



J.S. Bach's First Christmas in Leipzig: Vespers in the Nikolaikirche, 25 December 1723

J.S. Bach's first Christmas at Leipzig came during one of his most frenetic years for composition and performance, the Cantor having produced one large cantata (sometimes two) per week since his first service, on 30 May 1723. Not all the music for the Christmas service was completely new; indeed, it is likely that only the four 'Laudes' – traditional seasonal verses inserted between movements of the E flat Magnificat – were freshly composed that December. Nevertheless, Bach clearly went out of his way to prepare the most impressive

music he could, so as to create an appropriate range of moods to aid the congregation's meditation on the themes of the season. Given the recent closure of the Leipzig opera, there must have been many in the town who were craving music in the newest styles, and – even in a society in which it was almost impossible to dissent from religious belief – it is very likely that they would have relished the purely musical experience the Cantor's liturgies afforded.

Lutheran Vespers followed the model of the Roman office in centring on the canticle of the Magnificat (Mary's song on visiting her cousin Elizabeth, Luke 1:46–55). However, rather than the sequence of psalms of the Catholic tradition, the canticle would often be preceded by an appropriate cantata, normally the same one that had been performed in the morning service that day. In between, in typically Lutheran fashion, came the sermon as the central axis of the liturgy. Beyond this, the symmetrical service was fleshed out with motets and congregational chorales. It thus presented the three main types of church music in use at the time: chorales from the Lutheran tradition; motets, usually drawn from Erhard Bodenschatz's two-volume collection *Florilegium portense* (1618 and 1621), which therefore reflected the late Renaissance polyphonic tradition; and sumptuous music in the newest Italianate styles. In many instances, this modern music also contained references to motet and chorale styles, so that it presented a synthesis of much of the known musical past. Beyond this, there was the requirement for the organist to provide preludes to each of the chorales and musical pieces, as well as to accompany the congregation in appropriately festive style.

Cantata: Christen, ätzet diesen Tag, BWV 63

This cantata was written almost a decade before Bach's arrival in Leipzig, most likely for Christmas 1714 in Weimar. Its lavish orchestration (including Bach's only use of four trumpets) implies a much bigger venue than the Weimar court chapel: perhaps the main parish church or even a performance beyond the town. Although the text does not relate the events of the Christmas story, it does provide a deep meditation on the implications of the 'ray of grace' emanating from the crib (opening chorus). The first recitative contemplates the way in which the promised redeemer arrives, despite human sin, with the ensuing duet expanding on the way God has well disposed the wonderful event. The central recitative provides the axis, exactly as does the sermon for the service as a whole: it makes the theological point about the coming of Jesus turning suffering into salvation and grace, thus restoring our freedom. The second half of the cantata mirrors the first, beginning with another duet, this time inviting Christians to 'the dance'.

That image is extremely interesting, given that many other Protestant movements condemned dancing. In fact, the type of dance, 'Reihen' ('round-dance'), is the one that Luther himself claimed we could expect to encounter in heaven, so it would have come with strong connotations of expectation and joy. This is reinforced by the final two movements, which look forward to the end times ('climbing joyfully to heaven'); the closing

chorus, yet another piece in dance style, implores the almighty to find our sounds agreeable.

It is not difficult to see why Bach saw this cantata as such an appropriate companion for his more recent Magnificat. The opening movement celebrates the play between its three main instrumental choirs and the four singers (luxuriously supported by ripienists in the choruses); together they create an enormously compelling call to celebration and establish the dance-like style that influences so many of the movements. Moreover, the first duet, accompanied by a plaintive solo oboe, makes an ideal analogue to the 'Quia respexit' of the Magnificat and demonstrates in its very order and leisurely expansion the sense of the events being 'wohl gefüget' ('well disposed'). Perhaps the most surprising piece is the closing chorus, which begins in the rhythm of a gavotte. It goes on to cover a far broader range of note values than is common in Bach, the brilliant instrumental interlude almost bursting beyond the framework established in the opening strain.

Later there is a strong reference to motet style, which is in turn transformed into a highly expressive Adagio section alluding to the torments of Satan, torments that we implore may never happen. The tightly packed contrasts and moods of the entire cantata, and this closing chorus in particular, are typical of Bach's earlier vocal works, but they still find an obvious resonance with the newer Magnificat setting.

Magnificat in E flat major, BWV 243a

Bach had to perform a concerted setting of the Magnificat at Vespers (together with the service to celebrate the Visitation of Mary) several times a year. Indeed, it seems that he compiled a significant repertory of Magnificat settings by several composers to fulfil this purpose; his own Latin Magnificat is merely the most substantial of these. The first, E flat version was, according to the research of Andreas Glöckner, most likely written for the Visitation service on 2 July 1723 (little more than a month after Bach's first service at Leipzig). The connection with Christmas of the same year is established by the fact that the manuscript includes indications for four Christmas interpolations to be performed at specific points within the sequence of movements. Given that these pieces are appended at the end of the manuscript, it is clear that the Magnificat was first designed as a self-standing piece.

Some ten years later, possibly again for the Visitation service (which, in 1733 coincided with the end of the period of mourning for Elector Friedrich Augustus I), Bach produced a new version of the Magnificat, transposed down a semitone to D major. This version is the more well known, but there are several elements of the early version that were lost in the process of re-writing. Recorders, rather than the transverse flutes of the later version, accompany the 'Esurientes'; a trumpet, rather than oboe, played the *tonus peregrinus* melody of the 'Suscepit Israel', and, at certain points in the earlier version, the harmonies are rather more pungent (e.g. the fermata chord just before the end of the chorus 'Omnes generationes'). The difference in key also affects the layout of the string parts, in particular; this is most noticeable in the 'Deposit potentes', where the opening scale is an octave lower in the violins and the open G string (the key note for this aria), the lowest note of the violin, is suitably employed. The triplet passages that appear three times between the block chord passages of the 'Gloria' were originally written without the sustained continuo notes that Bach added to the later version. These latter undoubtedly make the passages easier to sing, but the early version is arguably more exciting in the way that the vocalists are encouraged to direct their lines towards the next tutti passages.

The Magnificat – in whichever version – is one of Bach's most vivid choral works. It contains such dramatic devices as the chilling harmonic depiction of the word 'imagination' ('mente') in the line 'he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts', and with its rapid alternation of choruses and arias (without da capos) it is also remarkably compact. The word painting is reminiscent of Bach's very early cantatas, with sometimes startling changes of affect: for instance the dramatic interjection 'Omnes generationes' at

the end of the 'Quia respexit'. The return of the opening music for the 'Sicut erat in principio' ('As it was in the beginning') suggests that Bach was aware of a familiar pun in seventeenth-century Vesper settings.

The four Christmas interpolations seem specifically to have been a Leipzig custom. These so-called *Laudes* are settings of seasonal German and Latin hymns. Following the practice of Bach's predecessor, Johann Kuhnau, each hymn tells a part of the Christmas story and is interleaved with the movements of the Magnificat. This mixing of texts – Latin and German, narrative allusion and a traditional canticle – did cause disquiet in some theological circles, and it is not certain how long the practice lasted after Bach's first years at Leipzig. The first hymn, 'Vom Himmel hoch', relates the shepherds' encounter with the angels. This is written in traditional Lutheran motet style with the lines of the original chorale providing the basic melodic material of the lower voices. Learned though it might be, the music creates a joyful effect, the close imitation between parts alluding to the descending angelic host; its clashing fragments are rather reminiscent of bells sounding together and across one another. The next interpolation concerns the message relayed by the angels: 'Freut euch und jubiliert'. This is in a lighter, dance-like style highly reminiscent of the 'Et exsultavit' of the Magnificat itself: thus Bach makes a musical connection between the rejoicing of Mary's spirit in the canticle and the rejoicing ordained by the angels. The third piece concerns the singing of the heavenly host, with the traditional text 'Gloria in excelsis Deo!'. This is a rustic and celebratory piece, almost crude in some respects, and contrasting very markedly with the 'Fecit potentiam' fugue that immediately precedes it. The final interpolation is based on a Latin hymn relating to Mary and Joseph expressing their joy at the holy birth. This is set, not surprisingly, as a duet for soprano and bass, an amiable gigue that encourages effervescent coloratura. The last part of this is missing in Bach's autograph, but the outlines are provided by a later version of the same piece in another Christmas work, Cantata 110 (we have largely used Alfred Dürr's completion, with a couple of modifications).

One thing that is striking about these four pieces when they are heard as a group is the stylistic variety that Bach sets out to achieve: on the one hand, two kinds of choral piece, one in the older, imitative style and the other in a more modern homophonic idiom; on the other hand, two types of dance, one a modern minuet ('Freut euch') and the last a more traditional gigue. This contrasting of styles and pairing of historical elements seems typical of Bach's increasingly emerging encyclopaedic tendencies. It also balances the variety of styles in the Magnificat itself, from a dramatic 'rage' aria ('Deposuit potentes') to the subtle parody of galant inanities in the 'Esurientes'; from the dance-like 'Et exsultavit' to the supremely expressive 'Quia respexit'. The choruses are characterized by the modern, celebratory idiom of the opening (and closing chorus), virtuoso fugue in the 'Fecit potentiam' and 'old-style' fugue in 'Sicut locutus est' (appropriate for 'as he promised to our forefathers').

Recreating the Performance of 25 December 1723

The presence of the four *Laudes* immediately brings up the question of how the extended version of the canticle worked in its original context (indeed, it could be argued that the interpolations somewhat distort the epigrammatic structure of the Magnificat if it is heard only as an isolated piece). Moreover, some of these movements (e.g. 'Vom Himmel hoch' and especially 'Gloria in excelsis Deo!') seem to have been written in an idiom that is slightly crude in comparison with Bach's 'normal' style, thus raising the question of the sort of amateur singing that they might perhaps have evoked. But the sources for Bach's Leipzig liturgy are relatively clear, at least in terms of the order of events (the sexton of the time, Johann Christoph Rost, left detailed notes), so the remaining parts of the afternoon Vesper liturgy can be reconstructed with reasonable plausibility.

For the opening of the service, the most obvious motet for Christmas Day from Bodenschatz's collection is Giovanni Gabrieli's eight-part *Hodie Christus natus est*. This

would have been sung by the first 'Cantorey' of the Thomasschule, which (according to the recent researches of Michael Maul) comprised by statute the eight most specialized singers from the school body. This system was set up in precisely the period when Bodenschatz's collection was compiled, at the outset of the seventeenth century (during the cantorate of Seth Calvisius): it must have been designed specifically with double-choir motets in mind. In keeping with Bach's known motet practice, such late Renaissance pieces would have been supplemented with a continuo bass line that doubled whichever was the lowest voice at any given time. The same eight singers would have been responsible for the other specialized music in the service (although whether they all participated in all the cantata choruses is another question). Sources for Bach's Christmas music in general tend to have a greater number of 'ripieno' parts (i.e. those that double the four main voices in choruses) than is usual in the other surviving sources, and the performing parts for Cantata, BWV 63 are among those that show evidence of this. It is therefore by no means beyond the realms of possibility that Bach may have used two singers to a part in the Magnificat choruses too, at least on Christmas Day. However, the canticle is very unusual in being set for five voices (a scoring it shares with only the Mass in B minor, the cantata version of the Gloria, BWV 191, and the motet *Jesu, meine Freude*), so Bach would have had to find two extra sopranos if he did indeed wish to double every voice.

One of the intriguing aspects of the E flat Magnificat is its very key, which is highly unusual for a work with trumpets. Unfortunately, no original parts survive for either version of the piece, so it is impossible to judge precisely the pitch standards that might have been used. However, there is some evidence from the surviving parts of Cantata, BWV 63 that in 1723 it was performed at the lower 'Tief-Kammerton', which Bach had been accustomed to at the Cöthen court (and which it has in common with several other pieces of the early Leipzig years). This was the fashionable French court pitch, somewhere in the region of A=392 (and thus roughly a whole tone below modern concert pitch of A=440, and a semitone below what is often incorrectly assumed to be the 'standard' Baroque pitch of A=415, the 'Kammerton' that soon became Bach's norm for Leipzig). It might be, then, that Bach composed the Magnificat in E flat (very soon after leaving Cöthen) in order to combine strings and woodwind playing at A=392 with trumpets playing in their 'home' key of D at A=415. If this was indeed the case, the two versions of the Magnificat would have been at the same sounding pitch, the latter version designed for a time when the *Tief-Kammerton* instruments were no longer available, or when Bach was fully reconciled to using the higher *Kammerton* pitch standard. Either way, the lower pitch offers an opportunity to explore the rich sonorities that the heavier string gauges and the slightly larger woodwind instruments afford.

One aspect of Bach's church performance that is usually obscured by concert presentation is the use of the organ to set the scene and style for each musical number. In the case of chorales, the many preludes that Bach himself wrote provide an obvious selection of suitable pieces, provided the key is suitable. For motets, cantatas and canticles, the prelude may have been an improvised piece in free style or something based on an appropriate chorale (these preludes are played by John Butt on this recording). The Magnificat, in particular, offers an excellent opportunity to use Bach's superb fugal prelude on the Magnificat tone, the *tonus peregrinus*, which is played on the trumpet in the 'Suscepit Israel'.

The congregational chorales for this recording are sourced from the *Neu Leipziger Gesangbuch*, compiled by Gottfried Vopelius in 1682, which was the basis for several later editions and other hymnbooks that were used in the main churches of the town. The first edition is unique in providing printed harmonizations of the music, and it is likely that many would have learned both the melodies and the harmonies during their time at school in Leipzig. Our specially recruited 'congregation' therefore sings some verses in unison and

others in full harmony. For this recording, Stephen Farr not only plays the preludes for these chorales, but also improvises organ accompaniments in the styles of the period (one cue here is Bach's early organ chorale settings, which in some cases could have functioned as accompaniments as well as preludes). These range from the improvisation of flourishes between each line of the chorale (as in Georg Kauffmann's 1733 organ-chorale publication *Harmonische Seelenlust*) to the improvisation of divisions (i.e. fast notes) within the accompaniment itself, in a style that seems to have been practised throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. © **John Butt, 2015**