

## **Bach**

### **Great Cantata Choruses**

The inexhaustible and compelling journey of exploring Bach's cantatas – and the great choruses which define the heart of their message – lies primarily in the depth, richness and variety of Bach's response to the seamless rhythm of the liturgical year. Particular events in the Lutheran calendar are associated with the contemplative or the celebratory and yet, within these seasonal expectations, Bach departs radically from convention in his nearly-200 surviving church cantatas written between about 1703 and the late 1740s.

The fourteen choruses heard here were recorded during the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage of 2000 and exhibit Bach's artistic personality writ large: an almost unfathomable emotional range wedded to intellectual depth and layered with tireless invention, meaning and beauty. How could such masterpieces have been conceived each week, amidst the daily hubbub of Bach's duties in Leipzig - administering, teaching, advising, performing, greeting, hosting and parenting?

Each of these choruses reminds us that Bach's originality stems primarily from the way he critiques and challenges the meaning of the texts, transcending the routine with one dazzling creative statement after another. His underlying artistic motivation is often determined by a single idea or emotional state extracted from the Gospel or poetry. An image or metaphor arrests his imagination and off he flies, arrow-like, to deliver a penetrating commentary on the theme of the day.

In the usual cantata pattern, the opening chorus presents an intricate 'concerto' for singers and instruments and is followed by a series of arias and recitatives for solo voice and a final strophic 'congregational' chorale (or hymn). But each chorus can also represent a sort of micro-climate within the overall narrative of the complete piece, a self-contained world with, as we will see here, some extraordinarily

diverse landscapes. The majority of cantatas represented on this disc were composed in a spurt of remarkable activity during the first three years following Bach's arrival in Leipzig in May 1723 and form part of the major *Jahrgänge* which occupied him initially with astonishing intensity and then with decreasing regularity as the decade drew to a close.

Two magnificent pieces employ the full orchestra to project vivid and extreme physical imagery. In the case of 'O ewiges Feuer, o Ursprung der Liebe' (BWV 34), Whit Sunday is marked by a sensational, trumpet-led ensemble. This is a late work modelled on an earlier wedding cantata extolling the 'heavenly flames of love', which are now transformed into a white-hot furnace of Pentecostal conflagration. Likewise, 'Es erhub sich ein Streit' (BWV 19) launches ceremoniously into a fully worked-out fugal joust between heaven and hell as St Michael, whose feast the work celebrates, defeats the vengeful 'raging serpent and infernal dragon'. The devil is dispatched in less than four minutes of combative, ricocheting trumpets and busy choral roulades.

Bach's dramatic instincts are further explored in three soaring hymns from which he constructed especially visceral and unusual choral fantasias. The chorus of 'Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott' (BWV 101) is a decidedly uncomfortable ride. If the Gospel prophesies the destruction of Jerusalem, then Bach pits the arcane and doctrinal resonances of Luther's Lord's Prayer chorale ('Vater unser') against references to the Ten Commandments (the hymn tune 'Dies sind die heiligen zehn Gebot'). With biting dissonance at every turn, rib-digging appoggiaturas and fractured phrasing within eleven parts, 'contagion, fire and grievous pain' are punishingly relayed. It is an astonishing vision.

No chorus captures the German Reformation battle-cry with greater fervour than 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' (BWV 80). Recorded

at Wittenberg on the site where Luther pinned up his 95 theses, this blistering contrapuntal edifice is a virtuoso chorale fantasia where every single melodic 'nut and bolt' is employed to buttress the mighty fortress of granite hymnody and turbo-charged bass stretti. Likewise 'O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort' (BWV 20) treats the fearful concept of eternity with regal respect, alongside a subliminal terror of God's judgement. A French overture leads to an animated and sanguine fugue (is this deliberately delusional on Bach's part, or a genuine hope for redemption?), after which the rangy chorale returns to its previous state of tension and trepidation.

Bach often alights on the potential of antithesis. In the case of 'Ihr werdet weinen und heulen' (BWV 103) there is a disorienting juxtaposition between the joyful sentiments of Jubilate Sunday and the conceit of lamentation. The music sets off with sparkling good humour, only to find the choral entries caught up in a black run of cascading chromatic melismata and crooked motifs. A bitter-sweet central adagio is ultimately cathartic, if not quite transfiguring, as Bach ingeniously transforms despondency almost imperceptibly into uplifting exaltation. 'Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding' (BWV 176) is conceived on similar principles, this time in sustained irritability with the twin human weaknesses of stubbornness and feebleness – and all in under two minutes. 'Weinen, Klagen, Sorgen, Zagen' (BWV 12) is another Jubilate cantata, dating from Weimar in 1714 and adapted a decade later, but here the mood of sadness is totally undistracted. Bach adapted this movement as the celebrated 'Crucifixus' of the *Mass in B minor*.

Bach's choruses can create manifold worlds unto themselves, as 'Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot' (BWV 39) demonstrates with the gracious disbursement of bread. The chorus speaks as a united discipleship to serve and protect the poor, the ritual of good works and generosity lightly punctuated by recorders and oboes. Such simplicity of utterance extends into a glorious doctrinal peroration that those who

feed the hungry shall receive the glory of the Lord. 'Ärgre dich, o Seele, nicht' (BWV 186) is inspired by the Gospel context of feeding the four thousand, but this delectable and subtle rondeau-chorus plays on the idea of the soul's capacity to be easily distracted, to fret about appearances when God is often 'concealed in a vassal's form'. 'Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält' (BWV 178) is no less singularly focused, pitting a syllabic statement of fact – 'If God the Lord is not on our side... then all is lost' – against an intractable orchestral palette of dotted motifs and running semiquavers, to present a stark vision of enemies raging against us.

A sub-genre in the Cantatas are works in which the subject of death and the preparation for death inspired Bach to heights of supreme elegiac lyricism. Three magnificent works from each of the three Leipzig cycles are united by references to passing time, evocatively defining our mortality. 'Wer weiß, wie nahe mir mein Ende?' (BWV 27) and 'Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben?' (BWV 8) play delicately on aural images of clock mechanisms and funeral bells (with tender pizzicato) respectively. The doleful resignation of the latter is drawn from the soft, powdery textures as the soul moves off prayerfully, clinging to faith and hope, into a new sphere. Plangent oboes are inflected with a passion-like melodic character in both works, but in BWV 27 an accompanied recitative sets up a haloed passage on 'grant me a happy end'; as in another great 'death' cantata chorus, 'Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin' (BWV 125), Bach uses bold harmonic regions to acknowledge the momentous nature of life's passing.

'Christus, der ist mein Leben' (BWV 95) stands apart in this trio of works as a more robust recognition of the struggle on the journey towards death, inhabiting two distinct and topical chorales, the second presented after a dramatic central recitative. This is followed by a remarkably restless motivic scrap where the oboe d'amores are joined in the fray by a disorientingly antiquated cornetto part – fantasy music

from another world, appearing fleetingly as another unique snapshot  
from Bach's seemingly endless choral imagination.

**Jonathan Freeman-Attwood, 2009**