

## Programme Notes

Tonight's programme has a particular focus on the church of St Thomas in Leipzig, with three of the four composers featured having held the position of *Thomaskantor*: Johann **Schelle**, Johann **Kuhnau**, and Johann Sebastian **Bach**. Schelle, who succeeded his teacher Sebastian Knüpfer in 1677, fought the town council to replace traditional Latin pieces in the church services with ones in the German tongue; the instigation of the great tradition of gospel and chorale cantatas in Leipzig was his achievement. Kuhnau, who received his early education in Dresden, studied law the Leipzig university, and was appointed organist of the *Thomaskirche* at the age of 24. He remained active as a lawyer, as well as theorist, linguist, and novelist, and upon Schelle's death, was appointed cantor in 1701. He in turn was succeeded by J.S. Bach in 1722.

The programme opens with the *Kyrie 'Christe du Kamme Gottes'*, a contrapuntal setting for five-part choir of the first part of the ordinary of the mass in the original Greek, but which incorporates the chorale tune and words of Luther's German translation of the Agnus Dei, the last portion of the latin ordinary of the mass. Possibly dating from Bach's time in Weimar, he revised and reused it in the 1730s as part of the *Missa in F* BWV 233, with the chorale tune played by by instruments.

Kuhnau, though an immensely talented polymath, nevertheless faced challenges in his position as Thomaskantor, notably from the young, dynamic Telemann who was for a short time director of music at the New Church, and from the Leipzig opera (of which he himself was a cofounder), both of which drew musical resources, especially talented students, away from the *Thomaskirche*. Perhaps for these reasons he gained a reputation as a conservative, dull predecessor to J. S. Bach, but it is only recently that his church music has received much attention, showing it to be melodious, inventive, full of life and of the 'italianate' operatic forms he was

said to condemn; ***Weicht ich Sorgen aus dem Herten*** is exemplary. On the other hand, ***Tristis est anima mea*** (heard in the second half of the programme) is a motet, understood at the time to be a composition for chorus, usually contrapuntal, without obligatory instrumental parts, based on a biblical or chorale text, and often quite short. Harkening back to the style of Palestrina, Kuhnau sets the Latin text in a conservative contrapuntal texture, but with ravishing expressivity. Notably, *Tristis* was used and adapted by Bach, and remained in the repertoire of German church choirs to the present time.

Bach's setting of ***Jesu meine Freude*** is easily the most sophisticated vocal work on tonight's programme, and much more elaborate example of the motet style. The longest of the six surviving works by Bach in the genre, its sectional and strophic organisation around variations on the chorale shows clear parallels with the cantata style, and its eleven movements are organised into an imposing symmetrical structure, with the six verses of the chorale with their devotional poetry by Johann Franck alternating with freely-composed settings of biblical text from the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans. The symmetry is outlined below:

- I 4 part **chorale** harmonisation (Franck, verse 1)
- II 5 part **motet** (biblical)
- III 5 part **chorale** harmonisation (elaborated)  
(Franck, verse 2)
- IV **Trio**, SSA (biblical)
- V 5 part **chorale** free setting  
(Franck, verse 3)
- VI **Fugue** (Biblical)
- VII 4 part **chorale** (Franck, verse 4)
- VIII **Trio**, ATB (biblical)
- IX 4 part **Chorale prelude** (Franck, verse 5)
- X 5 part motet (biblical)

## XI 4 part **chorale** harmonisation (Franck, verse 6)

This symmetry is an example of *chiastic* structure which represents Christ in the metaphysics of the music theory of the day (*chiasmus* represents the Greek letter *chi* ('X'), the first letter in the name 'Christ' and whose shape resembles a cross). At the centre of this musical structure (206 bars precede it and 208 follow) is a sublime fugue on the text 'Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich, sondern geistlich' with its two-syllable off-beat emphasis of '*fleischlich*' and beautiful melismatic extension of the syllable '*Geist*'. Bach is clearly pointing to this passage as the key text. Even in Bach's time, music such as the cantatas and this motet with their chorale-settings and elaborate learned counterpoint on the one hand and personalised, devotional poetry and more cerebral biblical passages on the other represented a compromise between pietism (which favoured a personal approach to religion and eschewed sophisticated art) and Lutheran orthodoxy (which was more concerned with the communal nature of religion and fully embraced high art in religious services). Nowadays both these aspects may be far less relevant, given that high art has largely been rejected by religion, and religion largely rejected by society (the place of high art in society is another argument, no less relevant today than it was to Buxtehude). But in the words of Katherine Goheen writing about Bach's motet, one can hope the listener might be able to 'live in the Spirit, just for a moment, through the long, beautiful lines in the fugal and chorale expositions' of this central movement of *Jesu, meine Freude*. (1) John Elliot Gardiner says that we sense how "Bach ... 'stands here and sings in confident tranquility' [paraphrasing movement V] and exhorts us to do the same. If one wanted to pick a single example of how Bach chose to harness his compositional prowess and capacity for intention to articulate his zeal and faith, this would be it." (2)

Schelle's cantata ***Herr, lehre uns bedenken*** sets words by David Elias Heidenreich, from a collection of cantata texts used by many

composers of the time. This cantata is, with its chamber-like small scale (three voices and three solo instruments) incorporates an additional level beyond the biblical and poetic aspects of the libretto: the instruments wordlessly comment on the text by quoting chorale tunes which of course would have been intimately known to the listeners of the day. In turn, these are 'Christus, der ist mein Leben', 'Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist', 'Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, O Herr', and 'Herzlich tut mich verlangen'.

The two pieces by Dietrich **Buxtehude** are in some ways the outliers on tonight's programme: not only was Buxtehude not associated with Leipzig or the *Thomaskirche*, these two pieces were not written for church services, but more likely for private events or the famous *Abendmusik* series of concerts which he ran in Lübeck. Both are *ciacconas*, based on a repeating bass line, in the case of

***Quemadmodum desiderat cervus*** repeated 64 times. The effect though, is one of an improvisatory, ecstatic dance, as melodic variations carry the Latin text (loosely based on Psalm 42 and 118) to thrilling utterances of 'Gaudium' ('rejoice') in the last repetitions.

The **Trio Sonata in A minor** makes use of an unusual juxtaposition of instrumental sonorities to achieve some striking effects.

Buxtehude, immensely well-regarded as a composer in his time, has one connexion to the music of tonight's programme in that he was a profound influence on the young Bach, who made a pilgrimage to Lübeck to learn all he could from the master.

Tonight's programme closes, after the motet by Kuhnau, with Bach's ***Sanctus in D***, another setting of part of the ordinary of the Latin mass. This ebullient movement is thought to have been performed during the morning service on Bach's first Christmas in Leipzig.

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(1) Kathleen Goheen: "Jesu meine Freude: a cultural reception analysis of Romans 8, Bach the evangelist, and our contemporary

secularized society.” *Consensus Journal: a Canadian Lutheran Journal of Theology*, Vol. 32 No. 2, 2008.

(2) John Eliot Gardiner, CD liner notes to *JS Bach – Motets* (SDG 716), 2011.

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