

Mallarmé Chamber Players and the Choral Society of Durham

Historical Bach – Program Notes written by Susan Dakin

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) served as Kantor of the St. Thomas Choir School in Leipzig from 1723 until his death. As “Director of the Choir and Music in Leipzig” (his official title), he was responsible for the music at the town’s four main Lutheran churches. In the services, which lasted for several hours, the cantata followed the Gospel reading and preceded the hour-long sermon; it was expected to take up to 30 minutes. The bulk of Bach’s cantatas date from his first five years at Leipzig when he took on the ambitious task of creating a complete set of cantatas for each liturgical year. For services, Bach typically used a total of 25 to 40 singers and instrumentalists, who included choristers from the Choir School, the town’s eight salaried musicians, Bach’s private students from the university, and others, including paid soloists.

Cantata BWV 190 was composed for New Year’s Day 1724, Bach’s first New Year in Leipzig. Unfortunately, the first two movements of this cantata have survived only in fragmentary form. Bach used the same music again in 1730 for a cantata (BWV 190a) to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Augsburg Confession, but with different texts and a different concluding chorale. Evidently, Bach reused pages from the 1724 score and instrumental parts, inserting them into the 1730 version. As the score and parts of the 1730 version have been lost, the reused pages from the 1724 version also are lost; of the first two movements, only a copy of the vocal parts and first and second violin parts survives. For the first movement, Bach’s orchestration of the final movement serves as a guide to his intentions. For the second movement, only the viola and continuo parts must be reconstructed, as the trumpets and timpani would not have been used, and the woodwinds would have doubled the voice parts. Today’s performance uses the 1995 reconstruction of the first two movements by Diethard Hellman.

The cantata’s text may have been assembled by the poet Christian Friedrich Henrici (1700–1764, known as “Picander”), who wrote many of Bach’s texts. New Year’s Day is the festival of the circumcision and naming of Christ, but cantata text reflects a more general theme of praise, thanks, and renewal of faith. The first movement combines Psalm verses (149:1 and 150:4,6) with the opening words of Martin Luther’s German *Te Deum* (“Lord God, we praise you, Lord God, we thank you”), which also appear in the second movement, along with text by the poet. The poet provides the text for the third through sixth movements, and the closing movement uses a chorale text by Johannes Hermann (1515–1593).

The opening choral movement is scored for strings, continuo, three oboes, bassoon, three trumpets, and timpani. It consists of settings of the Psalm verses separated by statements from the *Te Deum* sung to the traditional plainchant melody. Following a fanfare-like introduction, the choir calls for praise of the Lord in music (“Sing to the Lord a new song”). After the first interjection from the *Te Deum* comes a brief fugue on the text “Let

all that has breath praise the Lord"; after the second, the movement closes with a reprise of the opening section on the text "Alleluia." In the second movement, choral statements of praise and thanks alternate with recitative passages requesting continued blessings on the city. The third movement is a dance-like aria of praise for the alto soloist. The mood becomes more introspective and focused on Christ in the next two movements, a bass recitative and a duet for tenor and bass that repeatedly invokes the name of Jesus (the closest reference the text makes to the liturgical significance of festival). The instrument for which Bach intended the obbligato accompaniment to the duet is not specified in the score, but it is most often assigned to the oboe d'amore, as in today's performance. A recitative for tenor reiterates the request for blessings on the city and its inhabitants in the New Year. The cantata closes with the second verse of the traditional New Year's chorale "*Jesu, nun sei gepreiset,*" sung by the chorus, with obbligato trumpet fanfare.

Cantata BWV 196 may have been written for the June 1708 wedding of Regina Wedemann, the aunt of Bach's wife, Maria Barbara, and Johann Lorenz Stauber, the pastor who had officiated at Bach's own wedding the previous October. There is no firm evidence for the date or occasion of its composition, but stylistic features suggest that this is one of Bach's earliest cantatas. Furthermore, its small scale and its scoring for small forces (three soloists, chorus, strings, and continuo) are consistent with its use for a wedding ceremony in Stauber's small church at Dornheim, and the text (Psalm 115, verses 12–15), with its references to posterity, is appropriate for the occasion. If this theory of the cantata's origin is correct, it dates from Bach's brief stint as church organist and city music director at Mühlhausen, during which he composed several cantatas for civic occasions, but none for church use.

The modest simplicity of this work contrasts with opulence of the cantatas that open and close today's concert. The cantata opens with an instrumental sinfonia, dignified yet joyous in character (and easily envisioned as a wedding processional). The choral second movement opens with a contrapuntal section related to themes of the sinfonia, followed by a canon on the text "He blesses the house of Israel, he blesses the house of Aaron." The blessings continue in a *da capo* aria for soprano accompanied by solo violin and continuo, followed by an imitative duet for tenor and bass accompanied by the full ensemble. The longest movement is the choral finale; a brief opening section on the text "You are the blessed of the Lord, who has made heaven and earth" is followed by sprightly fugue on "Amen," bringing the cantata to a gentle conclusion.

Bach's four orchestral suites are sets of pieces in traditional French dance forms, composed on the model established by Jean-Baptiste Lully (who in the 1650s and 1660s created suites of overtures and dance tunes from his operas). Also known as "overtures" (after their opening movements), such collections were meant not for dancing but as concert pieces, and were a forerunner of the symphony. The dates of Bach's orchestral suites are uncertain, but it is believed that he composed them in Leipzig for the Collegium Musicum, an organization of professional musicians and university students

that presented frequent public concerts, and of which Bach became director in 1729. The manuscript score of Suite No. 2, BWV 1067, has not survived, and the suite is known from a performance copy dating from 1738 or 1739. This suite is concerto-like, featuring the transverse flute, which, as a result of technical innovations, was starting to replace the recorder as an orchestral instrument. It has also been suggested that this suite was originally composed for the flute virtuoso Pierre-Gabriel Buffardin (1690–1768), who was renowned for his technical facility and was a soloist at the court of the Elector of Saxony in Dresden from 1715 to 1749 (Bach had met Buffardin in 1716).

In Bach's suite, the flute both doubles the first violin part and performs as a solo instrument with orchestral or continuo accompaniment. It is first heard on its own in the fugal sections of the stately Overture. The *Rondeau* is a form in which a refrain alternates with a series of contrasting strains; it gave rise to the classical rondo. This movement again features passages for solo flute. The *Sarabande* is a slow dance in triple meter, of Spanish origin and typically of plaintive character. Though the flute mostly doubles the melody in the first violins, a brief solo passage leads into a canonic closing section. The two *Bourées* are quick movements in duple meter, based on a French folk dance. Conventionally, two *Bourées* are linked in a *da capo* structure: first, each *Bourée* is played with repeats, then the first *Bourée* is played again without repeats. Bach features the solo flute in the second *Bourée*. The *Polonaise-Double* is another pair of movements presented in *da capo* format. The *Polonaise* is based on the Polish national dance, a stately dance in triple meter characterized by dotted rhythms. In the *Double*, the main *Polonaise* theme appears in the continuo, over which the flute plays variations. The *Menuet* is a graceful dance in triple meter, the stylized descendent of a quick peasant dance. The solo flute is again featured in the closing *Badinerie*, a rare dance form best known from this suite, in which it serves as a virtuosic showpiece.

Cantata BWV 137 dates from 1725. Although it is designated for the twelfth Sunday after Trinity (June 19 of that year), it has been suggested that the cantata was meant for the installation of the newly elected Leipzig Town Council a few days later. The text is not specifically related to the Gospel reading for the date, and the work's festive character would have suited the civic occasion. Like many of Bach's Leipzig cantatas, this one is based on a chorale, "Lobe den Herren, den mächtigen König der Ehren," a text written by Joachim Neander (1650–1680) and well known to English-speaking congregations as "Praise to the Lord, the almighty, the king of creation." The cantata is unusual, though, in employing only the five verses of the chorale text, with no added biblical texts or poems (and hence no recitatives). Furthermore, Bach uses the tune traditionally associated with this text in all five movements of the cantata, which thus constitutes a set of chorale variations (a cantata form Bach had not used in over twenty years). The cantata also is unusual in that, instead of staying in one key, the five movements progress from C major through G major, E minor, and A minor to C major. In addition to chorus and vocal soloists, it is scored for first and second violins, viola, two oboes, three trumpets, timpani, and continuo (in today's performance, cello, bass, and harpsichord).

The first movement involves the full orchestra and is in the form of a chorale fantasy (or fantasia): the sopranos declaim the chorale tune, around which the other parts weave intricate polyphony. The movement opens with a lively, syncopated orchestral introduction, and related orchestral transitions separate the choral statements of the four hymn phrases. Bach breaks the pattern for the third hymn phrase, uniting the vocal parts for the text “Come in throngs, psaltery and harp, awake!”; he returns to polyphony for the final phrase, and the movement closes with a reprise of the orchestral introduction.

The second movement is an alto aria with violin obbligato; the vocal soloist presents the chorale verse with only slight decoration, while the violin dances around the melody. The third movement is an imitative duet for soprano and bass, based on the chorale tune but in a minor key. The soloists are accompanied by an obbligato duet for the two oboes, also entering in canon. In the fourth verse, a florid tenor aria in the key of A minor, the chorale tune is stated by a solo trumpet in the relative major key of C — to which the cantata returns for the final chorale verse, triumphantly stated by the chorus and full orchestra.