

Program Notes from June 12, 1999

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**Bach sings of faith and love:
Three Cantatas: BWV #8, 49, 111**

CANTATA #49

Ich geh and suche mit Verlangen (I Go and Search with Longing)

This work, another from the third Leipzig cycle, was performed November 3, 1726 for the 20th Sunday after Trinity. The librettist is unknown, but might have been Bach's frequent collaborator Picander.

The text of the work is loosely based on the gospel for the day, Matthew xxii 1-14, where a king's son's wedding feast is described. What we have here is one of several "Dialogus" cantatas: the characters of Christ and the Soul are represented as allegorical lovers about to be "wed" (i.e., united in Heaven). The sensual nature of the text (and music) stems from a long tradition (Third Century) of such Christian "Dialog" poetry which was inspired by the Song of Solomon. Other sources of the text are drawn from Old Testament sources: Jeremiah, Revelations, and Hosea. The concluding movement incorporates the third verse of Philipp Nicolai's *Wie schon leuchtet der Morgenstern* (1599), "How Brightly Shines the Morning Star." Bach set several Dialog cantatas during these years (Nos. 57, 32, 49, 58). In this cantata the Soul (soprano) and Christ (bass) are the only vocal parts and are joined by colorful obbligati: solo organ and oboe d'amore (a mezzo-soprano oboe, tuned a minor third lower than an oboe and having a sweeter sound). The style and overall form of this work is that of the Italian secular cantata.

These Dialog works--and this one in particular--show how romantic and sensual Bach's writing can be. The portrayal of spiritual longing and spiritual union using erotic or nuptial metaphors, should not be considered profane or sacrilegious: it's simply the nature of this poetic genre. But Bach far transcends the form by not contenting himself with the writing of simple "love" music; instead he creates a masterful structure on which stunning, immediately appealing music rests. The work's musical and exegetical profundity is accompanied by qualities of lightness, surprise, heart-melting beauty and spectacular virtuoso instrumental interplay.

To start with we have an organ concerto movement, the Sinfonia. It was taken from the third movement of a lost Kothen work. The first two movements of this concerto appear in the cantata Bach had performed on October 20, two weeks earlier (#169). The entire concerto was to be later arranged as the Harpsichord Concerto #2 (BWV 1053). This sets the festive atmosphere: the preparation of a wedding (metaphorically, of course).

The first Aria uses an organ obbligato, thus providing some continuity with the Sinfonia. However, the mood is hardly festive. The chromatic organ melody, starting, stopping, and frantically leaping upwards, depicts the anxious "searching" of the Bridegroom (Christ), at other times it represents the flight of the beloved "dove." The bass's opening words of searching and longing are to be used again in other movements.

CANTATA #111

Was mein Gott will, das g'scheh allzeit

The second Leipzig cantata cycle (1724-1725) was marked by Bach's profuse experimentation with chorale, melodies and text as integrative compositional elements. Chorale melodies were woven into choruses; recitatives and arias alike. At times the chorale text was appropriated verbatim, at other times the libretti abound in hymn paraphrases. In a handful of cantatas, as in the present one, fragments of hymn tunes and text intermingle with free composition.

Was mein Gott will (S. I I I), written for the 3rd. Sunday of Epiphany. January 21, 1725, is a typical specimen of the "first-last" species of chorale cantatas in which the first and last movements are based entirely on a specific hymn tune and text. The hymn *Was mein Gott will* was written by Duke Albrecht of Prussia in 1547 to a tune thought to be of French origin. The treatment of the chorale melody in the first movement follows a style of "chorale fantasy" popularized by one of Bach's musical forebears, Johann Pachelbel. The soprano voice intones the tune in long sustained notes while the other parts contrapuntally precede this cantus with the same musical phrase sung in short note values. The piece's spirit is energetic and self-assured emphasizing the unshaken confidence of the faithful who wholly trust and rely on God. The bass aria that follows is a simply scored *quasi-ostinato* movement for voice and continuo; woven in with the otherwise freely composed text and melody are two lines quoted from the chorale's second strophe. After a brief recitative a brilliant duet scored for tenor, alto, and strings, becomes the cantata's grand "centerpiece." The string accompaniment, with its striding bass line, underscores the "courageous steps" in a rousing, stately, dotted French rhythm. The unusually steady pace of harmonic rhythm, combined with the highly imitative vocal parts, give the listener an impression of indomitable Will, unity, and courage. An expressive recitative follows accompanied by oboes and continuo. This reflection on mortality concludes with a plaintive *arioso* passage expressing the phrase. "Oh blessed, wished-for end." The concluding four-part chorale is a simple prayer for strength and guidance against evil and weakness.

MOTET: *Lobet den Herrn, alle Heiden* (Praise the Lord, All ye Nations)

This miniature was first published in 1821 with an organ continuo part. It was probably performed in the 1720s, and is now believed to have been part of a lost cantata. The text is Psalm 117, with an additional, spectacularly set "Hallelujah." The rising triads which herald the Lord with "praise" provide the opening subject of a double fugue in which "And praise him, all ye people" is set as the second subject. In next section, "For his grace and truth sustains us through Eternity," the word "sustain" is taken very literally: long notes in the bass sustain melismas --expressive vocal passages sung to one syllable-- in the other parts. These very words are then given an extended fugal treatment; "Eternity" is now set to sustained notes which both musically and poetically underpin the rest of the text.

A glorious fugal "Hallelujah" follows, in which a flourish of ecstatic sequences conclude this brief motet.

CANTATA #8

Liebster Gott, wann werd ich sterben? (Dearest God, when will I die?)

Ironically, or, so it seems, the subject of death frequently inspired some of the lightest and most immediately ingratiating of Bach's works. Cantatas composed for the sixteenth Sunday after Trinity, in particular, are almost "death songs," and reflect a sensuous, aural sheen. They frequently delight the ear with pizzicato strings, uncomplicated choral writing, and delicate instrumentation. *Liebster Gott* belongs to this group, and is, by far, the most popular. It was originally performed on September 24, 1724, and Bach revived it on two other occasions, which attests to the high regard he had for the work. The libretto, by the seventeenth-century theologian, Caspar Neumann, was not set to the usual melody associated with that text. Instead, Bach chose a setting by the Leipzig organist, Daniel Vetter. No doubt he chose Vetter's version as a tribute to the local musician.

The opening and closing movements set the hymn with the chorale tune while the middle three movements are paraphrases of four hymn strophes. The Gospel for this Sunday addresses the raising of the widow's son in Nain (Luke 7,11-17); the librettist uses this source and Neumann's chorale and provides us with a gentle and sentimental meditation on death. The pastoral instrumentation and the descending key structure (E major, C# minor, A major, F# minor and E major) convey the sense of content resignation to the inevitability of our deaths.

The first movement immediately catches our attention by the luminous effect of the flute, oboes d'amore and plucked strings. This use of pizzicato strings and patterns of repeated notes is a musical allusion to the striking of funeral bells: slower rhythms depict the tolling of low bells, and faster beat divisions denote the higher pitched bells. Bach frequently used this metaphor (e.g., cantatas 198, 95 and 161) for a dual purpose: to invoke a musical symbol, immediately familiar in this context with his audience, and to impart a sense of timelessness and serenity by the static quality of the continuous rhythmic patterns. Thus, in a way, the musical effect is that of a death lullaby. For the highest "bells," Bach uses the upper register of the flute to "beat" a pattern of twenty-four notes, alluding to the passing of days. Against this evocative backdrop, he sets a graceful part for two oboes d'amore and creates an elegant ritornello which binds the simple, homophonic phrases of the chorale. In keeping with this bitter sweet imagery, the rhymes "sterben" and "erben" -- "death" and "heirs" -- both are treated with a gentle chromatic touch: the brief and wretched earthly existence is Adam's legacy to us, his progeny.

The tenor aria is set for oboe d'amore and continuo, again pizzicato, in a rocking, bell-like pattern. "Why, are thou, my spirit, afraid for my last hour to strike?", the singer asks in a jittery vocal part laden with much gestured ornamentation. He even echoes the bells by affecting a vocal "pizzicato" on the word "strike." In the second section, Bach illustrates "My body daily bends towards earth" by a vocal descent, "multitudes" by melismas, and "place of rest" by long, sustained notes.

The somewhat contained feeling of dread now gathers to an anxious outburst in the ensuing recitative, set for alto and string accompaniment. The striking of bells has ceased, and along with it, the lullaby's consolation. Tortured questions are posed: "Where will my body find its rest?" and "Whither will my loved ones, in their sorrow, be scattered and driven?" In this extraordinary, compact movement, Bach portrays the singer's worry and disorientation by some stunning harmonic progressions, and an open, questioning cadence.

An exuberant bass aria provides an affirmative rejoinder to this lingering fear of death: "But hence, you foolish, senseless worries!" Scored for flute and strings, this gigue is as unfettered as the text suggests. The joyful mood continues by setting the question "When Jesus calls me: who would not go?" with a simple, triadic vocal line and a virtuoso flute obligato. The detached articulation of "Nichts"--nothing --is a cheerful contrast to the bell symbolism heard in the previous movements. The final two lines speak of a transfigured spirit, "radiant and glorious," who evokes a "blessed, exuberant morn, " and are set with some of the warmest, most resplendent passages in the cantata.

A final reflection, the soprano recitative, reminds us that our corporal self is mere "poverty," and that only in Heaven will we be "prosperous and blessed." God's love is eternal; and it is made anew "every morning," as illustrated by the high C# in the vocal part.

The concluding chorale calls for "courage and resolve" in facing our mortality. Here, Bach arranges Vetter's own four-part setting of the hymn and recalls the first movement; but instead of the placid yet questioning mood of the former, the cantata ends with an earnest prayer that we should live, and die, earning an "honest" end, by our unflagging affirmation of faith.