

Program Notes for Dec 13, 2008

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J. S. Bach — Weihnachts-Oratorium (1734) S.248 (The Christmas Oratorio)

German music, especially northern liturgical music, seems to have a deserved reputation of being cerebral, contemplative, and rather somber. Such are the qualities we've learned to respect in the "Northern Character" of Germany's place in Western culture. However, the spirit of Christmas seems to charm composers of all nationalities, even those "serious" German masters. Early German baroque composers, such as Michael Praetorius and Heinrich Schütz, set Yuletide models for their contemporaries and for subsequent generations of German church composers. Images of shepherds inspire the use of the gentle, pastoral sounds of flutes, recorders, and oboes; richly textured strings seem to convey the swaddling of the infant Jesus; brass instruments, with their regal connotation (for the Three Kings), are both visual and musical symbols of splendor. Warmth of instrumental tone color, a comfort to the bleakness of the solstice, invokes both the joy of birth, and the atmosphere of loving tribute. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, German settings of Christmas hymns are disarmingly touching, easily comprehended, and extraordinarily colorful. In particular, Schütz's *Weihnachts-Historie*, of 1664, undoubtedly unknown to Bach himself, is, nonetheless, a direct artistic and historical precedent to Bach's *Weihnachts-Oratorium*. In Schütz's succinct and intimate setting, an Evangelist narrates the biblical passages, while ensembles of vocalists and instrumentalists partake in *Intermedia*, which can be perceived as precursors to formal arias and choruses. By Bach's time, a century later, oratorios had further evolved using a variety of Italianate innovations: *da capo* arias and choruses, as well as extended instrumental interludes, or *sinfonias*. Bach's own Oratorio, while perfectly consistent with the expected genre, and perfectly suited to the festivities of the Nativity, was, however, largely an outgrowth of his work with "secular-drama," an odd hybrid of opera and cantata, in fashion at the time.

Background and Sources

From 1730 onwards, after many unhappy confrontations and disputes with the Leipzig City Council and the administration of St. Thomas Church, Bach reacted by veering away a bit from liturgical music, seeking musical recognition and fulfillment in secular and instrumental music. He became the music director of a highly talented band of musicians, the *Collegium Musicum* of Leipzig, which was made up of talented students, local amateur virtuosi, and guest musicians from surrounding towns and villages. Concurrently, Bach became acquainted with the rich musical life of the opulent court of Dresden; in particular, he attended performances of operas. These stage works seemed to give Bach the aesthetic impetus for indulging in more popular, semi-dramatic vocal forms. Although no true operas were to follow, a series of cantatas known as "musical dramas" – *drammæ per musica* – are the closest of Bach's works to being operatic. The form that Bach followed is best described as *Festspiele*, an outgrowth of German baroque drama, and clearly differentiated from the extravagant sensuality of Italian opera.

The circumstances for the creation of such quasi-operas do not lie solely with Bach's artistic woes: the death of Augustus I in 1733 provided an opportunity of tribute to the Saxon royalty. Bach had much to gain by winning the favor of Augustus's successor, Elector Friedrich August II, since the title of *Hofkomponist* for the Royal Family would command respect from the *petite bourgeoisie* in Leipzig. Additionally, the musical resources in Dresden, the royal seat, were extraordinary and inspirational.

Thus, the ascension of the new Elector, the birthday of his heir, crown prince Friedrich Christian, and the birthday of the Elector's consort, all gave occasions for several brilliant *Drammæ per Musica*. Bach wrote a series of five secular cantatas for the newly enthroned Saxon royalty: #213 *Hercules auf dem Scheidewege* ("Hercules at the Crossroads"), #214 *Tönet ihr Pauken* ("Sound ye drums, blow ye trumpets"), #205a (music lost), S.Anh12 (music also lost), and #215 *Preise dein Glücke* ("Praise your Good Fortune"). The works

exploited the musicianship of the Collegium Musicum; certainly, no less than the most accomplished musicians could fully realize the opulence of the scoring of these works, their dazzling string passages, or their delicate solo *obbligati*. Weather permitting, performances were *al fresco*, with candlelight and illumination effects.

The Leipzig gentry, having enjoyed these festive works as tributes, would hear them reworked as a set of six cantatas, better known collectively as the *Weinachts-Oratorium* of 1734. Thus, most of the music of this Oratorio was adapted or “parodied” from purely secular works that were nearly operatic. The brilliance of trumpets, drums, and whirling strings, once paying obsequious tribute to royalty, would now convey the more metaphoric splendor of the Nativity festival.

Part I – For Christmas Day

The opening chorus, *Jauchzet frohlocket!*, “Rejoice, be Glad!”, is a parody of the opening chorus of cantata #214, *Tönet ihr Pauken*. The original’s words seem more fitting to what we hear in the music: thundering timpani and blaring trumpets illustrate the text’s imperative to “sound ye drums and trumpets.” However, by appealing to our affective state, rather than merely commanding a musical paean, the movement seems less martial than the regal original. The aria, *Bereite dich Zion*, “Make ready, Zion,” again, loses the literal symbolism of the original Hercules Cantata. In this earlier work, a writhing bass line depicts the menacing snakes that Hercules “crushed and tore” in his infancy. No snakes in the grass for Christmas – just the palpitating expectancy and preparation of a symbolic union of Zion with the Savior. However, the brilliant bass aria, *Großer Herr, o starker König*, with its use of a “crowning” trumpet, is closer in spirit and word to the original source than any of the preceding movements.

Part 2 – For the Second Day of Christmas

Perhaps the most widely performed and best known movement from the Oratorio is the lovely *Sinfonia* that opens this second part. Written in the style of a *siciliano* or *pastorale*, the traditional evocation of the shepherd tending a flock is, perhaps, the richest and most appealing of any similar work in the Baroque. The key to the sound world of this piece is the heavy reliance on the reedy sonorities of different oboes: *oboes d’amore*, a creamy-sounding variety, and the deeply full-throated *oboes da caccia* (ancestor of English horns). The tenor aria, *Frohe Hirten, eilt*, “Joyful shepherds hurry,” is a marvelous transformation of an alto aria from #215, *Fromme Musen*, “Patient muses”: plucked strings and flute replace the sober scoring of the original. Similarly, the lullaby, *Schlafe, mein Liebster*, “Sleep, my dearest,” is more fittingly scored than the original from #213, in which an additional flute part suggests the hovering angels about the infant’s cradle. More angels follow in the fast-paced chorus, *Ehre sei Gott*, “Glory to God,” which becomes the unusually exuberant climax of this section of the oratorio. The concluding chorale, set once again in a *siciliano* style of the opening *sinfonia*, balances the entire section.

Part 3- For the Third Day of Christmas

Trumpets and drums return with *Herrscher des Himmels*, “Ruler of Heaven,” a chorus drawn from the conclusion to #214, *Blühet, ihr Linden*, “Flourish like cedars.” Shepherds, with their associated flutes and oboes, reappear in the next chorus, *Laßest uns nun gehen gen Bethlehem*, “Let us go now to Bethlehem,” where the vocal parts “follow” each other imitatively. The duet, *Herr dein Mitleid*, “Lord, your mercy,” is a sacred sublimation of a rather sensual duet, *Ich bin deine*, “I am yours,” from the Hercules Cantata. Although the intertwining of parts is a delight to hear, the quasi-erotic connotation of the original is lost. As for the next aria, *Schleüße, mein Herze*, “Embrace, my heart,” Bach planned to reuse the aria *Durch die von Eifer entflammten Waffen*, “To punish enemies,” from #215; however, he thought better of it at the last minute and composed a fresh movement – Bach’s autograph shows uncharacteristically scribbled “X”s through the original fourteen staves. For his finale, Bach must have thought well enough of the first chorus (which was, as mentioned before, an “end” piece) to repeat it once again as a festive, brassy conclusion to this third part of his greatest Christmas music.

A page from Bach's original

Scena i Nationalis M. i 4 Voci. 3 Trombe, 3 Trombe, 2 Hautbois. 2 Violini, 1 Viola e Fag. Basso.
Oratorium. 17^o 8.

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation. At the top, there is a title and instrumentation list in Italian: "Scena i Nationalis M. i 4 Voci. 3 Trombe, 3 Trombe, 2 Hautbois. 2 Violini, 1 Viola e Fag. Basso." Below this, the word "Oratorium" is written in a large, bold, cursive font. To the right of "Oratorium" is the page number "17o 8". The musical notation consists of several staves. The top staves appear to be for vocal parts, with some notes and clefs visible. Below these are staves for instruments, including strings and woodwinds. The notation is dense and includes various musical symbols such as clefs, notes, rests, and dynamic markings. The handwriting is in black ink on aged paper.