata BWV 80 which Bach based on Luther's defiant hymn (1528/9). The string-doubled voices rang out impressively enough, but there was a problem. The massive instrumental canon that Bach devised to frame his choral counterpoint sounded out of kilter: all top (three oboes in unison) and no bottom (violone and organ). This is, after all, the only cantata of Bach's to differentiate between continuo parts: *violoncello e cembalo* in support of the four-voiced chorale fantasia, *violone et organo* as bass cantus firmus. Even after bringing the string bass right to the front of the stage, the problem remained. The beautiful Jennings cabinet organ which has accompanied us everywhere this year and served us so well does not have pedals nor the sixteen-foot trombone stop specified in one of the sources. So last-minute calls were made to locate a bass sackbut player able to provide the necessary *pondus*. The improbably-named Fernando soon appeared from Leipzig and duly transformed things with his thunderous

bottom Ds filling the church vaults. The visual impact of that splendid brass bell and the trombone slide at full extension added a Breughel-like swagger to the music.

Competing strains of the same iconic hymn wafted in from the outside all through our rehearsal, sung and played on any available instrument and in several keys at once by the crowd of pilgrims, street-hawkers and 'medieval' minstrels thronging the narrow streets. Eventually the noise abated as our concert began in the packed church, but it reminded me of reading somewhere how the Jesuits used to complain that Luther's hymns 'killed more souls than his works and sermons'.

We opened with **Gott der Herr ist Sonn und Schild** BWV 79, as stirring a way to celebrate this Reformation Festival as one could ever imagine. It dates from 1723. Bach had missed the opportunity six years earlier to compose something spectacular for the bicentennial celebrations at Weimar – either he was not asked or, more likely, he declined (he was sulking because of the Duke's refusal to let him take up a new post at Cöthen). This time he was determined to put his best foot forward, and there is evidence that, contrary to his usual practice, he began composing BWV 79 six months ahead of its scheduled performance.

The opening movement is fashioned as a kind of ceremonial Aufzug or procession – a moving tableau of Lutheran folk on the march. But their militancy is not in the least grimfaced: the 62-bar introduction establishes a mood of outgoing joy and bonhomie. Underpinning the fanfares of the high horns is an insistent drum beat which, interpreted a little fancifully, replicates the hammering of Luther's theses to the oak door at the back of the church. Even this drops out after twelve bars, time for the horn players to breathe and to make room for an animated three-part fugato between the strings, flutes and oboes. When it returns, the horn theme hovering above the busy working out of the fugato, it is to prepare for the grand entrance of the chorus. The voices enter singly and spaciously with majestic sweep and a glorious arc to their phrases, a lustre more evocative of cherubim and seraphim than of sturdy Lutheran Hausfrauen on the warpath. Bach's control of his material is consummate. After four segments never lasting more than eight bars he adapts the instrumental fugato to suit his choir, now declaiming 'no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly'. He makes six pairs of entries in *strettos*, now at half-bar, now at whole-bar intervals, sometimes at the unison, then at the octave, down a fourth, and so on, with the 'answer' given twice direct and four times inverted. Gillies Whittaker, who besides writing extensive analyses of Bach's church cantatas, conducted them all in Newcastle over several years after the First World War, confessed that he 'rarely felt such spiritual exultation as when conducting this wonderful chorus'. I do remember being tremendously stirred when I conducted it in 1972, but on this occasion, here in Wittenberg, its impact was overwhelming.

With his penchant for pronounced changes of scale and abrupt switches from the public to the private, Bach follows this initial pageantry with an aria for alto with oboe obbligato of deceptive simplicity. Both the syncopated stresses of the first two bars and the varying phrase divisions (6 + 6 bars for the ritornello, 2 + 2, 2 + 2, then 6 in the vocal line) tease the ear. In the last line comes the warning of a 'blasphemous barking dog' – could this

be an allusion to the dog Luther claimed to have found in his bed up in his Wartburg prison? Convinced that it was the devil in disguise he hurled the poor beast out of his window into the night.

Back come the horns and drums with their marching theme from the first movement, now as a backcloth to Martin Rinckart's hymn 'Nun danket alle Gott', familiar in English as 'Now thank we all our God'. Crüger's sturdy tune never moves out of the narrow span of a sixth, though you would never guess it from the breadth and majesty it generates. Bach's harmonisation brings this triptych to a satisfying conclusion, suggesting that originally the sermon may have followed at this point.

The second part of the cantata is perhaps inevitably less impressive, though there is a ravishing duet for soprano and bass (No.5) beginning with parallel motion in tenths, innocent in the way an Adam-and-Eve like couple (pre-Fall) invoke God's protection, hand in hand. There is even a pre-echo here of Papageno and Papagena, a Mozartian impression reinforced by the hint of *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* in the violin ritornelli. Though Bach does his best to counter this genial music and to suggest danger in his treatment of the 'raging of the enemy' his foes remain a lot less threatening than Luther's persistent ghoulish tormentors.

The little three-movement cantata **Nun danket alle Gott** BWV 192 risked giving the impression of a shrinking violet dwarfed by two such hot-house blooms (BWV 79 and 80). In fact with its modest instrumentation it provides an attractive contrast, an alternative and less bombastic approach to the celebrations. The first movement is a skilful and unconventional chorale fantasia. Twice the sopranos abandon their chief function of intoning Crüger's hymn tune and switch to being an integral part of the four-part choral fabric. Meanwhile the instruments, thematically quite independently and divided by families (flutes, oboes and strings), engage in *concertante* dialogue. But Bach is not content to leave things so neatly separated. Imperceptibly he weaves the two together and then, when all seems done and dusted and with the final strophe of the hymn completed, he suddenly brings back the choir for a final shout of praise over the last bars of the orchestral play-out.

It is fascinating to watch how Bach mitigates the sapping metric regularity of a hymn-stanza when setting it for solo voices as in the soprano/bass duet (verse 2), through subtle variations and repetitions of his material. But he reserves his best music for the third verse, a paraphrased doxology set here as a lilting *gigue*. This is surely first cousin to the one in D which concludes his third Orchestral Suite (BWV 1068). Whittaker is not alone among commentators in finding this movement 'singularly unsuitable for such a day of triumphant national rejoicing'. But to me it seems entirely apt – Bach's particular way of celebrating the joyous throwing off of shackles achieved by Luther's Reformation.

Now, as the climax of our concert came Bach's final version of his cantata on Luther's **Ein feste Burg**, BWV 80. What had started out as a Lenten cantata composed in 1715 in Weimar to a text by Salomo Franck had subsequently undergone extensive revision in Leipzig. To replace the simple four-part harmonisation of Luther's hymn with which he had opened his cantata in 1724 and again in 1730, Bach, now in the last decade of his life,

constructed a stupendous and elaborate new contrapuntal opening movement, 228 bars long. He provides no instrumental prelude whatsoever. Without warning the tenors launch themselves into the fray (surely there was never a more arresting start to a cantata, nor more vigorous words fused to such a stirring tune?), followed in canonic imitation by the three other voice parts in a decorated but fittingly archaic motet style. Then, like two chunky book-ends holding this affirmation of the persuasive force of God's word in place, the mighty canon gets under way – in *stretto*, single beat and three octaves apart. Nothing could bring home more vividly the pivotal role of speech and song (separately and together) in spreading Luther's Reformation across Europe.

Luther's hymn resurfaces in three of the seven subsequent movements. Bach could of course count on his listeners' familiarity with it, and therefore challenge them to pick out the bones of the tune from their ornament-encrusted surroundings, as in the duet (No.2) where the soprano's embellishments are out-decorated by the accompanying oboe. No such problems occur in the central fifth movement, an exuberant *giga* reminiscent of the finale to the third Brandenburg Concerto, in which all the voices in unison and in octaves thunder out each line of Luther's third verse: a collective exorcism through which Bach dispatches Luther's devils with panache.

There are other wonderful examples of Bach's craft and imagination to savour, many of them in the movements carried over from the Weimar cantata of 1715. They include the fine bass arioso (No.3) in which the spirit of Christ is shown to be 'firmly bound to you' by the interweaving of the vocal line with its continuo – expression and rhetoric in perfect accord; the seraphic tenderness of the soprano/cello aria (No.4) with its pleading melismas on 'Verlangen' ('longing'); and the extended alto/tenor duet (No.7) in which Bach's lifelong fascination with, and creative use of, canon is manifest. But even the felicities of the concluding four-part harmonisation of the hymn cannot disguise the fact that it is the opening movement which is the most original – a triumph of word, tune and compositional fabric, of mood and structure. As such it is perhaps the most perfect vindication of Luther's – as well as Bach's – belief in the healing power of music to banish 'der alte böse Feind' ('the wicked old foe') and to overcome the forces of darkness.

At the end of the concert the rather severe-looking pastor came forward. First, he acknowledged that the music-making had given 'der alte böse Feind' a good beating. Then, having spotted in the programme that our next port of call was to be Rome – and perhaps recalling how scandalised Luther had been at the irreligion he found there ('a whore of a city' he called it!) – he fixed me with his gimlet eye: 'Carry the good work on to Rome!' he said, and turned on his heel.

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