

Program Notes from Feb 20, 2000

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In Peace and Joy

*God knows we are but dust,
just like mown grass,
A flower or falling leaf.
The wind blows over it,
And it is gone.
Thus does man pass away,
His end is ever nigh.*

Psalm 102:14-16 (text from Bach's motet *Singet dem Herrn*)

Concert presenters invariably shudder when I propose to them a program consisting entirely of Lutheran funeral music. The notion conjures up the gloomy prospect of an endless succession of dreary laments, weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth, and a general absence of audience-pleasing tunes. We tend to react to the idea of death with aversion, behaving as though we can somehow ignore the fact of it waiting for all of us, sooner or later. In 17th- and 18th-century Germany, however, the everyday presence of death made it much more difficult to ignore. To a high rate of infant mortality, the grave risks of childbirth, and a generally shorter lifespan than today, the Thirty Years War (1618-48) added the horrors of war, famine and epidemic, with effects which endured for generations. Johann Sebastian Bach's family history, by no means exceptional, points up the familiarity of death in this society: Bach's first wife died at age 36, and of his 20 children, only nine outlived their father.

In supplying the musical requirements of funeral services, German composers created a large repertoire of music which culminated in Bach's motets for double choir. What may surprise today's audiences is the wide range of emotion expressed in Lutheran funeral music, from grief to celebration, from despair to serene confidence. Some of the funerary music of this period is indeed heartwrenchingly sorrowful, but the idea that death was not final, that the soul, in passing through death, exchanged temporary suffering on earth for eternal bliss in heaven, was so powerful in Lutheran culture that much of the repertoire is plainly jubilant. Bach's motet *Singet dem Herrn ein neues lied* demonstrates perfectly how music at a funeral could teach the mourners to rejoice in the works of God. It opens with an exuberant setting of verses from Psalm 149 calling for God the King and Creator to be praised with voice, dance, and instruments. In the middle movement one choir sings verses of a chorale version of Psalm 103, telling us that our earthly life is as fleeting as that of the grass or the flower, but that God is merciful to us, just as a father to his children; the other choir sings an aria calling for us to place our trust in God, without whose grace we are helpless. After the gentle mood of this section the music turns again to irresistible joy, praising God for his works and his glory: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Alleluia!"

The specific occasion for *Singet dem Herrn* is unknown, but the deceased was undoubtedly a person of considerable social standing; to judge from the magnificence and scale of Bach's composition. Music for the funerals of somewhat more ordinary citizens might have been more along the lines of the strophic songs which open each half of the concert. An enormous number of these "death-arias" or graveside songs with innumerable verses are preserved in 17th-century German sources, often alongside the texts of the sermons delivered. Many of these works are by otherwise unknown, probably amateur composers, and their quality is uneven; here we perform two by highly accomplished musicians. *Komm, Jesu, komm*, with music by Johann Schelle and text by Paul Thymich, was written for the funeral of a university professor and rector at the Thomasschule in Leipzig; forty or more years later Bach used the first and last of the poem's eleven strophes for his motet of the same

name. Johann Christoph Bach's *Es ist nun aus* features an expressive melody which recalls the four-part "arias" in the later motets of his cousin's son Johann Sebastian (the middle section of *Singet dem Herrn*, for example, or the conclusion of *Komm, Jesu, komm*, and a poignant final gesture on "Gute Nacht."

Es ist nun aus speaks in the voice of the departed, comforting the bereaved with the assurance that their loved one's soul is now at home with God, brought to eternal life through Jesus Christ. Other funeral texts take a sterner or more penitent line, reminding the listener that all mankind is as nothing and crying for mercy from a wrathful God; Schein's *Threnus*, for example, a work of madrigalian intensity with its painful dissonances, despairing silences, imploring chants of "Wende deine Plage von mir" ("Turn away your torments from me"), and fluttering word-painting on the word "moths." Bernhard's *Zur selbigen Zeit* and Scheidt's *Zion spricht* make a severe effect with their minor tonality, dense counterpoint, and, in the Scheidt, plangent chromaticism, but the message is finally one of comfort, Old Testament prophecies recalling God's promises made to the people of Israel; a mother might forget her own son before the Lord will forget his children.

Heinrich Schutz composed the *Musikalische Exequien* for the funeral of a friend and patron, the aptly-named Prince Heinrich Posthumus von Reuss, who himself selected and arranged the texts for his service and even took a hand in designing the coffin, which was inscribed with the texts. We perform here the motet for double choir which is the second of the Exequien's three parts. In this work, as in the motet *So far ich hin* which concludes the program, the composer's extraordinary ability to control the large-scale rhythm of a piece by means of harmony and counterpoint creates a feeling of incredible serenity; as we listen, Schütz's musical time replaces the normal time we experience in daily life, pointing to the eternal time of the life to come.

A second theme of this program is the many-branched musical lineages of 17th-century Germany, the tradition inherited by Johann Sebastian Bach. The composers represented here include three of Bach's predecessors as Thomascantor in Leipzig: Johann Hermann Schein, Sebastian Knopfer, and Johann Schelle. Samuel Scheidt and Heinrich Schutz were friends, colleagues, and near-exact contemporaries of Schein. Christoph Bernhard was a student of Schutz. Johann Christoph Bach was Johann Sebastian's most famous ancestor, the most celebrated among the large number of professional musicians in the Bach family. Johann Sebastian Bach was himself highly conscious of his position in this tradition. He carefully studied the work of earlier Bachs and other 17th-century German composers; in fact, most of Johann Christoph Bach's extant works survive in copies made by the younger composer, preserved in a collection called the *Alt-Bachisches Archiv*. Knopfer's motet *Erforsche mich, Gott* likewise survives in a score in Bach's hand, with an imitative entry in the first soprano corrected from a literal imitation, resulting in an awkward dissonance, to a smoother, harmonically-adjusted entry. The one work on the program not clearly associated with a funeral is the *Praeludium* by Dietrich Buxtehude, the composer and organ virtuoso from Lobeck whom the young Bach famously traveled over 200 miles on foot to meet and work with, "to comprehend one thing and another about his art."