

Program Notes from Nov. 2001

Seth Lachterman

PROGRAM NOTES

The three Bach cantatas and the two Schütz motets were chosen for this program well before the events of September 11. However, when we thought that, in the light of our national tragedy and the personal mourning of so many, we might want to modify that selection to better fit the present mood, we found that no changes were really needed. The human condition is described in its essential weakness and vulnerability in the works presented here, but they also offer the spiritual solace and eventual hope that drive human destiny and surmount adversity and doom. We only added, at the conclusion of Cantata #57, a new verse to the final Chorale, sung by our children and proclaiming: "Love One Another!"

THREE CANTATAS BY JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685-1750)

AUS DER TIEFE RUF' ICH, HERR, ZU DIR (OUT OF THE DEPTH, I CALL UNTO THEE, O LORD) BWV 131

This setting of the De Profundis Psalm 130 is believed to be the young Bach's very first cantata and is dated no later than 1707. On Easter of that year Bach had applied for the post of organist at the St. Blasius church of Mühlhausen. Three days after the Council had decided to hire him, a fire razed the parish and destroyed 360 homes. Nevertheless Bach proceeded with his musical duties, but was requested to write an inspirational work of "consolation and penance" for a devastated community.

Stylistically "Aus der Tiefe" is a study in strategic balances: Old Testament Psalm passages are evenly blended with Lutheran Chorale insertions; the easily perceived symmetric layout is set equally with equal doses of homophonic and polyphonic textures. The fugal sections belie the youth of the contrapuntist in their skillful experimentation and striking effects. In this work, as in others of that period, there are radical departures in structure and design from the great outpouring of mature Leipzig cantatas.

After 1723, when Bach took on his position in Leipzig, his cantatas reveal a top-heavy structure: a large opening chorus is followed by a succession of recitatives and arias which is then concluded by a simple chorale. Thus the message bursts forth at the very start, as in Cantata #187 heard later this evening. The solo movements that follow are virtual commentary and musical "essays," and the final summation offers a resolution to the dialectic tension of the text.

Here the format is clearly different. The choral movements are evenly balanced with the solo movements and the most rousing music is reserved for the very end. "Aus der Tiefe" unfolds its message gradually and leaves us with a tense, stirring fugal finale.

The doleful *sinfonia* which opens the work is dominated by plunging melodic lines, echoed by the concertato chorus, motivated by the "Tiefe" (depth) of the text. After some piercing cries "Ruf' ich, Herr zu dir" (I cry, Lord, to thee) the second line of the Psalm is set to an animated *Vivace*. As the movement progresses and the text changes, so does the fabric of the musical setting as shown in the flexibility of the dynamic markings (*p*, *pp*, *f*), rare in Bach's later works.

A hushed instrumental *pianissimo* prepares for the first solo movement, a basso Aria on the third line of the Psalm, with the soprano singing over it a chorale verse commenting on the anxiety expressed in the bass part.

An unmistakable trait of these early works is the occasional flash of romanticism. The central choral movement is such an instance. "My soul is waiting," the fugue's main subject, appropriately languishes and descends over sequences of dominant sevenths while the sighing interjections of "I am hoping" serve as a countersubject. As "waiting" continues to dominate the Psalm text, it provides also the musical impetus for the next tenor aria "My soul is waiting" over which again flows a chorale verse, this time by the alto voice. But the mood has changed and the lively triplets and faster tempo turn "waiting" into excited anticipation. But Bach is also preparing for the great finale which begins with three outbursts "Israel, Israel, Israel." It gathers energy on the words "hope" and "redemption" and the final fugue culminates the mounting excitement. At the very end the chorus echoes the last phrase of the text in one homophonic statement which makes the last chord seem to be leading into yet another movement. This harmonically ambivalent ending, unique in Bach's extant cantatas, is perhaps one last daring portrayal of the persistent yearning and uncertainty expressed by the Psalm text: "I wait for the Lord, my soul is waiting."

Simon Wainrib

SELIG IST DER MANN (BLESSED IS THE MAN) BWV 57

The Cantata was written in 1725, and was performed in Leipzig on the second day of Christmas of that year which was also the feast of St. Stephen, a martyr of the early Church, hence the reference to that saint in the last recitative and the mention of his "tortured body" in the last chorale.

The text is a dialogue between the soul, sung by an obviously feminine soprano and Jesus, a virile basso. Throughout the cantata, the tender interchange between the two protagonists has the rather secular and delightfully sensuous charm of an operatic love scene.

In the instrumental ritornello that weaves through the first Aria, the first violin's sigh-like quaver figure is repeated throughout the movement, setting the plaintive tone for the cantata's first part.

That gloomy mood is dispelled when Jesus proclaims, in a blisteringly martial Aria, at the very center of the Cantata, "Yes, I can defeat the fiends," where we can practically see the knight in shining armor brandishing his sword to rescue his damsel in distress. It all ends with the soul welcoming her deliverance, which is her death, and her reunion with Jesus, as she sings "Nimble I will end my earthly life" in a dancing, light-hearted 3/4 time aria. In the final Chorale, Jesus promises the "constant delight" of his presence.

ES WARTET ALLES AUF DICH (THEY ALL WAIT UPON THEE) BWV 187

First performed in August 1726, in the third year of Bach's tenure as director of music in the Leipzig churches, this work belongs to Bach's third full cycle of cantatas written for Leipzig performances. The text was probably from the pen of duke Ernst Ludwig of Saxe Meiningen, and focuses on the Lord's power to appease the hunger of all creatures.

Quite different from #131, the earlier work in freer form that opened this program, the format of the Leipzig cantatas is by now well established. It consists of a massive opening chorus that offers the work's main message, usually derived from the scriptural readings of the week, followed by solo recitatives and arias that reflect and comment on that message, to conclude mostly with a simple four part chorale.

Here the opening chorus, sustained by strings and oboes, is based on a passage from Psalms that praises God as the primary source of bodily and spiritual nourishment. It starts with a complex contrapuntal prelude and dovetails into a mighty fugal statement.

A basso recitative then describes the world teeming with multitudes that need to be fed and sustained, followed by two successive solo arias by alto and basso that proclaim God's concern with his creatures' welfare and nourishment.

A last soprano aria applies this same divine goodness to human needs and a final recitative leads into the two verses of the closing Chorale and the words of thanks that conclude the cantata.

TWO MOTETS BY HEINRICH SCHÜTZ (1585-1672)

Born just a century before Johann Sebastian Bach, Heinrich Schütz was one of his most important forerunners. If we consider the era of the Baroque extending for about 150 years from roughly 1600 to the death of Bach in 1750, we can consider the lives and work of those two masters as covering pretty much the whole Baroque efflorescence. A stylistic comparison will easily demonstrate the evolution of music from the early Baroque of Schütz to Bach's high Baroque. As a matter of fact, in the Bach cantatas presented today, the earlier one (#131) still displays Schütz's influence, while the two later works, and specially the operatic "Selig ist der Mann" and its heroic center aria, point already to the "galant" style of the early classicism of Haydn and Mozart.

The two motets performed today were composed on the same text of a liturgical canticle in the year 1656 on the occasion of the death of Johann Georg I, prince-elect of Saxony, the first motet to be sung before the burial, the second thereafter.

After extended travel in Italy where he studied with Gabrieli and absorbed the influence of the late Renaissance masters, Schütz had started musical service at the court of Dresden, Saxony's capital, as early as 1617 and, after an extended stay at the court of Denmark, he returned there in 1645 to remain in Dresden till the end of his life.

GEORG MUFFAT (1653-1704)

This German organist and composer learned his craft first with Lully at the court of Versailles, then with Corelli in Rome, thus blending in his musical language the German, French and Italian traditions. The Concerto Grosso on this program was published in 1701, when, after service in the cathedrals of Strassburg and Salzburg, he was music director for the Bishop of Passau, a position he held until the end of his life.