

Program Notes: Nov. 2000

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Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot, S.39

The late, great recorder virtuoso and early music scholar, Bernard Krainis, once commented that Bach seemed to have lost interest in the using the recorder (known then as the “block flute” in contrast to the modern “transverse flute”) after 1727. Its use in the early Mülhausen and Weimar cantatas was widespread, but not so in the Leipzig works from 1723 onward. If Mr. Krainis’s thesis is correct, the cantata, *Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot*, written for the first Sunday after Trinity in 1726, might include the last appearance of these sweet, affecting pipes in a regular church service apart from the 1727 performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*. The prominence of a pair of recorders lends much to the mood of humility, “unadornment,” and piety that pervades this work.

Many scholars believe that a subsequent performance in 1732 was a response to the ignoble plight of Austrian Protestants who were expelled from Salzburg. A superlative opening chorus that bears a close musical affinity to Bach’s *Trauer Ode*, written a year later, dominates the composition. The text of the movement is a paraphrase of Isaiah 58:7-8 in which the giving of food, shelter, and clothing to the needy is seen as a divine, transforming act of charity. This lengthy, complex movement is cast in two main section sections separated by a brief transitional section. The first section, further divided into three sections (A-B-A’), literally depicts the distribution of bread to the hungry by “distributing” staccato chords to differing musical forces (recorders, oboes, then strings). Those who are “miserable” are reflected by the descending, chromatic harmonic wailings that contrast against the steady punctuations of “food distribution.” After this exposition, Bach, engages the same text to an entirely different fugal setting (B) against the backdrop of the same staccato “distribution” motif. A recapitulation (A’), which reworks the material of the opening, concludes this first section. After a brief transitional section, the second main section - musically and metrically distinct from what has been heard thus far - consists of a pair of fugues using almost identical subjects but set to different texts. The setting of differing texts to the same *music* balances the setting of differing music to the same *text* offered earlier, and further suggests the way in which previously bound matter can be loosened and redistributed.

The magnificence of this grand opening edifice, as is the case in many of Bach’s cantatas, dwarfs the remaining movements. Yet, consistent with the spiritual themes embodied in this cantata, Bach constructs an ingenious symmetry about an unadorned Bass *arioso* declaring the sacred duty to share and to perceive oneself as unadorned or impoverished save that by holy endowment gives. About this very sparse movement, two dulcet arias carry the message further. In the first, set for solo violin, oboe, and alto, Bach recalls the staccato “distribution” motif of the chorus in “scattering here the seeds of blessing.” The second aria, affectingly set for soprano and unison recorders, emphasizes the unity of all earthly possessions as a reflection of divine largess.

Du Hirte Israel, höre S.104

Written for the second Sunday after Easter, 1724, *Du Hirte Israel*, is based on the text of Psalm 80 “Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, thou that leadest Joseph like a flock; thou that dwellest between the cherubim, shine forth.” Keeping with this pastoral song, Bach deploys the stock instruments of the shepherd (oboes); the idiomatic *siciliano* - with rocking triple meter/triplet figures - symbolizes “perfection” and human serenity in Baroque musical rhetoric. The predominantly uniform rhythm of all musical forces lends an homophonic texture in which all things are “as one,” being lead by a shepherding force. Bach uses the ensuing tenor aria as a complete contrast in its jolting chromatic shifts and seemingly meandering melodic lines. Here, the “soul” is lost on the desert, stumbling with “faltering steps,” calling for “Abba” (father) - the shepherd - and is expressing an anxious troubled state. The “guiding” oboes, though, spinning fluid, steady lines, cajole the errant spirit to follow. The concluding bass aria reflects the pastoral rhythms and homogenous texture of the first chorus.

“Death” and “Sleep” surrounded by the peaceful *pianissimo* wafting of strings, offer both the joy and release of the faithful in the afterlife.

Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben S.147

This work is chiefly known for the splendid chorale setting of Martin Jahn’s melody of 1661, *Jesu meiner Seelen Wonne*, known popularly as “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring.” Over this melody, which is sung by chorus and reinforced by trumpet, a gigue-like instrumental arabesque gently spins and swirls in dancing triplets. Although this cantata was performed in Leipzig in 1723 for the festival of The Visitation of Mary (and later in 1728), its roots are found in a much earlier cantata (#147a) written in Weimar in 1716. In the earlier version, all that survives is the ebullient opening chorus and arias set to texts of Salamo Franck; however, the much-beloved *Jesu* chorale, apparently, was added in the later Leipzig version.

The opening chorus, “Heart and mouth, and tongue, and deed,” is as sunny a choral movement as can be found in Bach. The cheerful fugue capped by a high trumpet recalls the brilliant choral settings in the *B-Minor Mass*. The middle section, which highlights *Furcht und Heuchelei* (“fear and falsity”), is set in a contrasting homophonic, chromatic manner, lends a dark hue to the outer fugal sections. The tenor *recitative* which follows is unusually dramatic and splendid with its backdrop of accompanying strings; Bach, apparently, sets the mood and color from the opening phrase, *Gebenedeiter Mund*, (“O thou most blessed voice”). The aria for alto and oboe d’amore, *Schäme dich, o Seele, nicht* (“Be not ashamed, O my soul”), is unusual for its intensity and economy of design eschewing any obvious word painting or virtuoso effects. However, the ensuing *recitative*, is full of colorful word painting: the “Highest’s arm thrusting,” then “this arm exalts,” and “earthly orb quaking” corresponding to melodic risings, fallings and tremolos. Similarly, “the meek who so shall be saved,” is set to a dissipated quiet with a “false cadence.” The soprano aria, *Bereite dir, Jesu*, “Make ready, Jesu,” contrasts with the alto aria in yielding to a dance-like figuration and easily comprehended melodic and harmonic sequences. The violin part might have been based on a preliminary sketch of the D-minor Prelude from Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier. The cantata’s first part (movements 1-6 presented before the Sunday sermon) concludes with the first appearance of *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*.

Opening the second half, the tenor aria, *Hilf, Jesu, hilf*, “Help, Jesu, help,” is scored merely for voice and continuo. However sparse, the aria’s confident and joyful *ritornello*, with the descending cascades of triplets, conveys a unmistakable sense of rapture. Especially stunning are the center passages, “that I may my Savior call thee,” and “my heart is burning” in which the triplets remind one of a swelling passion or flame. The alto recitative, describing the story of John “leaping and springing” in his mother’s womb after Elizabeth admits her pregnancy to Mary, bathes the narrative with the swaddling sounds of *oboes da caccia*. The final aria for bass marks a return of the high trumpet and higher spirits heard in the opening chorus. Finally, the cantata closes with a reprise of *Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring*.