

Bach Beat

The Newsletter of the Bach Cantata Choir



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Newsletter

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An Old German Tradition

By Dorothea Lail—Soprano

Every year at this time, people in Germany get their Christmas stuff from the attic and basement and start setting up. Besides the Christmas tree, there are lots of decorations like nutcrackers, a little man with incense sticks inside, carved wooden candle arches for the window and the little pyramids that show nativity or winter scenes and spin, driven by the hot air of candles. Some families own quite elaborate Nativities that take up whole dinner tables and more, showing whole villages with their many inhabitants. Often this kind of Christmas decoration originates from the Southeastern part of Germany called the *Erzgebirge* (the 'ore mountains'), near Dresden at the border with the Czech Republic. This kind of Christmas decoration has its own very distinctive style and reaches back many centuries. It was developed by the miners and their families. Originally meant as a hobby for the long evening hours in the winter, it became an additional source of income for them and eventually even replaced the mining industry when the ore ran out. Today, Christmas decoration and toy manufacturing is the main income source along with tourism and glass manufacturing, and these products are exported all over the world.

If you have ever seen one of these Erzgebirge nativity scenes, you might have

noticed a small group of people clad in black robes with white collars, and wearing black hats. Often, they're grouped around a person with a lantern. This group is called a *Kurrende* group, singers who go from house to house and sing Christmas songs, like the carolers in Anglo-American culture. *Kurrende* is derived from the Latin word *currere*; it means "those who have to run" and is the name of a very old tradition that can be traced back to the Middle Ages. Originally, students of monastery schools formed little groups of singers under the leadership of an older student, and they would sing at all sorts of private events, from birthdays to weddings to funeral ceremonies. They did this to supplement their often very meager food portions at the monastery and to support their families. One of the most famous *Kurrende* singers was certainly Martin Luther, but many composers around



Erzgebirge Kurrende group

Bach's time gathered early experience with their *Kurrende* groups. The tradition has survived in Southeastern Germany to this day, though with some changes: the groups now gather only during Advent and include girls as well. They perform in the churches and on the many Christmas markets but also – true to their original name – visit people at their homes who can't go to church anymore to share the joy of Advent and Christmas with them. Their repertory includes old and new Advent and Christmas songs.

When you browse through the older songs, you might stumble over pieces by a little-known composer, Johannes Eccard. He was born in the town of Mühlhausen in Thuringia in 1553. His musical education led

to becoming a member of the Court Chapel at Weimar in 1576. Both those towns might sound familiar to you since both of them were also stations in J.S. Bach's life about 150 years later.

In 1571, Johannes Eccard joined the Chapel choir of the Bavarian Court in Munich under the direction of Orlando di Lasso. Besides singing contralto parts, he also studied composition with the maestro. This resulted in a study trip to Venice where he met Andrea Gabrieli among others. Eccard returned to his hometown in 1573 and stayed there for two years. During that time he joined the circle around Ludwig Helmbold and Joachim a Burck. The former initiated a new wave in the development of Protestant church music by continuing Martin Luther's work of writing new German texts for chorales. Joachim a Burck set the music for a lot of these poems and established Mühlhausen as a center of music in Central Germany. Some of Burck's anthems are still in use today.

In 1575, the famous merchant and banker Jacob Fugger called Eccard to Augsburg to fill the position of an organist. Four years later, Eccard was engaged by the Margrave of Ansbach for his court at Koenigsberg in today's Russia. First he was assistant to the court's Director of Music, then he took over the position in all but name when his predecessor passed away 6 years later. The Margrave however took his time in appointing Eccard officially. Finally, in 1603/04 (the sources are not quite clear) Eccard was allowed to call himself Director of Music. So it was not really a surprise, when in 1608 he followed the call of the Elector Joachim Friedrich to become Director of Music of the Court at Berlin. Eccard filled that position until his death in 1611.



Johannes Eccard (1553-1611)

Eccard's compositions had a vital influence on the development of the Protestant church music between 1570 and 1620. His style combined elements of song and motet, yielding musical pieces that could be performed without much effort yet still met artistic demands. A collection of pieces called *Preussische Festlieder* (Prussian Celebration Songs) led to his re-discovery in the 19th century.

The three Christmas pieces by Eccard to be performed by the BCC in our Christmas concert show his style very well. The first piece *Über's Gebirg* (Over the mountains) tells the story of Mary visiting Elisabeth after the Announcment of the Angel and how the Magnificat came to be. You might call it the title song of the *Kurrende* since in the second verse, people are encouraged to go over the mountains to spread the message of Christmas. The piece is set for five-voice choir with two sopranos. In the first part, the voices are depicted as walking over the mountains, each at their own speed, but they fall into step when Mary begins the Magnificat.

The second piece, *Gelobet seist Du, Jesus Christ* (Praise to Thee, Jesus Christ) uses text and melody from one of the oldest known German Christmas songs, one that goes back to the 13th century. Martin Luther used this song for his main hymn for Christmas Day.

The same technique is used in the third piece, Eccard's rendition of the famous *Ich steh' an Deiner Krippen hier* (Here I stand next to your manger). Following the message of the text, Eccard composed a very intimate and tender piece, almost like a lullaby. The melody is the same one that Bach uses in the Christmas Oratorio.

Friday, December 20,
2013 at 7:30 p.m. at Rose
City Park Presbyterian
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