

**Uri Golomb**

## **Bach's Oratorios**

“Set aside fear, banish lamentation, / strike up a song full of joy and mirth!” These words, which appear near the beginning of Bach's Christmas Oratorio, could well serve as a motto for the cycle of oratorios for Christmas (BWV 248), Easter Sunday (BWV 249), and Ascension Day (BWV 11) that Bach compiled in 1734/5. In expressive terms, these works stand at the opposite end of the spectrum from the Passions. Philipp Spitta (vol. II, p. 538) wrote of the St. Matthew Passion: “In a work planned to represent the most stupendous events, and engaged throughout with none but the saddest emotions, every possible contrast had to be made the utmost use of”. In the Oratorios, Bach faced a similar challenge from the opposite direction: injecting variety into a predominantly bright context, commenting on stories that did not generate the narrative and psychological drama that inspired the Passions' profound expressiveness.

The other challenge that Bach set for himself was to forge convincing sequences out of movements drawn from other works. This process of self-borrowing (usually referred to as “parody”), though common enough in the Baroque era, was viewed with suspicion by some of Bach's admirers in the 19th and 20th centuries: stringing together movements drawn from other works seemed to them like a sign of creative weakness. Such reasoning, however, is based on the perception of the musical work as an indivisible and inviolable whole – a notion that Bach and his contemporaries would probably not have recognised, let alone accepted.

The fact that the music for these liturgical works was drawn primarily from secular music was also quite within the spirit of the times: the union of secular and liturgical music was increasingly advocated in Bach's lifetime by several prominent figures, such as Erdmann Neumeister and Johannes Mattheson. Gottfried Ephraim Scheibel's 1721 treatise on church music includes a detailed argument in favour of adopting secular, even operatic music into liturgical works. Joyce Irwin (p. 118) writes that,

Although we cannot know whether Bach was aware of Scheibel's work, Bach practiced much of what Scheibel advocated: the use of recitatives and arias for giving expression to religious affections, the adaptation of music used in

secular contexts to sacred texts, and the concern for relating poetry and music skillfully and effectively.

The Oratorios offer particularly striking illustrations of this aspect of Bach's sacred music.

### **The term "Oratorio"**

The Christmas Oratorio, composed in 1734, is a cycle of six cantatas, each intended for a different feast-day (as detailed below). The Ascension Oratorio was first performed on Ascension Day (May 19) 1735. For Easter Sunday the same year, Bach revised an existing cantata, first performed on Easter Sunday 1725, and re-titled it *Oratorium (Festo Paschali)*, thus completing a set of three oratorios.

In his 1732 *Musicalisches Lexicon*, Bach's relative and compatriot, Johann Gottfried Walther, defined Oratorio as "A sacred OPERA or a representation IN MUSIC of a sacred history" (quoted by Daw, p. 155). The Easter Oratorio fits the definition: it is a dramatisation of a specific Biblical event, in the manner of an opera, with no narration or commentary.

The other two Oratorios comply with Erdmann Neumeister's definition of the term (quoted in Boyd's *Bach*, p. 165): "a literary genre mixing Biblical verses, aria texts and chorales". In part, they continue the Lutheran tradition of musical *Historia*: the musical representation of a Biblical story, mostly narrated by an Evangelist, but with direct speech portions assigned to soloists or (when a group speaks) to a chorus. In Bach's Ascension and Christmas Oratorios, as in his surviving Passions, this narrative is framed and interrupted by chorales and by newly-written poetic stanzas, set to music as choruses, recitatives and arias. These represent latter-day believers' reflections upon the Biblical story.

The three works might not belong to the same genre; but all of them present and interpret Biblical stories that are central to the Christian faith and liturgy. Given this narrative element, and the explicit use of the term "Oratorio", one might have expected these works to represent the dramatic aspect of their composer's artistic personality. Bach did, after all, display a remarkable talent and propensity for conjuring highly dramatic scenes. The two cantatas drawing on the chorale *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort* (O Eternity, thou thunderous word; BWV 20 and BWV 60) contain explosively dramatic music; several cantatas – such as *Wachet auf* (Awake;

BWV 140) – contain engaging love-duets; *Jesus schläft* (Jesus sleeps; BWV 81) is so vividly picturesque that it seems worthy of theatrical, even cinematic representation. The powerfully dramatic character of the two Passions is often commented upon (see also my own article on “Liturgical drama in the St. Matthew Passion”, GOLDBERG 39).

The Oratorios, however, do not aspire to a similar level of musical drama. The most subdued and elegiac emotion explored in these works is yearning for Christ and for the salvation He offers; and expressions of this emotion are invariably followed, sooner or later, by the affirmation that such salvation is indeed at hand. To set this poetry, Bach drew upon works intended primarily to praise the virtues of kings and noblemen; though several of these works are titled *drama per musica*, only the *Hercules cantata* (see below) has an actual story to tell.

## **The Easter Oratorio**

The Easter Oratorio began life as *Kommt, fliehet und eilet* (Come, fly and make haste), a cantata for Easter Sunday 1725, based directly on *Entfliehet, verschwindet, entweichet, ihr Sorgen* (Fly, vanish, flee, o worries), a birthday cantata for Duke Christian von Sachsen-Weißenfels. Bach had to compose new recitatives for the sacred version, and make some alterations to the first duet; but the Sinfonia, three arias and concluding chorus were probably borrowed unchanged from the secular work. The work’s secular origin is reflected in the total absence of chorale melodies – a rarity in Bach’s liturgical output.

The music for the birthday cantata is now lost, but the text – by Picander (Christian Friedrich Henrici) – survived. It presents two shepherds and two shepherdesses debating how to celebrate the Duke’s birthday. In the sacred version, the four pastoral characters are replaced by Biblical ones: Maria Jacobi (soprano), Mary Magdalene (alto) and the apostles Peter (tenor) and John (bass). The two apostles rush to Jesus’s grave; at the site of the empty tomb, the two women inform them of Christ’s resurrection. This new text is probably also by Picander, who is also assumed to have written the libretti of the Christmas and Ascension Oratorios.

There is something of an expressive tension within the work, which might reflect its history. As noted, the original story is merely a discussion on how to celebrate a birthday. This predominantly happy affect is retained when the music is

adapted for Easter Sunday. Thus, in the Easter Oratorio's opening duet, we see the two apostles rushing to the tomb in "laughter and merriment [...] for our Saviour is raised from the dead".

However, in the recitatives – newly composed for the sacred work – the apostles seem to backtrack: they speak of anointing the Jesus's body with their tears, and later express surprise at his body's absence. The two women also express, initially, sadness and mourning (even though they ostensibly know that Christ has risen). It seems that Bach used the opportunity offered by the recitative texts to inject additional expressive variety and intensity, employing tenser harmonies and more pained melodic lines, replete with dissonant leaps and chromaticism. Yet these do little to disguise the work's origin in a celebratory pastoral cantata. Mourning for Christ (which, the text soon reveals, is by now inappropriate) is restricted to the recitatives.

The work opens with a two-part Sinfonia (Allegro and Adagio), leading directly into the opening duet. This duet's thematic materials (especially in the orchestra) bear a clear resemblance to those of the Allegro; the three movements thus form a coherent sequence, shaped in a loose A-B-A structure. The music could well have originated in a three-movement concerto, with two jubilant fast movements for full ensemble (three trumpets, two oboes, strings, timpani and continuo) enclosing a poignant Adagio for oboe (or, in a later version, flute), strings and continuo. Robert Mealy and Paul McCreech (in their notes to the latter's recording of the work) hear in this Adagio an evocation of "the women's response in finding the empty tomb" – an appropriate dramatic illustration, albeit one which could not have served as inspiration for the work if one accepts the (reasonable) assumption that this Adagio, too, appeared in the pastoral cantata.

Bach made several revisions to the work in subsequent performances. In the 1740s, he re-wrote the opening duet as a four-part chorus (the version most frequently heard today). Earlier, in 1735, Bach made several changes to the libretto. He changed the opening words to *Kommt, eilet und laufet* (Come, make haste and run). He also gave it the title Oratorio, emphasising its dramatic aspect – but removed the characters' names, thereby omitting the narrative.

The change is problematic: some recitative texts (e.g., Mary Magdalene's statement that she has just met an angel telling her of Christ's resurrection) don't really make sense when ascribed to a latter-day believer, who reflects on the Biblical events but does not take part in them. The texts of the arias and choruses, however,

easily survive the transformation: Mary Magdalene's yearning for Christ – "Come, embrace me / for without you my heart / is bereft and afflicted" – could just as easily appear in a more symbolic text. Indeed, similar texts appear in several of Bach's sacred cantatas, especially when these present a dialogue between Christ and the Soul. As I note below, there are hints of such dialogues in the other two Oratorios as well.

## **The Christmas Oratorio**

The Christmas Oratorio consists of six cantatas intended for six separate occasions, over a two-week period:

1. *Jauchzet, frolocket* (Rejoice, exult): Cantata for Christmas Day (December 25); scored for three trumpets, two oboes, two flutes, drums, strings and continuo.
2. *Und es waren Hirten* (There were shepherds): Cantata for the Second Day of Christmas (December 26); scored for two flutes, two oboes d'amore, two oboes da caccia, strings and continuo.
3. *Herrscher des Himmels* (Ruler of Heavens): Cantata for the Third Day of Christmas (December 27); same scoring as the first cantata.
4. *Fallt mit Danken* (Fall down with thanks): Cantata for the Feast of the Circumcision (New Year's Day); scored for two horns, two oboes, strings and continuo.
5. *Ehre sei dir, Gott, gesungen* (Let thy glory, God, be sung): Cantata for the first Sunday after New Year (which, in 1735, took place on January 2); scored for two oboes d'amore, strings and continuo.
6. *Herr, wenn die stolzen Feinde schnauben* (Lord, when the proud enemies rage): Cantata for the Feast of the Epiphany (January 6); scoring identical to first and third cantatas.

The printed libretto, however, clearly identifies the six cantatas as parts of a single Oratorio, presenting a single story. The first four cantatas, drawing on Luke's gospel, tell of Mary and Joseph's arrival in Bethlehem and Jesus's birth in the manger, the angels' announcement of Christ's birth to the shepherds, and the circumcision and naming of Jesus. Cantatas 5 and 6, drawing on Matthew's gospel, tell of the Three Wise Men's visit, as they follow the star to Bethlehem and present

their offerings to Jesus – and of King Herod’s attempt to have Jesus tracked down and killed.

Recitatives and chorale-based movements were composed especially for the Christmas Oratorio. More than half of the choruses and solo numbers in the first five cantatas, however, are derived from two secular cantatas: *Hercules auf dem Scheidewege* (Hercules at the Crossroads; BWV 213, 1733) and *Tönet, ihr Pauken!* (Sound, ye drums; BWV 214, 1733); one aria is taken from *Preise dein Glücke, gesegnetes Sachsen* (Praise thy fortunes, blessed Saxony; BWV 215, 1734). Other movements are probably drawn from lost sacred works; the sixth cantata might be a parody on a lost church cantata.

In the Easter Oratorio, Bach transformed one secular work into a liturgical one; in the Christmas Oratorio, however, he used existing works as a repository of sources. Thus, for example, almost all the non-recitative movements from *Hercules* are used in the Christmas Oratorio. They are distributed among the first four cantatas, with no consideration of the original sequence, rubbing shoulders with newly-composed movements and parodies from other works.

Bach, however, ensured that each cantata would form a coherent and satisfying sequence. He used newly-composed materials to create a suitable context for the parodied materials, and subtle revisions intended to make the parodied movements fit within the new context.

In some cases, the parody procedure consisted merely of writing new texts under old music. The music for the Oratorio’s opening chorus, for example, is taken from the opening movement of *Tönet, ihr Pauken*, which begins with the words: “Sound, ye drums! Ring out, trumpets! / Resonant strings, fill the air!” Bach therefore began with timpani strokes, followed by fanfares and violin cascades; these were both realised in the orchestra and imitated by the choir. All these features were copied into the Christmas Oratorio’s opening movement, though the new text made no reference to musical instruments. The music’s joyous, confident affect, however, is equally appropriate to both texts.

In other cases, the parody process involved more extensive revisions. The most notable example is the Oratorio’s first aria, “Bereite dich, Zion” (“Prepare thyself, Zion”), modelled on the aria “Ich will dich nicht hören” (“I will not hear thee”) from *Hercules*. In the original version, Hercules vehemently rejects Vollust, the personification of earthly pleasures and desires, comparing her to the serpents that he

crushed as they attempted to smother him in his crib. In the Christmas Oratorio, however, the same music is attached to a text that calls Zion to embrace and love its newly-arrived Saviour.

Remarkably, the music works well in both contexts – especially when the performers ensure that this would be the case. But Bach also made subtle yet significant alterations to the music. In the opening ritornello of “Bereite dich, Zion”, the sharp *staccati* dots that appeared in Hercules’s furious aria are replaced by short slurred figures that emphasise the movement’s minuet-like gestures. The vocal line in the Christmas Oratorio version is similarly rendered smoother through the addition of appoggiaturas. In the ‘b’ section of this da-capo aria, there are changes in the actual composition. In *Hercules*, Bach uses short, vehement vocal phrases to illustrate the crushing and rending of the serpents. In the Christmas Oratorio, he replaces them with longer, rounded lines, as the alto speaks of embracing Christ as Bridegroom. The rounder feeling of the Christmas Oratorio version is enhanced by the scoring. The original version was scored alto, violin and continuo; in the Christmas Oratorio, the violin line is doubled by an oboe d’amore, creating a richer sonority.

A more prominent change of scoring is apparent in the duet “Herr, dein Mitleid” (“Lord, thy compassion”) in the third cantata. In *Hercules*, this music is used for a love duet between Hercules (alto) and the personification of Virtue (tenor), accompanied by two violas and continuo. The music reflects this, with many phrases in parallel thirds and sixths, and some instances – especially in the ‘b’ section – where the lines intertwine and merge with each other.

The Christmas Oratorio version is a chaste prayer, set for soprano and bass, accompanied by two oboes d’amore and continuo. The new scoring is brighter and more transparent. Most of the musical material is identical; however, subtle re-writing in some portions of the ‘b’ section allows for fewer clashes and intertwining between the two lines. This change reflects the difference in the text – Hercules and Virtue in *Hercules* were singing to each other, whereas the soprano and bass in the Christmas Oratorio are engaged in a joint prayer to God.

A change of scoring has an almost opposite effect in “Schlafe, mein Liebster” (“Sleep, my beloved”), one of Bach’s most serene and blissful arias, which appears at the heart of the second cantata. Here, Vollust’s attempt to lure Hercules from the path of righteousness becomes a lullaby for the baby Jesus. The original version was for soprano, strings and continuo. In the Christmas Oratorio version, the alto part is

doubled by a flute, and the strings are doubled by pairs of oboes d'amore and oboes da caccia.

The chaste lullaby to the Son of God sounds, surprisingly, more sumptuous than the seductive song by the personification of sensuous vice. Yet the new scoring also enhances the movement's connection with its new context – employing as it does the same sonorities as the cantata's opening Sinfonia and closing chorale (itself an alternation of phrases from the chorale *Vom Himmel hoch* with phrases from the Sinfonia). The Sinfonia and the chorale were composed especially for this cantata, but reveal a clear affinity with the lullaby in their character and affect; the lullaby itself was re-scored to enhance its connection with the Sinfonia and chorale.

The second cantata's calm and lyrical atmosphere is enhanced by its soft yet luxuriant sonorities. This description is also applicable to the fourth cantata, the only one to employ horns. This latter cantata's genial character could well be connected to its particular lack of narrative content. The Evangelist only has one recitative, dedicated to the circumcision and naming of Jesus. The rest of the cantata is a meditation on the name of Jesus.

Both arias in this cantata, as well as its opening chorus, are taken from *Hercules*, and undergo very little transformation. The tenor aria is transposed from E minor to D minor; the instrumental obbligati are assigned to two violins (instead of violin and oboe). This does not alter the aria's character: in both versions, it sounds like an Italianate concertante movement with three extroverted and virtuosic solo parts.

The other borrowed movements also have a distinctly “secular” feel. Meredith Little and Natalie Jenne (pp. 230-231) describe the opening movement as “one of [Bach's] few pieces in minuet dance rhythms sung by a chorus”:

The soothing repetitions of the graceful dance, still completely lacking in exuberance or virtuosity, only enhance the new text, which speaks of kneeling in thanks and praise before God's throne.

Similar gestures of kneeling (or at least bowing) appear in the cantata's final chorale – another dance-like, triple-metre movement. The third *Hercules* borrowing is the echo aria for soprano, ‘echo’ soprano, oboe and continuo. It is a charming, light-hearted piece, with subtle touches of humour.

Such secular touches can be found just as easily in works that Bach composed especially for the church. Nonetheless, Bach found it appropriate to surround the two

borrowed arias with chorale-based envelope. The echo aria is framed by two mellifluous *accompagnato* recitatives for bass, strings and continuo – which the soprano joins with an ornamented chorale melody. The expansive lyricism of these recitative-chorale pairings place the playfulness of the Echo aria and the flamboyance of the tenor aria in sharper relief; yet their similarly sunny affect allows the recitatives to sit comfortably beside the arias. Indeed, the recitatives serve to enhance the cantata’s fluent unity, creating a bridge that links between the two arias.

This combined use of the chorale – to facilitate the connection of borrowed materials into a new, liturgical whole, and to offer points of relaxation and contemplation – can also be cited in other cantatas. Cantatas nos. 1, 2, 4 and 6 end with chorales that audibly resemble their opening movements. The choir sings a four-part chorale harmonisation, alternately or simultaneously with independent instrumental contributions which hark back to the timbre, affect, rhythmic character and (in some cases) thematic materials of the opening movement.

Not all these chorales serve a contemplative purpose. The sixth cantata (and with it, the entire Oratorio) ends with the chorale melody *O Haupt voll Blut und Wunden* (O head full of blood and wounds), sometimes referred to as the Passion Chorale. That same melody – in a tense yet introverted harmonisation in E minor – appeared in the first cantata, expressing a yearning for Christ. In the sixth cantata, however, it is harmonised in D major and embedded into a bright orchestral setting, replete with triumphant trumpet fanfares. It appears no less extrovert and brilliant than the cantata’s confident, even defiant, opening chorus.

The sense of triumph reflects the verse that has been set here, “Nun seid ihr wohl gerochen” (“Now you are well avenged”), celebrating Christ’s triumph over “Death, Devil, Sin and Hell”. In narrative terms, it responds to the failure of King Herod’s plot against the new-born Christ, narrated in the fifth and sixth cantatas. This story is as close as we get, within the Christmas Oratorio, to genuine narrative drama; and the sixth cantata accordingly contains some of the Oratorio’s most strident and jagged movements.

In the fifth cantata, the enhanced drama is manifested primarily in a keener sense of dialogue. When the chorus sings the words of the Wise Men, asking where the King of the Jews is, the alto interrupts them with the words “seek him in my breast”, composed as an *accompagnato*. The chorus then resumes its questioning, only to be interrupted again by the alto, whose recitative this time leads into the bass

aria. Afterwards, when the Evangelist tells that Herod “and the whole of Jerusalem” were frightened by the news of Christ’s birth, the alto again interrupts the story, with the recitative “Why are you so afraid?” Such direct conversations between Biblical characters and latter-day believers appear in several works by Bach and his contemporaries. Even within the Christmas Oratorio, present-day characters have already addressed characters in the story; however, this is the first time that such dialogues break the musical flow of the Biblical narrative.

It is no coincidence that this breach is committed by the alto: over the course of the previous cantatas, this voice had established a clear connection with the Virgin Mary. Within the Biblical narrative, Mary has no direct-speech statements, and therefore no singer is called upon to represent her. Yet the alto repeatedly sings texts that seem peculiarly associated with Mary. The lullaby to Jesus in the second cantata is an alto aria. In the third cantata, the alto’s aria “SchlieÙe, mein Herze” (“Enclose, my heart, this blessed wonder”) appears immediately after the Evangelist told us that Mary heard of the angels’ announcement that her child is the Christ, and “kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart”. It is consistent, therefore, to have the same singer announce “seek Christ in my breast”, and to raise the alarm when Jesus is threatened, in the fifth cantata. In all these cases, however, the words are deliberately ambiguous. They could be those of the Virgin Mary. But they could equally (indeed, more plausibly) be interpreted as the thoughts of a modern believer, who feels a particular identification with her.

This casting continues in the terzetto “Ach, wenn wird die Zeit erscheinen” (“Ah, when will the time come?”) for soprano, alto, tenor, violin and continuo. Here, as in “SchlieÙe, mein Herze”, the solo violin’s line has an introverted, lyrical and vocal quality. “SchlieÙe, mein Herze”, however, is a calm meditation; “Ach, wenn wird” is an operatic ensemble. The soprano and tenor sing intense, deliberately fragmented lines, asking when the Saviour will comfort his people. Their affect is that of unsatisfied longing. The alto interrupts them with calmer, statelier lines, on the words: “Hush, He is already here”. The alto’s relation with Mary remains evident: all three singers represent latter-day believers, but the alto expresses the calm and comfort of one who’s already held Jesus to their breast.

“Ach, wenn wird” is the most intense expression of the longing for Christ and his salvation, virtually the only emotion (other than anger in the sixth cantata) which is allowed to shadow the Oratorio’s sunny and confident character. For the Biblical

Mary, Jesus is comfortingly, physically present. For Bach and his congregation, such tangible presence is but a distant story, or a tantalising promise to be fulfilled at the end of time. The difficulty of retaining belief in such circumstances is addressed more directly in other sacred works by Bach (e.g., the Passions, or cantatas BWV 60 and 66, which feature a direct dialogue between “Fear” and “Hope”). Arguably, it is hinted at in some moments of the Christmas Oratorio as well.

## **The Ascension Oratorio**

The most intense expression of this emotion, however, comes in the last work of the Oratorio cycle – the Ascension Oratorio, *Lobet Gott in seinen Reichen* (Praise God in His Kingdoms). The resurrected Christ’s departure from the world and his return to heaven triggers the alto aria “Ach, bleibe doch” (“Ah, stay awhile”). This aria (probably borrowed from a lost wedding serenade composed in 1725) is one of Bach’s most profoundly elegiac movements; it served as the basis for the *Agnus dei* of the B minor Mass, composed in 1748/9. The bass *accompagnato* that introduces this aria associates Jesus’s Ascension with abandonment; the aria’s text could, without alteration, have been used as in an opera libretto as a grief-stricken lover’s farewell to the departing beloved. It is also reminiscent of the words of Mary Magdalene in the Easter Oratorio (“come, embrace me / for my heart, without you, / is bereft and afflicted”). But Mary was actively seeking Jesus, and her music is largely a reflection of her opening words (“tell me *quickly*”). The speaker in “Ach, bleibe doch”, on the other hand, is resigned and melancholy.

This sentiment, however, does not dominate the Ascension Oratorio. Like the other Oratorios, the work is largely a parody; its sources are lost, but it probably drew on sacred and secular models alike. It is especially reminiscent of the Christmas Oratorio’s sixth cantata: the scoring is identical, and both works open with a vigorous festive chorus and close with an equally brilliant, triumphant chorale. This frame encloses a narrative – this time drawn from three different Biblical sources – interspersed with reflective chorales, recitatives and arias. Even the “simple” chorale harmonisation at the heart of this Oratorio, “Nun lieget alles unter dir” (“Now all lies beneath thee”), alludes to the irrepressible joy of the outer movements: with its triple metre, frequent syncopations and odd accentuation, it has an almost perky character.

In the Biblical narrative, those present at Christ’s departure do not express dismay at His rise to heaven; this reaction is ascribed to the modern believer. In a

subsequent *accompagnato*, the alto's grief is partly assuaged at the promise of Christ's eventual return; only then does the narrative mention that those present at the momentous event returned to Jerusalem "with great *joy*". This, in turn, leads to the work's second and last aria, "Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke" ("Jesus, thy merciful glance"). This aria is set for soprano, two flutes, oboe, violins and violas – without celli or continuo. The texture thus has an appropriately ethereal feel, and the aria vividly depicts the speaker's innocent faith – both in Christ's eventual return, and in the possibility of beholding his "merciful glance" here and now. Even after His ascension, Christ is perceived as ever-present.

The words of the final chorale still express yearning for Christ's return. The music, however, makes it sound as though the Second Coming has already taken place. The grief of the alto aria is all but forgotten; and the hope and longing of the text are transformed, in the music, into triumphant confidence.

## **Conclusion**

In giving two Oratorios within the same year, and re-designating a third work as an Oratorio, Bach might well have been trying to forge a cycle of Oratorios. Such a quest for overarching cycles is very much in character for this composer, joining such projects as the 1724/5 cycle of chorale cantatas, or his large-scale encyclopaedic collections of keyboard music. Whether he expected his congregation to perceive this unity is a moot point. He did emphasise that the cantatas of the Christmas Oratorio, though performed on six separate evenings, constitute part of a larger whole. The work's overall unity, however, is more easily perceived today, thanks to the distinctly un-historical practice of performing the entire Oratorio (which is shorter than the St. Matthew Passion) over one or two evenings.

The Oratorios might not be the quintessential representations of Bach the Dramatist. However, they clearly fulfil Walther's requirement that "[t]he musical COMPOSITION [of an Oratorio] must throughout be so richly inventive that the impression created is appropriate and integrated" (*Musicalisches Lexicon*, quoted by Daw, p. 155). As ever, Bach does not relinquish his penchant for complexity and intricacy, and these works are not without their delicate, even melancholy moments. Yet ultimately, they are dominated by extroverted brilliance and genial lyricism, enhanced by some of Bach's most attractive melodies and his varied and colourful

orchestral timbres. Overall, the Oratorios can be counted among Bach's most life-affirming and life-enhancing works.

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Text translations are based, in part, on the CD booklet of Philippe Herreweghe's recording of the Christmas Oratorio (Virgin Classics, 1989), and on translations featured on the Bach Cantatas website ([www.bach-cantatas.com](http://www.bach-cantatas.com)).

## Discography

Choosing the best recordings of Bach's Oratorios is a gratifyingly difficult task. The discography of the Christmas Oratorio is extensive and diverse. The work often brings out the best in musicians. There is much to commend, for instance, in the modern-instrument versions conducted by Karl Richter (Archiv) and Peter Schreier (Philips): compared with these conductors' frequent tendencies towards harsh rigidity, their renditions of the Christmas Oratorio are remarkably warm and relaxed, and feature some excellent solo singing.

The discographies of the Easter and Ascension Oratorios are smaller, but they include enough recordings to make the choice of a single favourite difficult. Several prominent conductors have made highly successful recordings of all three works – notably Philippe Herreweghe (Virgin Classics and Harmonia Mundi) and Masaaki Suzuki (Bis). Ton Koopman's fine performance of the Ascension Oratorio is included in Volume 20 of his Complete Cantatas (reviewed in GOLDBERG 39). I am not familiar with his renditions of the Christmas and Easter Oratorios, but such festive, jubilant works usually bring out the best in Koopman.

The two albums I discuss below have something extra to offer, beyond their "mere" excellence. Neither is entirely flawless, yet they are both deeply satisfying and yield fascinating insights.

### **J. S. Bach: Magnificat; Easter Oratorio; Ascension Oratorio; Cantatas Nos. 4 and 50**

Emma Kirkby, Evelyn Tubb, Emily Van Evera, Margaret Cable, Caroline Trevor, Howard Crook, Wilfrid Jochens, Charles Daniels, Stephen Charlesworth, Simon Grant, David Thomas, Peter Kooy

Taverner Consort & Players/ Andrew Parrott

Virgin Classics Veritas 5 61647 2; 2 CDs: 54:28 + 59:13; recorded 1989, 1993

Rating: 4/5 stars

This re-issue brings together Parrott's one-per-part recordings of the Ascension and Easter Oratorios. The documentation leaves much to be desired; but the value of the set is enhanced by the inclusion of three other works.

The Ascension Oratorio is especially inspiring. The four concertists sing the opening chorus and the closing chorale with captivating energy and superb textural clarity, as well as giving convincing readings of their respective solos. Emma Kirkby's rendition of "Jesu, deine Gnadenblicke" is delicate and refined, and Margaret Cable sings "Ach, bleibe doch" with eloquent restraint.

Parrott's Easter Oratorio suffers occasionally from technical insecurities. In the opening sinfonia-and-chorus, Paul McCreech's Archiv recording (which also employs one-per-part vocal forces) generates greater dramatic tension. In the rest of the work, I prefer Parrott's version – especially thanks to the tauter, more detailed shaping of the orchestral parts: as in the Ascension Oratorio, the Taverner Players play with natural eloquence, forming an absorbing partnership with the excellent singers. The tenor aria "Sanfte soll" – sometimes referred to as a "slumber aria" – is especially revelatory. Parrott's fast tempo and animated phrasing generate a vivid, forward-surgingly dialogue between Charles Daniels and the orchestra, and the performance movingly communicates a sense of ecstatic yearning.

## **J. S. Bach: Christmas Oratorio**

Claron McFadden, Bernarda Fink, Christoph Genz, Dietrich Henschel

Monteverdi Choir/ English Baroque Soloists/ John Eliot Gardiner

TDK DV-BACHO; 2 DVDs: 75:39 + 71:15 (not including bonuses); recorded 1999

rating: 5 stars

This album documents two concerts that took place at the Herderkirche in Weimar in December 1999. Taka Kidokoro's program notes describe these concerts as "particularly authentic from both a biographical and musical point of view". This description can be challenged on several grounds; but, historical pretensions aside, this is still a highly satisfying performance, both aurally and visually.

This live recording is warmer and more lyrical than Gardiner's hard-driven studio recording (Archiv, 1987). Even in faster movements, the musicians rarely sound rushed. The recording vividly captures the transparent textures and tonal beauty of Gardiner's virtuosic choir and orchestra. The four soloists are also superb.

Most importantly, Gardiner and his musicians sensitively underline the work's varied colours, expressive range and stylistic diversity. The strident defiance in parts of the sixth cantata; the understated drama of the trio in the fifth cantata; the sensuous lyricism of the second cantata; the intimate lyricism of "SchlieÙe, mein Herze" – all these, and more, are communicated with technical confidence and interpretive insight. These concerts launched Gardiner's Bach Cantata Pilgrimage (the DVDs include two documentaries covering different aspects of that fascinating project); one senses that the musicians are embarking on this project with infectious and joyful anticipation.

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