

## BACH CANTATA NOTES

The performance of Bach cantatas must be one of the most satisfying endeavors of music-making. The requirements placed on the musicians and listeners alike in the areas of concentration, understanding, and personal involvement are as great or greater than that of other genre of music. Yet, we must also remember that these works (we have about 275 of them--another 100 or so have been lost) were written by Bach for presentation at worship, along with a sermon and service, by his own small choir and what instruments he could muster.

Bach's writing is aimed at emotionally magnifying the text for his congregation. He uses hymn tunes (chorales) for recognition--we must assume that these tunes could be heard and recognized by the members of the congregation so that they in turn could recall the words of the chorales and incorporate their meaning into the meaning of the topic of that particular church service. The accompaniments often reflect, either through obvious motifs or thematic repetition, the mood or "feeling" of the text. This is certainly also a major characteristic of the music of Handel, but in Bach it seems to take on a subtler and deeper meaning. Bach will certainly use as obvious a device as a rising scale to depict the ascent into heaven, but he will also use "sigh" motifs in the amazing opening chorus to Cantata No. 3 to depict the pains of the heart.

In choosing which cantatas to present, Peter Kechley and I have tried to use works which were written for these particular times of year. Cantata No. 28 is for the Sunday after Christmas; No. 73 for the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, and No. 3 for the 2nd Sunday after Epiphany. By keeping with the appropriate season, we can more appreciate how the works for the church fit with the seasonal times and feelings of the year. Also, this gives us a good opportunity to present both familiar and lesser-known cantatas.

CANTATA NO. 28 with text by Erdmann Neumeister was composed in Leipzig between 1723 and 1727. The work opens with a joyous, almost Italian Balletto for solo soprano and full instrumental ensemble. Following, after a very brief da capo ("from the beginning") of only the first orchestral introduction, is the main part of the work: the chorus based on the chorale tune "Nun lob' mein' Seel' den Herren". This great chorus (Bach wrote at the end "174 bars!") takes the chorale tune phrase by phrase with contrapuntal imitation in the lower voices and doubles the parts, like in the major motets, with brass, strings and double reeds. Note particularly the chromaticism where the text speaks of our sins. The next recitativo Bach wrote the words on a piece of manuscript paper, and then rearranged both the words and the music until it was exactly what he wanted. The tenor recitativo is a perfect example of Bach's use of harmony and only very occasionally moving parts (in the strings) to heighten the meaning of the text. The jig-like duet for alto and tenor brings us, joyfully, to the final chorale.

CANTATA NO. 73 was described by Albert Schweitzer as a good cantata to introduce those not overly familiar with Bach's music to the art of cantata writing. (The author of the text is unknown; the work was composed in Leipzig during the same period as No. 28.) The opening movement is an unusual one. The figure in the oboes is used to accompany throughout: it is used with the chorale melody "Wo Gott, der Herr, nicht bei uns hält" as well as with the interspersed recitatives for each voice part. The unusual aspect of the chorus is the use of the homophonic (block-chord) chorale tune phrase by phrase, and placing these semi-accompanied, semi-free recitatives in between. Once again, Bach succeeds in heightening the meaning of the text during the recits., which are to represent the needs and shortcomings of humankind. Notice also that the first four notes of the chorale melody are found in the horn/trumpet accompaniment, but played more quickly. These notes correspond to the text "Lord, as Thou will". The tenor solo is one of hope and joy. The three-part counterpoint between tenor, oboe and bass line is one of the most delightful examples of such to be found in the cantatas. The bass recitative reflects the text through the curve

of the vocal line and the harmonic progressions. It is unusual for Bach to lead directly into an aria, as he does here, without any orchestral introduction. Once again, he does it because of the text "Lord, as Thou will." The accompaniment in the strings is based on the same first four notes of the chorale melody as well as on the oboe figure from the opening movement. What a wonderful place when the orchestra accompanies the knelling of the bell! The Closing chorale melody is "Come, help me praise God's goodness" - also "From God I will not wander".

CANTATA NO. 3 was chosen for the last on the program because it has some of the most expressive of Bach's contrapuntal writing. The author of the text is not known for sure; it was composed in Leipzig, but more than ten years later than the first two on this evening's program: 1735-1744. The opening chorus is one of my favorites. The wonderful strange notes in the vocal lines combined with the intricate imitative counterpoint in the strings and oboes make this chorus an exceptional example of Bach's command of harmony and melody. Some of the twists of the melody and the abrupt changes in the harmony would make Wagner, Strauss, or even Schoenberg proud. To top off all of this, Bach places the chorale melody in the bass and specifies that it be doubled by a bass trombone. The second movement harkens back to the opening of No. 73 with the chorale melody alternating with the recitatives. Here, the repeating melodic figure (used for both chorale and recit. accompaniment) is the characteristic bass line with its impelling motion. Notice particularly the shape of the melodic lines in the recitatives as they relate to the meaning of the text. The angular, kinky melody of the bass aria is extremely evocative of the text "I feel the fear and pains of Hell" followed by the lengthy melisma (more than one note to a syllable) on the word Freuden = joy. The tenor recitative leads to the final duet for soprano and alto. The shape of the melody depicting the "prevailing sorrow" leads to the triumphant joyful passage (first heard in the soprano) "I will with joy be singing to my Jesus" (will ich in Freudigkeit zu meinem Jesu singen). We are treated to not only a duet between soprano and alto, but also a trio with the bass and a contrapuntal quartet when the strings and winds join.

Cantata listening certainly carries with it some aspects of the "acquired taste" school. I find two things very helpful: 1) follow the text, see what Bach is trying to do to paint the text or evoke the feelings of the text and 2) (slightly more gimmicky) try to imagine what Bach's congregation might have felt hearing the work for the very first time. Think of how advanced the music must have sounded, and yet how spiritual it must have felt. Imagine hearing your favorite chorale melody in the bass voice in long tones, or in fast notes in the horn. A last suggestion is to simply allow yourself to be reflective, introverted. Allow the music to enter and don't try to analyze, just feel.

Bach is accessible on many levels. Start where you feel the most comfortable and then progress to the areas where you are less sure. To find yourself anticipating, feeling, and understanding Bach's music--especially the cantatas--on an emotional, spiritual, and intellectual level is one of the greatest joys the world of music has to offer. Remember what Beethoven said of Bach: "Not BACH (german for "brook"), but OCEAN should be his name.