

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



December 2011

Vol.5, No.2

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Newsletter

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The *BachBeat* newsletter is published cyclically by the Bach Cantata Choir.

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Weihnachts-Oratorium

By Lorin Wilkerson – Bass

When J.S. Bach set out to write his monumental *Weihnachts-Oratorium* (Christmas Oratorio) in 1733-34, he was drawing on a musical form that was then about a century and a half old, but had evolved from much older works.

The Roman aristocrat Emilio de'Cavalieri (1550-1602) was a man who had no mean opinion of himself, or of the value of the new style of music he was producing during the era that could be thought of as the dawn of the baroque in the late 16th century. One of his compositions, the *Rappresentatione di Anima, et di Corpo*, is considered extremely historically important, as it is the earliest surviving example of what is now called the oratorio, at least in such a form as it could be recognized today. In it de'Cavalieri included speech, strophic songs, recitatives, and motets in the form of madrigals, which were the most elevated form of vocal music of the day. The composer could draw on older styles such as the *laudi spirituali*, which had been known in Italy for centuries by the time de'Cavalieri set out to compose the *Rappresentatione*.

Oratorios evolved hand in hand with opera as these new styles flowed out of Italy and rapidly conquered the rest of Europe during the 17th century. Monteverdi's *Combattimento di Tancredi et Clorinda* is thought of as the first secular oratorio, and by Bach's day the oratorio was a form that served a number of purposes.

Similar to its close cousin the opera, an oratorio tells a story (often taken from the Bible, or in the case of Catholic composers from the lives of the saints). They both focus

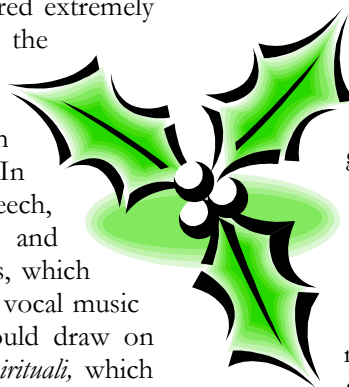
on a compelling narrative, dramatic interchange between characters, and an admixture of choral, solo, and instrumental movements that lend a varied texture. The principal difference in the two styles is the absence of staging, costumes or acting in the oratorio; indeed one of the purposes of the early oratorio was to provide spiritual nourishment through music during Lent, at which time spectacles of any kind were forbidden.

The Christmas Oratorio

As in so much of J.S. Bach's work, the Lutheran chorale provides the bedrock foundation upon which the Christmas Oratorio is built. Other contemporaries of Bach

largely looked past the old hymns of the church, but J.S. Bach was different: "Bach is unique for his time in the use he makes of the chorale. His great contemporaries [Telemann, Handel, Mattheson et al]...tended to regard the ancient hymns as an outmoded form of expression in church music, which had no place in the new, elegant, more theatrical style. But in the passions and

later church cantatas and organ works, Bach repeatedly affirms the importance of the chorales as a vital source of religious and musical inspiration..."¹ He saw himself in the tradition of those who had been making music for the glory of God since the earliest times. In his personal copy of the Luther Bible at the beginning of 1 Chronicles 25 (which talks about music in the temple), in his own hand Bach wrote "This chapter is the true foundation of all church music pleasing to God."² His reverence for the chorale and fascination with the endless permutations in which it could be employed were undoubtedly a reflection of this attitude. In the Christmas



Oratorio, the chorale “enhances the dramatic action by expressing the reaction of the congregation to what has just taken place.”³

Bach had been busy as cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig for over a decade when he turned his hand to a sacred oratorio dealing with the birth of Christ. He had produced other oratorios before, such as the St. Matthew and St. John Passions, but instead of composing brand new music he parodied older music of his, and the result was six cantatas that were to be performed on the major feast days of the Christmas period.

The term ‘parody’ in reference to music doesn’t necessarily espouse the comedic elements of the word; another way to think of it is a recycling of older material. This doesn’t suggest, however, that Bach was merely scribbling out new words and slapping them on top of any previous work he could grab. Rather the process was meticulously thought out, and he may have even had in mind a re-use of this material as he was composing it, which could explain the seamless way the Christmas libretto dovetails onto those sacred cantatas (BWV 213, 214, 215, and 248a).

Musicologists have theorized that the librettist Picander (pen name for Christian Friedrich Henrici) collaborated with Bach even as he was writing the original cantatas in the two years prior to their adaptation into the Christmas Oratorio. Bach took great pains to make sure the setting was appropriate to the gravity of Christmas in the church theology. For example, he composed an instrumental pastorella for the beginning of part two instead of re-using an earlier chorus, which certainly would have been less time-consuming. Also, Picander wrote new lyrics for a final chorus of BWV 213 which Bach intended to re-use, but apparently Bach thought better of using a quasi-gavotte to set the words ‘Let thy praise be sung, O Lord’ (*Ehre sei gott, gesungen.*) so he wrote an elaborate new chorus for the setting of this text.

A curious exception to this meticulous re-working appears to be the sixth and final part: “Bach, suddenly less fussy, decided to use a complete cantata that he had just

written, down to the recitatives and final chorus...Toward the end of his work he was apparently short on time or resources and so had to make sure he could complete his great project.”⁴

The only surviving example of what is known as Cantata 248a is to be found in the Christmas Oratorio; without this work 248a would have joined the ranks of the many cantatas by the Leipzig master that are now lost to us. In this unique way then, as in so many others, the *Weihnachts-Oratorium* is the gift that indeed keeps on giving. ♪

¹ Basil Smallman *The Background of Passion Music: J.S. Bach and his Predecessors*. (London, 1957. 1970 ed.) p 87.

² Raymond Erickson, editor. *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach*. (Aston Magna Foundation, 2009) p 35.

³ W. Murray Young. *The Sacred Dramas of J.S. Bach: A Reference and Textual Interpretation*. (McFarland and Co., Inc. 1994) p 193.

⁴ Martin Geck. *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work*. (Rowholt Verlag GmbH 2000. Tr: John Hargraves) p 341.

Silent Auction Thank You!



With thanks to the extremely generous support of our audience, choir members and orchestral musicians, the Bach Cantata Choir was able to raise nearly \$4000 dollars at the Silent Auction held during our first concert of the 2011-2012 season. The funds raised at this event are absolutely vital to the continuing financial viability of our organization, so on behalf of all of us, the Bach Cantata Choir extends warm and heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated in this event.

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