

# Singing The Word: The Cantatas of J S Bach

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I want to look at Bach's cantatas, not simply as an excuse to play you some music this evening<sup>1</sup>, but to explore an example of how a particular cultural form at a particular moment was used to transmit the Christian gospel, to speak or rather *sing* the Word.

In the Spring of 1723 the city fathers of Leipzig appointed Johann Sebastian Bach as Cantor of St Thomas's Church to compose, primarily, *musical sermons*. For that is what the cantata became in Bach's hands. A musical extension to the sermon preached from the pulpit of St Thomas's, loosely based on the readings for the day and also incorporating the Lutheran tradition of hymn-writing, the chorale. Bach's cantatas were, then, one of the ways in which the Lutheran Church preserved and transmitted the Christian tradition, though to our eyes in a spiritualising, sometimes moralistic, and rather pietistic manner.

The German cantata was still a relatively recent innovation in Bach's time. It had its roots in the late seventeenth century and we have a number of cantatas by Buxtehude, Böhm, Pachelbel and others from that earlier generation. The word 'cantata' simply means that it is a sung piece with instrumental accompaniment but its main characteristics are that it is in German rather than Latin – the Lutheran Church still performed the 'missa', the Kyrie and Gloria, in their ancient languages – and it is based on or its text derives from scripture, whereas the earlier Catholic polyphonic tradition usually used liturgical texts, very often the ordinary of the Mass (Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei). In addition to the church cantatas there are also twenty-four surviving *secular* cantatas by Bach, written for a variety of public occasions, but these are not to be considered here save to make the general point that one should beware of suggesting that particular notes or intervals or instrumentation in the church cantatas have a special religious or spiritual significance, because Bach freely re-used music from a secular cantata with fresh words in a later church cantata, and vice versa. In Bach's theology there is no clear distinction between sacred and secular.

<sup>1</sup> This is an extended version of the presentation given at the CTA conference but without the musical extracts from cantatas 168, 82 and 140.

Secular cantatas in Cöthen became church cantatas in Leipzig (BWV 134, 173, 184).

Bach wrote about thirty church cantatas in the early part of his career, before Leipzig, and some of these are simply settings of a biblical text – BWV 131 is a setting of Psalm 130, *Aus tiefe Not schrei ich zu dir*, Out of the Depths I cry to you O Lord – or a strophic setting of a hymn, BWV 4 *Christ lag in Todesbanden* for Easter Sunday. Both are wonderful works and, indeed, the early cantatas include some of his most appealing choral music so he re-used them in Leipzig.

At this stage the structure of the church cantata was quite loose but a pattern emerged which became established in his Leipzig cantatas. There are some solo cantatas for voice and instruments but usually Bach uses a choir, a small group of twelve singers, three to a part, though a memo from 1730 shows he would have liked four to a part<sup>2</sup>, and from these were taken the four soloists (sometimes fewer than four). The choir did not usually sing a lot: often an opening chorus and one verse of a chorale at the end. Between these choral movements, placed like book-ends, would be a series of recitatives and arias for soloists. Here we see the influence of the theatre, the recently invented opera. The instrumental group would have been a little larger than the choir: strings, woodwind playing instruments not normally in use these days, and a bass continuo including the organ to accompany the soloists. On festive occasions Bach could use drums and trumpeters from the town musicians. They would all have performed in the gallery at the back of St Thomas's with Bach beating time with a rolled-up scroll.

Bach's duty in Leipzig was to produce a piece of concerted music for each Sunday of the Church's year and for the main feast days: three days for each of Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, plus Ascension Day, the Marian feasts, St John's, St Michael's and Reformation Day. The only exceptions were the second, third and fourth Sundays of Advent and the last four Sundays of Lent when there was no choral music and Bach had some breathing space to prepare for the demands of Christmas and Easter. Altogether he had to provide about 60 cantatas a year. As Cantor, Bach was in charge of the music in four churches and his cantatas were usually performed twice each Sunday and feast day at St Thomas's and St Nicholas's, the churches alternating between mornings and afternoons. His other performing responsibilities were delegated to senior pupils. So each week Bach had to write a cantata, have copies made, rehearse the senior choir and instrumentalists, and perform it twice on the Sunday, in addition to his other teaching duties – and while

<sup>2</sup> There have been some recent experiments on disc, not altogether unsuccessful, of performing with just four singers, one to a part – even the Matthew Passion.

bringing up a large family<sup>3</sup>. Bach, then, was not the maestro of the concert hall so much as a jobbing-musician meeting his employers demands, but a jobbing musician of the highest order.

The morning service at that time was quite something: it lasted three hours or more beginning at 7am, with the sermon expected to last at least an hour. It included a variety of music including hymns and organ preludes, with the cantata, usually lasting about twenty minutes, placed after the reading of the Gospel and the creed but before the sermon. Some are double-cantatas with the second half being performed during the distribution of communion. Or it seems a second cantata could have been used at that point to supplement the earlier Gospel cantata.<sup>4</sup> And so after the morning's labour, including motets, hymns and a lot of organ playing, there followed lunch and a repeat performance at Vespers in the afternoon at the other of Leipzig's two principal churches.

Immediately on his arrival at Leipzig, Bach began his first cycle of church cantatas on the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Trinity with BWV 75, *Die Elenden sollen essen*, (the catalogue numbers are no indication of their chronology) a two-part cantata written in Cöthen and first performed in St Nicholas's on 30 May 1723. The labour of producing a full cycle within one year was so enormous he re-used some earlier cantatas written in Mülhausen or Weimar. (He had not been able to write any religious music in his previous employment at the Calvinist court of Cöthen.) By the end of this first cycle he had written and performed 62 new cantatas as well as the celebrated *Magnificat* for Christmas Vespers and the St John Passion for Good Friday 1724. Come Trinity Sunday he immediately began this second cycle beginning on 11 June 1724 with BWV 20, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*. There followed 54 more cantatas, plus the so-called Easter Oratorio BWV 249 and a repeat of the St John Passion.

The following summer, 1725, he began a third cycle but the works now became more sporadic either because he was running out of steam, or because he felt he had a big enough bank to be able to repeat works, or perhaps many have just been lost. At least he now had time to complete the St Matthew Passion for Good Friday 1727. Bach's obituary written by his son Carl Philip Emmanuel tells us that his father had written five cycles of church cantatas in Leipzig which would amount to around 300 separate pieces – over 100 hours of music. Almost 200 have survived and these make up about 40% of Bach's extant output. Only one was published in Bach's own lifetime

<sup>3</sup> It is well known that Bach had twenty children but most died in infancy or early childhood which was normal before the twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup> In his first year at Leipzig, Bach wrote thirteen two-part cantatas or paired cantatas for the same service: 75, 76, 21, 24 + 185, 147, 186, 179 + 199, 70, 181 + 18, 31 + 4, 172 + 59, 194 + 165, and 22 + 23.

(BWV 71, *Gott ist mein König*) and the missing 100 disappeared when his manuscripts were distributed among his sons after his death. Wilhelm Friedemann seems largely to blame. Although one might wonder whether Bach completed five complete cycles.

The cantatas were written for particular days of the liturgical year, though in fact many seem to have little or nothing to do with the readings for the day or they choose to develop a *theme* set by the Gospel. Cantatas that develop a theme without setting anything from the Gospel itself include BWV 20, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, on judgment and damnation; BWV 44, *Sie werden euch in den Bahn tun*, on persecution and the reliability of God's protection; BWV 47 on pride and humility; BWV 48 on healing in body and soul; BWV 148 on how to keep the Sabbath (Bach's Christian answer is: by contemplating God), and many others. The first on this list, BWV 20, is the first of Bach's second cycle and is a choral cantata which, like all of this cycle up to Easter, sets the words of a hymn whose theme is related to the Gospel. Why did he set hymns? There is the practical answer that he had already composed a whole cycle based on biblical texts and he wanted something different for the second year. But it also suggests that in the Lutheran liturgy the chorale is second in importance only to scripture.

Other cantatas use a *sermon* text. Good examples would be BWV 37 on the ascension based on Mark 16.16; and BWV 154, *Mein liebster Jesus ist verloren*, on how to find Jesus, provoked by the Gospel for the first Sunday after Epiphany, Luke 2.41–52, about the parents of Jesus losing him in Jerusalem.

Some cantatas use the Bible in a different way. BWV 44, 45, 46 and 136 all begin with a choral setting of an Old Testament text that parallels the Gospel for the day, and each later ties this to an actual quotation from the Gospel. Cantata 136, for example, uses Psalm 139.23, 'Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts.' The Gospel is Matthew 7.15–23, a complex of sayings focussed on 'Not everyone who says to me "Lord, Lord" shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father in heaven.' The theme of this scripturally based sermon-cantata is evident. Let us now look at one of these thematic cantatas in detail.

BWV 168, *Tue Rechnung* is not a well known cantata. It was written for the ninth Sunday after Trinity and the Gospel was Luke 16.1–19, the parable of the Dishonest Steward, who remits part of the debts he has to recover to earn favour with the debtors in case his master sacks him when he returns. Bach nowhere quotes Luke but he develops a text (or rather Salomon Franck did, but Bach owned the texts whoever actually wrote them) on judgment and how the burghers of Leipzig must use their money for the poor to ensure their salvation. He actually has an aria on 'capital and interest'! The bass (vox Christi) sings:

Make a reckoning! Word of Thunder,  
 that by itself splits the rocks.  
 Word, which freezes my blood!  
 Make a reckoning! Soul, go forth!  
 Ah, you must repay to God  
 his gifts, love and life.  
 Make a reckoning, Word of thunder!

The tenor replies in recitative:

It is only an alien good  
 that I have in this life;  
 spirit, life, courage and blood  
 and office and position is the gift of my God,  
 it is mine for safekeeping  
 and for faithful stewardship  
 entrusted to me from lofty hands;  
 ah! but alas! I shudder  
 when I look to my conscience  
 and see my accounts so full of defects!  
 I have, day and night,  
 the goods which God has lent to me,  
 cold-mindedly squandered!  
 How can I escape from you, righteous God!  
 I call pleadingly:  
 fall you mountains! You hills conceal me  
 from God's wrathful judgment  
 and from the flash of his countenance.

And follows with the aria:

Capital and interest,  
 my debts great and small  
 must one day be accounted for.  
 Everything of which I remain guilty  
 is written in God's ledger  
 as if with steel and diamond.

The following recitative tells us not to despair now that our debts have been wiped away, 'The blood of the Lamb, o great love, has cancelled your debt and settled you with God. It is repaid and your balance cleared.' So we are the debtors and the Lamb is the steward; an interesting piece of exegesis! Then we are reminded that we are stewards too. You must 'make prudent use of mammon to benefit the poor; so when your time and life have ended, you shall rest secure in heaven's shelter.' The last aria, a duet, tells us to break free of mammon's chains. And it ends with a chorale.

In this run-of-the-mill cantata we can see how Bach goes about interpreting the Gospel (he rarely makes reference to the first reading, the Epistle). He takes the text of the Gospel and its *literal* meaning

for granted; that was no doubt dealt with in the sermon. Of the three forms of *spiritual interpretation* that St Thomas lists in the first question of his Summa (1a 1.10) Bach usually avoids *allegorical interpretation* whereby the old law is interpreted by the new and which includes Christological interpretation, but we shall see an example of this later in Cantata 140. He does, however, include *anagogical interpretation* which refers the text to the people of Leipzig and their eternal glory (*ea quae sunt in aeterna gloria est sensus anagogicus*). And he offers a *moral interpretation* to influence their present behaviour because, as he says in Cantata 179 with the Gospel on the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18.9–14), ‘Today’s Christianity is ill-disposed. Most Christian people in the world are lukewarm like Laodiceans, and like the puffed-up Phariseans who outwardly appear so pious. Indeed they go into God’s house and there perform their outward duties, but does all this in truth make a Christian? No, hypocrites can do this too.’ What did the congregation make of that?

BWV 82 *Ich habe genug*, ‘I have sufficient’, is not a typical Leipzig cantata. There is no chorus, just a part for bass with oboe and strings. It was first performed on 2 February 1727 for the feast of the Purification, one of seven cantatas he wrote for this festival. The Gospel is Luke 2.22–32, the presentation in the temple and the song of Simeon, the *Nunc Dimittis*. Again Bach does not set the Gospel to music. He sits very lightly on the text and weaves a meditation round it. The opening movement is usually said to be a very free setting of Simeon’s *Nunc Dimittis*.

I have enough. I have received the saviour, hope of the pious, in my yearning arms. It is enough. I have seen him; my faith has grasped Jesus to my heart, and today I would gladly leave this world.

So sings Simeon. But what’s this? ‘My faith has grasped Jesus.’ The following recitative shifts away from Simeon to the faith of the Christian “everyman”.

It is enough. My only hope is that Jesus shall be mine, and I his. I cling to him in faith and, with Simeon, I already see the joy of that other life. Let us join him! If the Lord would only deliver me from the chains of my body. Ah, if only the time of my farewell were here, I would say with joy to the world: I have enough.

We might not, however, feel very comfortable with the Pietism suggested here. It is one thing to accept one’s mortality, to be reconciled to dying; it is another to long for death. But Bach’s cantatas are full of it, even on Jubilate Sunday (BWV 146) and Whit Sunday (BWV 59). The text here is not a setting of Luke’s Gospel. It is a meditation for each listener on faith and death provoked by Simeon. The soloist who represents each of us, sings in an

enthusiastic and almost jolly last movement, ‘I look forward to my death. Ah, would that I had already found it.’

In BWV 39, *Bring den Hungrigen dein Brot*, Bach uses scripture in an oblique way. It begins his third cycle and was written in 1726. The Gospel for the first Sunday after Trinity is Luke 16.19–31, Dives and Lazarus, the story of the miserable fate of the rich man who fails to succour the poor man at his gate. The cantata does not use Luke directly but the opening chorus uses an equivalent passage from Isaiah 58.7–8,

Share your bread with the hungry,  
and bring the homeless poor into your house;  
when you see the naked, clothe him,  
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?  
Then shall your light break forth like the dawn,  
and your health shall prosper speedily;  
your righteousness shall go before you,  
the glory of the Lord shall be your reward.

The theme of the rest of the work, really a sermon in music, is that God cares for everyone and he provides for the poor by giving the rest of us enough to provide for them (spiritual meaning). Our obligation to provide for the poor is laid on the line (moral meaning).

In Cantata 22, *Jesus nahm zu sich die Zwölfe*, Bach’s author quotes directly a couple of verses from the day’s Gospel, Luke 18.31–43 on Jesus’s final journey to Jerusalem, sung by the tenor, bass and chorus. Then the event is transferred to the performer/listener of Bach’s day by singing of how he (actually an Alto who could be male or female) would gladly accompany Jesus to Jerusalem if only his desires might be crucified within him.

Oh, crucify in me, in my corrupted breast  
before all else, this world and its forbidden lust.  
So I will welcome understanding that comes from what you say,  
and will go to Jerusalem with a thousand joys.

So a historical journey in the first century becomes a spiritual journey in the eighteenth or any other century. This is the first of a pair of cantatas with BWV 23 to be performed before and after the sermon on Quinquagesima Sunday. Both were performed at Bach’s audition in February 1723 and re-used the following Lent. While BWV 22 focuses on the first half of the Gospel, Cantata 23, *Du wahrer Gott und Davids Sohn*, looks at the second half, on the healing of a blind man on the way to Jerusalem but without quoting Luke. Again the blindness is internalised by the tenor who looks forward to his own healing.

BWV 140, *Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme*, Wake up, the voice calls us, shows Bach’s use of a text at its richest. We do not know

who wrote the text. It is usually ascribed to that famous poet 'unknown', though it might have been by Christian Friedrich Henrici who wrote under the name Picander. It was written for the 27<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity to be performed in 1731, but this Sunday doesn't come round very often, only when Easter occurs before 27 March. The only other year in which it could have been performed in Bach's own time was in 1742. The cantata was composed late to fill a gap in an earlier cycle. The text begins with the opening stanza of the hymn *Wachet auf* by Philipp Nicolai (1599) and finishes with the last stanza in a simple four-part harmonic setting.

The Gospel for the day is Matthew 25.1–13, the parable of the wise and foolish maidens. Matthew tells us explicitly that it is a parable about the kingdom of heaven. The following characters are part of the story: ten maidens, five wise and the five foolish who have run out of oil for their lamps, the bridegroom, the voice that announces the arrival of the bridegroom. In the background are dealers in olive oil but neither bride nor guests are mentioned. The clue to its meaning is in the opening: it is about the kingdom of heaven (as Matthew calls it). In what respect? It is about preparedness: the big event is at hand but we don't know exactly when, be ready or you may be locked out.

The epistle for the day, 1 Thessalonians 5.1–11, is more explicitly about judgment. Paul writes about the Day of the Lord (itself an Old Testament idea) coming like a thief in the night. 'So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.'

Now for the hymn. 'Wake up, the voice calls us'. Whose is the voice? God's? No, 'The watchman high up on the battlement. Wake up, you city of Jerusalem, the hour is midnight' and indeed we hear twelve dotted notes on the strings in the first four bars and this is repeated several times later. So the maidens of the parable have in the chorale become the inhabitants of Jerusalem. The watchman is Ezekiel who has been appointed to warn us of the enemy at the gate (Ezek 33.1–6) which is what the bridegroom will be for the unready maidens.

Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme,  
 der Wächter sehr hoch auf der Zinne,  
 wach auf, du Stadt Jerusalem.  
 Mitternacht heisst diese Stunde,  
 sie ruffen uns mit hellem Munde,  
 wo seid ihr klugen Jungfrauen?  
 Wohlauf, der Bräut'gam kommt,  
 steht auf, die Lampen nehmt,  
 Alleluia  
 Macht euch bereit  
 zu der Hochzeit,  
 ihr müsset ihm entgegengehn.

Wake up, the voice calls us,  
 the watchman, high on the tower,  
 Wake up, you city of Jerusalem.  
 The hour is midnight,  
 they call us with bright voices,  
 Where are you, wise maidens?  
 Indeed the bridegroom comes,  
 stand up and take your lamps.  
 Alleluia  
 Make yourselves ready  
 for the wedding,  
 you must go to meet him.



The music seems to represent a procession of these maidens going out to meet the bridegroom. The instrumental opening sets the basic rhythm of three in a bar with an antiphonal effect between the strings and the wind. The chorale theme is sung very slowly, one to a bar, by the sopranos who perhaps represent the wise maidens who are calling us to wake up because the bridegroom is now coming. The lower parts sing three to a bar, to keep it moving. These are supported by the woodwind at the same speed – three to a bar – but sometimes doubling to six to a bar with the strings scurrying at the same speed. So you have three related tempi working together to give the chorale a firm ground in the cantus firmus of the chorale coupled with movement, pace. It is this that gives the seven minute movement a sense of monumentality even though it is performed by a small group of, in its own time, twelve singers and perhaps fifteen instrumentalists.

Now look at how the theme of the Gospel is developed. In the following tenor recitative we get a link to the Song of Songs in the Old Testament. The citizens of Jerusalem of the opening choral movement become ‘the daughters of Zion’ and the bridegroom is described as a ‘stag springing on the hills’, an image that comes from the same book:

‘The voice of my beloved!  
Behold he comes leaping upon the mountains,  
    bounding over the hills;  
my beloved is like a gazelle  
    or a young stag.’ (3.8f.)

The aria which follows is a duet for soprano and bass and, typically for Bach, these are the voices used for ‘the soul’ and Christ. So we now have a Christological interpretation of the parable. This is not in the original – in Matthew the bridegroom is not Christ – in the parable we have Jesus telling a story about a bridegroom and how we must be ready for his arrival at an unexpected hour. What we have here is an allegorical interpretation of the parable which had become standard practice at a very early stage in the Church’s history. Whether Jesus ever intended any of his parables to be interpreted allegorically is a point of some debate.

#### Recitative: Tenor

He comes, he comes,  
the bridegroom comes.  
Come out, you daughters of Jerusalem.  
His departure hurries from the heights  
to your mother’s house.  
The bridegroom comes, who like a roe

and a young stag  
 leaps upon the hills  
 and you he brings to the wedding feast.  
 Wake up, rouse yourselves  
 to receive the bridegroom,  
 There, look, he comes this way.

### Duet: Soprano, Bass

When are you coming, my saviour?

- I come, your awaited one -

I wait with burning oil.

Open the hall!

- I am opening the hall -

To the heavenly banquet

Come, Jesus.

- I am coming, dear soul.

So the bridegroom of Matthew has become the beloved of the Song of Songs and then the Christ of the Church's allegorical interpretation of scripture. The wise and foolish maidens have become the daughters of Zion of the Song of Songs in the tenor recitative, and the individual soul in the duet. The wedding we are invited to is salvation: 'When are you coming, *my saviour*?' The soul asks Jesus to 'Open the hall to the heavenly meal' This allusion to the messianic banquet now links the hearer to the liturgical celebration in which the cantata is placed: the eucharist. The soul says '*Komm Jesu*' and Jesus replies '*Ich komm liebliche Seele*' for it is in the eucharist that we meet Christ.

In the next movement the tenor sings a verse from the celebrated chorale and ends with the words 'We all follow to the hall of joy and stay for supper', '*Und halten mit das Abendmahl*' but *Abendmahl* is the German word used for the Lord's Supper, which is the heavenly meal of the previous aria and the wedding meal of the preceding recitative.

Zion hört die Wächter singen,  
 das Hertz tut ihr vor Freuden springen,  
 sie wachet und steht eilend auf.  
 Ihr Freund kommt von Himmel prächtig,

von Gnaden stark, von Wahrheit mächtig,  
 ihr Licht wird hell, ihr Stern geht auf.

Nun komm, du werthe Kron',  
 Herr Jesu, Gottes Sohn,  
 Hosianna!  
 Wir folgen all  
 zum Freudensaal  
 und halten mit das Abendmahl.

Zion hear, the watchmen call  
 her heart leaps with joy,  
 she wakes and speedily arises.  
 Her wonderful friend comes from  
 heaven,  
 strong in grace, powerful in truth  
 Her light becomes bright, her star  
 arises.  
 Come now, you precious crown,  
 Lord Jesus, Son of God  
 Hosanna  
 We all follow  
 to the joyful hall  
 And stay for supper.

The next movement is a short bass recitative, representing Christ, in which the soul (previously the daughters of Zion and before that the maidens) is now the bride and the bride is you, the listener: 'So go in with me, you my chosen bride. I have pledged myself to you for ever.' And in the following aria (duet for soprano and bass again) their love is as it were consummated: 'My friend is mine. And I am yours. Nothing shall separate this love. I will wander with you in heaven's rose garden. Joy, plenty and rapture will be there.'

The cantata ends with a simple setting of the last verse of the hymn that started us off, with a link now to the Book of Revelation, a book which is about judgment with talk of a wedding banquet and a new Jerusalem coming from heaven. So this now is the final message of the watchman to the daughters of Jerusalem and Bach's message to his congregation: Prepare for the new Jerusalem. It seems a big move from the original parable to the last judgment as pictured in the last book of the New Testament, but it works. The final verse of Nicolai's hymn, simply has a reference the twelve pearls of heaven's gate, while Revelation declares 'the twelve gates were twelve pearls, each of the gates made with a single pearl' (Rev 21.21).

Gloria sei dir gesungen,  
mit Menschen und englischen Zungen,

mit Harfen und mit Zimbeln schon.  
Von zwölf Perlen sind die Pforten,  
an deiner Stadt wir sind Konsorten  
der Engel hoch um deinen Thron.  
Kein Aug' hat je gespürt,  
kein Ohr hat je gehört  
solche Freude,  
des sind wir froh,  
io, io,  
ewig in *dulci júbilo*.

Let glory be sung to you  
with human and angelic [not English!]  
tongues  
with harps and even cymbals.  
The doors are made of twelve pearls  
in your city we are companions  
of the angels high around your throne.  
No eye has ever seen,  
no hear has ever heard  
such joy  
as our joy  
io, io,  
for ever in *dulci júbilo*.

The poet's ingenious text takes us on a journey through a number of transformations playing with a variety of biblical texts, and it is Bach's music that sees us through to the end.

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