A Brief Introduction

to the

Church Cantatas

of

J. S. Bach

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Roughly 200 cantatas written by Bach are extant, and yet we have only two "cantatas" by Bach! Further, it is possible that Cantata #131 was the first he wrote, while Cantata #1 was written almost twenty years after Cantata #131.

We have barely started, and are already having trouble with terminology and numbers. Before continuing our study of Bach's (so called) cantatas, therefore, we need to come to grips with a few basic issues.

What <u>exactly</u> is a "cantata"?

Unfortunately, the answer depends on which country and period is being discussed. For the purposes of Germany in Bach's time, the definition from the *Harvard Dictionary of Music* does a serviceable job, defining "cantata" as:

> A composite vocal form of the baroque period, consisting usually
> of a number of movements, such as arias, recitatives, duets, and
> choruses, which are based on a continuous narrative text that is
> lyrical, dramatic, or religious. (Apel, 127)

While this definition will do for the purpose of our study, we need to understand that it is somewhat specific to Germany. The form of the cantata originated in Italy around 1620 as a purely secular work for one or two voices, consisting of a sequence of arias or ariosos and recitatives, with limited instrumental accompaniment. In other words, cantatas in Italy were written for non-church use. Similarly, in France the cantata retained its identity as a secular form for a small number of solo voices with instrumental accompaniment.

Germans, however, chose to transfer the term to the field of sacred music. Indeed, immediate predecessors of Bach composed large numbers of cantatas for church use (sometimes thousands per composer). While such works could still be scored for a few solo voices, it is significant that many began to incorporate the use of choruses, as well as independent movements for orchestra. It was into this tradition of cantata writing that Bach was born.

So did Bach write hundreds of cantatas?

If you were to look at title pages of all the works by Bach we now call "cantatas," you would find only two instances (#54 and #199) where he used the *term* "cantata." Occasionally, he used words such as "motetto" (#71), "actus" (#106), or "concerto" (#61). Far more often, Bach gave no genre specification to these works, choosing instead to list only the opening words and instrumentation. This was consistent with many of his contemporaries, who used such general terms as "Kirchenstück" (church piece) or

"Music" in categorizing works we would now typically call "cantatas." (Wolff, *Early Cantatas*, 23).

So when did we start to see these works as cantatas, if Bach did not name them as such for us? The term "cantata" began to be used in reference to these works a hundred years after Bach died. In the middle of the nineteenth century, an organization set out to collect and publish the complete body of Bach's music, largely due to the pioneering work of Felix Mendelssohn in reintroducing the music of Bach to the general public. It was decided to categorize all such works by Bach as "cantatas," irrespective of the terminology used on the scores themselves. For our purposes, therefore, around 200 Bach cantatas are extant (it is suspected he wrote perhaps another 200 such works, now lost).

Are Bach's cantatas numbered in chronological order?

Sadly, no. Just as Bach did not typically assign a genre to his cantatas, he did not number them either, having no reason to do so. As with the terminology, the numbering of the Bach cantatas was determined by those nineteenth century catalogers of Bach's music, the Bach-Gesellschäft. When they assigned the term "cantata" to these works, they also gave them catalog numbers. Today, we distinguish works of Bach by their number, given as "BWV 61" (which stands for "Bach Gesellschäft Verzeichnis") or "S. 61" (which stands for "Schmieder", the man in charge of the catalog), denoting that it is #61 in the catalog. (The cantatas are all at the beginning of the catalog of Bach's works.)

As research progressed, however, it was realized that the order of composition was drastically different from the numbering given in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is possible, for example, that the first cantata Bach wrote (at least, which we still have) is either #131 or #106. Whatever the case, it is certainly not #1, which was written roughly eighteen years after Bach began composing cantatas. So remember that while cantata numbers are useful for our discussion, they have no chronological significance.

Did Bach write cantatas equally throughout his life, or did he compose them in spurts?

Let's take a look at the data for the works we have. Bach's first cantata was written in 1707, when he was 22 years old. The last Bach cantata we possess was probably written in 1743. As a way of depicting the answer to our question, the table below shows what we understand of Bach's cantata production, by year.

Year	Number of cantatas composed
1707	2
1708	2
1709	
1710	
1711	
1712	
1713	4
1714	7
1715	6
1716	5
1717	
1718	1
1719	1
1720	
1721	
1722	1
1723	30
1724	48
1725	33
1726	28
1727	7
1728	5
1729	8
1730	2
1731	4
1732	1
1733	2
1734	3
1735	5
1736	2
1737	1
1738	1
1739	1
1740	
1741	1
1742	3
1743	1

Table 1.1 Bach's cantata production by year

By far, the majority of Bach's extant cantatas were written in the four years 1723-1726, at the beginning of his time in Leipzig. There is also reason to believe that at least an additional 100 cantatas are now lost from that time (though there are many scholars who

argue that the fourth and fifth complete yearly cycles were never written, or at least never completed).

Why did Bach suddenly begin writing cantatas as such a furious rate in 1723? The answer has to do with job requirements. A significant portion of Bach's position description as Cantor in Leipzig was to provide a cantata each week (as well as on feast days, special civic days, and other holidays), whereas his role in places such as Cöthen was less focused on the church and more on the court. For this reason, it is important that if we are to understand Bach's cantatas, we need to understand Bach's situation in Leipzig.

Chapter 2: Life in Leipzig

What was Leipzig like in Bach's time?

Eighteenth century Leipzig was a beautiful city and a bustling center of trade, as well as home to a major university. (Sadly, being an industrial center, Leipzig was bombed almost to dust in World War II. Many buildings Bach knew were destroyed.) That being said, Bach's Leipzig was also relatively small by our standards, with a population of approximately 30,000. To put that in perspective, below are the populations of a few American university towns:

Town/City	Population in 2010
Princeton, NJ	28,572
Newark, DE	31,454
Charlottesville, VA	43,475
Chapel Hill, NC	57,233

Table 2.1 Representative university town populations today

As you can see, eighteenth century Leipzig was about the same size town as present day Princeton, New Jersey or Newark, Delaware. In any case, Bach's Leipzig was smaller than most modern-day cities which host major universities (such as Charlottesville, Virginia and Chapel Hill, North Carolina), and far smaller than anything we today would call a "big city."

Geographically, Leipzig is in the east central section of Germany, about 90 miles south and slightly west of Berlin. Figure 2-1 puts this in perspective.

Figure 2-1. Map of Germany

Meteorologically, Leipzig is temperate, with average daily highs as shown in the following table (based on recent data):

Month	Average High (°F)
January	38
February	39
March	48
April	55
May	66
June	71
July	75
August	75
September	68
October	57
November	45
December	39

Table 2.2 Average daily highs in Leipzig, Germany today

In short, Leipzig was a pleasant place to live. It was a beautiful, energetic, reasonably-sized, temperate university town.

What were the churches like in Leipzig during Bach's time?

It is hard to overstate the degree to which liturgical life was vibrant in eighteenth century Leipzig. An observer from that period, Friedrich Braun, said that

> Leipzig is indeed a famous city, famous for its many learned people, famous for its wise and praiseworthy government, famous for its flourishing business establishments. In particular, also the well-ordered worship has a special reputation everywhere, whether reference is to the excellent men who address the people in public, or to other practices, including the divinely hallowed singing. (Stiller, 47)

As another measure of the importance of Leipzig church life, in 1700 the city had two churches (St. Thomas and St. Nicholas). By the time Bach arrived (1723), the town fathers felt the need to add *three* additional places of worship. The Leipzig Bach knew, therefore, contained the following five main churches:

- St. Thomas Church
- St. Nicholas Church
- New Church
- St. John's Church
- University Church.

In addition, there was such liturgical intensity and enthusiasm that new weekday services were being added, and renovations were being made to the principal churches (including a "costly red, white, and black marble" altar at St. Thomas). (Stiller, 43) While Bach's job was to provide music for all five churches, we need only concern ourselves with the first two for the purposes of this study, since it was only in these that Bach's cantatas were regularly performed. By any reasonable standard, the two principal churches were beautiful and elaborate places, fitting settings for Bach's music.
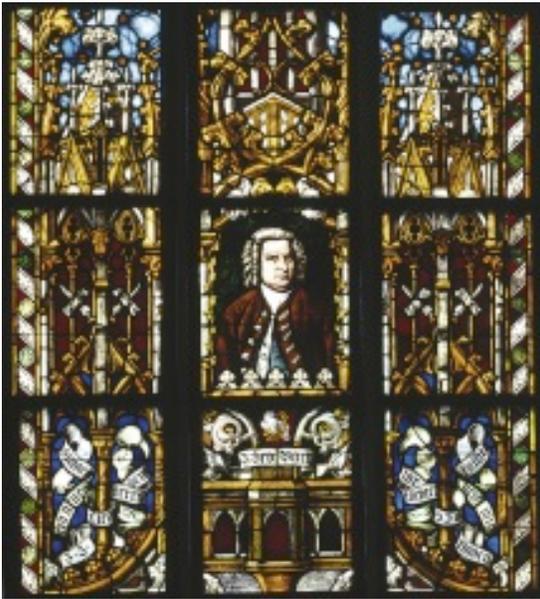
Figure 2-2. The Bach Window

When looking at the two main churches (St. Thomas and St. Nicholas), it is important to understand that there was not a specific choir assigned to each church. Rather, two choirs rotated between the two principal churches. The "first choir" (the most advanced in the system) sang the main service (and the cantata) in the morning at one of the two principal churches, then moved to the other principal church in the afternoon to sing Vespers (and to repeat the cantata there). This choir alternated principal churches each week, so that on one Sunday they would sing at St. Thomas in the morning and St. Nicholas in the afternoon, while on the next Sunday they would sing at St. Nicholas in the morning and St. Thomas in the afternoon. The "second choir" sang somewhat simpler music at the other of these two churches, also in rotation. Effectively, therefore, the two main churches shared the two top choirs.

What time would I have to get up to go to church, and how many people would be there?

In order to attend the *Hauptgottesdeinst* (the principal Eucharistic service) at St. Thomas or St. Nicholas, you would need to get up early if you wanted to be at church by the 7:00 a.m. starting time! (Actually, by that time, Sunday liturgical life in Leipzig would have been underway for two hours, the "Matins bell" having been rung at St. Nicholas at 5:00 a.m.)

If you think this early starting time means that by 8:00 a.m. you'd have a free day ahead of you, you are sorely mistaken. The *Hauptgottesdeinst* did not last an hour, or even two hours. In fact, the service was likely to last until 11:00 a.m. (or beyond, if there were many communicants, as on a festival day)! In other words, church on a Sunday morning in eighteenth century Leipzig at these two churches was an all-morning affair.

What's more, you could go directly from the *Hauptgottesdeinst* to a noontime prayer service for yet more worship. Further, you could add to your Sunday church experience by attending Vespers, which began in the middle of the afternoon.

So if you were to attend church at these times, would you be among the few faithful? Hardly, at least in Bach's time. The nave of St. Thomas accommodated slightly over 2,000 worshippers (with ample additional standing room); St. Nicholas was slightly larger. It is widely accepted that on most Sundays, these churches were filled to capacity. Overall, roughly 9,000 people attended services on Sunday mornings in Bach's Leipzig, out of a population of roughly 30,000. (Kevorkian, 28)

Adding to the sense of excitement, congregants in Bach's time would not have entered the church quietly ten minutes prior to the service, taken their seats, and stayed there in silence for the full service, as we expect worshippers to do today. Instead, the nave of the church would have been at some times during the service a center of considerable bustle, and at other times a place of more quiet reflection or listening to the music, or hour-long sermon. The seating was by gender, with women on the main floor, and men in the balconies. Further, where you sat in church was very much a question of social status. The upper levels of Leipzig society were considerably over-represented at St. Thomas and St. Nicholas, as were those in the artisan class. The working class, by contrast, was under-represented. Finally, it is well-documented that among the activities during the service was a considerable amount of courting being done by young men and young ladies! (Kevorkian, 28-31)

Going to church was a significant part of the life of many who lived at the time - an intellectual, spiritual, and cultural experience they valued. But our purpose is to study the cantatas. What role did the cantatas play in the principal services on a typical Sunday?

How long is a typical Bach cantata, and how did it fit into the services?

Bach's sacred cantatas vary in length, ranging from about 13-15 minutes at one extreme to 45 minutes or so at the other. Generally, however, most cantatas can be performed in roughly 20-25 minutes, so that will serve our purposes as a general guide.

Much study has been done on the order of worship at St. Thomas and St. Nicholas. Fortunately, we possess detailed records of the order of worship, including the following (slightly unusual, but useful) service order for *Hauptgottesdeinst* left by Bach himself on the score of *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (Cantata #61):

1. [Organ] Preluding
2. [Latin] *Motetta*
3. Preluding on the *Kyrie*, which is wholly concerted
4. [Collect] intoned before the altar
5. Epistle read
6. The Litany is sung [only in Advent and Lent]

7. Preluding on the chorale [which is then sung]
8. Gospel read
9. Preluding on the principal music [i.e., the cantata, which follows]
10. The Faith [*Der Glaube*] is sung [i.e., the credal hymn *Wir glauben all an einen Gott*]
11. The sermon [which concludes with confession and absolution, intercessions and notices]
12. After the sermon, the usual various verses from a hymn are sung
13. Verba Institutionis
14. Preluding on the music. And after which alternating preluding and the singing of chorales until communion is ended *& sic porrò*. (Leaver, 87-88)

Most of what we see in this service layout would be familiar to modern-day worshippers. There is music at the beginning, then lessons followed by a sermon. Then follows the Eucharist, with music at the end. Within this framework, there are two slots for a cantata. The first is after the Gospel for the day (which will be important when we discuss the texts Bach chose). In the list above, #9 states that "Preluding on the principal music" will take place, after which the cantata will be presented. It is likely that the preluding (i.e., a selection on the organ in the same key as the cantata to follow) served a variety of purposes, including telling parishioners it was time for the cantata, and establishing the key of the cantata so the players could tune quietly while the organ played. Following this preluding, the cantata would be performed. If the cantata for the day was a one-part cantata, it would be done in its entirety at this point. If the cantata was a two-part cantata, only the first part would be included here. The presence of the cantata near the sermon is significant, in that the sermon was considered the "main event" of the service. People who did not arrive for the beginning of a liturgy would surely be there by the time of the sermon, and there is evidence that after this section of the service, many worshippers left. That the cantata was in close proximity to the sermon suggests there might have been considerable coming-and-going during the performance. It also suggests it was sung/played while the most people were present.

The second slot for a cantata (or second part of a two-part cantata) was during the distribution of communion (#14 in the list above). This portion of the service took a considerable amount of time, thus allowing for quite a bit of music. Exactly what was to be sung and played here is less well-established than the presence of the cantata after the Gospel (except where a two-part cantata had been composed for the day, in which case the second part of the cantata would have been performed in this slot). Additionally, it is likely Bach performed his *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele* (Cantata #180) often as a cantata during communion. There are roughly fifty Bach cantatas which contain eucharistic references, leading to the possible conclusion they were used in this capacity. With that being said, the work we know today as Cantata #180 was referred to near Bach's time as "the Communion Cantata," so perhaps had a special place in that capacity.

The situation at Vespers was more straightforward, as the order of worship below indicates:

1. Organ Prelude
2. Latin motet
3. Cantata
4. Hymn, appropriate to the day or season
5. Sermon, preceded by the reading of the Epistle in German; concludes with confession and absolution, intercessions and notices.
6. Second part of the Cantata (if necessary)
7. Magnificat (in Latin or German, but always in Latin for festivals)
8. Verse and Collect
9. Benediction
10. Hymn. (Leaver, 89)

The principal cantata of the day, which would have been sung (or begun) before the Gospel in the morning service would be sung (or begun) during Vespers at slot #3 above, before the hymn which precedes the reading of the Epistle. If the principal cantata of the day was a two-part cantata, it would be concluded at slot #6 above. (Leaver, 89)

What did Bach have to accomplish every week in his first few years in Leipzig?

As you can see from the service listings above, Bach had his hands full preparing the regular music for any given Sunday (to say nothing of holy days). There was much music included in every service, a great deal of which would have been accompanied by instruments. In addition to the cantata, there was a motet to prepare, probably chosen from a collection of such works by other composers (e.g., *Florilegium Portense*), and on some occasions sections of the Ordinary (e.g., Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus, Agnus Dei) would have been choral compositions accompanied by orchestra. The situation is further complicated during Bach's tenure in Leipzig (especially the first few years) when we consider that he was expected to compose a new cantata each week for use in the services at St. Thomas and St. Nicholas. And remember, this was centuries before the advent of music notation computer programs, photocopying machines, and other such conveniences!

With that in mind, let's think about what Bach was required to do on a weekly basis. First, he had to compose a new cantata (generally from scratch, though in some instances he reused material from previous works). All by itself, this was a remarkable feat. Then, he had to prepare what is called a "fair copy" of the work (by hand, of course), so copyists could create vocal and instrumental parts as necessary for the Sunday performance. Having composed the work and having had copies made, he would need to arrange for instrumentalists, which could range from strings alone to a full Baroque orchestra.

Then would follow performance preparations. His singers and players would need to learn the work, in order to find copying errors (since these scores were prepared by hand, there were likely corrections to make to attend to). If the error was in the "fair copy," the mistake would have to be corrected in each copy thereof.

This monumental task was, however, not all of Bach's job. In addition, he had music lessons to conduct, classes to teach (both music and classics), the occasional funeral or wedding for which to provide music, civic functions to attend to, and several major liturgical holy days to address, some requiring large-scale works (e.g., a Passion). It is hard to imagine the creative energy and time this must have taken on Bach's part; modern comparisons are difficult to find.

Apart from the regular Sunday services, for what other occasions did Bach write cantatas?

Weddings in Bach's Leipzig were of two basic types - simple weddings and full bridal masses. Substantial music would only have been provided for the full bridal masses. While there were regularly between 250 and 300 weddings each year in Leipzig during the early days of Bach's tenure, there were only 31 full bridal masses at St. Thomas during Bach's 27 years in Leipzig. (Stiller, 71-72) Bach wrote five cantatas specifically for weddings, all of which were in two parts, and all of which incorporate hymns typically associated with weddings at that time. It is likely, therefore, that they were performed as "split cantatas" at these festive occasions. (Stiller, 94)

Funerals pose an entirely different problem in eighteenth century Leipzig than they do today. The service began at the house of mourning, which likely would have been the house in which the deceased died. For this reason, there were considerable health concerns for all who attended such services, including the musicians. Most people died of disease, with which they would have lived in the house during their final days. The choir then sang hymns in procession from the house to the cemetery. If the deceased was a prominent person, there would have been a memorial sermon at one of the churches, where motets (such as the seven we possess that Bach apparently wrote for such occasions) would have been sung and played by the choir and instrumentalists. Thus, singing a funeral was a time-consuming affair which could threaten the participants' health, from the danger of contracting the disease that led to the death being observed to singing in procession in the sometimes cold and damp air.

Finally, we have civic celebrations. There were a few regular occasions which took place each year, and others which were observed periodically, such as the installation of a new town council. Each of these events called for celebratory music. For such occasions, Bach often wrote among his most grandiose cantatas.

So where does this leave us?

Leipzig was an "in place" for churchgoers in the middle of the eighteenth century, especially for church musicians. Within nine days of the death of Bach's predecessor (Kuhnau), there were six applicants for the job, including the highly-regarded Telemann. With this background, let us now move on to the works under discussion by looking at where a cantata begins - with the text.

Chapter 3: Textual Matters

At the beginning of the cantata composition process was the text. Indeed, the text in some ways required the most foresight on Bach's part, since cantata texts were published for the congregation in booklet form, with each booklet containing the cantata texts for several Sundays and feast days. The libretti were bound in volumes which were for sale in bookstores around Leipzig, as well as sometimes at the church door. These texts were important to Bach, not merely as a compositional necessity, but for the theological and moral messages they conveyed. So well thought-out are many of them that Bach's cantatas are often called "sermons in music."

What sources did Bach use for the texts to his cantatas?

Before discussing who wrote the libretti for Bach's cantatas, we should note that the well-known Leipzig poet Johann Christoph Gottsched was *not* among the contributors. Gottsched was a leading figure of the Enlightenment, as respected a poet as Bach was a musician in his time. Still, while the two co-existed for many years in the same town, it appears their relationship never developed beyond mutual respect.

Why might Bach have not used Gottsched's cantata texts? After all, not only did Gottsched write libretti, but in a 1729 book he devoted an entire chapter to the theoretical requirements for writing cantata texts. Enlightenment poets in general, however, were concerned with liberating the artist from ecclesiastical and spiritual obligation, preferring to see the artist as autonomous. Gottsched emphasized the mechanics of his art, and deplored poets who let themselves become subservient to composers, a move he felt worked to the detriment of the writer's poetry. Bach, on the other hand, saw everything in terms of the theological and moral message of the libretto, with the more mechanical aspects of the poetry taking a backseat. Indeed, even when he used the work of poets such as Christiane Mariane von Zeigler (a member of the Gottsched school), he invariably shortened the libretto to make the message clearer. This serves to explain some of the fundamental differences between Bach's view and Gottsched's view of a cantata text.

While Bach used libretti by a variety of poets, many of his cantata texts were instead by clergymen. This makes sense when we consider that the theology of the libretto was of principal importance to Bach. Indeed, many of the texts were likely written by leading clergymen of Leipzig at that time. Erdmann Neumeister, who is responsible for a number of Bach's cantata texts, said he wrote his volumes of cantata texts after constructing his sermons, and that he sought to enhance the message of his sermon in these libretti. This strategy seems in keeping with Bach's mental process.

Starting around 1727, the chief poet used by Bach was a gentleman known as Picander (a pseudonym for Christian Friedrich Henrici). Picander was Leipzig's postmaster (who later became the town's official wine inspector!), and a close friend of Bach's. Some

scholars also believe Bach himself might have been the author of many of his unascribed cantata texts (perhaps as many as thirty).

In addition to contemporary clergymen and poets, there were two other text sources which figured heavily in Bach's cantata texts. First was Scripture itself, especially the Old Testament. In the extant cantatas, 128 movements are pure settings of Biblical text. In particular, the Psalms figure prominently among Bach's selections, as 46 movements are settings of Psalm verses. 23 cantatas begin with a setting of a Psalm verse, while 58 other movements make clear reference to a Psalm verse without directly quoting it. (Stiller, 215)

Finally, we see the frequent use of hymn texts. Bach was a keen collector of hymnals, and used both the music and text of chorales regularly in his cantatas. In addition to cantatas based entirely on hymns (e.g., #4 and #80), a significant number of cantatas use verses of hymns as autonomous movements in cantatas which otherwise contain free verses.

How do Bach's cantatas relate to the themes/lessons of the day?

While Bach's cantatas deal with theological and moral issues, they are not issues chosen independently by Bach. Instead, as a general rule Bach sought to reflect in his church music the specific themes of the lessons for the day. As with Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran and other liturgical churches today, the Lutheran church of Bach's time had a clearly prescribed lectionary. Bach studied the Bible, as well as a number of commentaries on Scripture (his library would have been the envy of many clergymen of the time), and then constructed his cantata texts so they either commented on the lessons for the day, or in some other way reflected the themes of the lessons.

We can be even more specific, though. Not only did Bach comment on the lessons - he zeroed in typically on the Gospel lesson at the *Hauptgottesdeinst* and the Epistle at Vespers. These were the lessons read closest to the performance of the cantata at their respective services (see Chapter 2), so it makes sense Bach would choose these particular lessons as the basis for a cantata libretto. As an example for this and the next chapter, let us look at Cantata #105 (*Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht*). This Leipzig cantata was first performed on 25 July 1723. In this chapter, we will look at the cantata with respect to the lessons for this occasion, the Ninth Sunday after Trinity.

Hauptgottesdeinst Gospel (Luke 16: 1-9)

And he said also unto his disciples, "There was a certain rich man, which had a steward; and the same was accused unto him that he had wasted his goods. And he called him, and said unto him 'How is it that I hear this of thee? Give an account of thy stewardship; for thou mayest be no longer steward.' Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my lord taketh away from me the stewardship: I cannot dig; to beg I am ashamed. I am resolved what to do, that, when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' So he called every one of his lord's debtors unto him, and said unto the first 'How much owest thou unto my lord?' And he said, 'An hundred measures of oil.' And he said unto him, 'Take thy bill, and sit down quickly, and write fifty.' Then said he to another, 'And how much owest thou?' And he said, 'An hundred measures of wheat.' And he said unto him, 'Take thy bill, and write fourscore.' And the lord commended the unjust steward, because he had done wisely; for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than the children of light. And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fall, they may receive you into everlasting habitations."

Vespers Epistle (1 Corinthians 10: 6-13)

Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall. There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.

Libretto – Cantata #105

Chorus: Lord, enter not into judgement with thy servant: for in thy sight shall no man living be justified. (Psalm 143:2)

Recit. (Alto): My God, cast me not, as I bend in humility before thee, from thy presence. I know how great is thy wrath and my iniquity, that thou art both a swift witness and a righteous judge. I offer before thee a free confession, and fall not into the danger of denying or concealing the failings of my soul!

Aria (Soprano): How tremble and waver the sinners' thoughts, the mean while accusing each other though daring to excuse themselves. Thus is an anguished conscience torn apart by its own torment.

Recit. (Bass): How happy is he, who is good to his fellows, who owes naught; so will the handwriting be wiped out, when Jesus washes it with his blood. He himself nailed it to the cross, he will of thy goodness, charity and life, when the death knell tolls, give account to the Father himself. So when thy mortal body is carried to the grave, and sprinkled with earth and dust, thy Savior will open to the everlasting habitations.

Aria (Tenor): Can I but make Jesus my friend, then Mammon will count for naught with me. I find no pleasure here in this vain world and earthly things.

> *Chorale:* Now, I know, thou wilt becalm my conscience, which torments me. In fulfillment of thy faithfulness, that which thou has promised: that throughout the wide world none will perish, but shall have eternal life, if they be but full of faith.

The unidentified librettist combines the main theme of the Epistle (admonitions against sins of the flesh and idolatry) with the main theme of the Gospel (the parable of the unjust steward). While one can argue this approach of commenting on two different lessons doesn't always provide a consistent or fluid narrative, it works well liturgically and theologically, which would have been Bach's most pressing interest. The opening chorus is influenced by the Gospel. The next recitative and aria (sung by the upper voices) then comment on the Epistle. Then follows another recitative and aria (sung by the lower voices) which speak more clearly to the Gospel theme. Finally, the closing chorale sums up the work and libretto.

This pattern is repeated regularly in Bach's cantata texts. Indeed, the libretti to the other two cantatas we possess for that day (#94 and #168) comment on the same lessons, though they do so in somewhat different ways.

Apart from the lectionary-specific cantata texts, however, many libretti were based on traditional Lutheran themes. The most central was the belief that salvation is achieved by grace, rather than by works. This is perhaps best stated in the fourth article of the *Augsburg Confession*:

> It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. (Leaver, 38)

What is the pattern of a cantata text? Can the pattern generally be discerned by inspection?

While it would be a stretch to say that all of Bach's cantata texts are alike in structure, there is a general pattern which emerges among a significant number of the libretti. Christoph Wolff explains it as follows:

> [The cantata texts] follow a standard pattern firmly grounded in the bifocal homiletic structure of a Lutheran sermon: *explicatio* and *applicatio*, biblical exegesis and theological instruction succeeded by practical and moral advice. The libretto ordinarily opens with a biblical dictum, usually a passage from the prescribed Gospel lesson that serves as a point of departure (opening chorus). It is followed by scriptural, doctrinal, and contextual explanations (a recitative-aria pair), leading to considerations of the consequences to be drawn from the lesson and the admonition to conduct a true Christian life (another recitative-aria pair). The text

concludes with a congregational prayer in the form of a hymn stanza (chorale). (Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 255)

In other words, Bach typically begins with scripture which lays out the situation facing us, then proceeds through recitatives and arias which address how the lesson themes ought to be reflected in our lives (and the consequences of not heeding Scripture), ending with a general hymn that concludes the thought.

This gives a brief introduction to the textual elements of Bach's cantatas. Next, of course, comes the process of composition.

Chapter 4: Musical Matters

The presentation of cantatas was not new to churchgoers in early eighteenth century Leipzig, and yet Bach's cantatas were another story altogether. What was so different about Bach's works? What are the musical factors that set them apart from those of his contemporaries? Let us devote a little time looking into those issues before concluding our study.

How are Bach's cantatas different from those of his predecessors?

First, we should understand that there are fine examples of cantatas by composers contemporary with Bach. Telemann wrote over a thousand cantatas, Pachelbel and Buxtehude wrote many fine cantatas, and Bach's predecessor at Leipzig (Kuhnau) wrote some excellent cantatas as well. Indeed, Bach was so taken with Buxtehude's cantatas and their presentation in church that he traveled a great distance in order to hear and study them in Hamburg (and got into some hot water with the authorities in the process!).

In general, Bach's cantatas are grander than those of his contemporaries. For instance, they are substantially longer than the typical German cantata of the time. Perhaps the most striking difference, though, is that they more regularly involve a chorus. While others used choruses in their cantatas, Bach was the only composer for whom a chorus was a regular necessity. Indeed, it is the magnificent opening choruses of so many cantatas which stand out in our memory after hearing these works. But while the role of the chorus cannot be overstated, the instrumental demands of Bach's cantatas are greater as well, both in terms of the number of players required and in terms of difficulty.

More to the point, however, is the complexity of these works, and the emotional depth with which they express the moral and theological messages Bach sought to convey. Every musical technique of the time is utilized in Bach's cantatas. Carefully crafted musical figures are designed to convey specific meanings. Large, complex musical movements are constructed with at least as much care as any composer of the time would put into writing works for royalty. (And, you should also remember that Bach did this *every week* for a number of years upon his arrival in Leipzig.)

Did Bach think in terms of "church music" and "theater music," as did some of his contemporaries?

No, Bach did not seem to think in terms of "church music" and "theatrical music." It appears that to Bach, *all* music was to be used to the glory of God. This was something of a controversial view at the time, when many thought of music in terms of "music suitable for being sung or played in church" and "music designed for the entertainment of the listener" (i.e., theatrical music). Further, Bach used the same players and instrumentalists for his church cantatas as for his secular music, whereas many at the time felt certain instruments and playing styles "too worldly" for appropriate church use.

This synthesis might help explain the numerous cases in which Bach originally wrote a work for church use, then modified the text and used essentially the same music for secular purposes. In Bach's eyes, an aria written for light entertainment in a secular cantata could just as easily suit sacred purposes if sacred words were set instead (e.g., the well-known soprano aria from Cantata #68). A French overture written as part of a large-scale orchestral work could announce the triumphant arrival of the King, or as part of an Advent or Christmas work (e.g., Cantata #61 or Cantata #110). Such crossover applications are seen throughout Bach's works, and show how little distinction he made between what was "sacred" and what was "secular" in his time.

What role do chorales play in Bach's cantatas?

Chorales serve multiple purposes in Bach's cantatas. Perhaps the most important thing to remember about their use, however, is that those listening to these cantatas knew the chorales well. While many of the tunes are generally not familiar to us now, they would have been as recognizable to the 2,000 people gathered at St. Thomas as "Amazing Grace" would be to a churchgoer in any church in today's America. Even a hint of the tune would have been recognized by contemporary worshippers.

So how often did Bach choose to use well-known chorales in his cantatas? From his very first works (especially Cantata #4), the chorale played a significant role in his cantatas - far more than in those of his contemporaries. This tendency did not lessen as Bach progressed. In his first Leipzig cycle of 44 works, 39 close with a simple setting of a chorale, and in seven cases, a chorale is treated by a soloist. In four of the opening choruses to these cantatas, a chorale tune is present as part of the texture.

But it was with his second Leipzig cycle (1724-1725) that Bach brought the chorale to the fore in his vocal works. There is some evidence Bach intended every cantata of this cycle to be a chorale cantata in substantial form. As it is, 41 of the 53 cantatas in this cycle contain chorale references other than the simple chorale which closes the work. The overall plan seems to have been to open and close a cantata with the presentation of a chorale, in the former case as an expansive choral movement, and in the latter case as a simple hymn statement, with intervening free movements in between the two.

What did Bach do musically to symbolically reflect the meaning of the text?

First, Bach does the things one would expect in representing the overall mood of his text. Triumphant, joyous texts tend to be in Major keys with trumpets, drums, and large orchestras. Somber texts are generally reflected in minor keys with more restrained instrumentation. Such was the normal stock-and-trade of the Baroque composer. Bach, however, went much further.

For the purposes of this study, let us return to Cantata #105 (*Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht*). It is often the case that Bach chooses not to symbolize his text in a madrigalian

manner, but instead to construct a movement which seems to produce the *affekt* of the text being presented. Such is the case with the opening chorus of this cantata. Setting a somber and supplicative text, Bach uses the prelude and fugue form for this movement. The opening, isolated notes even seem to depict a questioning tone on the part of the writer. While this does not specifically portray words of the text, it sets well the mood he is seeking to convey.

Two movements later (a soprano aria), Bach becomes more deliberate and pictorial in his setting of the text "How tremble and waver the sinners' thoughts," as Christoph Wolff describes:

> [The] texture of the setting is fashioned to represent the image of "trembling *and* wavering" simultaneously by a two-layered score: the motive of wavering thoughts in the floundering and halting melodic gestures that alternate between soprano and oboe in an overlapping manner, and the trembling thoughts in a string accompaniment based on a tremolo figure that proceeds, for purposes of intensification, at two different speeds. The word-generated texture thus created in this passage provides a strong unifying device that helps structure the instrumental ritornello and the movement as a whole, so that other, similarly word-generated musical ideas, like the long melisma on "verklagen" from the next line, can blend in without compromising their identity." (Wolff, *The Learned Musician*, 274-275)

In this movement, one can also notice a certain tonal uncertainty, as well as the absence of a continuo bass line, perhaps representative of a lack of a foundation of faith.

In the next movement, we hear the tolling of the death knell in the pizzicato bass, here representing the text "...he will of thy goodness, charity and life, when the death knell tolls, give account to the Father himself." Finally, some have suggested the gently trembling strings in the final chorale are meant to depict the "becalmed conscience" of the text.

These sorts of examples are to be found throughout Bach's cantatas. Whether they are readily heard by the listener in such a specific manner, the *affekt* they produce give the impression Bach intended.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This monograph was written to provide a basic context for the original presentation of Bach's cantatas. They would have been heard by a sizable congregation, representing especially the Leipzig elites, as well as the artisans of the town. Many worshippers would have purchased the libretti and would have been following along while the work was performed. And in any case, the listener would be experiencing the cantata immediately after hearing the lesson on which the text was substantially based.

One can enjoy a modern-day performance of a Bach cantata without understanding any of this; however, we hope this glimpse into the world of eighteenth century liturgical Leipzig will enhance your experience hearing our performances.

For further information on these works and their context, we encourage you to explore the references given in the Works Cited section which follows.

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