

# Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



December 2012

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## Newsletter

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

## Magnificat, or The Canticle of Mary

By Lorin Wilkerson—Bass

Looking back to the most ancient of the Christian hymns, one comes across the *Magnificat*. The earliest known Marian hymn, it is a key part of the Christmas story. Its text is taken from the Gospel of Luke, and consists of Mary's response to her cousin Elizabeth's praise. Patterned after the Song of Hannah from the Old Testament, it was sung in the earliest Christian circles, and is still spoken or sung in many denominations to this day.

Also known as the Song or Canticle of Mary, it is no surprise that this text has been set to music by many different composers throughout the years. When J.S. Bach turned his hand to it he was the newly-minted cantor at the Thomaskirche in Leipzig. The original version was written in E-flat major, and was first performed on Christmas Day in 1723 as part of the Vespers service at St. Thomas. This first iteration was also interpolated with a number of Christmas hymns which Bach removed when he reworked the composition into the key of D-major,<sup>1</sup> as he desired that the work should

be able to be used at other times during the liturgical year. It is interesting that he was able to achieve the insertion of these Christmas lauds, as they were called, given that since 1702 there was a local ordinance in place that "specifically rejected the singing of certain Latin responses—antiphones, psalms, hymns, recollects—but also the Christmas lauds—a clear criticism of the Saxon Elector's politically motivated conversion to Catholicism. From now on, everything that smacked of old "Catholic" ceremonies was to have no place in Leipzig church services."<sup>2</sup>

Bach's *Magnificat* is one of the best-loved of his works and perhaps one of the best-loved of all choral compositions of the baroque era, no small honor for this composition coming as it did from a man who

invested so much time, energy and tremendous genius into his vocal works. It fairly explodes right from the gates with its joyful eponymous exclamation. W. Murray Young believes that something deeply intrinsic to the Protestant faith is divulged in the opening of the first choral episode: "The Protestant emphasis on the individual's faith in God can be detected in the joy motif, in which the words *anima mea* (my soul) represent Mary's happiness alone and, at the same time, the joy felt by the shepherds and all mankind at this miracu-



lous Birth. The scene comes to life through the music.”<sup>3</sup> The fugue found at *Ommes Generationes* is powerful and thunderous, reminiscent of the *turba* choruses to be found in the Passions.

Some writers have compared Bach’s setting of the *Magnificat* to Jan Dismas Zelenka’s, which was composed for the court in Dresden just two years after Bach premiered his work. The two composers were well-acquainted with each other; Young speculated that Bach may have inspired Zelenka’s effort, though the latter’s was nowhere near as lengthy as Bach’s. However, Zelenka’s work was much more forward-looking; in keeping with the tastes of the Dresden audience Zelenka was looking toward the early *stil galante*: “...Bach’s writing is too multi-layered, too contrapuntally unified, too serious for Dresden audiences...[Zelenka’s] textures are more transparent, the phrase structures are more symmetrical, the harmonic and dynamic contrasts are more exaggerated. Zelenka’s music points ahead to Mozart...”<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to note the wide stylistic variation present in these settings composed so close together by men who knew one another’s music.

The *Magnificat* has been set hundreds of times by composers from medieval times through to the present; Charles Villiers Stanford, in fact, composed one setting of the *Magnificat* in every key.

<sup>1</sup>W. Murray Young. *The Sacred Dramas of J.S. Bach: A Reference and Textual Interpretation*. (McFarland and Co., Inc. 1994) p 3.

<sup>2</sup>Martin Geck. *Johann Sebastian Bach: Life and Work*. (Rowholt Verlag GmbH 2000. Tr: John Hargraves) p 147.

<sup>3</sup>Young, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>Raymond Erickson, editor. *The Worlds of Johann Sebastian Bach*. (Aston Magna Foundation, 2009) p 262



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Get your tickets now for  
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**Friday, December 21,**  
**2012 at 7:30 p.m.**

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## December Concert

Friday, December 21, 2012 at 7:30 p.m.

Tickets required - \$25 general / \$20 students & seniors

Giovanni Gabrieli (1557-1612): “O Magnum Mysterium”

J.S. Bach (1685-1750): “Magnificat in D Major”, BWV 243

J.S. Bach: “Christmas Oratorio”, BWV 248 (Highlights)

## Silent Auction Thank You!

The Bach Cantata Choir would like to extend you a warm and sincere thanks for making our 2012 Silent Auction fundraiser such a success. With your generous bids and donations, we were able to raise over \$3500, a vital and indispensable part of our budget. Thanks again for all you do for the BCC, and we wish you a Merry Christmas and the happiest of holiday seasons.

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