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Collision and Collusion

*Blest pair of sirens, pledges of Heav'n's joy,
Sphear-born harmonious Sisters, Voice, and Vers,
Wed your divine sounds, and mixt power employ
Dead things with inbreath'd sense able to pierce,
And to our high-rais'd phantasie present,
That undisturbèd Song of pure concent ...*

– John Milton, *At a Solemn Musick*

‘People often complain that music is too ambiguous,’ wrote Mendelssohn in 1842. Everyone understands words, of course, but listeners do not know what they should think when they hear music. ‘With me,’ he said, ‘it is exactly the opposite, and not only with regard to an entire speech but also with individual words. These, too, seem to me so ambiguous, so vague, so easily misunderstood in comparison to genuine music, which fills the soul with a thousand things better than words. The thoughts which are expressed to me by music that I love are not too *indefinite* to be put into words, but on the contrary, too *definite*.¹ It is a startling statement, one many musicians would subscribe to but the very opposite of what some others would expect. The relation of music to language is as complex as that of language to thought. Language can elucidate, but it can also throttle sensibility in the process of its transmission (see footnote on [this page](#)). Music, on the other hand, when it is performed, allows that channel of transmitted thought and sensibility to flow with total freedom: it might not be very good at expressing our everyday mundane transactions, but the thoughts it

does express are conveyed more clearly and fully than they would be by words. So what happens when you put the two together – as has happened from the beginning of time until the latest pop song? Any opera or cantata by necessity places text and its musical voicing in a symbiotic relationship, one that creates both opportunities and constraints for the composer.

It is, I hope, obvious from the previous three chapters that in Bach we are dealing with a composer who was never satisfied just to ‘set’ religious texts, whether cantatas, motets or Passions. Emanuel Bach told Forkel that his father ‘worked diligently, governing himself by the content of the text, without any strange misplacing of the words, and without elaborating on individual words at the expense of the sense of the whole, as a result of which ridiculous thoughts often appear, such as sometimes arouse the admiration of people who claim to be connoisseurs and are not’.² That may well have been the impression Emanuel wanted to give – that his father did not normally flout eighteenth-century conventions of text-setting. But the truth is that Bach’s texted music is far from compliant: it opens the door to all-encompassing moods, which he evokes far more powerfully and eloquently than words could alone, particularly as his textures are so often multilayered and thus able to convey parallel, complementary and even contradictory *Affekts*. Poring over the texts that he set to music gives us the liturgical context but in itself tells us nothing reliable about the music or of course how it came to be formed in his imagination. With him we soon find music is far from being a neutral outer shell for the words it encases. Bach dealt with textual specificity – sometimes by reinforcing it with music of a parallel definiteness, sometimes by countering it with music of a competing and, in Mendelssohn’s sense, superior definiteness. The words impart an extra dimension to the music and vice versa, so that their conjunction is greater than the sum of the individual parts; but even when music surrounds the text with a code of emphasis or matching mood it does not always fuse with language to achieve a perfect synergy. The process is either of collusion at one extreme or collision at another, or some combination of the two. There are of course many gradations in

between, including a halfway house (perhaps the most interesting stage) where music seems to absorb a meta-textual component. This chapter highlights some of the more striking examples of Bach's wide-ranging practice in his cantatas and motets – instances where his approach was markedly different to that of his contemporaries, even laying him open to the charge of inappropriateness.

Though he never admitted as much, Bach might have recognised that he was somehow swimming against the tide of current fashions in church music, and that he was aiming at something way beyond that of other composers of his day. This is immediately clear if we compare his results to Telemann's when both are faced with setting an identical text, dating from a time (1708–12) during which the two were in regular contact: Bach in Weimar, Telemann – who gave his middle name to his godson C. P. E. Bach – in Eisenach. The comparison shows how radically their paths had already diverged. As one of the pioneers of the new cantata style founded by Erdmann Neumeister, Telemann was widely admired for his skill in grafting the techniques of contemporary opera on to the old cantata rootstock. The libretto of *Gleichwie der Regen* was even written specially for him by Neumeister in 1711, and his cantata based on it was performed in Eisenach shortly afterwards, and perhaps also in Weimar, where Telemann was held in high esteem by Bach's employer Duke Ernst August.

From the opening solo, in which Isaiah compares the seed (55:4–15), and the impact of the weather on its germination and growth, to the Holy Word, it is obvious that Bach's setting of 1713 (BWV 18) is going to be the more adventurous – and more excitable, too, at moments when he disregards the 'correct' declamation of the words. Where in the second movement the poet combines warnings of the dangers to God's Word in the style of a sermon with four lines of prayer from a litany by Luther, Telemann strives to blur the distinction between psalmody and speech-like recitative and to avoid extremes of expressivity, his music operating modestly as the mere handmaiden of the words. Bach does the exact opposite: relishing the contrast between archaic psalm tone (initiated by the

soprano but completed by the full ensemble) and modern operatic recitative style (of which he shows total mastery, even though this is the first time he uses it), he sets his tenor and bass free to voice their personal pleas for faith and resolve in the face of ‘devilish guile’, with virtuosic displays of coloratura, ever-wider modulations and vivid word-painting on *berauben* (‘to rob’) and *irregehen* (‘to wander off course’), while reserving the most extravagant fifty-five-note run for the word *Verfolgung* (‘persecution’). In fact he turns this movement into the centrepiece of his work – a through-composed tapestry made up of four stretches of accompanied recitative, unique in his cantatas.

Where Telemann’s instrumentation is the standard one of four-part strings, Bach’s is improbable and strikingly original – four violas and basso continuo including a bassoon, bringing a magically dark-hued sonority to the overture and to later movements. The quick responsiveness of his music to the changing sentiments of the text allows him to describe, first, those who renounce the Word and ‘fall away like rotting fruit’ (in a decorated instrumental phrase, fluttering down) and, a moment later, how ‘another man may only tend his belly’. All contribute to a lively Bruegel-like portrayal of rural society at work – the sower, the glutton, the lurking Devil, and some pantomime villains in the form of Turks and Papists. Typical of litanies, the linking passages are unvaried musically (might they contain a whiff of satirical fun-poking at the monotonous intoning of the clergy?), except for the continuo part, which goes ballistic at mention of the Turks and Papists ‘blaspheming and raging’. With Telemann, on the other hand, we miss a sense of engagement with the text or of his using the full resources of music, as Bach does so masterfully, to lift it and its underlying message into his listener’s consciousness with a huge increase in musical substance, subtlety and interest.

From his Weimar years onwards Bach’s procedure in setting poetic commentary rarely fits into a conventional expository mode. His arias, for example, are seldom presented as a sermon of the time would have been, as ordered exegesis, and in shaping them to fit their particular context he takes liberties, following his own private

logic. As Laurence Dreyfus has shown, ‘he develops selective ideas from his texts that spark a dominating instrumental melody, but he also attaches signs, genres and styles foreign to the text that impose, by way of a kind of performance or execution of the text, an obscuring palimpsest on the poetry.’³ Take the Easter cantata BWV 31, *Der Himmel lacht*, first performed in Weimar on 21 April 1715. Faced with a verse of undiluted dogma, beginning ‘Adam must decay in us, if the new man shall recover’, with no discernible emotion and no opportunity for word-painting, Bach sets in motion a pulsating full-blooded string texture suggestive more of rites of spring than of man’s resolve to turn over a new leaf. This disregard for the rules of musical propriety would have been enough to make a pernickety theorist like Johann Mattheson wince – for, strictly speaking, the music is not the direct outcome of the text and it is certainly not set in sober syllabic style. It is an early instance of the collision that so often characterises Bach’s response to the genre, and which gives the emerging music such lasting vitality. The way he addresses a given text or doctrinal theme and the personal, very human gloss he puts on it tell us a lot more about his character than the self-deprecating words about being ‘obliged to be industrious’ that he used to describe the permissive basis of his approach to composition. This simply cannot constitute the full story of someone of his stature. At the outset of this book I hinted that viewing Bach as some kind of subversive might provide a point of entry to an understanding of his achievement, which, in common with other great artists, was ‘attuned to the most subtle manipulations and recasting of human experience’.⁴ Here we are coming across instances that seem to substantiate that claim.

Abstract music provides us with emotions purified of prescribed narratives and untethered from any pressing reality. We get the sadness of loss without loss itself, the sensation of terror without any object of terror to which we have to respond, the luminescence of joy that melts away as we perceive it.⁵ Something quite different occurs once music is conjoined with poetry, even poetry of low intrinsic value. At this point there is a delicate balance between

sound and sense: the music now *becomes* the loss and the terror just as much as the words do. Paul Valéry called poetry ‘a language within a language’ – but isn’t that also an accurate description of the way music and poetry negotiate with each other? The effect of music on verse goes beyond just adding a layer of *impasto*, thickening the physical presence of the words that convey meaning. It is the equivalent of metaphor: it puts a brake on the flow of speech and recited verse and sets it into a differently structured rhythm and tempo, one that if successful allows the listener to engage with the composer’s own reading of the words.^a

Theology is traditionally expressed through words, while music, Bach’s habitual form of expression, obeys rules that override word-driven considerations – in procedures that Dreyfus shows to be quite anti-literary at times.⁶ In the interplay – even friction – between words and music in his church cantatas, a strong sense emerges of Bach reaching for the definitive, summative formulation of meaning.^b In the process he seems constantly to be challenging his listeners to consider what it means to be a Christian (freighted with obligations as well as joys). He uses music both to draw new meanings out of the Gospel texts and to hint at others that occur to him, perhaps subconsciously, in the process of composing and performing.

The danger with Bach was always one of overload: he simply had too much to say – too much, at any rate, for the comfort of the waiting preacher – and too many different ways of saying it, supported by skills and techniques that were much greater than those of the majority of his peers. One suspects that this is what lay behind the strictures of less successful composers who had turned themselves into pundits, men such as Johann Adolph Scheibe and Johann Mattheson. Bach was one to push boundaries – boundaries of accepted taste, of what music could do to expand its formal and expressive vocabulary, of how it can convey human emotions, praise God and edify his neighbour, in excess of anything he himself had previously accomplished. Despite his limited geographical travels, like Shakespeare reaching out far beyond the borders of his own native experience, Bach transports us to places scarcely mapped and

to regions far beyond the intellectual reach of his critics. Attacking him anonymously, Scheibe deplored Bach's habit of 'taking away the natural element in his pieces by giving them a bombastic and confused style', darkening their beauty with what he called 'an excess of art'. Furthermore, he took him to task for expecting 'that singers and instrumentalists should be able to do with their throats and instruments whatever he can play on the clavier'. To this Bach (via his spokesman Abraham Birnbaum) countered, 'It is true that there are difficulties, but that does not mean that they are insurmountable': you just have to find solutions – so that singers and instrumentalists engaging in harmonious dialogue can give added significance to a simple reading of a text, and can 'work wonderfully in and about one another, but without the slightest confusion'.⁷

Bach, then, was up against not just the complacency of the style police of the day, but a fundamental misreading of his intentions and practice: his moving towards a radical re-working of the materials of music, his exploration of new ways for music and text to complement but also to rub up against each other, his fostering of an unprecedented interaction between his different singers and players, and finally his probing of the effects all this could have on the listener.⁸ Naturally he would have resisted the kind of schoolmasterly approach epitomised by Mattheson's insistence that when 'instruments and voices collaborate, the instruments must not predominate'. Bach was unwilling to have his orchestra reduced to the role of a docile accompanist simply laying down material in an opening ritornello that the singer would later develop and embellish. On the contrary, for him the opening instrumental strains of a cantata are a bidding to enter an ordered world of rhythm and sounds separate from quotidian noise or daily life and thence to mesh with the singer in fruitful dialogue.

Mattheson would have none of this. 'Many a beautiful painting is obscured in this way when fitted with a gold carved frame which alone diverts the eye and detracts from the painting. Any connoisseur of painting will prefer to choose a dark over a bright frame. The same thing applies to instruments, which provide no

more than a frame for the words set to music.⁹ Mattheson seems to hanker for a musician to be compliant in the same way that a painter gathers what he wishes to portray into a rectangle, frames it and brings it indoors, thereby domesticating the seeing eye so that the distance between the actual landscape and the viewer is widened. Strict obedience to the ‘frame’ in his cantata arias and choruses would have stemmed that flood of invention that brims over in Bach’s music. With far greater ambition than that of any of his contemporaries, he binds a vast quantity of material together in ways that require – insist upon – our active attention and engagement. That does not turn him into a musical van Gogh or Howard Hodgkin, artists who paint right over the frame of their pictures; for, although he shrugged off concerns of propriety and public approbation, he is of course ultimately compliant to the strictures of form.^c

We saw in [Chapter 5](#) how in his very first church cantatas, BWV 4, 131 and 106, Bach was staking out new territory for music, using it both as a point from which to view the universe and as a kind of critical megaphone. By examining the music we can discern the delicate path he treads between a theologically dutiful underpinning of texts and an individual glossing of them – and a whole range of ambivalent gradations in between. We know that Bach’s music does not fuse smoothly with language to create an integrated dramatic form such as we find in, say, the operas of Monteverdi or, much later, of Mozart. Instead, time after time, we encounter the peculiar dialectical relationship Bach seems to forge between his church music and the word – in particular the vernacular word, which since Luther’s day had become so dominant in the German consciousness.^d Bach has the knack of being able to vivify a doctrinal message and, when appropriate, of delivering it with a hard dramatic kick – and the next moment balancing this with music of an exceptional tenderness. He can both soften and humanise the frequent severity of the words while in no way diminishing their impact. He refuses to be cowed by the solemnity of the liturgy, willing to look behind the curtain of religion and, like

any practised man of the theatre (which by any conventional definition of course he wasn't), ready to use wit and even satire if it helps to open his listeners to the realities of life, to the world and its ways.

'Meta-language' is the term sometimes used to describe language describing itself. Between the area I call 'collusion', where Bach's music is in effect compliant with the text, and 'collision', where it clashes with it directly, there is a middle state akin to what Walter Benjamin in a parallel context calls a 'dichotomy of sound and script':¹⁰ here it can comment on, expand on, speculate about, agree or disagree with the text from a position of equality. That is what Bach sometimes does, and that is what interests me here.



The typical libretto of a Bach cantata has a moral that is fleshed out in a variety of forms. Take BWV 169, *Gott soll allein mein Herze haben*, composed in October 1726, the last and most consistently beautiful of his cantatas for alto solo. Here we find Bach approaching a text in his most collusive manner, formulating a rondo motif to match the motto-like phrase extrapolated from the Sunday Gospel (Matthew 22:34–46): 'God alone shall have my heart.' This simple idea (the *propositio* in rhetorical terms) provides the basis for an overarching unity, while permitting an implied dialogue between this figure – the repeated self-offering to the love of God – and the gloss (*confirmatio*) given to it by poet and composer. This is about as close as Bach ever came to a straightforward 'setting' of words, with music that matches every gesture and inflection of the text in front of him. Its mood of gently insistent piety, based on observing Christ's twin commandments – to love God and your neighbour – is in extreme contrast with his stern laying down of these laws in BWV 77 (see below, [this page](#)–[this page](#)). Almost as compliant is the hauntingly beautiful Christmas cantata BWV 151, *Süßer Trost, mein Jesus kommt*. To match the solace of the words ('Sweet comfort: my

Jesus comes, Jesus is now born'), Bach constructs the opening aria as a G major *siciliano* in $\frac{12}{8}$ marked *molt' adagio* for soprano, obbligato flute and strings, with an oboe d'amore doubling the first violins. His only gloss here is to imply by association and by means of this *berceuse* that it is the Virgin Mother herself singing a lullaby to her newborn child. Ineffably peaceful in mood, it contains musical anticipations of both Gluck and Brahms, while the arabesques of the solo flute suggest something folklike – perhaps Levantine or even Basque in origin. Any passing association with the musing Madonna is, however, quickly dispatched the moment the *vivace* B section bursts out in an ecstatic *alla breve* dance of joy, part gavotte, part gigue – 'Heart and soul rejoice.' Flute, soprano and the first violins (momentarily) exult in elegant triplet *fioriture* – similar in style and mood to the kind of secular music Handel wrote as a young man when he first encountered the works of Scarlatti and Steffani in Italy – before the opening cradle song returns. There is of course no reason why the Blessed Virgin should not have responded in this spontaneous girlish way, but it is not part of the biblical account of how 'Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart' (Luke 2:19). Bach can hardly be faulted for making this passing link in the listener's mind, and indeed a strict, straight text-setting in this instance might have been as unenlightening – charming but trite – as the pastoral Christmas concertos of Italian composers of the time – Corelli, Manfredini and others – a miniature genre which Bach himself adopted and transformed in the introduction to Part II of his *Christmas Oratorio*.

Earlier, in his Weimar years, Bach had composed the first of several outstanding cantatas for a solo singer, BWV 199, *Mein Herze schwimmt im Blut*, a work that exhibits enough operatic know-how and sensibility to suggest that he may have had a particular opera singer in mind, one of a kind unknown in Weimar (where only falsettists were employed) – perhaps a diva such as Christine Pauline Kellner, who regularly trod the operatic stage in nearby Weissenfels as well as in Hamburg and Wolfenbüttel. What Bach gives us here is not so much a sermon as a portrayal of the complex

psychological and emotional transformation of the conscience-struck individual. The underlying theological message based on the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9–14) is still present but now couched in personal terms. A Christian consumed by self-horror and knowing that her sins have turned her ‘into a monster in God’s eyes’ is racked by grief (opening accompanied recitative). Agony turns her dumb (A section of first aria); tears testify to her remorse (B section); a momentary flash of self-observation (extremely unusual C section interpolation in *secco* recitative) leads to a rhetorical outburst and a return to ‘silent sighing’ (A repeated). More self-immolation follows (*accompagnato*), culminating with the repentant cry of the publican in the parable: ‘God have mercy upon me!’ Next, without a break, comes an aria of deep humility and contrition (A), the confession of guilt (B) culminating in a plea for patience (tempo slowed to *adagio*) prior to a renewed expression of repentance (A repeated). This is the turning-point (a two-bar recitative). Now the sinner makes a further act of contrition, casting her sins into Christ’s wounds (chorale). Henceforth this will be her resting place (*accompagnato*) whence she can sing an ode to joyful reconciliation (A), blessing (B) and renewed joy (A repeated).

What Bach is striving for here is a lucid presentation of the text, or rather of the ideas that lie behind it, offered to the listener from several vantage points and in a highly individual style of his own devising. Not for him the mechanical patter of contemporary operatic recitative; instead, he develops a musical declamation flexible enough to burgeon into arioso at moments of heightened significance and adjusted to the rise and fall of the verbal imagery. Every recitative acts as the springboard to the following aria and thus to each change and expression of mood. Bach weaves such an amazingly vivid atmospheric web for each aria that words – even such overtly emotional ones as those written by Georg Christian Lehms – are not really needed to convey the specific *Affekt*. You could almost remove them and remain confident that the inflections and emotional contours would still be understood – which is almost what Bach himself does in the first aria, ‘Stumme Seufzer’.

Faced with a text that postulates the limitations of verbal expression ('my mouth is closed'), Bach shifts the expressive burden on to the instruments, so that the oboe expresses the turmoil of the sighing soul through its poignant *cantilena* as eloquently as the voice, perhaps even more so. The emotional charge is then redoubled when the voice returns later to incorporate fresh material into the oboe ritornello, a technique known as *Vokaleinbau*. Again, Bach may have been subverting conventional operatic practice where the singer is the primary focus: the very fact that she is musically contextualised might have provoked religious criticism to such a secular convention. Similarly you do not need to know that the second aria begins 'Bent low and full of remorse I lie' when the melodic arch of the strings of this spacious sarabande suggests prostration so graphically and the stretching of its phrases across the bar-line conveys the gestures of supplication. The success of this strategy depends a great deal, of course, on the oratorical skill and empathy of the individual singer – the ability to touch and literally 'affect' the listener, and not by vocal pyrotechnics alone.



Bach's implanting of words and vocal material into an existing structure often results in a collusion of sensibility and emotional expression, but nowhere does he do it more impressively than in two contrasted works, one for Christmas, one for Jubilate (Easter + 3). The most festive and brilliant of Bach's Christmas Day cantatas is his third, BWV 110, *Unser Mund sei voll Lachens*, composed in 1725. Its opening movement is identical to that of the overture to the Fourth Orchestral Suite in D, BWV 1069, with the addition of a pair of flutes to the first oboe line. Here he takes its French overture structure (slow – quick – slow) and uses the ceremonial outer sections to frame the fast fugal segment, but with a four-part chorus newly worked into the instrumental fabric. As a paraphrase of Psalm 126 the piece emerges new-minted, alive with unexpected sonorities

and a marvellous rendition of laughter-in-music, so different from the stiff, earnest way it is often played as orchestral music. When they are suddenly doubled, as here, by voices singing of laughter, instrumentalists have to re-think familiar lines and phrasing. Reciprocally, the singers need to adjust to the instrumental conventions of a French overture. To an existing structure with an already implied antiphony between separate instrumental groups Bach was later keen to add differentiated *concertante* effects. For one of the cantata's revivals (in either 1728 or 1731) he wrote out new *ripieno* parts for the upper three lines (the bass part is lost) so as to reinforce the contrast between solo and *tutti* sections. The whole piece has irresistible swagger, saved from degenerating into a peasant stomp by its elegance and lightness of touch.

This effect of illuminating a familiar original through engrafting was achieved still more impressively six months later. What started out as a violin concerto (now lost) and later took shape as the famous Concerto in D minor for clavier (BWV 1052) re-surfaces in the opening two movements of BWV 146, *Wir müssen durch viel Trübsal*, first performed at Jubilate in 1726. The first is an imposing introductory *sinfonia* (though it is not entirely obvious what such a vigorous and gritty concerto movement is doing here announcing the Gospel text 'We must through much tribulation enter the Kingdom of God'), and the second is a fully formed choral setting of those words superimposed on existing material, with both featuring the organist as soloist. In performance enormous restraint and control are required by both singers and players to sustain the hushed, otherworldly atmosphere of the latter movement over eighty-seven slow bars. This would be impressive enough as a piece of exceptionally clever implanting, if that is what it was, for we may never know for certain whether Bach had foreseen this particular solution at the outset, or whether, with the text in front of him, the possibility of a twin layering suddenly occurred to him, allowing him to anticipate many possible permutations of future moves.^e As Glenn Gould said, 'The prerequisite of contrapuntal art, more conspicuous in the work of Bach than in that of any other composer,

is an ability to conceive a priori of melodic identities which, when transposed, inverted, made retrograde, or transformed rhythmically, will yet exhibit, in conjunction with the original subject matter, some entirely new but completely harmonious profile.¹¹



We now turn to instances in Bach's multilayered approach in which music and text end up pointing in different directions, when instead of thoughts driving moods and emotions, moods and emotions suggested by music start driving thoughts, and as a result alter the way set ideas wear grooves in the mind. Bach's individual 'take' on the Gospel text, while it was intended to announce and bolster the sermon that it preceded, on occasion gave that sermon an alternative, unexpected slant. We have seen how rarely the musical setting of a cantata movement is driven exclusively by the semantic sense of the words. Instead, Bach often surrounds them with his own private code of emphasis, of matching *Affekts*. From a handful of cantatas that give the strongest sense of his music charting its own course at an oblique angle to that of the text, BWV 103, *Ihr werdet weinen und heulen*, stands out. We saw in [Chapter 9 \(this page\)](#) how its misleadingly festive opening is an example of a Bachian instrumental ritornello clashing with the sense of the text that follows, and how it can throw the listener off balance. A more conventional approach might have been to leave the antithesis of the two opening clauses intact with, say, a gloom-laden slow movement (as in BWV 12 and 146 for the same feast-day), followed by some form of chuckling *scherzo*. What Bach actually does is altogether astonishing. Anticipating by a century the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' of Beethoven's A minor string quartet, Op. 132, Bach plans to combine these opposite moods, binding them in mutual contingency while emphasising that it is the same God who both dispenses and then ameliorates these states of mind. Slowing abruptly to *adagio e piano* the bass soloist intones *Ihr aber werdet*

traurig sein ('And ye shall be sorrowful') with sustained and tortured harmonies. Then, just when joy seems most distant, it comes bounding back with the return of the fugal subject, the earlier mock-festive theme now transformed into genuine delight – not just extraordinarily clever, but enlightening into the bargain.

There are numerous occasions when Bach's music provides a variety of interpretative twists that would not emerge from a simple reading of the text alone. In [Chapter 9 \(this page\)](#) we came across two bass cantata arias whose words imply a silver lining to the harshness of life, but where Bach's music nonetheless seems entirely sombre, impregnated with pain and an inconsolable sadness. Exactly three years from the start of his cantorship and for the important first Sunday after Trinity that marked the beginning of his first two Leipzig cycles, we find ourselves pitched into a world of natural disasters and charitable appeals: BWV 39, *Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot*, was Bach's second use of a text from the court of Meiningen, where his cousin Johann Ludwig was employed. The Meiningen pattern entailed the quotation of two biblical texts: from the Old Testament for the opening movement, 'Deal [or break] thy bread to the hungry' (Isaiah 58:7–8), and from the New Testament, 'But to do good and to communicate forget not' (Hebrews 13:16), the common thread being an injunction to help the poor.

The opening chorus is multisectational and immense: at 218 bars it occupies more than a third of the whole cantata's length. Bach sets out almost tentatively in an introductory *sinfonia* with repeated quavers tossed from paired recorders to paired oboes to the strings and back over stiffly disjointed quavers in the continuo. German scholars from Spitta to Schering and Dürr claim that it 'unmistakably depicts the gesture of breaking bread'.^{f12} Schweitzer rightly counters by saying that 'no one who listens to the music can take it to be a picture of the breaking of bread ... it depicts the wretched ones who are being supported and led into the house'.^{f13g} That is certainly the image that comes to mind at the point when the choir enters after thirteen bars and from the way Bach pairs off his singers with broken phrases in thirds. Theirs are imploring

gestures, emotionally choked, their pleas breaking and stuttering. This leads to sustained chromatic phrases – *und die, so im Elend sind* ('and those that are in misery'), then a semiquaver passage in thirds for *föhre in's Haus* ('bring [in]to thy house') with weaving melismas. Just where you might expect an Oxfam appeal, you get the begging bowl itself. Bach writes his chorus not from the position of the Appeals Director but from that of the famine victim, in other words he is engineering a movable role for his choir – from members of a cast (here aligned in a famine queue) to biblical instructors laying down rules for appropriate, charitable behaviour.

The tenors now embark on a new condensed fugal theme with prominent A flats and D flats that has a pathos all of its own, especially when for eight bars it is joined in imitation by the altos. After ninety-three bars the time signature changes to common time. The basses begin unaccompanied with the words 'When thou seest the naked, cover him; and hide not thyself from thine own flesh' and are then answered by all voices and instruments very much in the old style of Bach's Weimar cantatas, with a florid counter-subject to suggest the 'clothing' of the naked. Clearly there has been a shift in the voices we are hearing: now no longer the hungry suffering, but the charity spokesmen. Bach is back to colluding again with the text. At bar 106 the time changes once more, this time to $\frac{6}{4}$ (again a Weimar feature) as the tenors lead off in the first of two fugal expositions separated by an interlude with a coda. The sense of relief after the stifling pathos of the opening sections is palpable and comes to a sizzling homophonic conclusion with *und deine Besserung wird schnell wachsen* ('and thy health shall spring forth speedily'). The basses now instigate a second fugal exposition, and, after so much pathos, the final coda led by the sopranos, *und die Herrlichkeit des Herrn wird dich zu sich nehmen* ('and the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward'), releases the pent-up energy in an explosion of joy.

Coming as the climax of a series-within-a-cycle in his first *Jahrgang*, BWV 77, *Du sollt Gott, deinen Herren, lieben*, was an opportunity for Bach to give resounding, conclusive expression to the core doctrines of faith already adumbrated in the first four

Sundays of the Trinity season. His aim is to demonstrate by means of every musical device available to him the centrality of the two ‘great’ commandments of the New Testament and how ‘on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets’. This leads him to construct a huge chorale fantasia in which the chorus, preceded by the upper three string lines in imitation, spells out the New Testament statement. At this point he decides to encase the sung New Testament Commandments with a wordless presentation of the Lutheran chorale melody ‘Dies sind die heilgen zehn Gebot’ (‘These are the holy Ten Commandments’) to demonstrate how the entire Law is contained within the commandment to love. Calculating that he can count on his listeners to make the link between tune and text, he introduces it in canon, a potent symbol of the Law, between the *tromba da tirarsi* (slide trumpet) at the top of his ensemble and the continuo at its base – a graphic device to demonstrate that the Old Testament serves as the bedrock of the New, or rather that the entire Law is understood to frame, and be inseparable from, Jesus’ injunction to love God and one’s neighbour.

That is just the start. Bach then proceeds to extrapolate the vocal lines from the chorale theme so that they emerge audibly in what is a retrograde inversion of the chorale tune in diminution. One way to grasp his procedure is to imagine it as a giant Caucasian *kilim*, with the geometric design and decorative patterning all of a piece. Your eye is drawn first to the elegant weave of the choral lines, but you then begin to discern a broader outline – the same basic design, but on a far bigger scale, bordering the whole and with its pattern developing in the opposite direction. That is the equivalent of the canon in augmentation, the bass line proceeding at the lower fifth at half-speed (in minims), symbol of the fundamental Law. Bach’s construct allows the trumpet (in crotchets) to deliver nine individual phrases of the chorale and symbolically, in a tenth, to repeat the entire tune for good measure, so that at the climax of the movement the ‘old’ and the ‘new’ are unambiguously fused in the listener’s mind.^h

The strange thing is that whenever the chorale tune stops (in fact even before it gets going) the music reveals a searching, almost

fragile quality – a quiet innocent introit without the usual eight-foot bass. Then comes a loud stentorian entry of the commandment theme (guaranteed to grab the attention of his congregation, you would think) and the choral voices thunder out ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God’ like so many evangelising sculptors chiselling the words out of the musical rock face. Suddenly a huge chasm in pitch, structure and dynamics opens up between the gentle interweaving of the imitative contrapuntal lines and the full, impressive weight of the double canon. Some find it helpful to hear this emphatic representation of height and depth as a spatial metaphor for the divine and human spheres – distant, yet interconnected. Beyond the obvious meshing of Old and New Testament commandments, the former strict in its canonic treatment, the latter freer and more ‘human’ in the working through of its vocal lines, is the symbolic separation of God’s control of the spheres of ‘above’ and ‘below’ (five statements of each, making ten in all). The music at this point is stupendous, the voices first in downward pursuit, then in upward, under the canopy of the trumpet’s final blast of the chorale tune. This is one of those breathtaking, monumental cantata openings that defies rational explanation. The end result is a potent mixture of modal and diatonic harmonies which leaves an unforgettable impression and propels one forwards to the world of Brahms’s *German Requiem* and beyond, to Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time* – both overpowering works in which their very different music takes on Bach’s mantle of extending the biblical message through music to answer to the ultimate questions of fear and faith.

What follows is a meditation on how ineffectual the believer’s will proves to be when attempting obedience to God’s commandments, and a foretaste of eternal life. Deceptive in its apparent simplicity and intimacy, an aria for alto is couched in the form of a sarabande, its weak phrase-beginnings and feminine cadences holding up a mirror to man’s proneness to fall short. As a foil to the singer, Bach decides at this point to recall his principal trumpet – so assured and majestic in the opening chorus, but now single and unsupported except by continuo alone. His role here is to convey human imperfection (*Unvollkommenheit*) in the baldest terms. If he had set

out to write an obbligato melody for the natural (or valveless) trumpet, Bach could hardly have devised more awkward intervals and more wildly unstable notes – recurrent C sharps and B flats, and occasional G sharps and E flats, which either do not exist on the instrument or else emerge painfully out of tune. In other words Bach is putting on display the shortcomings and frailty of mankind for all to hear and perhaps even to wince at.

To be the agent for illustrating the distinction between God (perfect) and man (flawed and fallible) is a tough ordeal for any musician unless you are a sad, white-faced clown, accustomed to playing your trumpet (badly) at the circus. But before jumping to the conclusion that Bach is being sadistic here, we should look beyond the surface of the music. Richard Taruskin claims that on occasion he ‘seems deliberately to engineer a bad-sounding performance by putting the apparent demands of the music beyond the reach of his performers and their equipment’.¹⁴ For that to be true, Bach would have had to allow for no remedial action to be available to his trumpeter using his large mouthpiece to ‘bend’ or ‘lip down’ (or ‘up’) the non-harmonic tones so as to make them slightly more acceptable, or to ask him to play the part on a *tromba da tirarsi* such as he often calls for in other contexts. The point is the effort Bach is concerned to illustrate as part of the music,¹⁵ and then, in blatant contrast, the ease with which, in the B section of the aria, he coasts through a ten-bar solo of ineffable beauty made up entirely of the diatonic tones of the natural trumpet without a single accidental: like some gleaming aircraft he emerges from a cloud bank into pure sunlight. Suddenly we are permitted a glorious glimpse of God’s realm, an augury of eternal life, in poignant juxtaposition to the believer’s sense of difficulty, incapacity, even, in executing God’s commandments unaided.ⁱ The device might be a bit drastic, but it is brilliantly effective. It requires the in-built unevenness of the natural trumpet to make its impact, which is simply lost when played on a modern chromatic valved trumpet. This is just a single example of the advantages historical instruments can bring to Bach performances. The techniques he uses in this cantata are extreme in their sophistication – in the first chorus by

laying down the Law and in this aria by presenting the harsh dichotomy between God's perfection and man's efforts to imitate it. We are left wondering how an over-worked church musician, locked into numbing routines, could have come up with anything so inventive – and not as an isolated work but, as we saw in [Chapter 9](#), as part of a coherent and highly impressive cantata cycle.



What can have spurred Bach to invent music of such density, vehemence and highly charged originality that it holds us spellbound? It is a question that has exercised scholars from the very beginning. Was it genuine religious fervour and the kind of single-minded dedication he exhibits on his title pages and in signing off each cantata with 'SDG' ('To God alone the Glory'), or rather his innate sense of drama and an imagination instantly fired by strong verbal imagery?^j You feel you know the answer – that it was sometimes one and sometimes the other – then along come the latter-day theologians sure of identifying an encoded doctrinal message embedded in the cantatas, and close on their heels the sceptics who insist that we forget all about religion when we interpret Bach, or literal-minded musicians who insist on keeping their music and Scripture separate. But even if we assume that Bach's Lutheran zeal was sincere (and there are no grounds to believe that it wasn't), does that automatically turn him into a theologian or mean that these cantatas must be interpreted in predominantly theological terms? Surely not: as we have already seen, theology is expressed primarily through words, while Bach's natural form of expression and his musical procedures have their own logic, one that overrides word-driven considerations. Yet Gottfried Ephraim Scheibel, for example, insisted that 'anyone who wants to compose sacred poetic texts must be a good theologian and moralist. For it does not just depend on one's notions; they must also be in accord with Scripture. Otherwise our music in church will

consist of empty words that, like empty shells, have no kernel, and it will be mere noise in which God takes no pleasure. A spirit-filled text and a moving composition must be combined.'¹⁶

However, we should not condone the tendency of theologically motivated commentators to treat the cantatas as doctrinal dissertations, as opposed to discrete musical compositions, any more than accept the glee with which aggressive atheists try to debunk any theological basis for Bach's musical exegesis. In the final analysis nothing can gainsay or diminish the overwhelming transformative force of Bach's music, the very quality that makes his cantatas so appealing to Christians and non-believers alike. When we are presented with thoughts and feelings in music, with far more candour, clarity and depth than we would otherwise be capable of, this can bring a huge sense of relief. We might at first feel preached at or lectured, and resist. But you realise that you can let go – you are not being obliged to subscribe to a doctrine, for Bach's approach, even at his most vehement, is not a moral fitness programme imposed on us *de haut en bas*. Instead, the defining quality lies in how he conveys his understanding of exactly what it is to be human – with all our faults, fears and blind spots – interpreting the word to us like a great novelist, capturing the sense of life itself.^k



There are times, however, when Bach's musical treatment is so compliant and so close to collusion it feels as though he has decided to follow for a change the admonitions of contemporary music theorists – to 'grasp the sense of the text' (M. J. Vogt, 1719), with the goal of 'refined and text-related musical expression [being] the true purpose of music' (J. D. Heinichen, 1711). But, just when you sense their vote of approval, Bach takes the law into his own hands and creates extreme contrasts of *Affekt* in successive movements of a

single cantata, guaranteed to startle and perhaps sow confusion in the minds of his listeners.

BWV 78, *Jesu, der du meine Seele*, opens with an immense choral lament in G minor, a musical frieze on a par with the exordia of both his Passions for scale, intensity and power of expression. Bach casts it as a *passacaglia* on a chromatically descending *ostinato* with the ‘ground’ acting as a counter-balance to a hymn tune, and weaves all manner of contrapuntal lines around it. Where you might expect the three lower voices to provide a respectful accompaniment to the *cantus firmus*, Bach gives them unusual prominence, mediating between *passacaglia* and chorale, anticipating and interpreting the chorale text just as the preacher of a sermon might do. Indeed, such is the power of exegesis here, one questions whether Bach was once again inadvertently stealing the preacher’s thunder by the eloquence of his musical oratory. It is one of those opening cantata movements in which you hang on every beat of every bar in a concentrated, almost desperate attempt to dig out every last morsel of musical value from the notes as they come within earshot.

Not in one’s wildest dreams, then, could one envisage a more abrupt sequel to this noble opening chorus than the delicious, almost frivolous duet that follows – ‘Wir eilen mit schwachen, doch emsigen Schritten’ (‘We hasten with weak but diligent steps’). Any straightforward reading of the text itself would not suggest a piece of such irreverence and frippery: you expect something dutiful, and instead you get a playful romp. With its *moto perpetuo* cello obbligato there are echoes of Purcell (‘Hark the echoing air’) and anticipations of Rossini. Bach’s wizardry encourages you to smile, tap your foot or nod in assent to the plea ‘May thy gracious countenance smile upon us.’

The reprieve is only temporary, however. With the tenor’s recitative, unusually marked to begin *piano*, we are back to the Miltonian concept of ‘leprosous sin’, which Bach expounded in several other post-Trinitarian cantatas. The vocal line is angular, the expression pained and the word-setting exemplary: almost an extension of Peter’s remorse in the *John Passion*, which he had

introduced to his audience six months earlier. Redemption lies through the shedding of Christ's blood, and, in the aria with flute obbligato (No. 4), the tenor claims confidently that, though 'all hell should call me to the fight, Jesus will stand beside me that I may take heart and win the day.' We might expect a trumpet, or at the very least the full string band, to evoke this battle with the forces of evil, but Bach is more subtle. What interests him more is the capacity of the flute's graceful figuration to erase or 'strike through' man's guilt, and, by adopting a catchy dance-like tune, to paint the way faith can cleanse the soul and make 'the heart feel light again'. For the *vivace* section of an *accompagnato* ('When a terrible judge lays a curse upon the damned'), Bach instructs his bass to sing *con ardore* – 'with passion'. For this is passion music with both a small and a capital *P*, strikingly similar in technique, mood and expressivity to the *John Passion* and to that other inimitable setting of the words in 'Es ist vollbracht' from BWV 159 (see [Chapter 9 this page](#)). Passion in a Bach performance is a rare commodity in today's climate of antiquarian purity and musicological correctness, but its absence jars with the miracle of Bach's technical expertise, his mastery of structure, harmony and counterpoint, and his having imbued them with such vehemence, meaning and – exactly that – passion.

Though we are accustomed by now to Bach's original, dramatic and sometimes wayward settings of words to music, we occasionally stumble across a movement that seems misconceived or indicative of a rare lapse of concentration. Take the melody of the soprano aria 'Lebens Sonne, Licht der Sinnen' from BWV 180, *Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele*, for instance. It starts out attractively, but after nineteen consecutive bars in which the singer continues to repeat the same words over and over again ('Sun of life, light of the mind'), it risks becoming unbearable. The aria 'Ich bin herrlich, ich bin schön' from BWV 49, *Ich geh und suche mit Verlangen*, is not much better. It feels like an early draft of 'I feel pretty, oh, so pretty' from *West Side Story*; but, unlike Bernstein's (and unlike, say, 'Nur ein Wink' from the *Christmas Oratorio*, where one welcomes each repetition), Bach's

tune does not have enough intrinsic interest beyond a certain surface attraction to warrant so many repetitions of the same words. In BWV 134, *Ein Herz, das seinen Jesum lebend weiß*, faced with the task of ‘parodying’ one of the most joyous of his Cöthen cantatas, Bach first had the vocal parts of the original copied out without text; then he wrote in the new ‘sacred’ words himself, note for note, making a few adjustments to the music as he went along. Obviously rushed or distracted, the recitatives (normally exemplary in their word-setting) suffered the most; indeed they give the impression of having been completed in his sleep. It was not until seven years later that he sat down to repair the damage, composing entirely new recitatives for three numbers and covering over the old incriminating pages.



One way Bach found to get around the rules and constraints of word-setting was to select an overall idea from the text that sparked the idea of a dominating instrumental sonority in his imagination. He came to know, for example, exactly how best to use the resources of the ceremonial trumpet-led orchestra and choir of his day to convey unbridled joy and majesty without knowing scientifically that the trumpet’s upper partials have a stimulating effect on the nervous system of the listener. Clearly he was spurred on by the presence in Leipzig of the municipal Stadtpfeifer, a virtuoso group of trumpeters under their *Capo*, Gottfried Reiche, who were available to him to augment his Thomaner on high days and holidays, and from whom he could have learnt what melodic possibilities these instruments held, both singly and contrapuntally, beyond their basic rhythmic role within a martial band. One has only to think of the high trumpet writing in any of the choruses of the *B minor Mass* to realize what a potent and entralling power this put at Bach’s disposal. From the *Sanctus* we can tell that Bach conceived of a cosmos charged with an invisible presence made of

pure spirit, beyond the reach of our normal faculties. As incorporeal beings, angels had their rightful place in the hierarchy of existence: in Psalm 8, humanity is ranked ‘a little lower than the angels’. The concept of a heavenly choir of trumpet-blowing angels was implanted in Bach when he was a schoolboy in Eisenach. Even the hymn books and psalters of the day gave graphic emblematic portrayal of this idea. The role of angels, Bach was instructed, was to praise God in song and dance, to act as messengers to human beings, to come to their aid and to fight on God’s side in the cosmic battle against evil. The dazzling cluster of cantatas Bach composed to honour the archangel Michael is immense in its sustained bravura.¹

Michaelmas must have come as a welcome relief during the Trinity season, with its prevalence of gloomy, sin-related themes. Take the opening of BWV 130, *Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir* – a song of praise and gratitude to God for creating the angelic host. Bach presents us with a tableau of the angels on parade: these are celestial military manoeuvres, some of them even danced, in preparation for combat. In the cantata’s centrepiece – a C major bass aria scored exceptionally for three trumpets, drums and continuo – the battle is portrayed not as a past event but as an ever-present danger from ‘the ancient dragon [who] burns with envy and keeps contriving new pain’ intended to break up Christ’s ‘poor little flock’. Though there is brilliance aplenty in the steely glint of Michael’s sword (including fifty-eight consecutive semiquavers for the principal trumpet to negotiate – twice), this is not an episode in a *Blitzkrieg*. Bach is more concerned to evoke two superpowers squaring up to one another: the one vigilant and poised to protect the *armes Häuflein* (the ‘poor little flock’) against assault (cue for a *tremulant* throbbing of all three trumpets in linked quavers); the other wily and deceitful (perhaps the kettledrums and continuo are intended to be on the dragon’s side and not part of Michael’s army, as in BWV 19 (see [Chapter 3, this page](#))). Probably no composer before or since has written such a profusion of celestial music for

mortals to sing and play – and no one could show off a trio of trumpets to such dazzling effect as Bach.

The prospect of joining the angelic choir or concert after death was considered to be a privileged entry-point for German musicians of the time (see [this page](#)). It is a mirror of Bach's own deep faith as well as his strategies, conscious or not, for bridging in music the gulf between this world and the next, and thereby enriching the listener's experience. Such strategies hinge on his use of certain specific sonorities such as the use of high trumpets or drums in the instances just alluded to, but equally on the evocation of certain states of mind – fragility at the point of death, or how to deal with bereavement. It is in this context that Keats's famous formulation of negative capability has special pertinence – ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’. Keats's rationalisation of the subjective allows joy and uncertainties to coexist, and provides an unintended denotation of the effect on the listener of Bach's consoling music. To penetrate to the great riches it offers requires both relaxation and effort, an absence of wilful straining but the most lucid attentiveness. It needs the listener both to let go and to be supremely vigilant. Ted Hughes once said that writing was about facing up to what we were too scared to face – about saying what we would prefer not to say, but desperately needed to share. That is also the cathartic function of Bach's cantatas that deal with the art of dying: their effect is that we are enabled to face the unfaceable.



It so happens that all four of Bach's cantatas for Trinity + 16 (BWV 161, 27, 8 and 95) give voice to the Lutheran yearning for death and the release of the body from worldly cares, struggles and bitterness. All but one feature the tolling of funerary bells known as *Leichenglocken*, which in Bach's day stood for the passing of the soul and evoked its hourly commemoration. Together they make a

deeply impressive quartet of concerted music that is both healing and uplifting. Despite their unity of theme, they are nonetheless full of creative tension, and feature divergent treatments of the convergence of music and words, and of texture, structure and mood. For the earliest of them, BWV 161, *Komm, du süße Todesstunde*, Bach uses a restricted palette of unusually soft-toned instrumentation led by two treble recorders (just as in the *Actus tragicus*) braced mostly in thirds or sixths. They are the leading colouristic element in the extraordinary *scena* that forms the cantata's central movement, in which the believer (in an accompanied recitative for alto), having arrived at the end of his spiritual pilgrimage, stands poised on the verge of death. Each textual image is replicated in the music: the 'gentle sleep' of the soul sinking to rest in Jesus' arms is represented by a descending scale motion by the voice, the continuo and the two recorders, in that order; simple detached chords suggest the 'cool grave' covered with roses; sudden animated semiquaver activity describes the raising from the dead and the closing in of 'the happy day', when the desire for death turns to joy; and the tolling of miniature death-bells marks the 'final hour', punctuated by the sounding of all four of the violin's open strings.

Two of its movements are in triple time, setting a pattern for several of Bach's later cantatas that also deal with the call of death – a device to lull and soothe the grieving heart, as in the magical opening chorus of BWV 27, *Wer weiß, wie nahe mir mein Ende*, an elegiac lament into which Bach has woven the modal tune linked to Neumark's hymn 'Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten'. The passage of time is suggested by the slow pendulum strokes in the bass of the orchestra. Against this the downward falling figure in the upper strings and a poignant broken theme in the oboes provide the backcloth for the haunting chorale melody, interlaced with contemplative recitative. Even the harpsichord obbligato and continuo line of the alto aria seem to be imbued with the notion of measured time emphasised by the percussive articulation of the harpsichord keys, a recurrent feature in these death-knell cantatas.

An equally evocative tableau in sound, almost of a passing funeral cortège, is created by purely instrumental means at the start of BWV 8, *Liebster Gott, wenn werd ich sterben*, consisting of an almost continuous semiquaver movement in E major for two oboes d'amore, a muted staccato quaver accompaniment by the upper strings, and a pizzicato bass line punctuating the slow $\frac{12}{8}$ pulse. Soaring above this is the high tintinnabulation of the traversa flute, playing out of its normal range – and so different from the simulated clang of multisized bells he summons to mark the passing of Queen Christiane in the *Trauer-Ode*, BWV 198 (see [Chapter 7, this page](#)). An elegiac and iridescent tenderness is established in this movement before even a note has been sung, which gives the impression of someone approaching life's end, witnessing the procession of his own family of mourners. If at times the oboe writing brings to mind the music of Brahms, some of the harmonic progressions anticipate Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ*; and Bach gives an almost fairground swing to the entry of the hymn tune sung by the sopranos. The funeral bells return (at least by inference) in the detached quavers of the tenor aria with the words *wenn meine letzte Stunde schlä-ä-ä-ä-ä-gt*, and in the pizzicato continuo.

Bach's imaginative capacity to convey through music and words the final stretch of the Christian pilgrimage reaches a peak in the second part of the opening chorus of BWV 95, *Christus, der ist mein Leben*. Here he depicts the struggle between the forces of life and death before the soul reaches its longed-for destination. It is similar to the climax of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Christian 'passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side'. Bach uses four successive funeral hymns as the supporting pillars of his structure, giving encouragement to the (tenor) believer as he contemplates his death. The rather muscular syncopated opening exchanges between paired oboes and violins pulsate with vitality and pave the way for the first triple-rhythm chorale. This dissolves at the word *sterben* ('to die'), a voice-by-voice entry building up a diminished seventh chord, coming to a rest and then re-exploding with *ist mein Gewinn* ('is my reward'). This culminates

with the line *mit Freud fahr ich dahin* as the connecting link to the next chorale, Luther's paraphrase of the *Nunc dimittis*.

Binding the two chorale statements is an arioso, 'Mit Freuden, ja, mit Herzenslust will ich von hinnen scheiden' ('With gladness, yea, with joyful heart I shall depart from hence'). Bach is highly experimental in the way he breaks up these segments of free rhythm, holding them in check by interjecting fragments of the opening syncopated motif. You gain the impression of a succession of unsanctioned $\frac{7}{4}$ bars (recitatives of the time were always barred in common time). At its climax the tenor sings unaccompanied 'My dying words are on my lips' – silence – 'Ah, could I but this day sing them!' With no break whatsoever the dialogue between *corno* and oboes announces the second chorale, Luther's ebullient 'Mit Fried und Freud'.^m At its conclusion the soprano soloist bursts in with the exclamation 'Now, false world! Now I have nothing further to do with you.' This leads, also without a break, into a captivating arched melody, 'Valet will ich dir geben, Du arge, falsche Welt' ('I would bid you farewell, you evil, false world'). The only true aria in this cantata is one for a high-flying tenor – the mesmerising 'Ach, schlage doch bald, selge Stunde' ('Ah, strike then soon, blessed hour') – in which two oboes d'amore proceed in almost naked fourths, pausing every now and again to alight on a dissonance (the effect is similar to the way the echo of cracked bells hangs in the air) always accompanied by a persistent pizzicato of the *Leichenglocken*.

But what exactly do they represent? Are they simply symbols introduced to resonate in his listeners' minds, non-verbal means to trigger rhythmic patterns and sonorities in the aural imaginations of the bereaved? Following performances we gave of all four of these cantatas in Santiago de Compostela in 2000, there was a big discussion in the hotel bar among the performers as to the meaning and imagery suggested by these *Leichenglocken*. Some felt that the repeated quavers of the flute in BWV 161/iv and in BWV 8/i just stand for the high-pitched funeral bells associated with infant death – that and no more. Others were convinced that the music in that aria

from BWV 95/v represents the workings of a clock, the tenor waiting for the chiming of his final hour: the strings imitate the clock's mechanical ticking, while the oboes imitate the wheel mechanism, which on the stroke of twelve grinds to a halt – just as time seems to do when you are impatient. The second oboe's echo nudges the clock around by pulling on the counterweight, thus setting the clock in motion once more.ⁿ Such an ingenious (and to me plausible) explanation leads one to reflect on what might have been Bach's preoccupations when composing these pieces. Was it possibly an inner preparation for the likely death of a frail child that inspired in him this succession of cantatas based on faith and trust, so childlike in their simplicity? His eighth child (and his first with Anna Magdalena), Christiana Sophia (b. 1723), was indeed weakly and was to die on 29 June 1726, just a few months before he sat down to compose BWV 27, a cantata imbued with the spirit of simplicity and innocence, and opening with the words 'Who knows how near is my end? Time goes by, death approaches.'^o



In his manual advising a young German Cavalier on etiquette (1728), Julius Bernhard von Rohr devotes thirty-one pages to the subject of death, burial and mourning. As a thoroughly enlightened tutor, von Rohr counsels 'reasonable' conduct as regards preparing for death, setting one's estate in order, proportionate clothing, ceremony and funerary eulogies. He has sharp words for those whom he describes as *Heuchel-Schein und Maul-Christen* ('hypocrites and lip-service Christians'), pastors who allow their burial sermons to develop into *Lügen-Predigt* ('lying sermons'), and he is all for the banning of private nocturnal funerals (*Beisetzung*).¹⁷ Bach might have agreed: the persistent habit of conducting burials at night-time without any music reduced his opportunities for supplementary income in funeral fees. For the same reason, the good health of Leipzig citizens was also of particular concern to Bach; as he

complained to his friend Georg Erdmann, ‘When a healthy wind blows ... as last year ... I lost fees ... of more than 100 thalers.’¹⁸ On the other hand, the death of a celebrity such as August the Strong, or his old employer Leopold of Cöthen, offered a rare chance for profitable composition and performance – yet it was also followed by a period of mourning and therefore of unprofitable silence. The bald facts of Bach’s experiences of death were probably above the norm in eighteenth-century Saxony. (As a reminder, a sister, two brothers and an uncle died during his infancy. Then came the death of both parents before he was ten, the loss of his first wife, Maria Barbara, in 1720, and of their third son, Johann Gottfried Bernhard, in his early twenties, plus four daughters and three sons by his second wife, Anna Magdalena.)

How this cumulative grief was expressed in his private life remains unknown. Instead we have the composer’s public expressions of grief and his poignant responses to funerary texts, both in his cantatas and motets. Arnold Toynbee said that in the relationship between the living and the dying, ‘There are two parties to the suffering that death inflicts; and, in the apportionment of this suffering, the survivor takes the brunt.’¹⁹ Bach, in good Lutheran fashion, addresses both parties: the deceased falling into a blessed slumber and the bereaved searching for spiritual comfort in the endless harvest of death. His strategies are far more sympathetic than for example Rembrandt’s manner of painting the raw truth about death ‘in a gust of black mirth’²⁰ following the attritions of the plague of 1668, which took his only son, Titus, at the age of twenty-seven. Bach avoids that morbid delight in suffering characteristic of some strands of Pietism which bring to mind ‘the mysterious eroticism of wounds’²¹ and those ugly narratives of violence and revenge that reflect our psychopathology whenever death is portrayed at the centre of religion.

While his library contained copious examples of theologians relishing the opportunities to portray the approach of death and bodily defilement in harrowing terms, Bach’s cantatas that deal with the subject offer deep reservoirs of solace to those who mourn. One of the most moving examples of this is the soprano aria ‘Letzte

Stunde, brich herein, mir die Augen zuzudrücken!' ('Come, O final hour, break forth and close mine eyes') from his Weimar cantata BWV 31, *Der Himmel lacht*, in which he strikes a note of elevated grief but within the rocking motion of a lullaby. The introductory oboe melody with paired quavers and alternations of strong and weak bars, and the way the upper strings wordlessly intone the death-bed chorale 'Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden ist' ('When my last hour is at hand'), create an unforgettable evocation of the passage from this life to the next and even of 'celestial beings floating above the bed of the departing believer'.²² Bach's melodies are described in the *Nekrolog* as 'strange, but always varied, rich in invention, and resembling those of no other composer', but this example from 1715 shows him already shedding some of that 'strangeness'. Originality is still present, however, in the length and angularity of certain vocal phrases that could never have been written by a Stölzel, a Graupner or even a Telemann.^P

There is no better example of this transformation to melodic ease than the fourth movement of one of his better-known cantatas, BWV 82, *Ich habe genug* – the aria 'Schlummert ein, ihr matten Augen' ('Close in sleep, you weary eyes'), perhaps the paradigm of collusion between music and text in all Bach's vocal works. Composed for the Feast of Purification in 1727, not only does it come as a welcome counterweight to the succession of grief-laden arias that characterise the Epiphany season (such as BWV 123/v and BWV 13/v discussed above and in Chapter 9), but with the gentle lilt of a lullaby it epitomises Luther's description 'Death has become my sleep', an effect reinforced by the dulcet sonority of the oboe da caccia he added for his sixth and last revision of 1748. That is the last line of his hymn 'Mit Fried und Freud', his free rendering of the *Nunc dimittis*. Bach used it for the same feast-day two years earlier as the basis of BWV 125, his cantata of that title, *Mit Fried und Freud ich fahr dahin* – a more public version of the consoling prospect of death than in *Ich habe genug*, yet, in its way, just as intimate and evocative, as the music of the first chorus slides into a quiet sepulchral register at the words *sanft und stille* ('calm and quiet') and

again with amazing pathos at the words *der Tod ist mein Schlaf worden* ('death has become my sleep'), which, like BWV 77, seems to catapult the listener 150 years forwards to the world of Brahms.⁹ At this point Bach's librettist inserts lines of his own, words stressing physical collapse, so contradicting the serenity and joy expressed in all the other movements: 'Even with weakened eyes, I shall look to thee, my faithful Saviour, though my body's frame falls apart' – a poignant anticipation of Bach's own lot. Bach sets it for alto with flute and oboe d'amore and a basso continuo marked *ligato per tutto è senza accompagn.* Interpreted as cello and organ *tasto solo* (i.e., in unison with no harmonies), it lends a sepulchral tone (indeed an 'empty' one, almost as though the organist himself had just upped and died) to this plaintive and intensely grief-stricken aria, with its persistent heavily dotted French sarabande rhythms woven into a three-voice (sometimes four-voice) texture with richly ornamented, sighing appoggiaturas. For all the nobility and stateliness of gesture with which the frailty of the expiring body and the 'broken' aspect of the eyes' dimming are conveyed, there seems to be a private grieving going on here, detectable in the very fragility of the upper three voices which Bach superimposes over the hollow sounds of the unembellished continuo and its inexorable repeated pairs of quavers. The core of this aria's affecting expression of private grief is sustained even when the text describes solace ('even though my body breaks, my heart and hope shall not fail').

This aria has none of the sensuality or the consoling chemistry of BWV 82, or even of his very first funerary work, the *Actus tragicus*, in which, as we saw in [Chapter 5 \(this page\)](#), like Montaigne, Bach sought to deprive death of its powers to terrify. Montaigne was concerned to establish links between physical activities and 'learning to die'. 'Knowing how to die frees us from all subjection and constraint,' he wrote in his essay 'Que philosopher, c'est apprendre à mourir'.²³ 'There is nothing evil in life for the man who has thoroughly grasped the fact that to be deprived of life is not an evil.' It is a 'true and sovereign liberty', enabling us 'to thumb our noses at force and injustice and to laugh at prisons and chains'.

Knowing about the shortness and unpredictability of life, and therefore ‘always booted and ready to go’, Montaigne wants death to find him at work with his daily business but unconcerned with the fruits of his labour: ‘I want death to find me planting my cabbages, but careless of death, and still more of my unfinished garden.’ Bach could have found recovery from the traumatic shock of losing both parents so young through his deep connection with music. Suddenly needing to face up to his own mortality, music may have been his path to unlocking that part of himself that led him to a very personal perception of the divine, something he shared with other exceptionally creative people and mystics such as Jakob Boehme, who wrote that ‘We are all strings in the concert of [God’s] joy.’²⁴ By this interpretation music could have been his means to express his inner turmoil: it is conceivable that he used that pain to unlock a stream of inspirational energy.

Life as both a pilgrimage and a sea voyage is the underlying metaphor of BWV 56, *Ich will den Kreuzstab gerne tragen*, a cantata for solo bass that is the equal of BWV 82 in the way its ingenious structure is so well worked out. What makes it especially appealing is Bach’s seemingly Romantic approach to text-setting – a sophisticated instance of collusion. He adjusts his melodic line to accommodate successive changes in mood – moving from a succinct initial upward climb, a harrowing arpeggio to a sharpened seventh (of the sort Hugo Wolf might later use) as a musical pun on the word *Kreuzstab* (‘cross-staff’), and thence to six and a half bars of pained descent to signify the ongoing burden of the Cross and the solace that ‘comes from God’s beloved hand’. Bach reserves the biggest change for the B section, switching to triplet rhythm in the voice part in a kind of arioso as the pilgrim lowers all his grief into his own grave: ‘Then shall my Saviour wipe the tears from my eyes.’ He fashions an arioso with cello arpeggiation to depict the lapping waves, while the voice line describes how ‘the sorrow, affliction and distress engulf me.’ Where the first movement was forward-looking, this arioso seems to hark back to the music he learnt as a child, that of his forebears. One can pick up hints of an early reliance on God’s

protection in the whispered comfort of *Ich bin bei dir* ('I am with you').

As we have seen, with the death of both of his parents when he was only nine years old there was no human substitute on whom he could wholly depend. As the waves die down and the cello comes to rest on a bottom D, the voice of the pilgrim continues in *secco* recitative with the Bunyan-like words, 'So I step from my ship into my own city, which is the kingdom of heaven, where I with all the righteous shall enter out of so great tribulation.' A further metaphor – of the obbligato oboe as guardian angel of the now jubilant pilgrim – is developed in the extended *da capo* aria 'Endlich wird mein Joch' ('At last, my yoke shall fall from me again'). Bach reserves the biggest surprise for the moment when the pilgrim's desire to fly up like an eagle can hold no bounds: 'Let it happen today!' he exclaims, the emphasis shifting from *O!* to *gescheh* to *heute* and finally to *noch*. These are the moments when one senses Bach bridging the gap between living and dying with total clarity and utter fearlessness. Mozart could be speaking for Bach when he wrote, Montaigne-like, to his father in April 1787: 'As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind, that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but is indeed very soothing and consoling!'²⁵



We have been attempting to explore the border of contact between music and language. In his church cantatas Bach's music goes to work on the language of his mother tongue, a process that sometimes leads to collusion and at others ends in collision or displacement. Often, as I have tried to show, the results reach right to the heart of the human condition. When it comes to his motets (which date from the whole of his middle years, but of which only a

handful have survived), the relationship between music and language is not quite the same, since they entail no collaborative negotiation with a poet or librettist as the cantatas do. Instead they draw on compact and aphoristic biblical passages combined with chorales – selected and arranged by the composer and (as far as we know) no other – allowing him to develop satisfying harmonious unities, which were so much harder to achieve in the church cantatas with their heterogeneous texts and slightly lopsided form. As predominantly funerary pieces, the motets epitomise the Lutheran longing for completion and union with God and that deeply implanted idea of heavenly love which gave justification to the lives of its adherents. They speak to us very directly, because, like several of the cantatas that take the *ars moriendi* as their subject matter, they address something we all share with Bach – our mortality.

This is essentially music for unaccompanied voices, made so gripping by Bach's skill in converting a range of instrumentally conceived figures into vocally expressive phrases through their fusion with words.^r This makes them hugely challenging to perform, so that it is little wonder that Bach, it seems, insisted that all fifty-four of the boarding Thomaner were in theory available to perform what was called 'the Cantor's music', whether divided up into separate eight-voiced *Kantoreien* (of which there were four, each with two boys per part) or in multiples thereof.²⁶ Like Mozart after him, with Bach there is no rigid dividing line between his instrumental melodies and sung arias or phrases – so that when some of his best singers were suddenly forced to serve as instrumentalists for a particular service, there was no drastic change of style. Take the middle section of his five-part motet BWV 227, *Jesu, meine Freude*, the subtle vocal fugue 'Ihr aber seid nicht fleischlich, sondern geistlich' ('But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit'): the way that Bach plans the stepwise approach to the word *fleischlich* in the main theme, stretches it languidly over the bar-line and then contrasts it with a long enigmatic melisma on *geistlich* is sufficient proof that even when thinking fugally he could make

room for expressive vocal inflection to bring life and particular emphasis to the words he was setting.^s

Another matchless example of this fluidity occurs in the long middle section of one of his earliest motets, BWV 228, *Fürchte dich nicht*, this time set as a double fugue in which the three lower voices exchange subjects that are free inversions of each other. If you are told at the outset that the ascending subject derives from the opening motif of the chorale that will soon appear as the soprano *cantus firmus*, it might strike you as just another example of Bach's unlimited cleverness. But when this motif appears for the third time, now sung by the altos in the key of the chorale (D major), the link is made instantly audible (as well as clever) – not least by the succession of words, the biblical *ich habe dich bei deinem Namen gerufen* ('I have called thee by name') leading climactically to the hymn-line *ich bin dein, weil du dein Leben [gegeben]* ('I am thine, for thou hast given thy life'). Bach learnt from his great predecessor Johann Christoph, who also made a motet from a version of these words from Isaiah, how to contrast, overlap and fuse similar words or ideas for expressive, exegetical purposes – and always with musical naturalness and charm. What could be simpler yet more eloquent than the little detached phrase *du bist mein* he interposes as a downward fifth in between the colliding fugal subjects?

At any given point in these motets Bach shows that he is aware of everything that can fruitfully happen to a tune or be extracted from it. With *Jesu, meine Freude* one cannot fail to be impressed by the exceptionally thorough symmetry and cross-referencing that Bach has engineered to provide an unobtrusive scaffolding for his word-setting (see diagram). This allowed him to juxtapose such outwardly ill-matched literary companions – Johann Franck's sugary hymn stanzas and stern verses from the eighth chapter of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans – with apparent ease and, as it turns out, in fruitful dramatic alternation. One does not generally encounter this degree of symmetrical bracing of movements in the church cantatas except in the early BWV 4, *Christ lag in Todesbanden*.



(illustration credit 53)

Nor is Bach shy of pinching an actor's cloak from time to time – to seize on the spoken force and rhythm of a single word like *trotz!* and fling it to the four corners of a church. Grammatically the word here is a preposition meaning ‘in spite of’, but in the context of Franck’s hymn and Bach’s setting it has resonances of the noun *Trotz*, which denotes defiance and cussedness – a gauntlet thrown down to the ‘old dragon’ conjured up before our eyes with the graphic vividness of a Cranach or a Grünewald. Then he opposes it with the equally powerful image of a Martin Luther, fearless in his isolated rebellion (*ich steh hier und singe*) and, like the archangel Michael himself, brave and unmovable in his defiance (*in gar sichrer Ruh*), or like Archimedes: ‘Give me a place to stand and I will move the earth.’ So close is Bach’s identification with Luther at this juncture that we sense how he too ‘stands here and sings in such certain peace’, urging us to do the same with equal vehemence. If one wanted to pick a single example of how Bach harnessed his compositional prowess and capacity for invention as a means of articulating his zeal and faith, this motet would be it.

Equal fervour, but of a less militant, more sensuous kind, is to be found in the most intimate and touching of his double-choir motets, bwv 229, *Komm, Jesu, komm*. Bach’s explorations of the dialectical possibilities of eight voices deployed as two antiphonal choirs here, and in his *Matthew Passion* (see [Chapter 11, this page](#)), goes many steps beyond the manipulation of spatially separate blocks of sound

pioneered by the Venetian polychoralists and the rhetorically conceived dialogues of Gabrieli's star pupil, Heinrich Schütz. Having clearly learnt the expressive force of word repetitions and exchanges from Schütz, Bach finds ways of weaving all eight lines into a rich contrapuntal tapestry, with extended cadences and dragging appoggiaturas on the words *müde* ('weary'), *sehne* ('yearn') and *Frieden* ('freedom') that anticipate the world-weariness and nostalgia one finds a century and a half later in the double-choir motets of Brahms.

The opening invocations to Christ – single-word entreaties by both choirs, first alternately and then conjointly – are couched in the expressive and physically explicit language of a love-song. Bach finds a distinctive musical character appropriate to each line of the rhymed metrical text of this funerary hymn. For the melodic outline of *die Kraft verschwindt* ('strength disappears') he inscribes an arc that hints at life's downward journey, beginning energetically in crotchets before the sands of life run out – *je mehr und mehr* ('more and more') – then regaining temporary impetus as one choir interrupts only to augment the expressive eloquence of the other. Again it is the basses who lead the evocation of *der saure Weg* ('life's bitter path') with the anguished falling interval of a diminished seventh given in slow minims and in canon. By the time it has passed through all eight voices and interleaved in a dense contrapuntal web, Bach has achieved an overwhelming depiction of personal and collective distress: 'the shame of motives late revealed, and the awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm'.²⁷ But Bach is not done yet. With two choirs in play he can give one the fragmented text and have the other interject with just two poignant words, *zu schwer!* ('too heavy') – life's bitter path being too much for anyone to have to bear. Then he rounds off this section with a little more than three bars of D pedal with passing harmonies of ravishing pathos.

Release of some sort is needed at this point, and it comes in the unexpected form of a fresh fugal exposition starting in the altos, *Komm, komm, ich will mich dir ergeben* ('Come, come, I will yield myself to thee'), more madrigal than churchy, to which the second

choir provides a syllabic commentary – chirpy and eager in the way that the opening repetitions of *Komm, komm* were languid and pleading. Now he switches metre to $\frac{6}{8}$, passing two-bar segments of a French minuet from one choir to the other for the words *du bist der rechte Weg, die Wahrheit und das Leben.*

Anyone else hitting on the idea of a dance movement at this point might have been happy to let it run its course and move on swiftly to the second stanza of Paul Thymich's hymn. Bach, on the other hand, has barely begun. For the next eighty-eight bars he elaborates one glorious extended sequence after another, first for one choir, then the other, so that the music appears never to stop while conveying the balm and reassurance of Christ's words 'I am the way, the truth and the life' (John 14:6). Lyricism and ecstasy of this degree can be found in several arias in his cantatas but seldom in their choruses. Here in *Komm, Jesu, komm* Bach breaks with the tradition of the Baroque motet as he had inherited it, seizing on the presence of his two four-part choirs to write for them with bold, unprecedented contrapuntal fantasy. The conclusion – two bars of antiphonal exchange, followed by eight more of eight-part imitative counterpoint – is then repeated as an echo, a fitting *envoi*, one that stretches the technical control of his (and every subsequent) choir to the utmost degree. The final stanza is set for the now united four-voiced choir he calls *aria* – but that need not confuse us, as it has past commentators, since clearly this is not a chorale, has no *cantus firmus* and conforms perfectly to Mattheson's definition of a choral aria for voices: 'moving in equal steps with no voice attempting what the other voices cannot to a certain extent equal'.²⁸ That description, however, does scant justice to Bach's soaring vocal lines as they emerge from an admirably supple arrangement of the words (in $\frac{3}{2}$ bars alternating with others in an implied $\frac{9}{8}$) in a lyrical prayer of submission to Jesus' lead and protection here at life's end.



‘Hardly had the choir sung a few bars when Mozart sat up startled; a few measures more and he called out: “What is this?” And now his whole soul seemed to be in his ears. When the singing was finished he cried out, full of joy: “Now *there* is something one can learn from!”’²⁹ And why not? BWV 225, *Singet dem Herrn*, is by far the meatiest and most technically demanding of Bach’s double-choir motets, but that is not what dazzled Mozart in the Thomaskirche in Leipzig in April 1789, leading him to call for the parts, which he then ‘spread all around him – in both hands, on his knees, and on the chairs next to him – and, forgetting everything, did not get up again until he had looked through everything of Sebastian Bach’s that was there’. Nothing in Mozart’s previous experience of church music had prepared him for this – some of the most exhilarating dance-impregnated vocal music Bach ever wrote. No instruments are actually required beyond the standard continuo (*colla parte* doubling is generally agreed to be permissible but not obligatory here); yet even without his cantata orchestra to draw on, this is the most orchestrally conceived of all Bach’s motets, evoking not just the drums and harps called for by the psalmist in praise of God’s name, but a myriad of other instruments and percussive effects as well.

At the outset Bach assigns chains of instrumental *figura corta* to one of his choirs, while from the way he sets the single word *Singet!* in Choir 2 he shows that he is out to extract the maximum percussive edge and frisson from the German text, beyond its function of providing the continuo and giving harmonic backing to Choir 1. His method of celebrating, first the community of saints, then Israel ‘rejoic[ing] in him that made him’, is to exploit the shock waves of strategically placed glottal stops and the syncopated force of plosive and fricative consonants. If the vowels and even the notes were removed, we would still get the exuberant mood of the text just from the collision of these animated consonants.

By the time Bach reaches the final section, ‘Lobet dem Herrn in seinen Taten’, it feels as though he has dragooned all the Temple instruments of the Old Testament – the harps, psalteries and cymbals – into the service of praising the Lord, like some latter-day

cuadro flamenco or Big Band leader. King David reputedly had nearly 300 musicians in his employ; Bach in Leipzig had barely thirty, but that was no bar to his inclusion in the hallowed lineage of church musicians appointed to form choirs responsible for songs of thanksgiving since biblical times. Bach wrote in the margin of his personal copy of Abraham Calov's Bible commentary, 'music ... was especially ordered by God's spirit through David.' On another page, in response to the passage (Exodus 15:20) describing how 'all the women went out after [Miriam] with timbrels and dancing', we find Calov speculating on what 'a mighty melody and a tremendous resonance and reverberation there must have been between these two choruses [Moses and the men of Israel, Miriam with the Israelite women]' on the occasion when 'David the king and prophet danced publicly before the ark of the covenant' – to which Bach adds in the margin, 'NB. First prelude, for two choirs to be performed for the glory of God.' And what does Miriam sing? 'Sing ye to the Lord, for he hath triumphed gloriously!'^t The 'first prelude' eventually leads to a fugue for the children of Zion to dance to. Only in the *Cum sancto spiritu* from the *B minor Mass* (which it resembles) did Bach ever write a more joyous, fleet-footed fugal subject.

Passages such as these remind us that Bach's is a Baroque version of medieval 'danced religion'. Just as many African languages lack distinct words for music and dance, so these two were once considered inseparable in Christian worship, their pagan, Dionysian fusion legitimised by the early church Fathers. To invoke 'zest and delight of the spirit', according to Clement of Alexandria (150–216), Christians were to 'raise our heads and our hands to heaven and move our feet just at the end of the prayer – *pedes excitamus*'.³⁰ He also instructed the faithful to 'dance in a ring, together with the angels, around Him who is without beginning or end' – an idea that, despite successive attempts of the church from the fourth to the sixteenth centuries to crack down on religious dancing in church, still held currency for Renaissance painters such as Botticelli and Filippino Lippi – and, I suggest, Bach, too, particularly in his Christmas music. At least Bach could claim the guarded backing of Luther, who, in accepting the legitimacy of 'country customs', said

'so long as it's done decently, I respect the rites and customs of weddings – and *I* dance anyway!'³¹ This is not very far from Émile Durkheim's notion of 'collective effervescence' – the ritually induced passion or ecstasy that cements social bonds and which, he proposed, forms the ultimate basis of religion.³² Suddenly we have a window on to those regular get-togethers of the Bach family – how their pious chorale-singing at the start of the day slipped into bibulous quodlibets at nightfall. Bach shared with his relatives a hedonistic vision of community based on the conviviality of human intercourse, one that in no sense clashed with his view of the seriousness of his calling as a musician or the funnelling of his creative talents to the greater glory of God. When Bach is in this mood, you sense that, for all its elegance, its dexterity and its complexity, his music has primitive, pagan roots. This is music to celebrate a festival, the turning-point of the year – life itself.

Other qualities Mozart might have admired in *Singet* are its architectural planning, and the way expressive rhetoric is reconciled with long-range continuity. This goes beyond the superficial resemblance of the sequence of its three movements to that of an Italian instrumental concerto (fast – slow – fast): both of the two outer movements are loosely paired on the prelude-and-fugue model. Once the 'First Prelude' has peaked with the 'collective effervescence' of Israel's rejoicing, Bach clears the way for Miriam and her maidens to step forward and lead the fugal dance 'Die Kinder Zion'.

He brilliantly chooses to persist with the *Singet* motto that accompanied the imitative effusion of his initial prelude now as a funky, offbeat commentary to his four-part fugue. This pays high dividends in the build-up of this long movement, as one by one the voices of both choirs re-enter emphatically, this time in reverse order (B-T-A-S), while the rich 'accompaniment' is re-distributed among the fugally unoccupied voices. In his second pairing, the finale of the motet, Bach achieves a different type of transition from prelude to fugue by narrowing the focus: suddenly and without a break, eight voices converge and become four. Out of the hurly-burly the united basses of both choirs step forward in a *passepied* set

to the words ‘Let everything that hath breath praise the Lord.’ This might sound straightforward enough, but in practice it is a challenge to achieve a seamless and fluent transition at this point of liftoff. It needs a readjustment of the singers’ ‘radar’ to pass from a full, dense eight-part polyphony in common time to fusion as a single line, one-in-a-bar, with spatially distanced voices now airborne, insubstantial and still dancing. Several episodes follow in quick succession – exposition, *stretto*, sequence, re-appearance of the subject in the super-tonic, sequence, *stretto* – each with expectations of an imminent conclusion. But Bach’s high-wire act still has 113 bars to run, and what promised to be a sprint to the line turns out to be a 1,500-metre race. As the singers move into the final straight, you sense the crowd’s excitement. Suddenly it’s no longer a flat race – there’s a big hurdle ahead, one to take the sopranos up to a top B_8^3 before they can breast the finishing tape, using up the last *Odem* (‘breath’) of which they are capable.

If the finale is a middle-distance track event, the central movement is more like an aeronautical display. While Choir 2 glides past in stately homophonic formation with a four-part chorale harmonisation, Choir 1 flies in, inscribing independent yet interlocking flight-paths responsive to thermal currents and the lines of its free poetic text. The antiphony between two parallel texts, one measured and formal as befits a chorale, the other lyrical, even rhapsodic, is unprecedented (Bach’s appellation of ‘aria’ here carrying metaphoric as well as stylistic connotations). His cantatas and Passions are littered with fruitful juxtapositions of personal and collective responses between solo arias and chorales, but this type of choral litany, in which the roles of the two choirs are reversed for the second verse, is another radical departure from contemporary notions of how motets were supposed to function. Bach’s motets contain unique bursts of festive and reflective creativity at the very margins of what the Lutheran clergy of his day would have found acceptable.

Their popularity in our time goes a little way towards reversing the process of desocialisation that chased the choral dance first out of church and then from communal recreation of the kind we are

told that the Bach family practised.³³ (This was also a feature of my childhood, thanks to my parents' no doubt unconscious re-creation of this pattern – intense sessions of *a cappella* singing, followed by physically liberating sessions of English country dancing based on John Playford's *The English Dancing Master* (1651)). Through their extraordinary compression and complexity, Bach's motets make colossal demands of performers, requiring exceptional virtuosity, stamina, and sensitivity to the abrupt changes of mood and texture as well as to the exact meaning of each word. Towards the end of his more than thirty years as music director of Berlin's Singakademie in 1827, Carl Friedrich Zelter wrote to his friend Goethe, 'Could I let you hear some happy day one of Sebastian Bach's motets, you would feel yourself at the centre of the world, as a man like you ought to be. I hear the works for the many hundredth time, and am not finished with them yet, and never will be.'³⁴ After knowing them for more than sixty years I feel exactly the same. The glorious freedom that Bach exhibits in his motets, his balletic joy in the praise of his maker and his total certitude in the contemplation of death – this, surely, is the best imaginable response to our mortal entrapment.



Tying together these threads of Bach's vocal music allows us to appreciate his extraordinary achievement in expressing the essence of Lutheran eschatology – ideas about eternity that can never satisfactorily be put into words. Part of this music's appeal to us today may lie in the affirmation it makes which many of us no longer find in conventional religion or politics (although this may also have been true of earlier responses to Bach, as when Mendelssohn revived the *Matthew Passion* in 1829). In the very special quality of consolation his music conveys, we have a sense of the past and the present being bound together. This is a central tenet of the 'eternal future' envisioned by the seventeenth-century

Lutheran theologians represented in Bach's library, such as Heinrich Müller, who saw participation in 'most blessed music' as an evocation of heaven and a powerful incentive for embracing death (see [illustration](#)).³⁵ This music – playing it, participating in it, listening to it – conveys a strong sense of being in the present and screens out all else. The very act of performing such a Bach piece produces a type of realised eschatology, one which implies that 'end times' are in a sense already here.

We have seen how Bach's music regularly goes beyond a straightforward affirmation of its texts and how on occasion it subverts them in ways he may not have foreseen when he began setting them. The problem for the Leipzig clergy may have been to admit, without feeling antagonised or threatened, that, for all his curmudgeonly behaviour, this cantor was an exceptional asset to the church. He could turn people's heads and even make them listen (though how much, of course, we can only imagine). His motets and cantatas provided an alternative route to Christian edification and contemplation, asserting the bleak truths of their texts as well as providing palliatives that the texts often deny. We today can certainly hear them in this way if we choose. In some respects approaches to his church music have become more straightforward: as in the first two decades of the nineteenth century, when men and women started to look to art and music for the inspiration, hope and consolation they were no longer finding in religion; and as in our own day, when religion is simultaneously in the ascendant in some parts of the world and increasingly absent from many people's lives in others. But at this distance it is easier for us to recognise the potency of his music and its ability simultaneously to reveal, even to insist upon, the unvarnished truth about human weakness – man's thin and easily broken attachment to moral good – and to chart the redemptive way back to decency, compassion and what he called 'good neighbourliness'.

By now we have seen that one of Bach's monumental achievements was to show that music and language together can do things which neither can do separately. But he also proves that music sometimes surpasses language, whether written or spoken, in

its capacity to penetrate to the innermost recesses of consciousness and to chip away at people's prejudices and our sometimes toxic patterns of thinking. We can still turn to his cantatas and motets for enlightenment (with a small *e*) about sin, redemption, evil or repentance, with no more difficulty than we can to, say, a widely read nineteenth-century writer like Dostoevsky – someone who 'found in the Christian religion the only solution to the riddle of existence' and who 'uncovered a volcanic crater in every human being'.³⁶ Bach in fact makes it a great deal easier for us to focus on the injunction to love one's neighbour than on all the filth and horror of the world. We emerge from performing or listening to a Bach motet chastened, maybe, but more often elated, such is the cleansing power of the music. There is not a whiff here of those 'foul fumes of religious fervour' that Richard Eyre sees today 'spreading sanctimoniousness and intolerance throughout the globe, while those far-from-exclusively Christian virtues – love, mercy, pity, peace – are choked.'³⁷



^a Valéry saw music as constituting the ideal of poetry because of the way we experience musical works. In hearing music, he wrote, 'I am made to generate movements, I am made to develop the space of the third or fourth dimension, I have been communicated quasi-abstract impressions of balance, of moving of balance' (Paul Valéry, *Oeuvres* (1960), Vol. 2, p. 704).

^b It is as though on occasion he is tacitly agreeing with Beaumarchais's disreputable quip 'If a thing isn't worth saying, you sing it.' Beaumarchais was passionately fond of music and even ended his play *Le Mariage de Figaro* with the line *tout finit par des chansons*. Mozart took note. Rossini went even further. A composer, he said, 'should not bother about the words, except to see to it that the music suits them without, however, deviating from its general character. He will operate in such a way that the words are subordinate to the music rather than the music to the words ... If the composer sets out to follow the meaning of the words with equal steps, he will write music that is not expressive by itself, but is poor, vulgar, mosaic-like, and incongruous or ridiculous.' Italian music had travelled a great distance away from Monteverdi and the old ideal of *prima la parola, dopo la musica* (see Chapter 4, pp. 104–5).

^c In comparing the dynamics of painting and music, there is another aspect that immediately stands out. With painting the viewer is always free to pick out and scan features at will and not in some time-oriented fashion. Music, on the other hand, carries with it an innate obligation on the part of the listener to follow in real time (unless of course you are silently following it in the score): it does not permit the promiscuous dipping in and out that visual art does. Just as paintings offer us glimpses for their own purely visual sake, so music is available for listening as pure sound. But there is a difference: music creates an appetite for a resolution of a kind – that it can and will itself provide – something it shares with literature but not with painting. Without simplistic representation music presupposes an ability and willingness on the part of the listener to string together a succession of related events not dictated by the material world, nor in Bach's case by an artificial division of it between raw nature and total artifice (see John Butt, 'Do Musical Works Contain an Implied Listener?', JRMA, Vol. 135, Special Issue 1 (2010)).

^d Dreyfus makes the pertinent observation: how 'music could be coaxed into a genuinely new form of commentary' – even a critique of his age and the music of the early Enlightenment in its 'facile hedonism' and the rejection (as well as cooption) of music as a branch of metaphysics (Laurence Dreyfus, *Bach and the Patterns of Invention* (1996), pp. 242–4).

^e By this I mean the way, for example, the four vocal lines were liable to intersect with one another at certain moments, and at the same time collide with the right-hand embellishments of the organ solo in the concerto's *adagio* movement. Admittedly, Bach gave himself a wonderfully solid basis for the twin processes of invention and elaboration by means of an *ostinato* bass line heard six times in the course of the movement.

^f They base their interpretation on a literal interpretation of the first word, *brich*, from the German verb *brechen*, meaning to break, as opposed to 'deal', or the more metaphorically implied 'share' in English (or *partager* in French). The New English Bible (1970) gives the verse as 'Is it not *sharing* [my italics] your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you meet them, and never evading a duty to your kinsfolk?'

^g This interpretation does not automatically turn this into Bach's 'Refugee Cantata' as some have maintained by linking it to a service to mark a cause célèbre – the banishing of around 22,000 Protestants from Salzburg by its archbishop in 1732 and their move to Prussia as part of King Frederick William I's *Peuplierungspolitik* (see Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648–1815* (2007), p. 88). The cantata was first performed six years earlier, in June 1726, though it is conceivable, as Dürr makes clear, that this cantata could have 'found a new purpose ... anticipated by neither librettist nor composer' when it was revived in 1732 (Dürr, *The Cantatas of J. S. Bach* (2005), p. 394).

^h The tune itself, at least thirteenth century in origin, began as a pilgrimage hymn to the words *In Gottes Namen fahren wir*, chosen by Luther, or those close to him, as an appeal to God for protection, particularly at the start of a sea voyage in which Christ was the chosen captain or pilot. Other than bwv 80, *Ein feste Burg*, no other canonic treatment of a *cantus firmus* in a Bach cantata has quite the same air of monumentality or hieratic authority as this.

ⁱ According to the seventeenth-century German theorist Andreas Werckmeister, whose works were known to Bach, there was a crucial theological distinction between the pure diatonic scale of the *clarino* octave (composed of

harmonic numbers and musical consonances), which he interpreted as ‘a mirror and prefiguration of eternal life’, and those chromatic departures from it which reflect, allegorically, man’s fallen state. In other words what we loosely refer to as ‘Baroque’ music, from the moment it set out to affect and stir the emotions (*Gemütsbewegung*), had, in Werckmeister’s theologically coloured view, imperfection embedded in it in terms of ‘tempered’ intervals. One has only to think of the bass aria ‘The trumpet shall sound’ from *Messiah* to appreciate how Handel, too, used the natural, God-designed properties of the trumpet and the prevalence of octaves and fifths to express the final stage in human redemption through Christ (see Ruth Tatlow, ‘Recapturing the Complexity of Historical Music Theories’, Eastman Theory Colloquium, 28 Sept. 2012).

^j By no means confined to Bach; musicians of the time used this phrase quite widely to round off their church compositions; according to Heinrich Bokemeyer (1679–1751), ‘in their hearts they think *Soli Musico Gloria*, which in reality means *soli carni, mundi & diabolo victoria*’ (reported in Mattheson, *Critica musica* (1722), Part 4, Section 26, p. 344).

^k Where the author and poet Blake Morrison uses these and other, similar words to describe the effect of poetry on the reader, others might make equivalent claims for the novel. Mikhail Bakhtin, for instance, in his essay ‘Discourse in the Novel’ (1934–5), suggests that, unlike all other genres which are in some way fixed and completed, the novel always brings with it the sense of a new era and comprises a living utterance which ‘cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads’ in any particular present (*The Dialogic Imagination* (1975), p. 276). Most tellingly, John Butt relates these observations to the church music of Bach, proposing that as listeners we experience a cantata or Passion ‘more like a novel in sound than a straightforward theatrical representation’. Bach ‘managed to combine traditional operatic practice with the type of active participation he would have presumed of a Lutheran congregation, thus engineering the experience as a way of cultivating faith’ (*Bach’s Dialogue with Modernity* (2010), p. 189).

^l Michael the archangel (the name means ‘who is like God’) is one of the few figures to appear in the Old and New Testaments, the Apocrypha and the Koran. He appears as protector of the children of Israel (Daniel 12:1), inspiring courage and strength, and was venerated both as the guardian angel of Christ’s earthly kingdom and as patron saint of knights in medieval lore. Michael is acknowledged in Christian lore as being responsible for ensuring the safe passage into heaven of souls due to be presented before God. Hence the offertory prayer in the Catholic Requiem Mass *sed signifer sanctus Michael repreäsentet eas in lucem sanctam* – ‘May the holy standard-bearer Michael bring them into the holy light.’ First established under the Roman Empire sometime in the fifth century, Michaelmas (*Michaelisfest*) was an important church feast, as it was one of the traditional quarter-days on which rents were levied and agreed in northern Europe, the start of the new agricultural year for many people and, in Leipzig, the day of one of its three annual trade fairs. When Lucifer, highest of the Seraphim, led a mutiny against God, he became transmogrified into the Devil, appearing either as a serpent or as a ten-headed dragon. Michael, at the head of God’s army in the great eschatological battle against the forces of darkness, was the key figure in his rout.

^m When I first heard the cantata, in the late 1960s, in a Karl Richter performance, I was struck by Bach's utterly original combination of *corno* and oboes locked together in a combative tussle. 'Jazz trumpets,' I thought at the time, and there is indeed something of a jam session feel to this passage. We have no idea precisely what instrument Bach intended here by his designation of *corno*. Some scholars take this to mean *cornetto*, but when performed on the archaic cornett it involves the player in elaborate and treacherous cross-fingerings, which inhibits the projection of sound. After we tried this out in London, for our performance in Santiago de Compostela in 2000 Michael Harrison brought along his mid-nineteenth-century German chromatic valve trumpet in C as an alternative, if anachronistic, solution, managing to make it sound credibly cornetto-like in timbre. Ultimately it is not the form, make or date of the instrument that guarantees conviction, but the skill and imagination of the player.

ⁿ Peter Wollny has drawn my attention to the existence of a grandfather clock in Weimar installed by Bach's intractable and reclusive employer, Duke Wilhelm Ernst, to measure out the precise duration of every second of his life.

^o Just three years before his death Bach revived this cantata. Since he could no longer justify the services of a professional copyist, he wrote out the parts himself, rather shakily. Such was the labour involved in the downward transposition for this revival (from E to D major) that he must have had compelling artistic reasons for it. It is strange, therefore, to find him going back to the E major version for one last time, incorporating all the changes he had just introduced in the D major version. The *flauto* piccolo now becomes a *traversa* part, with detailed articulation marks inserted by Bach for almost every single note. One seldom comes across this degree of detailed notation in the performing material for any other of the cantatas of the 1720s.

^p There are exceptions. The most distinguished movement in Telemann's funeral cantata *Du, aber, Daniel* (c. 1710) is a soprano aria which could have prompted Bach's use of a similar head motif in BWV 63/iii (1714) and still more strikingly in BWV 99/v (1724), a soprano/alto duet depicting the heavy tread to Calvary and the bitter sorrows of the Cross, which in turn is curiously similar in affective impact to the duet Handel composed for the husband and wife fated to meet and separate for the last time (*Io t'abbraccio*) in his *Rodelinda* (1725).

^q Brahms looked forward to the arrival of the tomes of the *Bach-Gesellschaft* complete edition of 1851–7 as others might the instalments of a thriller. This reverence and enthusiasm for Bach are reflected in several of his choral works, notably in his Opus 74 motets – in *O Heiland, reiß die Himmel auf*, which owes much in its structure to BWV 4 in achieving musical unity over a large canvas, and, still more, in *Warum ist das Licht?*, which, like BWV 125, ends with a chorale setting of the *Nunc dimittis* – Luther's 'Mit Fried und Freud'.

^r Funeral services in the Lutheran church did not normally involve instruments, but an exception was sometimes made with regard to motets. Notwithstanding the likelihood of a basso continuo accompaniment or the (optional) addition of *colla parte* instruments in the double-choir motets, we have Bach's original performing material for only one of these, BWV 226, *Der Geist hilft unsrer Schwachheit auf*, with strings doubling one choir and woodwinds the other.

^s Despite the attempts by Daniel Melamed (*J. S. Bach and the German Motet* (1995), pp. 85–9) and others to propose a piecemeal assembly of the motet, the fact is that in performance it coheres admirably well – but so, of course, does the *Credo* of the *B minor Mass*, a movement that, as we shall see in the next chapter, was definitely cobbled together from material originating in different times in Bach’s life. Bach is so good at erasing tell-tale traces of any grafts and at bringing total assurance to the finished entity that we can never be sure at which particular moment he decided on the final use of any particular work. There are passages which suggest an earlier (Weimar) provenance – particularly the ninth movement, the sublime ‘Gute Nacht’ duet for sopranos to which the tenors provide a vocal *bassetchen* continuo with the altos threading a line through the middle with the hymn tune. But this in no way detracts from its perfect placement at the heart of the motet. If a movement here or there strikes one as more akin to his keyboard music then it just goes to show that Bach created far fewer stylistic barriers between the various genres in which he cast his music than subsequent commentators would have us believe.

^t Handel, too, was clearly inspired by the verses from I Chronicles 25 and 28 when he set them to music as the culmination of his double-choir oratorio *Israel in Egypt* (1739).

^u The classic example – from another faith – is of course the Whirling Dervishes. Steven Runciman describes ‘their mystic practices, their rhythmic dances that brought them into a state of ecstasy, in communion with God’ (*A Traveller’s Alphabet* (1991), p. 63). Just as the Christian church tried to expunge holy dancing, so Atatürk’s regime tried to suppress the Dervishes.