

# Programme *Notes*

When Johann Sebastian Bach first tackled the cantata in his early twenties, he could not have foreseen that one day he would be appointed Cantor of the prestigious university city of Leipzig and that, for 27 years, he would be responsible for the music played every Sunday in the four main Lutheran churches, composing a cantata for each Sunday and holiday during his first five years. Listening to his early sacred works on the program for this concert, one wonders how Bach was able to combine the word of God with music so masterfully at such a young age.

## **The formative years**

Fatherless and motherless at the age of ten, Bach was entrusted to the care of his elder brother, organist and schoolmaster Johann Christoph (1671–1721), a pupil of Johann Pachelbel. After five years of apprenticeship, Bach set off to discover northern Germany and its organists, spending almost three years in Lüneburg, a city renowned for its vibrant musical life. His beautiful soprano voice earned him a place at St. Michael's, where he not only perfected his musical skills, but also studied Latin, theology and the art of rhetoric. At the age of 18, he briefly worked as a violinist and lackey at the court of Weimar, where he returned a few years later, in 1708, to serve as organist, chamber musician and

Konzertmeister. Between his two stays in Weimar, he essentially began his professional career on the organ, first in Arnstadt (1703–1707), and then in Mülhausen (1707–1708), amid the clash between Lutheranism and Pietism. In both cities, he was trusted implicitly to oversee the choir, which accounts for the character of his early cantatas.

## **"Masterly strokes for a first attempt!" (Pierre Corneille, *The Cid*)**

Bach had been in contact with Lutheran sacred music from an early age, notably through his uncles Georg Christoph and Johann Michael, who left a number of motets and short cantatas with soloists. Their works followed in the tradition of Heinrich Schütz (1585–1672), whose psalms and polyphonic motets, along with his little "spiritual concerts," laid the foundations for the cantata. During the years Bach spent in Lüneburg, the influence of Pachelbel on his family and his frequent contact in 1705 with the Lübeck organist Dietrich Buxtehude, a composer of cantatas, helped broaden his horizons.

Bach's earliest cantatas date from 1707–1708. Their anonymous librettos, perhaps put together by Bach himself, follow the Scriptures quite closely, but what is most striking about

them is that they have neither linking recitatives nor da capo arias (A-B-A), and the titles of their movements already reveal Bach's interest in Italian music. He experimented on a variety of possibilities, from the vocal concerto of his predecessors to variations on chorales. By the age of 22, the young Bach had assimilated the French style he discovered during his years in Lüneburg, the art of exploiting the Lutheran chorale, and the spiritual significance of the texts he set to music. In three of these cantatas, the presence of death is at times serious and at times serene—Bach learned to accept it at an early age, given the departure of some eight close relatives, including his father and mother, between 1692 and 1707.

***Nach dir, Herr, verlanget mich,*  
BWV 150**

Cantata BWV 150 was composed for the 3rd Sunday after Trinity. It was first sung in Mülhausen on July 10, 1707, less than a month after Bach's official appointment as organist at St. Blaise Church. It cites and paraphrases Psalm 25, which places the believer's trust in God. Bach, still strongly influenced by 17th-century madrigalism, accentuates the key words with tried-and-tested devices, such as chromaticism and lavish vocalises. And like Schütz, he employs rapid tempo changes within the same movement.

This cantata is in B minor, a key that Bach would often treat with solemnity, as he did in his monumental Mass in B Minor. It comprises seven movements and, unlike the other three cantatas, it has no chorale. In the opening sinfonia, Bach exploits the descending chromaticism traditionally used to express sadness, abandonment and death. His intention is clear: he aims to demonstrate what mankind suffers without the help of God.

The first chorus begins with a soaring octave leap to God (*Nach dir*), followed by a chromatic descent that prolongs the atmosphere of the sinfonia. Two gripping chords (*Mein Gott*) interrupt the prayer to give free rein to a stream of fugal vocalises which, in another context, would relate to joy, but here convey the humiliations endured by the believer.

The next three movements once again emphasize, in a concertante dialogue between the voices and the instruments, the pitfalls of human life and the salvation afforded by the Lord.

In the penultimate movement and chorus, the elegant instrumental garlands, with their sometimes-shaky rhythm, show how in captivity, one can free oneself from imprisonment with God's help.

The cantata ends with a *chaconne*, a dance worthy of the French composers and their admirers Buxtehude and Pachelbel. An obstinate four-bar bassline (B-C-sharp-D-E-F-sharp-B) is followed by 21 variations, alternately choral and instrumental. Their modulations in different keys bring out the meaning of the text: after a first line exuding human suffering, a long vocalise in D major builds on the word *Freude* (joy).

### ***Aus der Tiefe rufe ich, Herr, zu dir, BWV 131***

Also composed in Mülhausen in 1707, this cantata for four soloists, choir and small instrumental ensemble may well be Bach's very first. It was commissioned by one of Bach's friends, the Lutheran pastor Georg Christian Eilmar. It draws on Psalm 130 ("De profundis") and two stanzas from the hymn "Herr Jesu Christ, du höchstes Gut" (Lord Jesus Christ, Thou highest good) by Bartholomaüs Ringwaldt (1588). Its penitential character might have been intended for funerals, or to express the affliction that reigned in Mülhausen following the May 1707 fire, which ravaged part of the town just before Bach's arrival.

After a slow *sinfonia* in A minor, the choir comes in to accentuate the depth (*Tiefe*) of anguish and the sinner's call (*rufe ich, Herr, zu dir*). The fugal and concertante *allegro* that follows stresses

the prayer to God (*höre meine Stimme*). An *attacca* transition leads into an *arioso* for bass in a duet with the oboe; superimposed is stanza 2 of the hymn sung in *cantus firmus* by the soprano. The 4th movement is similar in structure, with a highly vocalizing tenor *arioso* and a chorale stanza sung by the alto.

The 3rd movement is a diptych in which we recognize the improvising organist that Bach was: to reflect the sinner's feverish anticipation (*ich harre*), he opts for a harmonic prelude interspersed with descriptive vocalises. This is followed by a dramatic fugue with repeated notes extending into a long lament, eventually resolving into an old-style plagal cadence. The emotion emanating from this rich polyphony sets the stage for Bach's Cantata BWV 21 and the Crucifixus from his Mass in B Minor.

The final chorus alternates between brief *adagios* and generously fugal and chromatic passages, showing how God has forgiven the wrongs of his people.

### ***Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit, BWV 106***

This cantata composed in Mülhausen may have been sung at the funeral of either a prominent figure in Mülhausen or a member of the Bach family. The text consists of brief passages from the Old and New Testaments

that contrast the inevitability of death—*Actus Tragicus*—with the hope of eternal life as proclaimed by Jesus.

Like the previous cantata, this one is intended for a small ensemble, that is, four voices with or without choir, two recorders, two violas da gamba and basso continuo, which creates an intimate atmosphere. It is in the tradition of the vocal concertos of Schütz and Buxtehude: a gentle sonatina in F major is followed by three movements, with each one featuring several sections and a chorale.

A refreshing chorus brings together a tenor arioso and a lively bass aria, both with recorders, as well as a fugue for choir, whose descending interval of diminished 7th in two leaps (D-E-flat-C-F-sharp-G) acts as a constant reminder that all of mankind must eventually die. To counteract this fate, the soprano calling for Jesus comes in between the various fugal episodes, while the recorders play the chorale melody "Ich hab' mein Sach Gott heimgestellt" (My cause is God's, and I am His). At the height of her rapture, the soprano calls out to Jesus one last time in an instrumental-like pirouette.

The 3rd movement, sung in succession by the alto and bass, is entirely devoted to Jesus, with first his surrender to the divine will ("Into your hands I commit

my spirit"), then his consoling words to the good thief, to which the Canticle of Simeon is added in *cantus firmus* ("In peace and joy I now depart"). Intended for the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, this hymn is also appropriate for funerals.

In the 4th movement, which ends in jubilation, the instrumental quartet, with the continuo, responds to the 7th verse of the F-major chorale "In dich hab' ich gehoffet, Herr" (In Thee, O Lord, I have hoped).

### ***Christ lag in Todes Banden, BWV 4***

Cantata BWV 4 was written for Easter and is based on a hymn by Martin Luther, "Christ ist erstanden" (Christ is risen), which is itself taken from the 11th-century Gregorian Easter sequence "Victimae paschali laudes." Although it evokes the joy of Jesus's resurrection, most composers, including Bach, have respected its Gregorian discipline and starkness, save for the Halleluja concluding each stanza.

Composed in 1707 or 1708, Cantata BWV 4 could only have been performed on an Easter Sunday, either April 24, 1707, when Bach was still in Arnstadt, or April 8, 1708, while he was organist in Mülhausen. In either case, it was probably sung in Mülhausen. The running battle that had been going on since 1705

between Bach and his superiors in Arnstadt prompted the fiery organist to apply for a position in Mülhausen in 1707. It was there, precisely at Easter, that he was to perform "on test." Like the previous cantatas, BWV 4 can be sung with or without choir, and in its original version, the singers are accompanied by strings and basso continuo. Bach revised it in Leipzig in 1724, doubling the voices with a cornetto and three trombones.

The seven movements of this cantata form a series of variations in the style of the organ partitas that Bach composed in Arnstadt. They use Luther's words in their entirety and are perhaps modelled on a cantata by Pachelbel on the same subject. Following the sinfonia in E minor, the Resurrection is celebrated by a choir singing a fugal chorale, with the soprano in *cantus firmus*. We are left surprised by the syncopation and fragmentation of the Halleluja, worthy of the rhythmic hocket of the Middle Ages.

With subtle dissonances, a soprano and alto duet reveals that humans do not escape death, a point supported by the continuo's octave leaps, which Bach would echo in the aria of his Orchestral Suite No. 3 in D Major.

In the 3rd stanza, the tenor, joyfully accompanied by the perpetual motion of the violins, celebrates redemption through

Jesus's sacrifice. A dramatic cut and a brief adagio on *dem Tod* (of death) confirm Jesus's triumph over death.

The central chorus, with an alto chorale, depicts the struggle between life and death in the manner of the picturesque vocal and instrumental "battles" so popular since the Renaissance.

The 5th stanza, for bass, is dedicated to the sacrificial lamb. It provides the chorale with a sense of freedom, as can be heard in the spectacular diminished 12th leap from B to E-sharp which seemingly desires to banish death (*dem Tode*) to oblivion.

The second last movement is a duet for soprano and tenor celebrating the triumph of life over death. The instruments combine the dotted rhythm of the French gigue with the lightness of the Italian gigue. In 1724, Bach replaced the lost final movement with a harmonized chorale.

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*English translation: Traductions Crescendo*