

Musical Notes for December 13, 2008

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Bach's Christmas Oratorio

The *Christmas Oratorio*, aside from being one of Johann Sebastian Bach's greatest choral masterworks, presents a number of interesting questions about what is known and what is speculation about this work. It is clear about the composition dates and the work's first performance. The autograph score says that work was intended for the feast of Christmas in 1734-35 (Christmas Day to Epiphany; 25 December to 6 January). One can then assume that the score was composed in the immediately following months, and most of it during Advent, when cantatas were not performed in Leipzig, and Bach, as a result, enjoyed some rare free time. What is not clear is who wrote the non-Biblical texts. Like his Passion settings, there are three levels of text: Bible stories, chorale texts, and specially written verse, or "free verse." Some scholars have suggested Picander, who worked with Bach on the *St. Matthew Passion*; others have concluded that Bach himself undertook the task. This subject remains a mystery.

Another interesting anomaly is the title of the work itself. Bach called the work an "oratorio," but it really is a collection of six discrete cantatas. In fact each cantata was performed on separate days, and are really "stand-alone" pieces, with their own internal structures. While one thinks of oratorios like *Messiah* and *Israel in Egypt*, which are meant to be heard in one evening, it was not uncommon especially in Germany to divide up Oratorios into several parts, which would be heard on separate occasions.

The music that constitutes the *Christmas Oratorio* consists of what one would expect in a typical cantata: recitative, aria, chorales, and, of course, extensive choral writing. This December you will have the opportunity to hear the first three cantatas, and Berkshire Bach plans to present the last three cantatas the following year. We do hope to see you on both occasions for this uplifting and simply stunning Christmas work.