

## **Cantatas for Whit Sunday**

### **Holy Trinity, Long Melford**

At this point in the year the festivals come thick and fast. We're at the finish of one of the most intensive week's rehearsals so far, preparing all nine of Bach's surviving Pentecostal cantatas. It has driven home to me how in the Lutheran church year Whitsuntide was the equal of Christmas and Easter, each feast celebrated on three consecutive days, representing not just an immense creative effort by Bach but a colossal work-load for him and for his musicians.

From London we're now heading for Long Melford in Suffolk, which boasts one of the most ravishing and opulent of late-Perpendicular churches, built at the height of the English wool trade in the late fifteenth century. Pentecost is the culmination of those 'great fifty days' which follow the Resurrection, a watershed marking the completion of Jesus' work on earth and the coming of the Holy Spirit. I find it very appealing that it was originally an agricultural festival, the descendant of one of those Canaanite feasts the Israelites took over when they arrived in the promised land. So that when St Paul speaks of Christ as 'the firstfruits' (I Corinthians 15:20 & 23) he seems to be making a conscious allusion to the Jewish feast of *Shabuoth*, when the first fruits to be harvested were offered at Pentecost. Of course harvest takes place a couple of months later in Saxony (and Suffolk) than in Palestine, but this is nevertheless a time of increasing light and promise, an apt moment for the church to reflect on the implications of Jesus' incarnation and the renewal of the ancient Covenant. Luther, following his favourite Gospel writer St John, latches on to the idea of the Holy Spirit bringing a new life to humankind, the product of the 'indwelling' of Father and Son with the faithful which allows for a life of love and brotherhood and a means to 'overcome' the world.

I'm finding through this year-long exploration of his cantatas in their seasonal context that Bach often brings to the surface pre-Christian aspects and forgotten connections which mirror the turning of the agricultural year. Now at the approach to midsummer he comes up with music of unalloyed optimism and exuberance in celebration of the first gifts of newly-awakened nature, as well as the miraculous ignition of the divine Pentecostal spark which allows human beings to communicate across the language barrier. Much the earliest of the four cantatas for this day, BWV 172 **Erschallet, ihr Lieder, erklinget ihr Saiten!** was composed in Weimar in 1714, just two weeks after Bach's promotion as court *Konzertmeister*. Evidently it is a work which he particularly valued, reviving and retouching it once in Cöthen (possibly) and three times in Leipzig, and setting a pattern for his later approaches to the Pentecostal theme.

In the absence of the autograph score we chose to adopt the version in D major used for the first of the three Leipzig performances on 28 May 1724 (we attempted a reconstruction of the C major 1731 version when we recorded it for DG in 1999). Its opening movement is sunny and ebullient, the ensemble divided into three 'choirs', one of trumpets, one of strings (with a bassoon as its bass) and the third comprising a four-voiced chorus. With no high woodwind instruments the textures are unusually open and there is a marvellous sustained surge as the voices twice pause on a seventh chord to convey the 'happiest hours'. For the middle section, in which the trumpets fall silent, Bach fashions an engaging piece of imitative polyphony, a fugue with no true counter-subject, the vocal entries placed at a distance of 3, 2, 3 and 2 bars. Twice he builds up an intricate web of sounds – a four-fold *stretto* stretched across the barlines – conjuring before us the elegant tracery of those 'temples' which God promises to make of our souls.

Jesus' valedictory words from the Gospel of the day (John 14:23) are set in recitative for bass (No.2), leading to an aria which is in effect a

fanfare for the Holy Trinity: three trumpets, a tripartite form, a theme moving in steps of a third and a triple address to the 'mighty God of honour', all highly appropriate in this glorious church dedicated to the Trinity with its circular 'rabbit' window, three of them forming a triangle as the left ear of each serves as the right ear of its neighbour. It is also a dazzling showpiece for the principal trumpet, required to negotiate 45 consecutive demi-semiquavers (three times, of course) and at speed. If this was intended to represent the 'rushing mighty wind' or the 'cloven tongues like as of fire' described in the Epistle for the day (Acts 2:1-13), the textual allusion to Pentecost is even stronger in the delicate tenor aria which follows, a dreamy evocation of 'a paradise of souls through which God's spirit breathes' generated by a seamless gentle melody for unison violins and violas with no apparent gravitational pull. In contrast to the Pentecostal rushing wind, here we sense the moment when God 'breathed into Adam's nostrils the breath of life'. Again, Trinitarian symbols are present: a three-part form, triple metre, an arpeggiated bass line rising by thirds and a three-fold reiteration of a waving figure to convey God's creative breath.

From its festive 'public' opening chorus the tone of this cantata grows gradually more personal, each successive movement defining stages (marked by a downward modulation by thirds) in the evolving relationship of God with man and of **the Holy Spirit dwelling within and guiding the believer's soul**. The Comforter announced by the tenor now converses with the soul and their dialogue (No.5), couched in overtly erotic/Pietistic language, is a musical allegory of the 'indwelling' and guiding of the believer's spirit within. It is a highly ornate and sensual piece, the two voices entwined over an ostinato-like cello obbligato to which Bach adds a fourth voice, an oboe playing an embellished version of the Whitsun chorale 'Komm, heiliger Geist'. So embedded is it in the texture, interlaced with the two singers' lines and transfigured by Bach's *fioriture*, that only the most wide-awake listener would have been

able to pick it out and recognise it. Yet for all its apparent complexity – the filigree part-writing and the ornament-encrusted chorale tune – the duet is structurally fairly straightforward (tripartite, of course!). First comes an appeal to the ‘gentle breeze of heaven’, then a modulation to the dominant minor, once for the sealing of this union with the ‘kiss of grace’ and once more for the third section marking its consummation, ‘I am yours, and you are mine’. The cantata concludes with the fourth verse of Nicolai’s rousing hymn, ‘Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern’, with a soaring first violin *fauxbourdon*, and finally a return of the opening chorus.

There is an intriguing biographical wrinkle connected to the origins of Bach’s second Pentecostal cantata BWV 59 **Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten I**. In one of his frequent letters of complaint to the Saxon king, Bach claimed that he ‘entered upon my university functions [in Leipzig] at Whit Sunday 1723’. Now Alfred Dürr states categorically that the cantata’s autograph was written for Whit Sunday 1723 at the latest, although the surviving performing parts date from the following year. It seems as though it may have been assembled by Bach, drawing on some earlier material, before he left Cöthen. Did Bach then actually announce himself to his Leipzig public on this important day, performing this four-movement cantata at the university church on Whit Sunday 1723 (16 May), **two** weeks before his reported arrival in the city, or was it a plan which simply failed to materialise? One can read into its restricted instrumentation (no woodwind or third trumpet), its solo allocation limited to soprano and bass and the lack of a final chorale, a tactical adjustment to the modest capabilities of the university forces available. As so often Bach proves the truth of Goethe’s saying, ‘In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst der Meister’ – in Alfred Dürr’s words, that he was ‘a master even in limitation’.

The opening movement is a delight in its synthesis of Italian chamber duet and festive instrumentation, yet tactfully restrained. Four

times the biblical motto is given in canon for the two singers, then a fifth and last time homophonically in parallel sixths, a cue for the instruments to let rip at last and add majesty to the Saviour's words in an exuberant postlude. The string-accompanied recitative for soprano is stylistically of a piece with several that Bach wrote in his Weimar years, culminating with a wistful *arioso* prayer that 'each of us should love Him'. The placement of a chorale at this point (No.3) is a little odd, yet as an appeal to the Holy Spirit for grace, utterly appropriate. This is Luther's Pentecostal hymn of 1524 which, as a result of the independent parts which Bach provides for the viola and second violin, sounds deceptively opulent and full-textured. The closing aria for bass with violin obbligato again focuses on the 'indwelling' of God in the human heart through love and the Holy Spirit. Is this really the end? The inscription 'Chorale seque' leaves us without any clear directive as to what Bach intended. A repeat of the previous chorale underlaid with the third stanza of Luther's hymn seems a plausible solution.

In 1725 Bach returned to the same music, but this time (BWV 74 **Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten II**), to a new text by Christiane Mariane von Ziegler. The chamber-like textures of the opening duet in BWV 59 are now expanded into a full-scale tableau for chorus and orchestra by the addition of three oboes and a third trumpet suggestive of Trinitarian symbolism. Such is the alchemy of Bach's reworking that with minimal alteration to the substance of the music itself (the two solo vocal lines are now redistributed amongst four and some new imitations skilfully superimposed on existing structures) the overall mood is subtly different. Despite Gillies Whittaker shaking his head at the way Bach adapts the bass and violin aria in BWV 59 for soprano and oboe da caccia to a new text – 'an extraordinary lapse... fitted with little consideration for congruity' – it seems on the contrary to fit its new ecstatic words rather better than before.

Overall BWV 74 is a good deal more sophisticated in structure and theological nuance than the earlier two cantatas. Ziegler takes as her basis all nine verses of the Gospel and constructs her text on three main themes: the paramount need for love, and the need to be in a state of readiness to receive the spirit (Nos 1-3); Jesus' announcement of his Ascension and return, and its joyful implications for humankind (Nos 4 & 5); and his triumph over Satan, freeing the believer from condemnation. She turns to St Paul (Romans 8:1) for a motto to introduce this final segment, one that emphasises the life-giving spirit of Christ in freeing mankind from the law of sin and death. Bach mirrors her scheme, dividing his cantata into three clearly-defined tonal areas: a descent to the flat side of the home key (C major) to the sub-dominant, F, for the first aria, and to the supertonic, D minor, for the following recitative, then a rise upwards through E minor (No.4) to the dominant, G major (No.5) before an affirmative return to the tonic for the victory over Satan (No.7) and the final chorale in its relative minor.

Two of the arias stand out from the rest in this grand eight-movement cantata. The first is for tenor and strings, 'Kommt, eilet, stimmet' (No.5), with melismatic chains for both singer and first violins, and engaging hide-and-seek exchanges for the line 'though He leaves, He shall return'. Bach is clearly roused by the imagery of Satan attempting to curse and obstruct the believer, and introduces extreme modulations, far-flung arpeggios and jangling cross-accents before ushering in an extended *da capo* return of the main theme to which the tenor adds his own embellishments to the 'eilet' motif in the violins.

More outrageous still in its graphic depiction of Hell is the alto aria 'Nichts kann mich erretten' (No.7). Bach seems determined to convey to his listeners with stark realism the image of hellish chains being rattled. Accordingly he sets up 'battle' exchanges between the three oboes and the strings, assigning a violin solo to execute fiendish *bariolage*, with the lowest arpeggiated note falling not on, but just after, the beat. The effect

is both disjointed and wonderfully invigorating. Soon the vocal line embarks on arpeggios that appear trapped within the vehement dialectic, as though it were trying to work itself free from the diabolical shackles. **At times this search for belief is plaintive, with cross-accented phrases reinforced by the oboe and solo violin against a menacing thud of repeated semiquavers.** In the 'B' section victory seems assured and the singer 'laughs at Hell's anger' against huge smashing chords by the winds and strings in triple and quadruple stoppings. The gloating comprises tripletised melismas and a descent of an octave-and-a-half before the *da capo*. Unapologetically, Bach draws on techniques borrowed from the opera house, though not gratuitously: they serve an impeccable theological purpose and the results must have been vastly entertaining to a theatrically-deprived audience.

An exceptionally late work dating from 1746/7, BWV 34 **O ewiges Feuer, o Ursprung der Liebe** began life as a wedding cantata whose references to 'heavenly flames' enabled Bach to re-adapt it easily as a cantata for Whitsun. Despite its origins this is a superb work from start to finish, and one in which Bach's use of trumpets and drums is markedly different from that in the other Whitsun cantatas. In the opening chorus the timpani trills crackle with fiery energy and the trumpets build up a storm. But then Bach releases the pent-up energy with a wonderfully frivolous descending arpeggio in the first trumpet. The chorus enters, the basses holding a top D for most of five bars to symbolise the 'eternal', the other three parts aglitter with 'fiery' embellishments. For the 'source of love' Bach superimposes two serene, intertwining lyrical lines over a 'sprung'-articulated bass line. Then the trumpets and drums return, precipitating a cross-beat homophonic passage for the choir, 'kindle our hearts and consecrate them'. Now the whole sequence is developed in the dominant while the image of flickering flames, the semiquaver *moto perpetuo*, is passed from violas to violins with periodic reinforcement by oboes and trumpets,

the lyrical 'source of love' dialogue increasing in ecstatic expression. This is in effect one huge *da capo* movement, the 'B' section being given over to dance-like vocal pairings – 'Let heavenly flames flare and pierce them'. In performance it generates colossal energy and elation, as satisfying a choral overture as ever Bach wrote.

And what's to come does not disappoint. A brief, high-lying tenor recitative leads to an exquisite pastoral tableau, an alto aria with muted strings and two flutes – 'Happy are you, you chosen souls'. This is an idyll inspired by the story of Jacob and Rachel, and may have had deeper personal significance to Bach than we can fathom today. But we can relish the tender sensuousness of the pastoral writing, the pairings of thirds and sixths, the blending of flutes and muted strings, and the satisfying textures and calm enchantment disturbed only momentarily by modulation. I've conducted the piece many times, with many fine mezzo-contraltos (including Anna Reynolds), but on this occasion Nathalie Stutzman seemed to me to catch the French nostalgic tug of this aria to perfection.

An innocuous-sounding bass recitative (No.4) catches fire at the words 'The Lord pronounces on His hallowed house / these words of blessing'. Like some Old Testament prophet the bass enjoins the whole ensemble to declaim verse 6 of Psalm 128, 'Peace upon Israel', in two slow bars reminiscent of and equivalent in grandeur to the opening exordium to the *B minor Mass*. Abruptly a typhoon of an orchestral finale is unleashed with off-beat D major scales, drawing the chorus to follow in its wake with 'thanks to the Almighty's wondrous hands'. There is an extended stretch of thrilling orchestra writing before the choir returns to the 'Peace upon Israel' theme, this time within the Allegro pulse, with a final shout of joy from the sopranos on a top B bringing this irresistible Whit Sunday cantata to a glorious conclusion.

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It puzzles me why scholars get so hot under the collar about Bach's self-borrowings, as though there were something innately shoddy about the practice. You'd have thought that Handel, with his habit of plagiarising other men's themes as starter fuel when the muse refused to co-operate, would have presented a far juicier target. It so happens that all three of Bach's surviving Leipzig cantatas for Whit Monday originated to a greater or lesser extent in secular music he had composed a few years earlier for the Weimar and Cöthen courts – and are none the worse for that. For although he is alert to the theological emphasis on the basic disparity between God and humankind, especially at this time of year, which refers back to the miracle of God's choice of the human heart as His dwelling place, Bach could express homage to a prince and homage to God in essentially the same way. Music – *his* music – was there to bridge the divide between worldly and divine glory. Each ruler exerted unquestioned authority in his own sphere. That was a basic tenet of Lutheranism and one that Bach, whose nomination as *Thomaskantor* in Leipzig was primarily due to the intervention of the Absolutist party in the town council, readily endorsed.

So, a birthday encomium written in 1717 for his musically-minded prince, Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen, came to be performed in Leipzig as a church cantata, in all probability on 29 May 1724, with a minimum of fuss and readjustment. Unfortunately no score or parts have survived for BWV 173 **Erhöhtes Fleisch und Blut**, but one wonders whether, like yesterday's BWV 59, it wasn't assembled ahead of Bach's arrival in Leipzig in the expectation of performance at Pentecost in 1723, its solo writing restricted to soprano and bass – as with its secular model (BWV 173a), and indeed BWV 59. The version we performed follows the fair copy Bach commissioned for a revival c.1728. Here the two solo voices

become four and the final duet is expanded as a chorus (No.6).

It is easy to empathise with Bach in valuing occasional music of this quality that was far too good to be jettisoned, especially when the pressure was on and a new cantata required for three consecutive days during the Whit festival. As with much of Bach's Cöthen music, four of this cantata's six movements are dance-inspired and dance-derived, while the other two (the recitatives Nos 1 & 5) are adapted, perhaps by Bach himself, from regular verse structures that cannot have been penned with recitative setting in mind. Taking his cue from St John's Gospel for the day (3:16-21), which begins with the words 'God so loved the world', Bach alters 'most illustrious Leopold' ('Durchlauchtster Leopold') to 'Exalted flesh and blood' ('Erhöhtes Fleisch und Blut'), retaining the metre but substantially changing the melodic line and entering these modifications into his old score. For the rest his task was a lot easier: deleting mention of Leopold and weaving in references to the Epistle (Acts 10:42-48), the descent of the Holy Spirit to the Gentiles and the gratitude this implies (in Nos 2, 3 & 6). His cleverest and most radical change comes in the duet (No.4) where the reference to Leopold's 'purple cloak', in the shelter of which his citizens find 'joy after pain', is changed to 'God so loved the world', both texts culminating with the equally apt words 'that we might enjoy his gifts of grace / which flow like abundant streams'. This is the cantata's most original number, an innocent-sounding minuet in G for strings in crotchet movement providing a theme for bass (strophe 1), then moving into quavers and modulating upwards through a circle of fifths to D, picking up a pair of flutes and on its way switching to soprano (strophe 2), then blossoming into a semiquaver *moto perpetuo* for the first violins and notching up into A major for a final duet. The closing chorus is also a minuet, though of a very different character, its vocal parts increased from two to four.

A year later Bach turned again to Christiane Mariane von Ziegler, nine of whose texts he had perhaps commissioned in 1724 but had

been unable to set to music on schedule because of the huge unforeseen effort spent in completing the *St John Passion* by Good Friday of that year. He was now in a position to complete an ambitious design for the Sundays leading up to Trinity Sunday, based on biblical mottoes and featuring the Gospel of St John. Invariably his settings of John's words are full of purpose, never more so than in the final chorus of BWV 68 **Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt** when, in place of a chorale, John postulates the chilling choice between salvation or judgement in the present life: 'he that believeth on Him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already' (John 3:18). Bach's setting is equally uncompromising: a double fugue whose two subjects describe the twin alternatives, the voices doubled by archaic brass instruments, a cornetto and three trombones. His contrapuntal working-out is full of disciplined energy and invention, but the way it ends seems designed to give a sharp jolt to the congregation. Abruptly he assigns the first subject to a new text – 'because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God' – once loud, once soft. The second day of Pentecost may have been a time of rejoicing, celebrating the relief brought by the Holy Spirit (and that indeed is the tenor of the cantata's earlier movements), but in postulating this bald division of the world into believers and sceptics, Bach left the congregation with food for thought.

Beginning with this trenchant biblical motto and ending with the lyrical and wistful chorale that is its first movement, it almost seems as if the cantata were composed back-to-front. Its tonal design inscribes an arc rising by thirds through its first four movements, d, F, a, C, before returning to d. On the page, Bach's opening chorus looks deceptively simple, but one needs to be sensitive to its rhythmical ebb and flow and vigilant both in articulating its lilting *siciliano* pulse and to questions of balance: the soprano line is often uncomfortably low, even when doubled, as here, by a cornetto, helping Vopelius' tune, reshaped and embellished by Bach, to stand out above the lyrical surrounding

textures.

Ziegler's poetic contributions needed to be fitted to two pre-existing movements (Nos 2 & 4), both festive in character, borrowed and painstakingly adapted by Bach from his 'Hunt' cantata (BWV 208) composed in Weimar for the birthday of the Duke of Saxe-Weissenfels. First comes that wonderful old war-horse, the soprano aria 'Mein gläubiges Herze', known to all English singers as 'My heart ever-faithful', surely one of Bach's most refreshing and unbuttoned expressions of melodic joy and high spirits. In its original secular form the leaping dance-like bass mirrors the annual *transhumance*, the sheep gambolling as they are turned out to pasture. In Long Melford's magnificent parish church, built on the rich proceeds of the medieval wool trade, I kept recalling the song's original lines: 'while the herds, thick with wool / are driven joyfully / through these fields, famed for far around'. The continuo line is now allocated to a five-string *violoncello piccolo*, an instrument Bach often associated at this time of year with Jesus' presence in the physical world – his second incarnation, as it were, within the believer's heart. On the last page of the manuscript he appended an instrumental coda, adding an oboe and violin to the cello and its continuo, and lasting nearly three-quarters of the length of the remainder, almost as if the singer's words were inadequate to express the full joy at the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the second of the arias Bach succeeds in fitting Ziegler's paraphrase of verse 17 of John's Gospel to music he previously assigned to Pan, the god of woods and shepherds, who 'makes the land so happy / that forest and field and all things live and laugh'. The retention of a trio of pastoral oboes is the key to the grafting process by which Bach externalises the message of joy caused by Jesus' presence on earth.

Bach's motives for incorporating and expanding on the first movement of his third Brandenburg concerto as the prelude to his final cantata for Whit Monday had nothing to do with pressure of time. In

taking over as director of the city's Collegium Musicum in 1729 he was surely seeking to sidestep the irksome hierarchy of the school system at St Thomas', which had caused him so much grief during the past six years. With this core group of qualified instrumentalists newly available to him, and not subject to municipal regulation, he was understandably keen to demonstrate their qualities, not merely in Zimmermann's café gardens on Wednesday afternoons but in the main forum of the town, his own stamping ground, the *Thomaskirche* on a Sunday morning. Bach's cantata BWV 174 **Ich liebe den Höchsten** is based on a text from Picander's cycle of 1728. He seems to have instructed his copyist to transfer the original Brandenburg lines for nine solo strings (three each of violins, violas and cellos) into the new score. These now become a *concertino* group set against a brand new independent *ripieno* ensemble comprising two horns, three oboes and four doubling string parts. These he composed straight into score. Even with one instrument per part, and the addition of violone, bassoon and keyboard continuo, suddenly he had available a band of over twenty players – hardly an inconsiderable phalanx, and one which provided a new-minted sheen and force to the original concerto movement, its colours and rhythms even sharper than before. What a wonderful way of opening the celebrations to this Whit Monday feast!

The potential impact in church of that living bombardment of instrumental sounds more usually associated with Zimmermann's café put me in mind of Thomas Hardy's description in *Life's Little Ironies* of the clerical uproar and indignation when the Dorset village choir-band, exhausted by too many Christmas gigs and fuelled against the cold with hot brandy, fell sound asleep during the long sermon. Waking suddenly, instead of striking up the evening hymn, they launched into 'The Devil among the tailors', according to Hardy 'the favourite jig of our neighbourhood at that time.'

The extraordinary thing is that Bach manages to balance this

impressive opening with an aria of (almost) equivalent dimensions, a warm, pastoral number of impressive serenity for alto with two oboes, in which at one point he compresses his material in a way one normally associates with Beethoven. The triple division of the upper strings derived from the original Brandenburg concerto is preserved in the accompanied tenor recitative (No.3) and in a second aria for bass, which establishes the firmness of faith in forthright terms: salvation is available to all to 'seize' and 'grasp' it. Perhaps only a chorale packing the emotional punch of Schalling's 'Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr', which ends the *St John Passion* so movingly, was adequate to conclude this remarkable cantata, marking Bach's liberation from the shackles of self-imposed weekly cantata composition.

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