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Music for Christmas
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Resound, ye drums! Ring out, ye trumpets!

Sacred and secular collisions in Bach's Christmas music

Christmas was a hectic time for Bach, as it continues to be for church musicians across the globe. Rarely, however, can a composer have addressed himself to the festive season with the ingenuity and industry of Bach facing his first Christmas as Kantor of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in 1723. He was at that stage midway through the first of five complete cycles of cantatas to mark every feast-day of the liturgical year. This he had already determined to become his life's work as a church composer – his *Endzweck* (final goal), as he called it – namely, the creation of 'a well-regulated church music to the glory of God'.

The climax of the Christmas Day liturgies took place that year at 1:30pm at the city's Church of St Nicholas, where Bach directed the first performance of a Magnificat he had written for the occasion. The technical difficulties of the Magnificat, its contrapuntal intricacies, the impact of its 12 movements out of all scale to their brevity, the kaleidoscopic whirls of instrumental colour and shifting patterns of vocal and instrumental resources, all bear witness to the pride Bach took in his work, to ambition and talent flaunted and to self-set challenges triumphantly overcome: traits that marked and defined his career.

However, the Magnificat was complemented at this afternoon service of Vespers by the Cantata BWV63 (CD6), *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag*, which he had already directed at 9am at a service in St Paul's Church, and at the 7am service in the Thomaskirche, where the liturgy was completed by a D major Sanctus BWV238. This too was new, like nearly everything Bach had presented in Leipzig until that point. The Cantata, however, dates back to 1714, near the beginning of a four-year tenure as Capellmeister in Weimar. It was not the first application in Leipzig of Bach's practical genius for reusing and recycling, but it responded to immediate pressures on both time and labour, while satisfying the requirement for something 'new' (to his congregation) and explosively joyful after the penitential season of Advent, when even the organ fell silent and the musical activity of Lutheran churches was restricted to unaccompanied chant, chorales and motets.

Notable here is the cantata's scoring for no fewer than four trumpets: doubtless as expensive as it was spectacular in the gloom of the Thomaskirche before dawn. Bach had pushed out the boat this way just once before in Leipzig, for the inauguration of a new town council on 30 August, which occasioned the composition of *Preise, Jerusalem, den Herrn* BWV119 (CD8).

In the opening movement of *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag* the orchestra is split up into three separate 'choirs': of brass, reed and strings. The principal motif is handled in a dialogue from one instrumental choir to the other, culminating in a tutti section at the end of the ritornello. The texture of this ritornello is informed by concerto traditions of the 17th century, standing in the Venetian polychoral tradition exemplified by Monteverdi and Gabrieli. When the vocalists enter in bar 34, they do so like a fourth choir: the brass and reed instruments drop out and the chorus begins unaccompanied.

Looking ahead one year to Christmas Day 1724 it can be observed that Bach did not rest on his laurels (indeed was temperamentally incapable of doing so). By this point he had embarked upon a much more unified, second cycle of 'chorale cantatas'. Thus the opening movement of *Gelobet seist du Jesu Christ* BWV91 (CD7) has again a concerto-like ritornello structure and an instrumental part which is quite independent from the singers. But Bach adds to the compositional challenges he had already set himself in the Magnificat by basing the choral texture on the chorale hymn which provides the theme, theological as well as musical, of the cantata, leaving himself much less freedom in the accompanying lines than he could even afford in the kinds of chorale prelude and organ fantasias which occupy CD11.

The opening movement of the secular BWV119 had been conceived as a grand French overture, with a swinging bass and elaborately ornamented string lines like the gates to a *palais*. A much more compressed and austere example of the form can be found at the opening of the Cantata for the first Sunday of Advent (before all the instruments were packed away for a month) BWV61, *Nun komm der heiden Heiland* (CD5): another product of the Weimar years, and one of which he was sufficiently proud to re-present it in Leipzig. Bach returned to the genre – and to the principle of deft recycling – on Christmas Day 1725 for the magnificent first chorus of *Unser Mund sei voll Lachens* BWV110 (CD8). This is a choral reworking of the Overture to the Fourth Orchestral Suite BWV1069, probably composed during Bach's six years – directly before his appointment in Leipzig – as Capellmeister to the court of Prince Leopold in Cothen, when he was required to concentrate his energies upon instrumental music.

Such traffic between established idioms of sacred and secular need not surprise us. Bach himself may have complained bitterly about the attitude shown by his employers at the Leipzig town council ('whimsical and little devoted to music' as he described them in a letter to a friend), choosing to shift his focus throughout the 1730s away from his duties at the Thomaskirche to

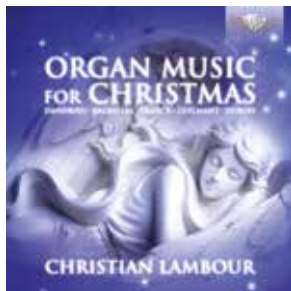
the more congenial demands of the Collegium Musicum hosted by city's most popular coffee house, but in fact Leipzig congregations were not so conservative as all that. As an important trading hub, the city prided itself as a centre of culture to rival nearby Dresden, the capital of Saxony, yet Leipzig's Oper am Brühl (founded in 1693) had closed its doors in 1720 after a dispute between the owner of the building and the management of the opera company, such that in the absence of the lyric stage, a certain degree of theatricality could even be expected as well as welcomed by worshippers at the city's churches.

Viewed in that context, the Christmas Oratorio (CD1–3) is a perfectly judged summation of purpose, technique and achievement. Put together in the weeks before Christmas 1734, it is Bach's last major contribution to the repertoire of German Lutheran liturgical music: a capstone for his *Endzweck* which had to all intents and purposes been completed by 1730. The parody technique of adaptation is taken to lengths unprecedented even for Bach: all the arias and choruses of the first five parts had originally been written during the previous two years for three cantatas which marked festive occasions (birthdays, name-days and the like) for sundry members of the Saxon royal family.

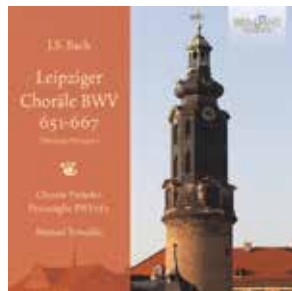
After making an unsuccessful appeal to the court in Dresden for preferment in 1732 with the manuscript of the Kyrie and Gloria of what would eventually become the B minor Mass, Bach was evidently still keen to curry favour, and perhaps a certain degree of cultural traffic worked two ways between Leipzig and the more worldly Dresden: at any rate, the immediately appealing, sensuous and progressive qualities of the Oratorio mark a further evolution in Bach's music. At points such as the second bass recitative in Part 2 (CD1:18), which does not merely observe but urges the shepherds on their way to sing their Saviour to sleep with a lullaby, the Cantor of Leipzig never came closer to writing an opera.

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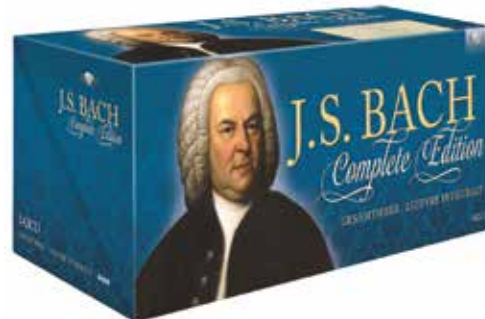


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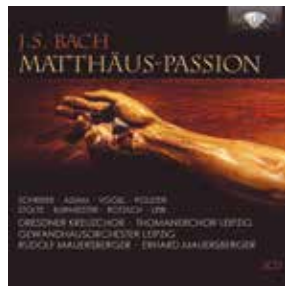


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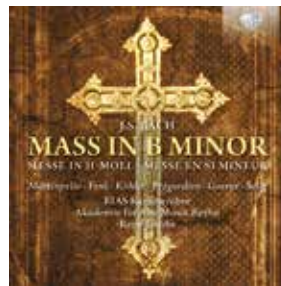
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