

# **9**

## **Cycles and Seasons**

*Rituals in Time are what the habitation is in Space. For it is good that the flow of time should not appear to us to wear us away and disperse us like a handful of sand, but should complete and strengthen us. It is right, too, that we see Time as a building-up. So I move from one feast-day to another, from anniversary to anniversary, from harvest-time to harvest-time, just as I went as a child from the council chamber to the bedroom within the thick walls of my father's mansion, where every footstep had purpose.*

– after Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Citadelle* (1948)

On the face of it, there is little reason for us to bother about Bach's cantatas today. Never intended to be performed or listened to other than as part of a lengthy church service, they were composed (and rehearsed) each week at great speed to act as a foretaste of the Sunday sermon. The genre is essentially a bastard obsolescent form, 'cobbled together from multiple styles of writing'.<sup>a</sup> Bach's examples of the form were structured in an ungainly lopsided sequence – typically a long opening chorus, followed by pairs of exhorting recitatives and chastising arias, and then a closing hymn to wrap things up. Their texts (mostly anonymous) seldom rise above poetic doggerel, while the underlying theology is at times unappetising – mankind portrayed as wallowing in degradation and sinfulness, the world a hospital peopled by sick souls whose sins fester like suppurating boils and yellow excrement. What is one to make of a cantata (BWV 199) that opens with the words 'My heart swims in blood, for sin's brood turns me into a monster in God's eyes ... my sins are my executioners, as Adam's seed robs me of sleep and I must hide from Him, He from whom even the angels conceal their faces'?<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it comes as no surprise to find that only one cantata was published during Bach's lifetime – BWV 71, *Gott ist mein König*, written for the inauguration of the Mühlhausen Town Council in 1708 – while at his death the bulk of them were distributed among four of his sons and his widow, but with scores and parts separated. Some cantatas lingered on for a while in the repertoire of his successors, a few were revived in bowdlerised form, many were

sold, and an uncountable number disappeared into the recesses of church libraries or were lost for ever.<sup>b</sup> Some were used to light fires.

So what is all the fuss about? If we are to believe the late Charles Rosen, ‘the fashionable placing of the cantatas as Bach’s principal achievement has only been harmful: it has led to an overemphasis on extra-musical symbolism.’ Great pianist that he was, Rosen not surprisingly felt ‘it is time to return to the old evaluation of Bach’s keyboard music as the centre of his work.’<sup>2</sup> However, he failed to explain why the writers of the *Nekrolog* placed ‘five full annual cycles of church pieces [*Kirchenstücke*],<sup>c</sup> for all the Sundays and feast-days’ right at the head of Bach’s work-list of unpublished pieces if they – and Bach himself – had not believed them to be of huge importance. Bach saw himself as belonging to a line of north and central German organist-composers who considered themselves representatives of modern music within the life of the Lutheran church. Cycles were to be a vital component of his cantatas and were a constant theme and presence throughout his œuvre, beginning with the *Orgel-Büchlein*, an unfinished collection of jewel-like chorale preludes crafted and adjusted to the rhythms of the entire church year. While the challenge for him was always to make every composition a complete and harmonious work in itself, composing in cycles gave him the possibility of moulding a single idea in multiple ways and of extending its expressive range beyond the horizons visible to any other composer of his time. Anton Webern grasped the significance of this in 1933 when he wrote, ‘You find everything in Bach: the development of cyclic forms, the conquest of the realm of tonality – the attempt at a summation of the highest order.’<sup>3</sup> In terms of music intended for use in church, cycles opened up an inviting route for him to stretch his skills in mirroring the fullness and harmoniousness of God’s creation and in engaging deeply with what was essentially an ancient cosmology. For, as John Butt notes, ‘cyclic time is essential to a liturgical, ritualistic approach to religion, in which important events and aspects of dogma are celebrated within a yearly cycle.’<sup>4</sup>

When the opportunity finally came for him to compose church cantatas on a monthly schedule at the Weimar Court, he met the

challenge almost as though he were in training for more extended future ones. If we take, for example, the three cantatas he wrote for the Advent and Christmas season in 1714 and a fourth composed two years later, we see that they join naturally to form a plausible mini-cycle. Hearing them in sequence is a bit like opening the doors of a child's Advent calendar: each is a brilliant cameo, a story linked by the underlying metaphor of the old year as the time of Israel and the new year as the time of Christ. The first, BWV 61, *Nun komm, der Heiden Heiland* (for Advent Sunday), addresses the hopes and fears of the Christian community in the context of Jesus' birth as the beginning of God's plan for our salvation. The second, BWV 70a, *Wachet! Betet!*, focuses on Christ's second coming as judge of the world, beginning with an exhortation to watch and pray, and then alludes to Israel's captivity in Egypt and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah; dire warnings that 'this is the end of time' are, however, mitigated by a vision of release and final reconciliation. By way of contrast, BWV 63, *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag*, celebrates Christmas itself as the long-awaited day of the fulfilment of God's promise and the end of Israel's captivity. Placed at the heart of this cantata's symmetrical structure is the word *Gnaden* – the grace that comes with Christ's birth and, with it, the release of humanity from sin and death – the very word that sanctifies music-making when two or three are gathered together with the right spirit: 'Where there is devotional music, God with His grace is always present.'<sup>d</sup>

Another word, *Stein* ('stone'), lies at the centre of BWV 152, *Tritt auf die Glaubensbahn*, for the first Sunday after Christmas: it symbolises the cornerstone of faith set by God in Jesus' incarnation, but also the way human inclination can take the form of a stumbling block to salvation. Bach and his librettist Salomo Franck make much of this duality – between humanity's initial fall and the need for spiritual abasement, and the triumph of faith and the soul's attainment of the crown as the terminus of the *Glaubensbahn* (the path, or 'train', of faith). It is constructed as an allegorical dialogue between Jesus (bass) and the Soul (soprano), an intimate chamber piece in which three archaic instruments – a recorder, a viola

d'amore and a viola da gamba – standing for the old order (the Rock of Ages reinforced still more tellingly by the ‘old-fashioned’ counterpoint) are juxtaposed with a ‘modern’ oboe and basso continuo representing the new. You sense the evident pleasure Bach takes in the mixing and blending of these instrumental timbres before their final convergence to reflect the unity of Jesus and the Soul. Residual flaws in the genre itself seldom proved insurmountable for Bach, and he was rarely stumped for ways of getting round the problems of the texts in front of him – even when dull, peculiar or simply over the top. Indeed, there is such an astonishingly rich diversity and quality to these Weimar works that, had Bach never composed another cantata – that is, the 150 or so that have survived from his Leipzig years – he would still qualify as the most innovative composer of church music of his day. We have twenty-two immensely varied church cantatas from these years: sparing and resourceful in their use of musical material, exuberant and sometimes dramatic in their response to their texts. His subsequent move to the Calvinist court at Cöthen in 1717 brought no further responsibility for church music. But if the next six years formed a period of Lutheran hibernation, they were far from wasted in terms of glorifying God: he was building up a rich store of secular works, admirable in themselves, and that had all the potential for recycling and transforming on to a higher level in years to come.

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The opportunity to resume composing cantatas, but on a far more regular basis than in the past, was one of the factors that weighed with Bach and a main reason why, after months of hesitation, he applied for the cantor’s job in Leipzig. Clearly he saw this as the chance to fulfil his *Endzweck* – the ‘ultimate goal’ of a ‘well-regulated church music to the glory of God’ (see [Chapter 6, this page](#)). Indeed, it is as though he had reached a point where his desires as an artist were so imbued with strong religious leanings

that he had to find an immediate outlet for them: there is no other logical explanation as to why he concentrated all his energies on composing cantatas over such a short period of time and to the virtual exclusion of all else. For, from the moment of his official induction as Thomascantor in Leipzig in the early summer of 1723, Bach set off at a pace of weekly church-cantata composition so furious that probably no one – not even he, with his extraordinary reserves of creative energy and powers of concentration – could sustain it for more than a couple of years (as indeed he didn't). There is a sense of him saying to himself: 'This is my time: I can do this.' Far from being fallen wood-shavings from the great man's workbench, the cantatas Bach went on to compose are substantial independent works in their own right. Now approaching the zenith of his powers, Bach poured some of his most striking creative energy into their individual shaping, voicing and content. What has come down to us is not just a residue of *œuvres de circonstance*, a splutter of glorious blazes ready for re-ignition in occasional performances today, but a procession of gripping musical works of exceptional worth.

On assuming office in 1723 Bach was evidently determined to set out his compositional stall as quickly as possible. At the back of his mind may have been the consistorial jibe he received in Arnstadt at the very outset of his career about his failure to provide figural music, the frustrations he experienced in finding adequate musicians there and in Mühlhausen, and then the years he had to wait in Weimar before the chance came to string together a monthly cycle of cantatas. Now, as Leipzig's newly appointed Thomascantor, with the chance to provide figural music for every Sunday and festival in the church year, he set off as though stung into action. Such zeal went far beyond any contractual obligation to compose and perform music to adorn the liturgy of the Lutheran church. No one, least of all the sceptical mayoral committee that had appointed him (see illustrations of burgomasters in second inset), would probably have expected him to produce a new composition for every single one of the sixty annual feasts of the church; that he would need to have occasional recourse to the works of past or contemporary colleagues

would have been understood. Certainly no previous Thomascantor had done so, nor had any of his peers ever attempted such an ambitious, pressured undertaking – at least not on an equivalent scale or level of musical complexity. But then, as he was later to insist to a bemused city council, ‘most of my own compositions are incomparably harder and more intricate [than those of other composers].’<sup>5e</sup> Their success was wholly dependent on highly skilled musicians capable of persuasive performances under his direction. For, as he is reported to have said, ‘in music, anyway, everything depends on performance.’<sup>6</sup> A lot more was at stake for Bach: an endeavour that was to prove among the sternest challenges in his life as a creative and performing artist.

Cantatas were called for on saints’ days and feast-days, in addition to the regular Sundays, and were distributed unevenly across the year in the Leipzig liturgy: rare periods of passivity (the so-called ‘closed’ seasons of Advent and Lent, when no figural music was allowed in the city churches) were followed by sudden bursts of frenetic activity around the main festivals of Easter, Whitsun and Christmas. (See diagram of the Lutheran Liturgical Year, Plate 14.) To follow the chronological elaboration of his cantata cycles in linear sequence, just as his Leipzig audience experienced them week to week, is to be dazzled by the fecundity of his invention, his extraordinary consistency, and the rich diversity of texture, mood and form he managed to achieve. Furthermore, exploring Bach’s cantatas sequentially can help us to understand how these intense agglomerations of work could have precipitated the crises – of both creation and reception – in his first two years, particularly (as we shall see) in the build-up to Good Friday, when a Passion performance was due, with the result that his plans for a given cantata cycle were disrupted. Donald Francis Tovey’s view that ‘the main lesson of the analysis of great music is a lesson of organic unity’ is exemplified by Bach’s approach to cyclical cantata composition, showing him to be flexible and capable of widely differing responses from one year to the next.

Following his cantatas in their seasonal context also allows us to notice how Bach, like Janacek two centuries later, often brings to

the surface pre-Christian rituals and forgotten connections that reflect the turning of the agricultural year – the certainty of the land, its rhythms and rituals, the unerring pace of its calendar and the vagaries of rural weather. Saxony in the eighteenth century was still a predominantly agrarian society in which these seasonal events and happenings were closely linked to the concerns of religion – reminding us how, in today's predominantly urban society, many of us tend to lose contact with the rhythms and patterns of the farming calendar and even with perceptions of the basic cyclical round of life and death which feature prominently in so many of Bach's cantatas. There we find rural imagery permeating contemplative religious texts and the poetic elaborations of the lectionary for each successive feast-day.<sup>f</sup> For Bach to remind his urban audience of Leipzig burghers of the patterns of seed-time and harvest existing just beyond their city walls was nothing unusual, and the rhythms and rituals of the agrarian year frequently seep through into his music, giving it topicality and currency as well as a layer of simple rusticity. So when Bach expands on Jesus' Gospel words from the Sermon on the Mount – 'By their fruits ye shall know them' (Matthew 7:15–23) – in a cantata from his first cycle, BWV 136, *Erforsche mich, Gott, und erfahre mein Herz*, he could count on his congregation knowing that Christ's words referred to the terrifying Old Testament warning 'Cursed is the ground on your account ... thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you' (Genesis 3:17–18). This is just one of the perennial worries of the arable farmer at this time of year, along with corn-flattening summer storms (BWV 93/v), bird damage (BWV 187/ii) or the threat of it (BWV 181/i), and crop-failure (BWV 186/vii) – all this despite good seed-bed preparation and timely sowing (BWV 185/iii). At these moments he seems to be drawing on his own childhood memories of country customs, of life close to the Thüringerwald, as we saw in [Chapter 2](#), inspired by the view from his study in the Thomasschule across the River Pleisse to the pleasure gardens that Goethe later compared to the Elysian Fields, and beyond them the rural chequer-board of villages, spinneys and fields being worked by farmers.

A year-to-year comparison of Bach's cantata cycles reveals, too, how strongly they are linked to the rhythms of the geophysical year. This is most apparent at those seminal points when church festivals such as the Annunciation and Palm Sunday coincide with the spring equinox (BWV 1 and 182), or at Easter (BWV 4, 31 and 249), or at the beginning (BWV 75, 20 and 39) and closing (BWV 60, 26, 90, 116, 70 and 140) of the Trinity season, or, the clearest of all, at the winter solstice with its proximity to the ending of the calendar year itself (BWV 190, 41, 16 and 171). These turning-points form an essential backdrop in Bach's measuring of the ups and downs of the liturgical calendar; his braiding of the two conveys the simple idea of an inevitable progression from beginning to end and thence to a new beginning. The difference between the Greek concepts of *kairos* and *chronos* has a direct bearing on Bach's concept of time and how it plays out in his cantatas.<sup>8</sup> In the Koine Greek of the New Testament, *chronos* signifies time in general – both stretches of time passing and waiting time (such as Advent). But, whereas *chronos* marks a continuous line indicating duration, *kairos* is a moment marked somewhere along that line. The phrase *en kairo* means 'at the right moment' (such as Pooh Bear's 'time for a little something'). The New Testament *hoi chronoi kai hoi kairoi* ('the times and the seasons') is a key to understanding what might have been Bach's concept of time – his way of locating and encapsulating music in precise moments and in the appointed season. By localising the event and occasion to which his music was attached, one might think that he risked reducing its impact and future accessibility, but the reverse seems to be true – its universality lies in the very specificity of its origins.

One of the features that registered most strongly with me and with many of the musicians who were exposed to Bach's cantatas in their seasonal succession in 2000 was the periodic emphasis he gives to the idea of cyclic return, of a journey from a beginning to an ending – or, in the theological language of his day, from Alpha to Omega. In replicating the rhythms of Bach's own practice and experiencing the cantata cycles at their appointed times, we gained a sense of *kairos* through this seasonal unfolding. We became aware

of indissoluble connections between the music and its place in the season and often between the music of one week and that of the next, like arcs of a circle being drawn and re-drawn. It felt as though we were reconnecting to the seasonal progression and rhetorical ambit implied in Bach's music – a continuously unfolding rhythmic pattern, but one that normally goes unnoticed. As a result it allowed us to be drawn into the (re-)creative process and active edification implied in Bach's music. This was markedly different from the conventional practices of music-making we were accustomed to in concert halls, which, however persuasive, cannot help but carry resonances foreign to the intrinsic purpose of the music.

More than half of all Bach's sacred cantatas to have survived were composed in his first three to four years as Thomascantor. This is how the Leipzig cantatas break down:

- In Year 1 (1723/4) he composed forty new cantatas. This first cycle also included fourteen adaptations or expansions of Weimar cantatas and five 'parodies' of secular Cöthen cantatas for the period after Easter 1724 that may not have been part of his original plan (see below).
- In Year 2 (1724/5) he composed fifty-two new cantatas; three of these (BWV 6, 42 and 85) are structurally identical to cantatas composed in the February of the previous year and could therefore be considered casualties of a crisis associated with the first performance of his *John Passion* on 7 April 1724. (See diagram of Bach's First Leipzig Cycle, Plate 15.)
- An equivalent disruption to his plans for Good Friday the following year could be linked to the abandonment of the chorale-based cantata cycle after Palm Sunday 1725, and may account for the inclusion of a revival (BWV 4) and a parody (BWV 249) on Easter Sunday; it may also have contributed to the realisation of a new sequence for the 'Great Fifty Days' between Easter and Pentecost. This last now comprised twelve cantatas: three (BWV 6, 42 and 185) whose texts may have been taken from a collection originally reserved for the first cycle, and nine

cantatas with texts by Christiane Mariane von Ziegler (BWV 103, 108, 87, 128, 183, 74, 68, 175 and 176). It seems, then, that Bach planned this new sequence as a way of completing his first cycle in a more satisfactory way than had been possible in the spring of 1724, this time mirroring the liturgical character of the ‘Great Fifty Days’ unified by the preponderance of texts drawn from St John’s Gospel.

- The rate of production of cantatas slows down by almost 50 per cent in 1725/6 to twenty-seven new works, and slower still to just five in the following year, a sign of the mounting problems Bach was facing in finding good-enough musicians from his available Thomaner performing ensemble. This meant that this third cycle ended up being stretched over two years (1725/7).
- This, in turn, is followed by the so-called ‘Picander Cycle’ of 1728/9 that may have been intended by Bach to be apportioned among himself (eight new works), his two elder sons and selected pupil-composers.
- There are around a dozen ‘late’ cantatas to have survived from the 1730s and 1740s.

Evidence that from the outset Bach planned on a broader scale than individual works and feast-to-feast is clear from his opening salvos for the first four Sundays after Trinity in both of his first two annual Leipzig cycles. Compared to Advent, the real beginning of the liturgical year, the first Sunday after Trinity might not seem a particularly significant day to begin a new cycle, but in fact it marked both the beginning of the academic year of the Thomasschule and the midpoint of the Lutheran liturgical year: the crossover from ‘the time of Christ’ (the *temporale*) to ‘the era of the church’ (the long Trinity season) dominated by the concerns of Christian believers living in the here and now under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Bach therefore had good reason to emphasise this important seasonal change – which was coincidentally when he and his family arrived in Leipzig – and to establish it as the launching pad of two successive cantata cycles, the first beginning on 30 May

1723 with BWV 75, *Die Elenden sollen essen*, and the second a year later with BWV 20, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*, which set the tone for a completely new stylistic orientation and a more radical approach (see below, [this page](#)). Add to these the third of his surviving cantatas for this feast, BWV 39, *Brich dem Hungrigen dein Brot*, composed in 1726 (see [Chapter 12](#)), and we have three contrasted large-scale bipartite works all for the same liturgical occasion that afford us a basis for comparison.

Bach announced himself to the congregations gathered in Leipzig's Nikolaikirche and Thomaskirche in 1723 in an opening sequence couched in wide-ranging musical styles and full of exegetical allusions. His two debut cantatas, BWV 75 and 76, composed for consecutive Sundays (Tr + 1 and Tr + 2), are formed like identical twins in the way they present a musical interpretation of Scripture spread across fourteen movements (with the same unfolding pattern of movements of arias and recitatives) – seven to be performed before and seven after the sermon and during the distribution of the Communion. Evidently much thought had gone into both works – discussions with an unknown librettist and possibly with representatives of the Leipzig clergy at the time of his audition in February – before the style, tone and narrative shaping were set. The thematic link between the two works was prompted by the two set Epistles – the injunction to love God (1 John 4:16–21) and one's brother (1 John 3:13–18) – with the implicit insistence that brotherly love is the principal means by which the believer can honour God (BWV 76, Part 2). Such a comprehensive double exposition of the two New Testament commandments – to love God and one's neighbour – was in perfect accord with the definitions Bach gave at various times of his musical goals: glory to God and service to his neighbour (see [Chapter 8](#), [this page](#)). Here was the perfect opportunity for Bach to make plain his future intentions to his congregation, and using his own identifying number<sup>h</sup> – fourteen – in the number of movements of these consecutive works may have been Bach's symbolic way of conveying a personal message to his congregation.<sup>7</sup> As his first official Leipzig

cantata on assuming office, BWV 75, *Die Elenden sollen essen*, was performed eight days after he and his family arrived in Leipzig, and two days prior to his formal installation.<sup>i</sup> Judging from the neat appearance of the autograph score and the non-Leipzig paper on which it was written, it seems that Bach had given himself a head start by finishing it while he was still in Cöthen. (By contrast, the autograph of its sequel, BWV 76, *Die Himmel erzählen*, is a working score with multiple corrections, showing clear signs of haste.) The contrast between poverty (*Armut*) and spiritual riches (*Reichtum*) is used as a metaphor not just for the impermanence of earthly wealth but also for the spiritual privation of the Christian up to the moment that he is enriched by faith. Reduced to its essentials, BWV 75 presents the following message:

## Part I

1. Appearances are deceptive, but those who suffer in this life will one day, like Lazarus, be recompensed (*opening chorus as prelude and fugue*); for
2. riches and worldly pleasures are transitory (*accompanied recitative for bass*),
3. whereas unreserved devotion to Jesus (*aria as polonaise for tenor with oboe and strings*)
4. can lead to joy in the next life (*tenor recitative*).
5. So endure patiently like Lazarus (*aria as minuet for soprano with continuo*)
6. and you can live with a clear conscience (*soprano recitative*);
7. for whatever God does, is for the best (*chorale*).

## Part II

8. *Sinfonia (for trumpet and strings)*
9. Poverty of spirit (*accompagned recitative for alto*)
10. is made rich by Jesus (*alto aria as passepied with violins and continuo*);
11. so practise self-denial (*bass recitative*)
12. and you will be warmed by Jesus' flame (*dramatic aria for bass with trumpet and strings*);
13. so take care not to forfeit it (*tenor recitative*),
14. for whatever God does, is for the best (*chorale*).

The Gospel's 'theme of the week' – the idea that the lowly shall participate in the kingdom of God as conveyed through the Parable of Dives and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) – is summed up in the stirring hymn 'Was Gott tut, das ist wohlgetan' that concludes both parts of Bach's opening cantata, not in a conventional four-part arrangement, but with the voice lines loosened in polyphony and placed in an independent orchestral fabric:

Whatever God does, is well done:  
To this I shall be constant  
Though I be cast on to a rough road  
By affliction, death and misery.

There is something both poignant and prophetic in Bach's assent to the principle these words describe – his constancy in embarking on a divinely inspired assignment and the rough road he had taken towards fulfilling it. Bach was later to complain to a friend that, in fulfilling his duties in Leipzig, he had been scarcely helped by the authorities, whom he had thought 'odd and little interested in music'. But for the moment all is optimism while he focuses on his work with a white-knuckled energy.

BWV 76 is clearly more than just a sequel to the previous Sunday's cantata: together they form a diptych reflecting the dualism of the two segments of the church's year, while also ensuring a thematic continuity extended over two weeks, their texts replete with cross-references between the two set Gospels and Epistles. Thus the injunction to give charitably to the hungry (BWV 75/i) is balanced a week later by the parable of the great banquet to which all are invited 'from all the highways' (BWV 76/vi). Bach chose to open the latter with the same psalm (19:1, 3) that Heinrich Schütz had set so memorably seventy-five years before when he included it in his *Geistliche Chormusik*, dedicated to the same choir of the Thomaskirche in Leipzig:

The heavens declare the glory of God;  
and the firmament sheweth his handywork.  
There is no speech nor language,  
where their voice is not heard.

The idea of the entire cosmos celebrating God's rich creation was a gift to a composer of Bach's conceptual ability. It allowed him to contemplate and expound the meaning of infinity, a concept that was largely sidestepped throughout the Middle Ages, of the cosmos being aware of itself, of how 'nature and grace speak to all of mankind', showing us how as humans we can marvel about our own ability to do so. Bach's vision is reflected in his choice of instruments: regal trumpets in Part I to symbolize God's glory; a viola da gamba, that ancient instrument he uses at moments of the most intense feeling, to underline the human potential for faith and love in Part II. Treating the poverty/riches antithesis would have been enough for most other composers. Instead Bach and his unknown librettist (could it have been Gottfried Lange, the poet-burgomaster, who was acting almost as his patron in these early years of his cantorate?) looked for ways to enrich the connective tissue. In his First Epistle, John focuses on the meaning of love for humanity – conveyed by Bach in a majestic aria for bass and trumpet (BWV 75/xii) – and then, the following week, on brotherly

love (*die brüderliche Treue*) as the basis of worldly life, the means by which mankind gives honour to God (BWV 76/xi).

Bach extends his theme over four consecutive Sundays, for at some point he must have realised how aptly two of his Weimar cantatas (BWV 21 and 185) could be re-worked to round it out. In reviving BWV 21, *Ich hatte viel Bekümmerniss*, which had already grown into one of his more impressive works, Bach was able to enrich the duality of love of God and one's neighbour with a vision of eternity as man's eschatological goal. Remembering how the librettist Salomo Franck of BWV 185, *Barmherziges Herze*, had written that 'the art of the Christian' is 'to know only God and myself, to burn with true love, not to judge unduly, nor nullify another's deeds, not to forget one's neighbour and to mete out ample measure', Bach saw an opportunity to recycle this modestly scored work for four voices and strings with just an oboe and clarino in support. A further advantage to including these two earlier works was that it allowed him to display to his congregation a wide range of compositional styles painted on canvases of strikingly different sizes. It was a means, too, for him to gauge his listeners' preferences.

Bach's task all through this First Leipzig Cycle (see diagram, Plate 15) was to keep pace with the weekly demand. In the process he created forty new cantatas, binding them thematically in subunits to provide continuity and clarity, while remembering which earlier pieces could fit comfortably into the weave of this unfolding tapestry without stylistic disturbance. There was the copying out of parts and guiding his (as yet) untried group of young musicians in how to negotiate the hazards of his startling and challenging music with a bare minimum of rehearsal – tasks we explored in the previous chapter. Come the day, there was first a long, cold wait in an unheated church, then a single shot at a daunting target. Then, without a backward glance, on to the next, maintaining a relentless rhythm. For all the invention and originality of these initial works, this was a sequence to allay the fears of the Leipzig authorities, so suspicious of anything 'operatic' being heard in church; in

comparison with the works he would go on to compose, there was at this stage nothing to alarm them.

With the long Trinity season stretching from late May to late November came a persistent thematic emphasis in the Lutheran lectionary on sin and sickness in mind and body. ‘The whole world is but a hospital’ declares the tenor at one point in BWV 25, *Es ist nichts Gesundes an meinem Leibe*: Adam’s Fall has ‘defiled us all and infected us with leprous sin’<sup>j</sup>. Sickness, raging fever, leprous boils and the ‘odious stench’ of sin are described in detail in the text of this cantata, making no concession to the listener’s delicacy of feeling or potential queasiness. Although the unknown librettist builds to an impassioned appeal to Christ as the ‘healer and helper of all’ to cure and show mercy, it is Bach’s music that completes the spiritual journey for us. As listeners we sense this happening, but it is difficult to say how he affects a change in our perception of what the words are saying. Take the opening chorus with its gloomy description of a sin-ridden world: ‘there is no soundness in my flesh because of Thine anger; neither is there any rest in my bones, because of my sin’ (Psalm 38:3). Having set things in motion to underscore the words by every corroborative means he could devise (two-voiced canons, sighing motifs and unstable harmonies modulating downwards), Bach had, one might imagine, exhausted his expressive arsenal, but not so. In the fifteenth bar he brings in a separate ‘choir’ made up of three recorders, a cornett and three trombones to intone the familiar ‘Passion Chorale’,<sup>k</sup> one phrase at a time. Bach has added an independent commentary of his own which gradually works its magic, instilling the idea of hope and consolation. Here he reaches out to his listeners, his music serving as a kind of spiritual blood transfusion, in which the critical agency in the healing process emanates from the music, not the words.

Time and again in these early Leipzig works we notice how Bach’s most persuasive cantata-writing is all about helping listeners to see what choices they have in life, in showing them an ideal (‘heaven’), then focusing on the real world and how to deal with it – in terms of attitude, behaviour and conduct. This explains why his cantatas

appear to escape their historical and liturgical confinement and reach out to us today. Thoughts and feelings that we have had find expression through Bach, but with so much more candour and clarity than we can ever muster. Then he draws together all the strands of exegetical gloss he has given to the devotional themes in the course of the work in a closing chorale (usually but not always) perfectly adjusted to its situation within the emotional scheme. This was a moment of comfort for his listeners, bringing them back to the here and now of their quotidian concerns – to a ‘sane’ present. For, however strange or complex the new cantor’s music was in the opening movements of his cantatas, the chorale was a familiar point of reference – a return to territory to which they could respond either by singing along with the melody or just by following inwardly.

Successive penitential cantatas follow, maintaining this seasonal campaign of catechismal strafing, sometimes reinforced, sometimes tempered, by Bach’s music. We become accustomed to the way the human actor is positioned by the librettist in scenarios of faith and doubt, sin and Satan. The curious thing is that all this heavy theological attack neither blunts the audacity of Bach’s musical response nor diminishes the humanity of his sympathy with the faithful. For, although Bach is habitually required to deal with such towering universal themes as eternity, sin and death, he shows he is also interested in the flickers of doubt and the daily tribulations of every individual, recognising that small lives do not seem small to the people who live them (just as such lives come to seem enormous the instant they are richly imagined and minutely observed by novelists such as Tolstoy or Flaubert). In this he exemplifies what Vico called *fantasia*: a faculty of imaginative insight or a capacity to get into the skin of others, or what Herder later called *Einfühlung* (‘empathy’).<sup>8</sup>

This comes to the surface in a work like BWV 105, *Herr, gehe nicht ins Gericht*, in which the penitent servant rues ‘the errors of my [his] soul’. Bach turns to a device, a commonplace Baroque representation of anxiety, the *tremolo*, requiring his string players to

make pulsated reiterations by twos or fours under a single bow stroke (a technique sometimes called ‘bow vibrato’)<sup>1</sup> and uses it astutely in three of the cantata’s six movements: first to represent the ‘unjust steward’ waiting nervously, knowing that he is about to be dismissed for failing to collect his master’s dues (Luke 16:1–9), then to represent the quivering conscience of the sinner, fixing the idea in the listener’s ear by means of the persistent thrum of semiquavers assigned to the two violins and the quaver-pulsed viola line tapping out a light but inescapable symbol of mental distress: ‘How the thoughts of sinners / Tremble and reel / As they accuse / And then dare to excuse one another / Thus is the anguished conscience / Torn asunder by its own torture.’ There is both a crystalline fragility to this soprano aria and a fragmented lyricism in the melodic line, first for oboe, then for the voice. They exchange tentative proposals and reticent retractions – two ‘voices’ echoing one another within a single mind manifestly at odds with itself. Bach avoids all melodrama. Where another composer might have seized on the obvious opportunities for vivid mimesis of the ‘anguished conscience’, Bach instead opts for a subtle and essentially human approach, varying his chromatic and diatonic harmonies to convey the mood-swings of a mind in a state of constant vacillation: tempted, resisting, succumbing, resisting again, achieving repose only with the final cadence (which even so we sense is only provisional). Then, in the finale chorale, to convey the progressive stilling of the sinner’s troubled conscience, he returns to the *tremulant* device of the cantata’s opening movement. First he plants pulsating semiquavers in the instrumental lines, then slows them down to triplet, then duplet quavers, then slower still to tripletised crotchets, and finally to plain crotchets chromatically descending – a gradual winding down to the point where both voices and continuo fall silent. It is a brilliantly graphic and original means to describe the release of the spirit from its earthly encasement.

At this distance it is easy to empathise with the deeply human way Bach lays out the various choices we all have to face at different stages in our lives – the blind alleys we pursue, the temptations and the price we often have to pay for following or

giving in to them, the various ploys for easing our troubled consciences. While the word-painting here is subtle and the imagery generally easier to grasp than in several other cantatas (much helped by the atypically high quality of the libretto), the real pleasure comes in following Bach's prodigious musical inventiveness as it develops: those ideas which sparked his fantasy in the first place, and then the techniques used in presenting and elaborating them.

The relationship between this cantata and that for the following Sunday, BWV 46, *Schauet doch und sehet*, is far too close to be accidental. It goes beyond the obvious facts that they share warnings against sin, fear of reprisal in the shape of God's harsh judgement and the same (by no means unique) symmetrical six-movement layout (chorus – recitative – aria – recitative – aria – chorale). For example, both draw on *bassetchen* texture (105/iii, 46/v) and both have highly unusual final movements in which the chorale is embedded within an independent orchestral setting, with interludes for upper strings (105/vi) and two recorders (46/vi), in both cases unsupported by continuo. Even the *tremulant* device, such a prominent feature of BWV 105, reappears (perhaps to jog the listener's short-term memory) in the second part of a storm-scene bass aria (BWV 46/iii), changing the mood of martial menace to one of anxious waiting for God's vengeance to strike – and marked to be performed *pianissimo*. Most importantly, both cantatas announce themselves in grand opening movements structured as a chorale prelude and fugue to mirror the sentence divisions of the biblical text.

There are signs here of the way Bach was already thinking ahead to Passontide, the two choruses revealing features we associate with the opening tableau of the *John Passion* (see [Chapter 10, this page](#)): in BWV 46, the same pronounced sighing figure in the violas; and, in BWV 105, imploring choral shouts of *Herr! Herr!* linked to similar harsh suspensions in the upper instruments, and the same throbbing bass line and G minor tonality. BWV 46 begins as a lament over the destruction of Jerusalem in the words of Jeremiah

(Lamentations 1:12). Jesus' prophecy of the Roman destruction in AD 70 is recounted in the Gospel of the day (Luke 19:41–8), and both on this Sunday and on Good Friday in the Leipzig churches there were annual readings of the Roman historian Josephus' account of the event as well as John's Passion narration. By alluding to it here, Bach's musical narrative is able to span separate historical eras – from that of the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah to that of Jesus – and brand these successive catastrophes in the believer's mind, giving them the form of metaphors for his self-inflicted woes, just as there is a similar spanning of time zones in his Passions.

It might have taken him nine or ten Sundays to get fully into his stride and develop these elaborate contrapuntal choruses, but from this point on there is no turning back. Bach had set out to develop a new cantata style in Leipzig, distinct from the works he had written earlier, and by reviving four Weimar cantatas in previous weeks he had given himself additional time to reflect and elaborate on it. BWV 105 and 46 are the result. Preference for one or the other of these imposing cantatas is a matter of personal choice, but one could easily be seduced by the richer instrumentation of BWV 46 – two recorders, two oboes da caccia and a slide trumpet added to the normal string ensemble – and by the fact that its first ('Prelude') section came to be re-used to the words *Qui tollis peccata mundi* in the Gloria of the *B minor Mass*, evidence of how highly Bach himself valued it.<sup>m</sup> Taken together, one senses that Bach intended the cantatas of these two weeks to form a musico-theological climax to this early Trinity season.

With summer giving way to autumn, the focus of the appointed texts for each Sunday is on the hazards of living in society – with warnings against false prophets and hypocrites and how to live righteously in a sin-affected world. One could choose any of the thirty cantatas he included from the start of his first cycle up to Christmas to illustrate this progression. Midway through BWV 93, *Wer nur den lieben Gott lässt walten*, Bach has his tenor exclaim, 'There is death in the pots!' – an allusion likely to have puzzled even his Bible-reading congregation. (It turns out to be Elisha's reaction

in a time of death to an unappetising dish prepared for him which he somehow makes edible ‘for the people’ (II Kings 4:40–41) – an apt metaphor for Bach’s skill in regularly converting the hard doctrinal crust of this unpromising Trinitarian fare into something both palatable and varied.) Having already acquired the knack of how to vivify a doctrinal message and, when appropriate, of delivering it with a hard dramatic kick, he is now exploring ways of how and when to balance it with music of an emollient tenderness, humouring and softening the severity of his texts while in no way blunting their impact. Time and again one senses Bach’s exceptional level of engagement with the words, his music going far beyond literal mimesis or the codified use of conventional figures and symbols. (Bach’s complex braiding of words and music will be the subject of [Chapter 12](#), where we will encounter more of his inaugural Leipzig cantatas.)



As autumn passes to winter the themes of the week become steadily grimmer as the faithful are urged to reject the world, its lures and snares, and to focus on eventual union with God – or risk the horror of permanent exclusion. From week to week this dichotomy appears to grow harsher, with the stress on sin and guilt deepening as the weather worsens. To convey the inner conflict between belief and doubt in BWV 109, *Ich glaube, lieber Herr, hilf meinem Unglauben!*, we find him assigning two opposing ‘voices’, sung by the same singer, one marked *forte*, the other *piano*. (How Schumann – the creator of Florestan and Eusebius, who hated to express himself in a single unified voice – would have loved this.) Polarity of a different kind is suggested in BWV 90, *Es reiset euch ein schrecklich Ende* – between the terrifying outcome that awaits sinners at the Last Judgement and the protection God guarantees to ‘His elect’. Bach opens with a ‘rage’ aria of unflagging energy – with *tirades* and flourishes of fourteen consecutive demisemiquavers, big jumps in tessitura,

curtailed phrase-endings and dramatic pauses mid-word (*schreck ... lich*). This is as theatrically extreme as anything his listeners (and performers) might have encountered during the years when Leipzig had its own opera house (1693–1720)<sup>9</sup> – and not what they would normally expect to hear in church – and the first time he had risked this flagrant breach of protocol.

For his final cantata of the Trinity season, BWV 70, *Wachet! betet! betet! wachet!*, with its play on words, Bach increases the voltage. In flanking *accompagnati* now added to his earlier Weimar cantata, with their repeated semiquavers hammered out in Monteverdi's *stile concitato* (the 'excited style'), Bach anticipates by many years the inherently operatic outbursts of two of Handel's most formidable stage heroines: Dejanira, the unhinged wife in *Hercules* (1745) ('Where shall I fly?'), and Storgè, the outraged mother in *Jephtha* (1752) ('First perish thou!'). But it is not merely the full-throttle openings of these dramatic scenes that beg comparison with this cantata: Bach is a match for his Saxon contemporary at every step – in the power of his vocal declamation, in the vividly supportive orchestral accompaniment he invents to portray the cataclysmic destruction of the world and in the seraphic transition he achieves as Jesus finally guides the believer to complete 'stillness, to that place of abundant joy'. In these two cantatas that bring the Trinity season to a close, Bach seems – presumably unintentionally – to have taken on his peer group of Italian-opera composers and beaten them at their own game. (This is all part of the evolution of a mutant form of opera proposed in [Chapter 4](#).) In the process he manifestly broke the pledge he had given to the council barely six months previously – not to make compositions that were 'too theatrical' or of the kind he had composed in Weimar. As we shall soon see these were not momentary slips but by now a habitual transgression – hugely entertaining and to be relished by a congregation numbed by cold and four hours on a hard pew.

With Bach's approach to his first Christmas season in Leipzig the mood lightens. After the Advent *tempus clausum* comes a collective intake of breath, followed by an explosion of festive music. A cluster

of brand-new works suddenly appears on the music stands of the Thomaner – nine major pieces for them to master and deliver over the next sixteen days in three of the city's churches. In his mind Bach must have set aside this first break in the cycle as the time to accelerate his speed of weekly composition.<sup>n</sup> In less than a month he would need to complete music for seven feasts, from Christmas Day through to the first Sunday after Epiphany: six new cantatas – BWV 40, 64, 190, 153, 65 and 154 – and two Latin works in a separate but equally challenging idiom – a compact *Sanctus* in D (BWV 238) and the *Magnificat* in E<sup>3</sup><sub>8</sub> major (BWV 243a), more familiar nowadays in its later D major version (BWV 243). These two were to be performed in tandem with his grand Weimar cantata BWV 63, *Christen, ätzet diesen Tag*, on Christmas Day. A glance at the schedule reveals the immensity and relentlessness of the assignment Bach set for himself and his performing ensemble:

**Christmas Day, 25 December 1723**

7 a.m. Mass	Thomaskirche	BWV 63	<i>Christen, ätzet diesen Tag</i>
		BWV 238	<i>Sanctus</i>
9 a.m. Service	Paulinerkirche	BWV 63	<i>Christen, ätzet diesen Tag</i>
1.30 p.m. Vespers	Nikolaikirche	BWV 63	<i>Christen, ätzet diesen Tag</i>
		BWV 243a	<i>Magnificat</i>

**Second Day of Christmas, Feast of St Stephen, 26 December**

7 a.m. Mass	Nikolaikirche	BWV 40	<i>Darzu ist erschienen</i>
		BWV 238	<i>Sanctus</i>
1.30 p.m. Vespers	Thomaskirche	BWV 40	<i>Darzu ist erschienen</i>
		BWV 243a	<i>Magnificat</i>

**Third Day of Christmas, Feast of St John, 27 December**

7 a.m. Mass	Thomaskirche	BWV 64	<i>Sehet, Welch eine Liebe</i>
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**New Year's Day, Feast of the Circumcision, 1 January 1724**

7 a.m. Mass	Nikolaikirche	BWV 190	<i>Singet dem Herrn</i>
1.30 p.m. Vespers	Thomaskirche	BWV 190	<i>Singet dem Herrn</i>

**Sunday after New Year's Day, 2 January**

7 a.m. Mass	Thomaskirche	BWV 153	<i>Schau, lieber Gott</i>
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**Epiphany, 6 January**

7 a.m. Mass	Nikolaikirche	BWV 65	<i>Sie werden aus Saba</i>
1.30 p.m. Vespers	Thomaskirche	BWV 65	<i>Sie werden aus Saba</i>

**First Sunday after Epiphany, 9 January**

7 a.m. Mass	Thomaskirche	BWV 154	<i>Mein liebster Jesus</i>
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One marvels at how he and his performers could have met these challenges. We shall of course never know how well they acquitted themselves and just how well the music was performed under such pressure.<sup>o</sup> Signs that Bach had anticipated the problem of

cumulative fatigue may be found in his use of *colla parte* instruments to bolster the choral lines of several opening choruses and the absence of soprano solos in five cantatas (BWV 40, 190, 153, 65 and 154). Open any one of these scores at random or listen to them and you cannot fail to be impressed by the stupefying scale of Bach's undertaking and the technical demands he made of himself and his performing ensemble in composing and performing such a cornucopia of Christmas music at breakneck speed: one is left with what Dreyfus calls 'inchoate feelings of awe'.<sup>10</sup>

As Bach emerged from this punishing schedule, there was the need to think ahead, to plan and plot, scrabbling for time to conceive and then to flesh out his first Passion oratorio. We have already seen evidence of preparatory sketches for his *John Passion*, but how much of it had been completed at this stage? Already at Christmas-time we start to find signs of him preparing his listeners for shocks to come and giving hints of what lay in store for them. For example, he gave what might seem to us a curiously unseasonal theological twist to three consecutive works for the three days of Christmas. Bach provides none of the usual themes we are used to from his (later) *Christmas Oratorio*: no song of the Virgin, no music for the shepherds or for the angels, not even the standard Christmas chorales. The exception is the well-known *Magnificat*. In this first version in E<sup>3</sup><sub>8</sub> Bach introduced so-called *laudes*. Mostly delightful, sometimes rather peculiar, these pieces are quite intricate for mere cradle songs and were apparently intended as a sop to local custom, to be sung by a separate 'angelic' choir from the swallow-nest gallery of the Thomaskirche. Inserted between the verses of Mary's song, they form a summary of the Christmas story in miniature.

Elsewhere he presents us with a decidedly Johannine view of the incarnation – as God's descent in human form to save man and to bring joy through His defeat of the Devil – in clear anticipation of the message of his *John Passion*, now only a few months away. In three thrilling Christmas cantatas – BWV 63, 40 and 64 – Bach gives strong emphasis throughout to John's depiction of Jesus as *Christus victor*.<sup>p</sup> Since the third day of Christmas is also the Feast of St John

we see why Bach might have chosen to emphasise a division between the world ‘above’ (full of truth and light) and the one ‘below’ (full of darkness, sin and incomprehension). God *descends* in human form to save man from the sin that has poisoned him ever since his first encounter with the Devil (represented by a snake). Man’s aspiration is to *ascend* to a plane where he can be included as one of God’s children. But before this ascent can begin Jesus must first undergo his Passion and then, by his resurrection, defeat sin, death and the Devil. It is of course all too easy to describe Bach’s music mainly in terms of text and then forget why we were interested in it in the first place. In the cases of BWV 40, 64 and the glorious Epiphany cantata BWV 65 that follows ten days later, there are little pointers in the way many of the words and images seem to spring so easily from the biblical quotations and chorales and are then fused so naturally with the music, enough to suggest that Bach himself might have written their texts, or at least had a preponderant influence on their author.

## b

In Bach’s time the period between Christmas and Epiphany was called *Raunächte* – literally ‘rough nights’ – the German equivalent to the Roman Saturnalia and of similar pagan tradition. Yet there was no respite for him: there were nine weeks from Epiphany to the beginning of Lent for which six new cantatas were needed (with three earlier Weimar works available for revision) plus one for the Feast of the Purification (2 February). For Epiphany + 4, what must count as Bach’s most ‘operatic’ cantata bursts into life: BWV 81, *Jesus schläft, was soll ich hoffen?* Here he gives his listeners a foretaste of the entralling music they could expect when his imagination was torched by a particularly dramatic incident. Based on Matthew’s description of Jesus’ calming a violent storm on the sea of Galilee that threatens to capsize the ship in which he and his disciples are sailing, it makes a sea voyage into a metaphor for the Christian life.

It begins with Jesus asleep on board ship, the backdrop to an eerie meditation on the terrors of abandonment in a godless world – cue for a pair of old-fashioned recorders added to the string band for an aria for alto, the voice Bach regularly uses for expressions of contrition, fear and lamenting. Here he challenges the singer to a serious technical (and symbolic) test of endurance: to hold a low B<sup>3</sup><sub>8</sub> without quavering for ten slow beats and then to negotiate a series of angular leaps and twists (through diminished and augmented intervals) to evoke the gaping abyss of approaching death. Life without Jesus – his somnolent silence lasts all the way through the first three numbers – causes his disciples, and of course Christians ever since, acute anguish and a sense of alienation that rises to the surface in the tenor recitative with its dislocated, dissonant harmonies. In the background of the night we hear the words of Psalm 13 – ‘How long wilt thou forget me, O Lord, for ever? How long wilt thou hide thy face from me?’ – and the image of the guiding star precious to all mariners and to the magi.

Suddenly the storm bursts. A continuous spume of violent demisemiquavers in the first violins is set against an unabated thudding in the other instruments. It reaches a succession of ear-splitting cracks on diminished seventh chords conveying the rage of ‘Belial’s waters’ beating against the tiny vessel. It is similar to one of Handel’s powerful ‘rage’ arias, demanding an equivalent virtuosity of rapid passagework by both tenor and violins, but imbued with vastly more harmonic tension – what *Paradise Lost* might sound like if set as an opera. Three times Bach halts the momentum mid-storm for two-bar ‘close-ups’ of the storm-tossed mariner. Though it feels intensely real, the tempest is also an emblem of the godless forces that threaten to engulf the lone Christian as he stands up to his tormentors. It is extraordinary what a vivid *scena* Bach has created from its beginning in a simple  $\frac{6}{4}$  *allegro* in G major for strings alone. Jesus, now awake (as if he could possibly have slept through all the mayhem), rebukes his disciples for their lack of faith. In an arioso with straightforward continuo accompaniment, almost a two-part invention, the bass soloist assumes the role of *vox Christi*. After the

colourful drama of the preceding *scena* the very sparseness and deliberate repetitiveness of the music is striking. One wonders whether there is a pinch of dramatic realism here, of yawn-induced rebuke (the repetition of *warum?*) or even of mild satire – one of those occasions when Bach may be poking fun at one of his Leipzig theological task-masters. There follows a second seascape, almost as remarkable as the earlier tempest, this time as an aria for bass, two oboes d'amore and strings. The strings are locked in octaves, a symbol of order to show that even the pull of the tides, the undertow and the waves welling up can be checked just as they are about to break by Jesus' commands *Schweig! Schweig!* ('Be silent!') and *Verstumme!* ('Be still!').<sup>9</sup>

When might Bach, a landlocked Thuringian, have witnessed a maritime storm? It could only have been on the Baltic during his brief stay in Lübeck in 1705, if ever. However, one of his favourite authors, the seventeenth-century theologian Heinrich Müller, certainly did. Müller lived in Rostock on the Baltic coast and commentated eloquently on this particular incident in Matthew's Gospel. For the true believer to travel in 'Christ's little ship' is, metaphorically, to experience the buffettings of life and bad weather but to come through unscathed: 'the paradox of total peace in the midst of turbulence'.<sup>11</sup> Müller's tropological interpretation of this biblical event – one to give moral guidance to the listener – may have prompted Bach's exceptional treatment, a foretaste of the equally dramatic story-telling in music in his *John Passion*, whose premiere was fast approaching. No doubt it ruffled the feathers of Leipzig councilmen like Dr Steger, who, nine months earlier, had voted for Bach as cantor with the explicit proviso 'that he should make compositions that were not too theatrical'.<sup>12</sup> A work such as this suggests what kind of opera composer Bach might have made if he had been so inclined, for there is nothing in his secular cantatas (despite their titles as *drammi per musica*) that is as remotely theatrical as this amazing cantata.

Assuming that he had a pre-eminent role in the choice of poetic texts and selection of chorales in the period leading up to Lent, it seems that Bach was carefully preparing the congregation for the

communal response that the chorales were soon to fulfil in his first Passion setting, making sure also to establish a connection in their minds between a bass voice and the voice of Christ. That left Lent, its forty days interrupted by the Feast of the Annunciation (25 March), in which to complete the *John Passion* in time for Good Friday (7 April). This, as it turned out, would be his one opportunity to stamp his mark on the shape, style and purpose of music for this red-letter day with impunity. We can piece together the links in the narrative from the council minutes. In the lead up to Holy Week 1724 Bach had forged ahead, posting announcements, printing and issuing libretti of his *John Passion* scheduled for performance in the Thomaskirche. To the dismay of some in the council offices it must have seemed as though the new cantor simply did not grasp the elementary protocol of how things were done in Leipzig. Was he not aware of the local ‘tradition’ (established just three years before, in 1721) of alternating the Good Friday service between the city’s two main churches? The council minutes state that the cantor had been notified in advance that this year it was the turn of the Nikolaikirche. He was duly summoned to appear before the consistory to explain why he had flouted their instruction and to be told in no uncertain terms to ‘pay attention’ (*darnach achten*) and ‘to take better care in future’. The town clerk’s minutes indicate that Bach’s response was (surprisingly) measured and co-operative: ‘He would comply with the same [agreeing to switch venue to the Nikolaikirche in other words], but pointed out that the booklet had already been printed ... [and] he requested at least that a little additional room be provided in the choir loft, so that he could place the persons needed for the music; also that the harpsichord be repaired.’ To this ‘The Honourable and Most Wise Council’ duly agreed, and a new leaflet announcing the change of venue was printed.<sup>13</sup> That should have been the end of the matter, but it clearly wasn’t: there was still the clergy to deal with, as we shall see in the next chapter.

Bach’s best-laid plans seem to have gone awry. The first performance of the *John Passion* on 7 April 1724 manifestly interfered with the subsequent unfolding of his first cantata cycle,

though we can only guess whether this was because Bach had received a stern theological reproof or was simply a consequence of his having overextended himself. Fifteen church feasts remained for the ‘Great Fifty Days’ from Easter to Whit Sunday and its sequel, Trinity Sunday, before the cycle was complete, and with dense three-day pressure points at the Easter and Whitsun weekends.<sup>1</sup> For whatever reasons Bach was not able to keep to his original plan for a through-composed sequence, and as a consequence we find him being forced into makeshift solutions – resorting to four previously composed cantatas (BWV 31, 12, 172 and 194) and then recycling material from secular works composed in his Cöthen days (BWV 66, 134, 104, 173 and 184) for another five. That still left five new works leading up to Whit Sunday for him to compose. Their overall quality is consistently high, and here again he casts them to form a mini-cycle.

The first in this sequence, BWV 67, *Halt im Gedächtnis*, is especially impressive: the music vibrates with a pulsating rhythmic energy and a wealth of invention. Bach’s task here is to depict the perplexed and vacillating feelings of the disciples, their hopes dashed after the Crucifixion. He conveys the palpable tension between Thomas’s doubts and the need within the group to keep faith (the corno blasts this out as a sustained single note in the opening chorus, an injunction to ‘hold’ Jesus in remembrance). Later, what starts out as a poised and chirpy gavotte for tenor, oboe and strings fragments abruptly in its second bar: ‘But what affrights me still?’ juxtaposes these contrary *Affekts*, one fretful, the other affirmative. He successfully captures the jittery mind-frame of the beleaguered Christian, his alto soloist exhorting the choir to keep their spirits up by singing the iconic Easter hymn ‘Erschienen ist der herrlich Tag’. Then at the climax of the cantata comes a dramatic *scena* in which the strings work up a storm to illustrate the raging of the enemy without. The three-voiced choir of stricken disciples, augmented by the *furioso* strings, conveys a sense of alienation of the Christian community in the here and now. Like a cinematic dissolve, Bach blends this into a slower, gently dotted triple-rhythm sequence for

his three woodwind instruments – cue for Jesus' sudden appearance to his disciples who are huddled together in a locked room. Three times their anxiety is quelled by Jesus' beatific utterance *Friede sei mit euch* ('Peace be unto you'). At its fourth and final appearance the strings abandon their storm-rousing and symbolically melt into the woodwind's lulling rhythms. In this way the scene ends peacefully, the concluding chorale acknowledging the Prince of Peace as 'a strong helper in need, in life and in death'.



Now, without so much as a week to reflect or take stock, Bach plunges ahead with his Second Leipzig Cycle on 11 June 1724 (see diagram, Plate 16). There is an unmistakable shift in his approach but not the slightest diminution in quality. The first cycle was boldly experimental – in the diversity of its forms, in its varied instrumentation and in the huge challenges it posed to Bach's performing forces – but the second is, if anything, bolder still. The technique of his players and singers is to be stretched still further, the new music demanding an instant responsiveness to the pulse and mood of the moment: singers need to match the instruments for precision and agility; players reciprocally need to shape and inflect their lines like singers. There will also be fewer concessions to his listeners' scruples. That much is clear from the outset of his first cantata, BWV 20, *O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort*. It is an astonishing piece, one that sets the tone for the whole cycle and sums up so many of the original features we will encounter – a new range of expression, the use of operatic technique to enliven the doctrinal message and wild contrasts of mood. In this instance Bach takes his lead from the Epistle's plea for 'boldness in the day of judgement' (1 John 4: 16–21) to fire his imagination and powers of musical invention. We seem to be already in the death-throes of the Trinity season, not at its start – but then Bach's was an age that had the taste for apocalypse, and the theme crops up regularly and

unexpectedly.<sup>s</sup> While the tune of Johann Rist's hymn was familiar enough to his congregation, Bach's treatment of it was novel and shocking. Where the previous year's vision was of a faith-propelled anticipation of eternity in BWV 21, fear, rather than comfort, is now the subtext of BWV 20 – the chilling prospect of an eternity of torture and pain. It is the spur to man to save his soul: the only way towards salvation is for him to renounce sin. The hymn tune dominates all three segments of the opening chorale fantasia (*fast – slow – fast*). Bach saw to it that the combined energies of the Thomaner trebles were channelled into the rising melodic *cantus firmus* (*O Ewigkeit*) ('O eternity') and reinforced by the martial slide trumpet propelling the three lower voices in its wake before they splinter off in the sharply dotted style of the instruments (*du Donnerwort*) ('thou thunder-word'). Powerful cross-accents and a huge upward sweep for the basses on *Traurigkeit* ('grief') characterise the double fugue. Abruptly the orchestra screeches to a halt on a diminished seventh. Only a bold dramatist would risk stopping the forward momentum to convey trepidation – personal and petrifying – and Bach had good reason to be proud of this. (Any late-coming worshippers entering at that point would have been frozen to the spot, their neighbourly greetings silenced.) Out of the ensuing silence, terse and angular fragments are tossed from oboes to strings and back again in anticipation of the choir's resumption: 'My terrified heart quakes' – with actual breaks in the voice – 'so that my tongue cleaves to my gums.' Disjointed discourse of this intensity seems unimaginable in a pre-Beethovenian world. Bach understood the physiology of the voice far more than he is given credit for and makes it very much part of the expression. Suddenly we realise why he has chosen a French overture form as the structural basis of this movement:<sup>t</sup> far from its traditional evocation of order and grandeur, the jagged dotted rhythms and extravagant rhetorical gestures that typify the form delineate here a world disintegrating. Once underpinned by destabilising harmonies, the effect gains in potency – still more so when the pace quickens to *vivace*. Bach makes us instantly aware that the region of eternal

condemnation will be peopled by ghoulish minions of the Devil, herding and spearing the souls of the damned into a subterranean corral.

Nor does the apocalyptic vision fade at the close of this opening tirade. A tenor soloist steps forward and piles on the agony: ‘there is no redemption from the pain of eternity ... it drives on and on in its play of torment.’ Bach draws on a varied armoury for this aria – long notes and undulating quavers to imply eternity, tortuous intervals paired in quavers to suggest trepidation, broken fragments, chromatic and syncopated, for the quaking heart, wild coloratura runs for ‘flames that burn for ever’, sudden silences to underscore the terror. This profusion of dramatic imagery is seamlessly integrated into his overall design. The turbulence of the bass line is a destabilising feature of the entire cantata (we need only glance at the original basso continuo part to see how exceptionally angular are its gestures).

Climbing back into his pulpit, the bass delivers the harrowing prospect of ‘a thousand million years with all the demons’. Then, as he moves from recitative into aria, he abruptly changes tack and tone. We appear to have been shunted into the world of *opera buffa*, or, rather, of ducks – three of them (all oboes) and a bassoon (a token drake?) – quacking in genial assent as the singer declaims *Gott ist gerecht* (‘God is just’) over and over again. The mood seems to jar horribly. Was it not a prototype of Beethoven we were listening to a moment ago? Have we been misled by all the fire and brimstone? Perhaps Bach could see no further way to develop the theme of eternity before offering a speck of hope to the Christian soul now thoroughly battered and bruised. He reminds us that the solution to life’s problems is childlike in its simplicity: all it takes is to put one’s trust in God. It is a deliberate ploy to dissipate the gloom and tension – like opening a window in a smoke-filled room. Having cleared the air, you can almost picture him sitting back in his favourite chair, lighting a fresh pipe and contentedly blowing smoke circles.

Bach’s depiction of hell is far richer and more polychromatic than that of any other composer before Mozart and Berlioz. So much of

his richness comes from the dissonance that runs from the smallest to the largest levels.<sup>u</sup> The reprieve he allows us, however, is only temporary (after all, would we really want to achieve a serene eternity characterised by ducks?). The sequel he has planned is a strange aria for alto and strings – ‘O mankind, save your soul, flee from Satan’s slavery’ – presented with extravagant rhythmic dislocation, regular  $\frac{3}{4}$  bars alternating with single or double hemiolas in  $\frac{2}{3}$  as metaphors for Satan’s slavery. Stranger still is the way that he repeats the singer’s second phrase with orchestra alone – in a reflective coda which takes up exactly half of the whole aria’s duration.

The sermon was designed to follow at this point, ushered in by a pessimistic, even nihilistic, hymn stanza – ‘Torment shall never cease: men shall be plagued, by heat and cold, fear, hunger, terror, fire and lightning ... This pain will end when God is no longer eternal’, thus effectively undoing the repair work achieved earlier by the bass soloist. What words coming from a preacher’s mouth could now add anything meaningful to this musical bombardment? A logical choice for his theme would have been the call to the lost sheep to wake up and throw off the sleep of sin (Ephesians 5:14), the subject of the electrifying bass aria with trumpet and strings which opens Part 2 – Bach’s answer, as it were, to Handel’s ‘The trumpet shall sound’ from *Messiah* – a taxing piece for both singer and trumpeter, requiring dramatic delivery and technical control. As if that were not enough, the alto soloist now blasts off in a tirade against the carnal world, much along the lines of an Oxford Street sandwich-board-wearer: ‘Repent before it’s too late: the end is nigh.’<sup>v</sup> And with this message comes a twist calculated to bring the listener up short: ‘Consider ... it could be this very night that the coffin is brought to your door!’ It is not very often that Bach resorts to lurid pictorialism of the Hieronymus Bosch kind; yet, in the ensuing duet delivered to the errant pilgrim as though by Bunyan-esque angels (alto and tenor), he treats us to a ghoulish cameo of ‘howling and chattering teeth’, of the ominous approach of the hand-drawn hearse as it clatters across the cobbled street.

Successions of first inversion chords over a disjointed bass line in quavers with parallel thirds and sixths in the voice parts give way first to imitative and answering phrases, then to an anguished chromaticism evoking the bubbling stream and the drop of water denied to the parched rich man. The voices join for a final flourish. We hear the gurgling of the forbidden water and the continuo playing a last furtive snatch of the ritornello. Then, dissolve ... fade out ... silence. Extraordinary.

Only in the final chorale of this gripping work does Bach revert to being the congregation's spokesman, this time voicing their plea to be spared life's torments and temptations and the hideous spectre of eternal damnation. A small ray of light is offered at the conclusion of this lurid tableau, one in which what Laurence Dreyfus calls Bach's 'subversive pleasures' can be experienced.<sup>w</sup> Were they relished or wasted on Bach's first listeners? One somehow doubts if they left church whistling the hymn tune or any of Bach's melodies. Were we ever to recover even snippets of testimony as to how his cantatas were received at the time, it would help us gauge how, if at all, the reactions of his congregations affected the way he approached his weekly task. Was public opinion in any sense a spur or encouragement to his trying out different approaches, or did he just decide such strategies on his own and stick to them determinedly – this week a modern Italian concerto movement or a prelude and fugue, next week a polyphonic motet or a medieval *cantus firmus*, the following week elements of a modern French dance suite? Did he adjust to public reaction in the way, for example, that Dickens did when writing his novels in serial instalments? Might one or two adverse, even waspish, comments overheard from the congregation as it filed out of church on that Sunday morning on 11 June 1724 goad him towards his own brand of dare-devilry and to still bolder experiments? We simply have no idea. But one thing we can say for certain – a paradox, in fact: that what Bach undertook from duty (though in excess of his contract) stirs our emotions as strongly as anything prompted by his artistic desire to create. As Jack Westrup writes, 'In fulfilling a duty which

must often have been tedious, and sometimes intolerable, Bach not only satisfied the demands of his own age: he enriched ours.<sup>14</sup>



Bach's decision to ground his Second Leipzig Cycle on Lutheran chorales was by no means arbitrary: it was a key difference between this and the first cycle, in which a scriptural dictum (or *Spruch*) had provided the opening to most of his pieces. All through year one Bach had adjusted both to a new congregation and to a strong local liturgical tradition, while putting a new group of performers to the test. To an extent he had needed to live hand to mouth. For someone of his ordered and systematic way of thinking that cannot have been what he meant by a 'well-regulated church music'. As a corrective, and ever conscious of past precedent, he may have decided to give a new twist to a practice going back to Ludwig Senfl in the sixteenth century of setting chorales (and sometimes chorale variations *per omnes versus*) as a musical framework for what were known as 'chorale sermons' (*Liederpredigten*). This would also reinforce a more recent tradition: in 1714, unusually for a pastor of the Thomaskirche, Johann Benedikt Carpzov III had given a sermon extolling the virtues of concerted music. When he had finished expounding 'a good, fine old Protestant and Lutheran hymn', it was then sung by the congregation. Carpzov told them that what they had heard earlier was the result of the Cantor Johann Schelle having 'undertaken willingly to set each hymn in a charming piece of music, and let it be heard before the sermon'. It could have been the bicentenary of Luther's three hymnals in 1724 which prompted Bach and Salomon Deyling (who, as superintendent of the Nikolaikirche, was responsible for overseeing Bach's duties as Director Chori Musices) to put their heads together in a similar harmonious collaboration and to revive Schelle's practice of writing a complete chorale-based cycle.<sup>x</sup>

At all events, to plan a full cycle grounded on hallowed and iconic Lutheran hymns was one of Bach's most courageous decisions as a composer – one that he sustained for the next nine and a half months with extraordinary consistency. His commitment to using them as the structural thread for substantial compositions lasting between twenty and thirty minutes each meant that, were inspiration to flag, he could no longer rely on his own earlier pieces to plug the gaps – or on anyone else's come to that – so distinctive and specific was his chosen genre. The varied fare of Christmas the previous year, when cantatas had rubbed shoulders with Latin canticles and Mass movements, was no longer possible. Previously there had been a strong presence of chorales in all the cantatas, serving as a perpetual confirmation of his self-set challenges, and perhaps even affirming his self-definition as a composer, performer and teacher, in terms of the skill he showed in combining melody, harmony and instrumentation more inventively than anyone had before. Now, at the beginning of the Trinity season in 1724, for the first time the chorales move centre-stage. For the next year Bach stuck limpet-like to these hymns: a total of fifty-two new cantatas used them as their starting-point and, once elaborated, gave them fresh currency. From here onwards they stand out with the glint and regularity of brass studs on a leather-upholstered chair.

The sheer intellectual and experiential brio of these early second cycle cantatas leaps off the pages of their scores with a palpable sense of physicality. Rehearsal time with his trebles could be cut to a minimum if all that they had to do was to sing a familiar tune (often doubled by a horn, a cornett or a slide trumpet) within an otherwise elaborate opening chorus. Meanwhile choral fantasias, recitatives and arias, all extending Bach's demands and expectations of the human voice and of his chosen obbligato instruments, develop afresh as he strikes out in new directions.

As in the previous year the first four in this crop of early Trinity season cantatas constitute a mini-portfolio of discrete works, differing in their treatment but connected by doctrinal twine (not unlike the six component parts of the later *Christmas Oratorio*, with its 'unity in variety'). Each work opens with an elaborate setting of

the unaltered first strophe of the hymn on which the whole cantata is built. The following movements – recitatives, arias and duets – are textual paraphrases of the inner verses of the hymn, before the cantata concludes with a four-part harmonisation of the final strophe. Each of the four has a striking hymn tune emblazoned in its opening movement, its *cantus firmus* migrating each week to a different voice: soprano (BWV 20), alto (BWV 2), tenor (BWV 7) and bass (BWV 135). Each is couched in a distinct stylistic idiom: that of a French overture (BWV 20), an archaic motet without independent obbligato instrumental lines (BWV 2), an Italianate *concertante* movement featuring a solo violin (BWV 7) or a chorale fantasia (BWV 135). In all except the second of these, the principal test for Bach lay in combining a chorale melody with an instrumental concerto or ritornello form. He had previous practice of embedding chorales within a ritornello structure (as we saw in the conclusions to both parts of BWV 74 and 75) but on a far smaller scale than these imposing introductory movements. The corrections we find in Bach's surviving autograph scores reveal the colliding priorities of two unconnected structures and of his solutions in reconciling them – all under the pressure of time. This was a poser of far greater complexity than the Rubik's Cubes of the previous year. Here we see a great composer at the height of his powers meeting the challenges of a self-imposed regimen week by week and adjusting his choice of form, his approach and his tone of voice to each underlying theme, each symbol and each metaphor arising from the texts laid out in front of him. There can be no doubt as to the magnitude of the task or the rapidity with which his skill developed as he did so.



One disadvantage to exploring even such a coherent cycle as Bach's second *Jahrgang* in linear sequence (just as his Leipzig audience experienced them) is that it can insulate one from the equally striking connections from year to year. Just as 'vertical' and

‘horizontal’ tastings of fine wines and whiskies have their respective value, so a ‘slice-wise’ comparison of one cycle to another, and of the different approaches Bach adopted to the same occasion and the same lectionary prompting, can bring insights into his creative personality – as it did for those of us who took part in the Bach Cantata Pilgrimage in 2000. Suddenly he ceases to be a fixed Godlike figure located outside time and emerges as someone flexible and prone to widely differing responses from one year to the next. We saw how the Gospel account of Jesus weeping over the fate of Jerusalem dominated BWV 46, Bach’s first cantata for Trinity + 10 (see [this page](#)), yet it barely gets a mention the following year in BWV 101, *Nimm von uns, Herr, du treuer Gott*. This is because as a chorale cantata it is based squarely on the primary hymn for this Sunday, written during a time of plague and sung to the melody of Luther’s German version of the Lord’s Prayer. The relentlessness of Luther’s *Vater unser*, and the way the chorale is a strong, audible presence in all but one of the movements, including the recitatives, is matched in the opening movement by Bach’s use of yet *another* of Luther’s hymns as the thematic basis of a chorale fantasia, one associated in the congregation’s mind with the Ten Commandments (*Dies sind die heil’gen zehn Gebot*). The wages of sin, the overwhelming power of retribution visited upon those tempted to stray from the Lord’s path, prompted Bach to subject his first listeners to a twin-barrelled doctrinal salvo and to compose what the pianist and scholar Robert Levin described to me as ‘the most crushing work of Bach’s career’.

It starts out ruminatively with an independent continuo line supporting a trio of oboes exchanging the ‘Ten Commandments’ theme with the upper strings. But before long sharply accentuated dissonances over a dominant pedal are introduced, the first in a succession of hammer blows to convey the *schwere Straf und große Not* (‘grave punishment and great distress’) of the hymn text.<sup>y</sup> These contribute to the unsettling mood of this remarkable tone poem, sounding at once so archaic in the doubling of the voice parts by old-fashioned cornetto and trombones (as though Bach were intent

on reconnecting to Luther's time) and yet so modern in the way, for example, wrenching harmonies only begin to make sense as passing events in contrapuntal terms at a specific tempo. (This is just one of its interpretative challenges.) Bach elaborates a seven-part orchestral texture and then proceeds to expand it to eleven real parts. If that were not extraordinary enough, there is no thematic correspondence with the chorale tune: the orchestra functions independently of the choir throughout, as though fixated on this war-scarred landscape. In fact, the influence inverts the usual practice – with the lower voices occasionally borrowing instrumental themes in preparation for the re-entry of the hymn tune. A persistent feature is a three-note 'sighing' figure tossed between the instruments, appoggiaturas that resolve normally but are approached from above and below by a variety of initial preparatory intervals that appear to grow wider and wider to convey the inescapability of punishment, the fate that we 'with countless sins have truly merited' (indeed, the word *allzumal* – 'ineluctably' – comes in for vehement reiterated protestations by the three lower voices). Over the final tonic pedal Bach engineers a disturbing intensification of harmony and vocal expression for the words *für Seuchen, Feur und großem Leid* ('contagion, fire and grievous pain'). Here we sense Bach working his chosen motifs as hard as he possibly can, a trait we associate more readily with Beethoven and Brahms.

The antithesis between God's anger and mercy is clearest in the fourth movement, where Bach sets himself the challenge of interpolating a 'rage' aria for bass within each line of the chorale, now sung, now played and at three different speeds: *vivace* – *andante* – *adagio*. He has three oboes to help him – three *angry ducks* on this occasion, transformed into a kind of latter-day saxophone trio. There is a single moment midway, enough to strike horror in the listener, when Bach makes an abrupt Mahlerian swerve from E minor to C minor on the word *Warum [willst du so zornig sein?]*. Not even Purcell, with his penchant for a calculated spot-lit dissonance, was capable of matching this when setting the same words in his anthem 'Lord, how long wilt Thou be angry?' Sudden juxtapositions

of sacred text and personal commentary are a potent new dialectical weapon in Bach's expressive arsenal.

With its imploring gestures in *siciliano* rhythm, a flute now acts in counterpoint to the chorale tune first assigned to, and then exchanged with, the oboe da caccia. One wonders whether it was this particularly affecting combination of obbligato instruments and its association with the Saviour's love and compassion shown to the sinner at the moment of 'Jesus' bitter death' that planted the seed in Bach's mind for 'Aus Liebe', the great soprano aria from the *Matthew Passion*. If so, this duet served as a preliminary sketch for the Passion, which, I suggest, was still very much alive as the culmination of his second *Jahrgang*, planned for Good Friday 1725. (See below, [this page](#).)

At all events, BWV 101 was a cantata that Bach rated very highly. Reviving it a last time in 1748 (or possibly 1749), he intervened in the part-copying process with thick pen-strokes that by their pressure reveal his urgent intent as much as they do his failing eyesight. It had taken him three or four previous attempts to arrive at his ideal in terms of textual underlay, and at this point he drastically reduced the number of word repetitions. A whole fresh layer of minutely differentiated articulation and dynamic markings now appeared to enable him and future musicians to realise the precise nuances present in his imagination. Deciding to write out a new flute part for the musical highpoint of the cantata, the soprano-alto duet, and as economical as ever with manuscript paper, he wrote it on the back of the cornett part – a sign that for this final revival he intended to dispense altogether with the old-fashioned cornett/trombone *colla parte* choir – while adding far stronger contrasts of *legato* and *staccato* phrasing. Elsewhere mutes are introduced, pizzicato marks added in the bass line (technical matters that could have been indicated by a simple gesture in earlier performances), even cautionary *tacet* (bars' rest) marks are revised. Nothing is to be left to chance. The impact of these detailed instructions goes beyond mere adjustment to the more delicate (*empfindsam*) stylistic taste of the 1740s. It is a vital testimony to

Bach's quest for perfection, for completion, and a paradigm of the style of performance he continued to strive for during the last years of his life.



The theme of the hidden granting of faith returns later in the season in BWV 38, *Aus tiefer Not schrei ich zu dir*, for Trinity + 21, based on Luther's paraphrase of Psalm 130: he describes the cry of a 'truly penitent heart that is most deeply moved in its distress ... We are all in deep and great misery, but we do not feel our condition. Crying is nothing but a strong and earnest longing for God's grace, which does not arise in a person unless he sees in what depth he is lying.'<sup>15</sup> Bach would have known that Luther's hymn was linked to a time-honoured Phrygian tune, one so perfectly suited to archaic treatment in motet-style that it is hard to imagine him setting it in any other way. In an opening chorus in severe *stile antico* he etches each line of the melody in long notes sung by the sopranos and anticipated imitatively by the lower three voices, just as he was to do in his later six-part organ setting of the same chorale in *Clavier-Übung III* (BWV 686). Once again he doubles each of the four voices with a trombone – a technique one might associate more readily with Schütz or even with Bruckner than with Bach. Besides their unique burnished sonority, these noble instruments bring a sense of ritual and solemnity to the overall mood. Bach seems intent on pushing the frontiers of this movement almost out of stylistic reach through the abrupt chromatic twists he gives to its modal tune. By reordering the vocal entries at each juncture he creates a powerful evocation of this Lutheran *De profundis* in the clamour of imploring voices.

All three of the cantata's final movements are equally stern and uncompromising. Bach marks the recitative for soprano *a battuta* – unusually, to be sung in strict tempo – while the continuo thunders out the old tune as if daring the believer to give in to doubts in a

magnificent reversal of usual practice, the singer's weakened faith scarcely having time to express its frailty. Signs and wonders abound. The very word for signs (*Zeichen*) is given expressive, symbolic expression – a diminished seventh chord in the soprano recitative, formed by all three ‘signs’, one sharp (F<sup>#</sup>), one flat (E<sub>8</sub><sup>3</sup>) and one natural (C<sub>4</sub><sup>3</sup>).<sup>5</sup> In place of a second aria Bach inserts a *terzetto* for soprano, alto and tenor to describe how soon the rise of the ‘morning of comfort’ succeeds ‘this night of distress and cares’. Chains of suspensions precipitate a downward cycle of fifths through the minor keys (D, G, C, F then B<sub>8</sub><sup>3</sup> major), whereas the dawning of faith reverses the direction upwards until the idea of the troubled night turns it back again. Different as they may seem, these three final movements flow easily from one to the next. As with his cantata for this Sunday from the previous year (BWV 109), he delays the provision and granting of help until the last possible moment. With all the voices given full orchestral doubling (including those four trombones), this chorale is not simply impressive, it is even intimidating in its Lutheran zeal – especially its final Phrygian cadence, with the bass trombone plummeting to bottom E.

Less than a month later the need for comfort in times of distress is unchanged, but Bach’s musical treatment is radically different. The instrumental ritornello to the opening chorale fantasia of BWV 26, *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig*, is a stupendous musical confectionery illustrating the brevity of human life and the futility of earthly hopes. Long before the first statement of the hymn tune, Bach establishes the likeness of man’s life to a rising mist that will soon disperse. Fleet-footed scales, crossing and re-crossing, joining and dividing, create a mood of phantasmal vapour – a brilliant elaboration of an idea that first came to him ten years earlier in Weimar when composing an organ chorale (BWV 644) to a simplified version of this hymn. In his second stanza Melchior Franck (c. 1579–1639) compares the course of human life to rushing water shooting down a mountainside before disappearing in the depths, an image dear to the Romantic poets. Did Goethe have Franck’s hymn in mind when he wrote his marvellous ‘Gesang der Geister über den

Wassern' ('Song of the spirits over the waters') in Weimar sometime in the 1780s? Schubert set it to music for male voice choir on four separate occasions. There does seem to be a proto-Romantic *Gestalt* to the way Bach set it as an aria for tenor, flute, violin and continuo: each musician is constantly required to change functions – to respond, imitate, echo or double one another – while contributing to the inexorable forward motion of the tumbling torrent and a brief episode of falling raindrops. Human life first as mist and spray, then as a mountain torrent; next, Bach turns to the inevitability of beauty's withering like a flower and the moment when man succumbs to earthly pleasures and 'all things shatter and collapse in ruin.' He scores this for three oboes and continuo supporting his bass soloist in a mock *bouree* that develops into a grim dance of death. Where one might have expected this trio of oboes to establish a mood of earthly (even evangelical) pomp, with the stirring entry of the singer their role becomes rapidly more subversive and realistic: first in the throbbing accompaniment that seems to undermine the fabric of those 'earthly pleasures' by which men are seduced; then through jagged figures to represent the tongues of flame which will soon reduce them to ashes; and finally in hurtling semiquaver scales of  $\frac{6}{4}$  chords for those 'foaming floods' that will tear all worldly things apart.



With seven new cantatas and a *Sanctus* to compose for seven feast-days within twelve days, Christmas 1724 cannot have been any less frenzied than the previous year. The celebrations on Christmas Day itself began with BWV 91, *Gelobet seist du, Jesu Christ*, Bach's majestic setting of Luther's hymn, whose opening ritornello has the special sense of expectation that is the hallmark of Bach in Christmas mode: fanfares for the horns and running G major scales in the oboes that suggest the dancing of angels. In the unselfconscious abandon of his setting of *das ist wahr* ('this is true') and the syncopated *Kyrie eleis!*

(reminiscent of a similar word-setting in the *Zwiegesänge* of Michael Praetorius), Bach's seventeenth-century roots are exposed; and this mood persists in the soprano recitative interwoven with the second verse of the hymn and in the festive tenor aria set for three oboes swinging along in genial accompaniment. But even at Christmas-time Bach would not be Bach without a reference to the 'vale of tears' from which the newly incarnate Christ will lead us. He duly obliges with a slow, chromatic *accompagnato* (No. 4) for bass and strings in contrary motion, calculated to bring the listener up short. An extended duet for soprano and alto postulates the poverty that God assumed by coming into the world and the 'brimming store of heaven's treasures' He bestowed on the believer.

When Bach came to re-work this cantata during the 1730s, in order to illustrate the human aspiration to sing (and, by implication, dance) like the angels, he added lilting syncopations to the vocal lines that clash with the violins' dotted figure. The polarity between them is reinforced by means of upward modulations, once in sharps (as if to symbolise man's angel-directed aspirations), once in flats (as if to represent Jesus' humanity). The music brings to mind the vivid imagery of Botticelli's dancing angels or Filippino Lippi's angelic band in full cry on the walls of the Carafa Chapel in Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome. As with the *Sanctus* that followed in the same Christmas Day Mass, surely the most imposing of all of Bach's D major choruses, he may have been inspired by the vision of St John Chrysostom (c. 347–407), which he surely knew – those 'thousands of Archangels and ten thousands of Angels ... six-winged, full of eyes, and soar aloft on their wings, singing, crying, shouting, and saying *Agios! Agios! Agios! Kyrie Sabaoth!* Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of Hosts! Heaven and Earth are full of Thy Glory! Hosanna in the Highest!'<sup>16</sup>

Bach adopts a wholly different strategy for its sequel the next day. More than in any other cantata you sense a primitive root, an early Christian origin for the Marian text of BWV 121, *Christum wir sollen loben schon*, one of the oldest-feeling of all Bach's cantatas. Luther had appropriated and translated a famous fifth-century Latin hymn,

‘A solis ortus cardine’ (‘From the rising of the sun’), used for Lauds during the Christmas season, and Bach sets its opening verse in motet style, the voices doubled by a cornett and three trombones in addition to the usual oboes and strings. There is something mystical about this tune, not least in the way it seems to start in the Dorian mode and end in the Phrygian (or, in the language of diatonic harmony, on the dominant of the dominant). Replacing the portrayals of dancing seraphim are images of those angular, earnest faces that fifteenth-century Flemish painters use to depict the shepherds gazing into the manger-stall at the *reinen Magd Marien Sohn* (‘little son born of a spotless maid’). The archaic feel of the opening chorus seems perfectly attuned to the mystery of the Incarnation.

Unequivocally modern, however, is the startling enharmonic progression – a symbolic ‘transformation’ no less – at the end of the alto recitative (No. 3) describing the miracle of the virgin birth. This is the tonal pivot of the entire work and, appropriately, it occurs on the word *kehren* (‘to turn or reverse direction’); with *wundervoller Art* (Bach’s play on words is his cue for a ‘wondrous’ tritonal shift) God descends and takes on human form, symbolically represented by the last-minute swerve to C major. It is the perfect preparation for the bass aria (No. 4), where bold Italianate string writing and solid diatonic harmonies are used to describe how John the Baptist ‘leapt for joy in the womb when he recognised Jesus’. Bach’s design for this cantata mirrors the change from darkness to light and shows how the moment when Christians celebrate the coming of God’s light into the world coincides with the turning of the sun at the winter solstice. Beyond that, his purpose is to emphasise the benefit of the Incarnation for mankind and (again) that the supreme goal is to join the angelic choir (cue for a tough audition for the lead treble, who is required to reach a top B in the penultimate recitative). Any other composer would have been tempted to set the final chorale in some glittering stratospheric tessitura; instead, by returning to the cantata’s opening tonality (E major with its ambiguous and inconclusive modal twist to F  $\natural$ ), and by retaining the coppery

timbre of the cornett and trombones to intensify the choral sound, he finds other, subtler ways of achieving a luminous summation. It is the believer's hope – not the certainty – of eternal life Bach evokes here.

## b

One of the crowning glories of Bach's first Christmas season was BWV 65, *Sie werden aus Saba alle kommen*, for Epiphany 1724, and it is fascinating to observe him attaining the same peak the following year in BWV 123, *Liebster Immanuel, Herzog der Frommen* – but via a different route. One of the keys to this lies in the instrumentation. Where the atmosphere of the earlier work is oriental and pageant-like, the second opens with a graceful chorus in  a little reminiscent of an Elizabethan dance, with paired transverse flutes, oboes and violins presented in alternation. Its choral interjections form a Mendelssohnian love-song that sticks in the mind days after the music has ended. For the earlier 'Saba' cantata, by contrast, Bach uses high horns to convey majesty and antiquity, recorders to represent the high pitches traditionally associated with oriental music and, still more, oboes da caccia so redolent – to the modern ear – of the Macedonian *zurla*, the *sahnai* of Hindustan and the *nadaswaram* from Tamil Nadu in the southernmost part of the Indian Peninsula (which surely qualifies as the world's loudest non-brass acoustic instrument). With their haunting sonority these 'hunting oboes' seem to belong to the world of Marco Polo – of caravans traversing the Silk Route – and it remains something of a mystery how a specialist wind-instrument-maker, Herr Johann Eichentopf of Leipzig, could have invented this magnificent modern tenor oboe with its curved tube and flared brass bell around 1722 unless he had heard one of these oriental prototypes played by visitors to one of Leipzig's trade fairs (see Plate 21).

Bach was clearly intrigued by this new apparition (rather as Berlioz was a century later when Adolphe Sax was inventing the

saxhorn), and was to make extensive use of it in at least thirty of his choral works, not least in the opening ritornello to BWV 65. Here he shows off the glittery sheen of his exotic orchestra to advantage, so that even before the voices enter in canonic order he succeeds in parading before our eyes the stately procession of the three magi and the ‘multitude of camels’ (Isaiah 60:6) laden with gifts. This imposing fantasia concludes with a restatement of the octave unison theme, this time by all the voices and instruments spread over five octaves, as the caravan comes to a halt in front of the manger. Now there is a sudden shift in scale and mood, from the outward pomp of the royal procession to the intimacy of the simple stable and the oblations offered to the child in the crib, as the choir intone the sober German version of the Latin ‘Puer natus in Bethlehem’ traditionally sung in Leipzig at this feast.

We can be so taken and dazzled by the glamour of these cantatas’ opening movements as to be in danger of overlooking those in the middle. The earlier work features a *secco* recitative exemplary in its word-setting, its arching melodies and its rich chromatic harmonies, culminating in an affecting arioso. This leads to an aria for bass (No. 4) in which the two oboes *da caccia* engage in a triple canon with the continuo, evidently to portray the gifts of gold, incense and myrrh. To depict ‘the most abundant wealth’ (*des größten Reichtum*) mentioned in the recitative (No. 5), Bach draws on a most opulent scoring for this entrancing triple-rhythm aria for tenor (No. 6). Pairs of recorders, violins, horns, and oboes *da caccia* operate independently and in consort, exchanging one-bar riffs in kaleidoscopic varieties of timbre.<sup>aa</sup>

The quality of the arias in BWV 123 is more telling still: a tenor aria (No. 3), with two oboes *d’amore*, describes the ‘cross’s cruel journey’ to Calvary with heavy tread and almost unbearable pathos belying the words ‘[these] do not frighten me.’ Four bars in a quicker tempo to evoke ‘when the tempests rage’ dissolve in a tranquil return to the *lente* tempo as ‘Jesus sends me from heaven salvation and light.’ This is followed by what is surely one of the finest, but also loneliest, arias Bach ever composed, ‘Lass, o Welt,

mich aus Verachtung' ('Leave me, O scornful world / To sadness and loneliness!'). The fragile vocal line, bleak in its isolation, is offset by the flute accompanying the bass singer like some consoling guardian angel trying to inspire him with purpose and resolve. Even the B section ('Jesus ... shall stay with me for all my days') offers only a temporary reprieve because of the expected *da capo*. Here voice and instrument are intimately linked, but with the wordless flute left to complete what the singer cannot bring himself to utter. A year later Bach returned to this mood of Epiphany blues with a second hugely demanding bass aria, 'Ächzen und erbärmlich Weinen' from BWV 13, *Meine Seufzer, meine Tränen*, describing how 'groaning and piteous weeping cannot ease sorrow's sickness.' With the white, sepulchral sound of twin recorders playing an octave above a solo violin, Bach seems determined to impress on his listeners the full misery and wretchedness of life here below. Just where the text mentions a 'beam of joy' appearing, Bach momentarily lifts the shroud of dissonant angular harmony prior to a full-scale recapitulation in the subdominant, the music plunging again into darkness as though intent on exploring new agonies of mind and soul. With pulse and mind slowed down, our senses sharpened, we become alert to each tiny detail of Bach's mood-painting.



Quinquagesima, the last Sunday before Lent, held a special significance for Bach, for it was on this Sunday in 1723 that he had performed the twin trial-pieces (BWV 23 and 22) that were to clinch his appointment as Thomascantor, and he revived BWV 22 on the same Sunday the following year. Quinquagesima 1725 was his last opportunity to present a cantata to his Leipzig audience as a foretaste of a Passion performance and the biggest musical event in the Lutheran calendar, and, in this last regard, BWV 127, *Herr Jesu Christ, wahr' Mensch und Gott*, occupies a crucial role, for Bach placed a 'chorale Passion' like a jewel at its centre, just as he had

done the year before. There are features of BWV 127, a strikingly experimental cantata, that function in the same way. The first occurs in the elegiac chorale fantasia that opens the work: here Bach weaves together no fewer than three chorale tunes – an instrumental presentation of the Lutheran *Agnus Dei* with its clear reference to Christ’s Passion, a funeral lament by the French composer Claude Goudimel (1565), and finally several strains of a chorale melody we recognise as that of the Passion chorale, *Herzlich tut mich verlangen*, which will feature so prominently in the *Matthew Passion*. Next, it is noticeable that the following recitative for tenor links the individual’s thoughts of death to the path prepared by Jesus’ own patient journey towards his Crucifixion. Most telling of all is the fourth movement, a grand, tableau-like evocation of the Last Judgement, part accompanied recitative, part aria, made up of three alternating sections: a restless *accompagnato*, with no discernible tonal centre, an arioso in G minor (*Fürwahr, fürwahr*) quoting Goudimel’s choral melody on which the whole cantata is based, and finally a wild  $\frac{6}{8}$  section signalling man’s rescue from the violent bonds of death.

It is in this last segment, with trumpet fanfares and scurrying strings, that we come across a glaring instance of self-quotation unique in Bach’s church music: for the solo part for bass is identical with the four choral entries of the spectacular double chorus ‘Sind Blitze, sind Donner’, one of the highpoints of the *Matthew Passion* and rightly identified as ‘one of the most violent and grandiose descriptions of unloosed passion produced in the Baroque era’.<sup>17</sup> A comparison of the two settings suggests that the Passion chorus was composed *before* the cantata aria. (We caught a glimpse of Bach’s stressful preparation of the performing material of this number in [Chapter 7](#).) Though not conclusive proof in itself of a planned premiere for Good Friday, 30 March 1725, this ‘pre-echo’ of the ‘Sind Blitze’ chorus in BWV 127 suggests a consistent frame of mind and an indication that up to this point the *Matthew Passion* was still on course.

Those who attended Mendelssohn's famous revival of the *Matthew Passion* in Berlin in 1829 were told that they were celebrating the exact centenary of its first performance on Good Friday 1729. Since 1975 that date has been brought forward by two years.<sup>18</sup> But if, as suggested, Bach was actively engaged in preparing the *Matthew* as he was composing his second cantata cycle of 1724/5, the point at which it became clear to him that he would not have it ready for performance on Good Friday 1725 remains to be established. Had he miscalculated the time needed to allow him to bring it in on schedule? Was it simply a case of exhaustion, or had there been further dispiriting disputes with the clergy during the past year? No one has so far come up with convincing answers, and it could well be that the truth lies in a combination of all of these, with the decision to abort made very close to Holy Week 1725. By failing to complete the *Matthew* on time for Good Friday, Bach found himself boxed in. We do not even know at what point he officially informed the consistory of his solution to the problem of providing a Passion for that year – or whether the decision to fill the vacuum with a substantially revised version of the *John Passion* was imposed on him by the consistory with instructions to adjust its doctrinal tone (see [Chapter 10](#)). One new aria in particular, ‘Zerschmettert mich, ihr Felsen’ for tenor, has echoes of the climactic sequence of BWV 127, suggesting that Bach still had the material of that cantata in his mind when he sat down to compose this revision, as though determined to salvage something of its intended pre-announcement.

From all this confusion there is one thing to emerge with near certainty: it looks as if Bach's initial intentions at Leipzig were even more grandiose than scholars have generally supposed, and that at his appointment in 1723 he had set himself the task of presenting his own music, mostly newly composed, some of it re-cast from his Weimar years, for at least the first two *Jahrgänge*, each cycle culminating with a Passion setting – radically new by Leipzig standards, theologically controversial in the case of the *John* in 1724, and ground-breaking and more time-consuming than he had expected in the case of the *Matthew* (in which he took a bigger

swing at the ball), thus necessitating a deferral for a further two years.

In the midst of all this uncertainty Bach's Second Leipzig Cycle came to a premature close on 25 March 1725 with the jubilant springtime cantata BWV 1, *Wie schön leuchtet der Morgenstern* (see diagram, Plate 16). This year, there was a rare coincidence of Palm Sunday (a movable feast) with the Feast of the Annunciation (with a fixed date). It needs little imagination to gauge the importance of this dual celebration to Leipzig worshippers, coming as it did towards the end of the forty days' fasting period of Lent, during which they had heard no music in church. One hundred and twenty-five years later this was the first cantata to be published in Vol. 1 (out of forty-five) of the *Bach-Gesellschaft* (Bach Society) edition (hence its singular numbering), more than half of which was devoted to vocal music for the church. The subsequent numbering of the cantatas by BWV prefix was totally random and had nothing to do with the chronology of their composition.<sup>bb</sup> Both Schumann and Brahms were enthusiastic subscribers, and one wonders what they made of the inventive and masterly way Bach wove his contrapuntal textures around one of the most stirring of Lutheran hymns. The scoring is opulent and regal, redolent of the Epiphany cantata BWV 65 both in its 'eastern' instrumentation – horns, oboes da caccia and strings (but no recorders this time) – and in metre: a dignified  $\frac{12}{8}$  ceremonial in F major for the opening chorale fantasia in which a grand choral proclamation of Nicolai's tune is given out in long notes by the sopranos and the principal horn. As with Bach's only other cantata for Palm Sunday (the skittish and much smaller-scale Weimar cantata BWV 182), the crowd's greeting is stirring and jubilant. A measure of what Bach had achieved by this time in his handling of this form comes with the movement's climax, his setting of the last line, *Hoch und sehr prächtig erhaben* ('Highly and most splendidly exalted'), full of majesty and splendour. The effect is overwhelming – inspiration underpinned by unobtrusive skill.<sup>cc</sup>

The reasons for Bach leaving the chorale cycle incomplete at this point are unclear, but, whatever the cause, it was a breach he tried

to repair in subsequent years by the insertion of appropriate chorale cantatas for this final segment, such as BWV 112 and 129. Meanwhile, for Easter Sunday 1725 Bach revived the earliest of his chorale cantatas, BWV 4, a worthy but by now old-fashioned addition to the cycle, and probably performed it in the university church; while for the two main churches he made a hasty parody of a (lost) Weissenfels pastoral cantata (BWV 249a) as *Kommt, gehet und eilet*, later to be revised as the ‘Easter Oratorio’, *Kommt, eilet und laufet* (BWV 249) – which, in the meditative beauty of its slow second movement (with its aura of a Venetian oboe concerto) and its long soprano aria with flute obbligato, catches the sense of loss at Christ’s death and the feeling that the use of spices and embalming ointments could now be superseded by the power of musical prayer. Resurrection has not yet fully registered in the believer’s mind.

After Easter he then resumed his production of cantatas by setting a group of texts, including nine by the Leipzig-born poet Christiane Mariane von Ziegler that may have been planned as sequels to the *John Passion* the previous year.<sup>18</sup> What appeared to be a makeshift solution turned into a post-Resurrection sequence of twelve outstanding works, all beginning with biblical *dicta*, all with poetic texts that turned out to be more closely interrelated than any to be found in his other cantata sequences, and reflecting the liturgically unified character of the ‘Great Fifty Days’.<sup>19</sup>

## b

The ‘Great Fifty Days’ from Easter to Whitsun were rooted in the Jewish tradition of marking the seven weeks plus one day between Passover (the Feast of Unleavened Bread) and Pentecost/Shavuot (the Feast of the Weeks, and also the Day of the Ceremony (*Bikkurim*) of First Fruits – harvest, in other words). They signalled the completion of Jesus’ work on earth, his last appearances to his disciples, his valedictory message to them to bolster their faith, and his promise to protect them through the coming of the Holy Spirit. It

is thus a season of contrasts – of joy at Christ’s resurrection and reappearances, clouded by the prospect of his departure and the adversarial pressures of life in the temporal world. This duality between a world deprived of Jesus’ light and physical presence and a world of increasing spiritual darkness is very palpable in Bach’s cantata for Easter Monday, BWV 6, *Bleib bei uns, denn es will Abend werden*. One senses that Bach had the final chorus of his *John Passion*, if not on his writing desk then still ringing in his ears when he sat down to compose this cantata, with which it shares in its opening chorus both the sarabande-like gestures of ‘Ruht wohl’ and the key of C minor with its characteristic sweet-sad sonority. (Since this chorus was omitted in the revival of the *John* in 1725, as we shall see, it strengthens the argument that BWV 6 and its two sequels belonged in Bach’s mind to the previous year’s cycle – and were perhaps even sketched then.)

But where the Passion epilogue is elegiac and consolatory, the cantata is tinged with the sadness of bereavement. Its tender pleadings for enlightenment become ever more gestural and urgent in a darkening world from which Jesus’ presence has been removed. It manages to be both narrative (evoking the grieving disciples’ journey to Emmaus as darkness falls) and universal at the same time (the basic fear of being left alone in the dark, both literally and metaphorically). The overall mood is one of descent and abandonment, a direction reversed by the subtle weaving in of a theological message to the faithful – to hold on to the Word and sacrament, those mainstays of Christian life in the world after Jesus’ physical departure. Bach finds a way of ‘painting’ these two ideas by juxtaposing the curve of descent via trajectories of downward modulation with the injunction to remain steadfast – threading twenty-five Gs, then thirty-five B<sup>3</sup>s played in unison by violins and violas all through the surrounding dissonance. This device is linked to the disciples’ pleas to Jesus to remain, intoned nine times during the ensuing choral fugue. We might see in the collision of these two ideas an affinity with Caravaggio’s first portrayal of the *Supper at Emmaus*: beyond the obvious parallel of contrasted planes of light

and darkness is the further dichotomy of serenity and reassurance on the one hand – Christ in the act of blessing the meal affirms his identity and presence and seems to extend his hand of comfort right out of the canvas towards the viewer – and on the other, urgency, evident in the impulsive, theatrical gestures of the two disciples painted directly from life. It is religious drama presented as contemporary quotidian life, rather as if Bach were seeking to capture, here and in the next two movements, the disciples' despondency in the Saxon twilight he observed outside his study window.



One of Bach's most engaging habits we encounter in these cantatas is his turning to individual instruments, either alone or in various combinations, for expressive ends. In his hands they do a great deal more than just create special effects or moods, and it has been argued (by Eric Chafe and others) that they serve to underpin abstract theological ideas and associative links from work to work. But above all their presence creates immediacy in the listener's consciousness. We come across heart-stopping moments in arias of both cycles where Bach's chosen obbligato instrument – most often oboe or violin and, on rare and wonderful occasions, flute – complements the voice and adds a new layer of expression and meaning, beyond the reach of words.<sup>ee</sup>

Particularly noticeable in these final dozen cantatas is the rich and prominent use he gives to two specific instruments, each with a unique timbre and compass: the violoncello piccolo and the oboe da caccia (see Plates 21 and 22). With its beguiling, wide-ranging sonority the violoncello piccolo has a smaller soundbox than the normal full-sized cello and (sometimes) a fifth string that extends its treble range. Both instruments are used wonderfully in successive movements of BWV 6, the da caccia as the chief agent in a dance-like appeal for Jesus' continued presence (No. 2), the cello piccolo in a

wide-ranging, mediating role between voice and continuo (No. 3). Bach is so enamoured of them that he uses the oboe da caccia in six and the cello piccolo in five of the twelve cantatas from the final segment of his second cycle, deliberately seeking out roles for their qualities that are central to his poetic and interpretative approach. Both have a plangent sonority in the tenor register that seems to tug on the listener's heartstrings, but where the sound of the little cello suggests something essentially benign and consoling, the oboe da caccia tends to be used to convey suffering and anguish. As we shall see, Bach turns to it in the *Matthew Passion* at intense moments of suffering – for the Agony in the Garden ('O Schmerz'), his innocence in the Roman trial ('Aus Liebe'), his Crucifixion ('Sehet, Jesus hat die Hand') and burial ('Mache dich, mein Herze, rein'). Bach does something equally compelling in the D minor aria 'Vergib, o Vater' ('Forgive, O Father, all our sins and be patient with us yet') from BWV 87, *Bisher habt ihr nichts gebeten in meinem Namen*, by drawing on paired oboes da caccia to merge with his alto soloist against ascending arpeggios in the continuo. In this way gestures of grief and entreaty are registered concurrently – and primarily by instrumental means. A fortnight earlier, in BWV 85, *Ich bin ein guter Hirt*, he had used the cello piccolo in a meditation on Christ the Good Shepherd, profiting from the special glow it brings both in range and in harmonic function. You sense that with this mantra-like sound, any 'lamb' would feel confidently armed against the sheep-rustler – wolf, fox or human. At the start of the calendar year, in BWV 41, *Jesu, nun sei gepreiset*, Bach had composed for the five-string model (with a range extending from its lowest string, C, up to B<sup>3</sup><sub>4</sub> three octaves above in the treble clef) as though to encompass the duality of earth and heaven and to mirror God's control of human affairs both physical and spiritual (see Plate 23).

Jubilate (the third Sunday after Easter) in Leipzig marked the start of the Ostermesse, the Easter trade fair, when, for three weeks, a flood of visitors – book dealers, craftsmen, hawkers and international commercial travellers – swelled the resident population to some 30,000 citizens. Bach, who timed the

publication of the four sets of his *Clavier-Übung* to coincide with these fairs, would have understood the need to provide special music for this Sunday (when no trading was allowed), ‘since visitors and distinguished gentlemen [would] certainly want to hear something fine in the principal churches’, as his predecessor Kuhnau had pointed out.<sup>20</sup> All three of Bach’s surviving cantatas for Jubilate (BWV 12, 103 and 146) concern themselves with the sorrow surrounding Jesus’ farewell to his followers, with the trials that await them in his absence, and with joyful thoughts of seeing him again. Each is a journey, a musical and emotive progression – from profound gloom and anguish to euphoric celebration – based on the Gospel for the day: ‘Ye shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow shall be turned into joy’ (John 16:20), from which BWV 103, *Ihr werdet weinen und heulen*, takes its title. It seems a little strange, therefore, to find that it opens with a glittering fantasia for a *concertante* violin doubled on this occasion by another unusual instrument – a soprano recorder in D, known as a ‘sixth flute’. These two are pitted against a pair of oboes d’amore and the rest of the strings, who engage in (apparently) festive dialogue. Only with the entry of the four vocal *concertisten* to an angular fugal theme (comprising an augmented second and an upwards seventh) do we realise that we have been caught unawares: Bach’s bubbly instrumental theme represents not the disciples’ joy at Christ’s resurrection but the sceptics’ jeering laughter at their distress – hence the malicious cackles of the high recorder.

With Pentecost only ten days away, Bach conspired with Frau von Ziegler to review and reassemble in BWV 183, *Sie werden euch in den Bann tun*, many of the themes that together they had brought to the surface in the past five weeks through their collaboration: worldly persecution (No. 1), suffering mitigated by Jesus’ protection (No. 2), comfort afforded by Jesus’ spirit (No. 3), surrender to the guidance of the Holy Spirit (No. 4) and the Spirit’s role in pointing to prayer as humanity’s means to obtain divine help (No. 5). In a terse and dramatic curtain-raiser, a five-bar *accompagnato*, Bach assigns the opening *Spruch* to four oboes (two d’amore and two da caccia), a

permutation unique in his output outside the *Christmas Oratorio* and drastically different from his solution the previous year when for the identical line in BWV 44 he took eighty-seven bars for a duet and a further thirty-five bars for a chorus. This time the *Spruch* is dwarfed by its sequel, a hugely demanding aria in E minor for tenor with four-stringed cello piccolo, in which the singer insists that he does not fear the terror of death, while every ornate, feverish syncopation and rhythmic sub-pattern belies it. Meanwhile, the cello maintains its serene and luminous course with sweeping arpeggios. It is an intimate *scena* in which we can follow the believer in his struggles to overcome his fear of persecution and eventual extinction, sustained all the while by the soothing sounds of his companion, the *Schutzarm* (Jesus' protective arm) referred to in the text – the cello piccolo.

Whit Sunday might seem a strange day for a graphic depiction of hell. That, however, is the purpose of the alto aria 'Nichts kann mich erretten' from BWV 74, *Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten*, which makes demands of a solo violin at the opposite end of the expressive spectrum usually associated with Bach's writing for that instrument. He seems determined to convey to his listeners with stark realism the image of hellish chains being rattled by Jesus in his struggle with worldly forces. Accordingly he sets up battle formations for his three oboes and strings, asking his violinist to execute fiendish *bariolage*, with the lowest arpeggiated note falling not on, but just after, the beat. The effect is both disjointed and invigorating. Soon the vocal line embarks on arpeggios that appear trapped within the vehement dialectic, as though it were trying to work itself free from the hellish shackles. At times this search for belief is plaintive, with cross-accented phrases reinforced by the oboe and solo violin against a menacing thud of repeated semiquavers. In the B section victory seems assured and the singer 'laughs at Hell's anger' against stabbing accents in the winds and colossal smashing chords for the upper strings in triple and quadruple stops. The gloating comprises chains of tripletised melismas and a descent of an octave and a half before the *da capo*.

Bach draws on illustrative techniques from opera, though not gratuitously: they serve an impeccable theological purpose, while the results, you would think, must have been vastly entertaining to members of the Leipzig intelligentsia still grieving for the loss of their opera house. Perhaps one day we will know more about how the dichotomy between late-burgeoning Lutheranism and secular, enlightened thought played out – and about music’s pivotal role in these conflicts. Mouldering away somewhere in the attics of its citizens there still could be letters holding what we so sorely lack – direct testimony to the varied responses by members of Bach’s listening public to the music he put in front of them.



By Pentecost Bach was nearing completing his ambitious design for the twelve Sundays leading up to Trinity Sunday, based on biblical citations. His settings of John’s words are full of purpose, never more so than in the final chorus of BWV 68, *Also hat Gott die Welt geliebt*, when, in place of a chorale, he puts to his listeners the chilling choice between salvation and judgement in the present life: ‘He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already’ (John 3:18). Bach’s setting is as uncompromising as the text: a double fugue whose two subjects describe the alternatives, the voices doubled by his familiar alliance of archaic brass instruments, a cornett and three trombones. The second day of Pentecost may have been a time of celebration, elation and relief brought by the Holy Spirit (and that indeed is the tenor of the cantata’s earlier movements), but in projecting a world starkly divided between believers and sceptics, Bach would have left the congregation pondering.

Ziegler’s poetic contributions needed to be fitted to two pre-existing movements (Nos. 2 and 4), both festive in character, adapted by Bach from his *Hunting Cantata* (BWV 208) of 1713. Sometimes in Bach we come across a joyous inner spirit barely

contained by a law-abiding artistic intellect. For example, the soprano aria ‘Mein gläubiges Herze’, one of his most unbuttoned expressions of melodic joy and high jinks (the polar opposite of those slow, extended meditations of the beleaguered Christian we encountered in the Epiphany season). In its original secular form the leaping dance-like bass mirrors the sheep gambolling as they are turned out to pasture every spring. The continuo line is once again allocated to a five-string violoncello piccolo, Bach’s chosen vehicle for announcing Jesus’ presence in the physical world – his second incarnation within the believer’s heart. On the last page of the manuscript he appended an instrumental coda, adding an oboe and violin to the piccolo cello and its continuo. At twenty-seven bars this occupies nearly three quarters of the length of the aria, almost as if the singer’s words were inadequate to express the full joy at the coming of the Holy Spirit. In the second of the arias Bach succeeds in fitting Ziegler’s paraphrase of Verse 17 of John’s Gospel to music he previously assigned to Pan, the god of woods and shepherds, who ‘makes the land so happy / that forest and field and all things live and laugh’. The retention of a trio of pastoral oboes is the key to the grafting process by which Bach externalises the message of joy caused by Jesus’ presence on earth.

Trinity Sunday marks the last in the sequence of nine cantatas to texts by Christiane Mariane von Ziegler. The title of BWV 176, *Es ist ein trotzig und verzagt Ding*, translates as ‘There is something stubborn [or defiant or wilful] and yet fainthearted [or despondent or despairing] about the human heart.’ All the permutations of these adjectives apply to Bach’s setting, an arresting portrayal of the human condition – and might also reflect his own views, particularly as regards the intractable attitude of the Leipzig authorities. By interpreting the story of Nicodemus’ furtive nocturnal visit as a general human tendency Ziegler, working in cahoots with Bach, it seems, had given him the opportunity to set up a dramatic antithesis between headstrong aggression and lily-livered frailty. He opens with a defiant, indignant presentation of this *Spruch*, a terse, four-part choral fugue set against a string

fanfare reminiscent of the fifth Brandenburg Concerto. That applies to the first half only, with a rushing melisma up to the minor ninth on *trotzig* ('defiant') and then, at its peak, a melting and sighing figure over sustained strings to underscore the *verzagt* ('despondent') side of things. This ascending and descending contour persists throughout the fugue, two and a half expositions without ritornellos, the voices doubled by the three oboes, while the strings alternate between the vigorous Brandenburg motif and plaintive, sustained counterpoint.<sup>ff</sup> The exploration of these twin facets of human behaviour persists all through this cantata: the juxtaposition of Nicodemus (night) and Jesus (day) presented in the alto recitative (No. 2) is implied in the soprano gavotte aria in B<sup>3</sup><sub>8</sub> (No. 3), in which the timid, hesitant yet happy believer is singled out as a contrast with the rebellious mind portrayed in the opening chorus. Nicodemus is personified in the bass recitative (No. 4), to which Bach adds the words 'for whosoever believes in Thee, shall not perish' to Ziegler's text and sets them as an extended arioso to underline their significance. In the final aria, 'Ermuntert euch, furchtsam und schüchterne Sinne' ('Have courage, fearful, timorous spirits'), a trinity of oboes in symbolic unison accompanies the alto. Just when the unwary might imagine Bach is going to end there on the subdominant, he breaks the symmetry by adding two more bars. With the dénouement (No. 6) at a far higher pitch, he asserts the essence of the Trinity – *ein Wesen, drei Personen* ('one essence, three persons') – and the remoteness of God in His relationship to humankind. And so in this way he signs off this mini-cycle of twelve cantatas spanning the period between Easter and Trinity Sunday 1725 with a cantata crammed with provocative thoughts and musical exegesis. Bach had come full circle.



In the opening stanza of his *Choruses from 'The Rock'* (1934) T. S. Eliot berates modern society for losing faith in God, casting it in

## non-Christian symbols:

The Hunter with his dogs pursues his circuit.  
O perpetual revolution of configured stars,  
O perpetual recurrence of determined seasons,  
O world of spring and autumn, birth and dying!  
The endless cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.  
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to God.  
Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

The pity is that Eliot did not know Bach's cantata cycles (though he might have heard individual movements). If he had, he might have appreciated that in Bach's music the cycles of Heaven can bring us closer to God. They could also be telling us that the Dust is not the enemy, but part of our daily existence.<sup>gg</sup> At that point Eliot might genuinely have agreed with Thomas à Becket, when he has him say,

I have had a tremor of bliss, a wink of heaven, a whisper,  
And I would no longer be denied; all things  
Proceed to a joyful consummation.<sup>21</sup>



<sup>a</sup> Johann Mattheson describes its succession of recitatives and arias as belonging to the ‘madrigal style’ (by which he probably meant the current operatic style), its polyphonic choruses and fugues to the ‘motet style’, accompaniments and interludes to the ‘instrumental style’, and finally its chorales to the ‘melismatic style’ (Johann Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739), Ernest C. Harriss (trs.) (1981), p. 215).

<sup>b</sup> Christoph Wolff estimates that nearly two fifths of the cantatas were lost one way or another because the estate was split up (*The World of the Bach Cantatas* (1997), Vol. 1 p. 5).

<sup>c</sup> *Kirchenstück* was just one of several names (including *Stück* or just plain *Musik*) given to what for convenience scholars and musicians have called ‘cantatas’. From the strangely promiscuous descriptions Bach appended to his earliest works – *actus* (BWV 106), *concerto* (BWV 61), *motteto* (BWV 71) – with the appellation *cantata* confined to just two early works, both for solo voice (BWV 52 and 199), we can see that the title was manifestly not of primary significance.

<sup>d</sup> This, as we have already mentioned, was an annotation (see Plate 13) Bach made in the margin of his copy of Abraham Calov’s *Die Deutsche Bibel* (see *The Calov Bible of J. S. Bach*, Howard H. Cox (ed.) (1985)), catalogued in his library in 1733. But since this and other equally illuminating personal marginal notes reveal to us the biblical foundations of his vocation as a church musician, some scholars think that Bach could have been familiar with Calov’s commentary at a much earlier date – when his activity in composing church cantatas was at its most intense. Bach clearly prized Calov’s commentary greatly. When he bought at a book auction in 1742 a copy of the seven-volume Altenburg edition of Luther’s *Schriften* that had once belonged to Calov, he added a note saying that he felt this was what Calov ‘probably used to compile his great *Tütsche Bibel*’ (see Robin A. Leaver, *Bach’s Theological Library* (1983), p. 42). The three Calov volumes were the first to be listed in the inventory of his estate drawn up after his death in 1750.

<sup>e</sup> This was anathema to those who, like Scheibe, preached the gospel of new music, advocating the replacement of ‘artificial’ polyphony by simple, easily comprehended melody. Bach was soon accused of being the victim of his own unassailable skill: he expected his young singers and players to replicate the complex sounds that he could produce on the organ; and his habit of annotating even the most minute ornaments not only took ‘away from his pieces the beauty of harmony but completely [covered] the melody throughout’ (BD II, No. 400/NBR, p. 338). Scheibe simply misunderstood. It is the test of any Bach interpreter to avoid this happening: the skill lies in giving judicious weight to the individual lines so that they converse on an equal footing. The opening bars of a Bach cantata are an invitation to enter – and complete – a separate world of rhythm and harmony, complex yet lucid, transparent yet utterly mesmerising – an enthralling river into which the imagination can plunge.

<sup>f</sup> The Lutherans adopted the historic lectionary that goes back to St Jerome in the fifth century AD and was standardised 300 years later by Charlemagne’s spiritual adviser Alcuin, who shortened both the Gospel readings and the Epistles so that they dealt with a specific topic each week. With the establishment in the thirteenth century of Trinity Sunday as a major festival of the church, so-called ‘Propers’ were then assigned for the entire year. Penitentiary texts predominate in the second half of the Trinity season and extend to its very end – the Lutherans

adding Propers for Tr + 25 and + 26 as eschatological lessons designed to connect the end of human life with the end of all things.

<sup>g</sup> The major languages spoken by both Jews and Greeks in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus were Aramaic and Koine Greek (and, to a limited extent, a colloquial dialect of Mishnaic Hebrew). All the books that were grouped together and eventually formed the New Testament were originally written in Koine Greek.

<sup>h</sup> Bach's cousin Johann Gottfried Walther (*Musicalisches Lexicon* (1732), p. 64) was the first writer to draw public attention to Bach's frequent use of B-A-C-H in his compositions to express his surname – a cryptographic use of the simplest number alphabet, where A = 1, etc., with B in German standing for B<sup>3</sup> and H for B<sup>4</sup>, so both expressing the musical notes B<sup>3</sup>-A-C-B<sup>4</sup>) and the numbers 2-1-3-8 = 14.

<sup>i</sup> There is an alternative scenario in which Bach announced himself to his Leipzig public on Whit Sunday 1723 (16 May), two weeks before his reported arrival in the city. Alfred Dürr states categorically that the autograph of BWV 59, *Wer mich liebet, der wird mein Wort halten*, was written for Whit Sunday 1723 at the latest (although the surviving performing parts date from the following year). It is possible that before leaving Cöthen, Bach drew on some earlier material and assembled this four-movement cantata just in time for a 1723 premiere at Leipzig's university church. This hypothesis is supported by a passage in one of his letters of complaint to the Saxon king in which Bach claimed that he 'entered upon my University functions [in Leipzig] at Whitsunday, 1723' (*The Cantatas of J. S. Bach* (2005), p. 350; BD I, No. 12/ NBR, p. 124).

<sup>j</sup> BWV 25 was first performed on 29 Aug. 1723, the last of seven consecutive, interrelated cantatas all based on stern homiletic injunctions giving further expression to the core doctrines of faith already adumbrated in the first four Sundays of the Trinity season. They follow an identical ground plan: chorus – recitative – aria – recitative – aria – chorale.

<sup>k</sup> So-called on account of Bach's five-fold use of it in the *Matthew Passion*. Its famous tune by Hans Leo Hassler (1564–1612) was originally that of a love-song but was adapted to several hymn-texts. Probably the one Bach had in mind here was that based on Psalm 6, 'Ach Herr, mich armen Sünder' by Cyriacus Schneegass, whose fifth stanza sends a clear message of hope and relief. Apart from this, Bach's weaving of this chorale into his contrapuntal fabric is an extraordinary technical feat, and the only time, incidentally, when he uses trombones other than to bolster the voices and add colour.

<sup>l</sup> This is just one device that Bach could have learnt from Buxtehude, perhaps from his motet cycle *Membra Jesu nostri* or from his elder cousin Johann Christoph, who used it in his superb lament for bass, *Wie bist du denn, O Gott*.

<sup>m</sup> The recorders also have a prominent role in the sequel – to illustrate Christ's 'brimming streams of tears', set high above the sustained strings who inscribe nine successive bars without a common chord – and in anticipation of Jerusalem's fall and Christ's mercy in protecting the devout in a *bassetchen* aria for alto with oboes da caccia. They replicate that mood in episodes played between the lines of the final chorale – with the same cascade of semiquavers as well as melodic gestures recalling the opening chorus.

<sup>n</sup> From the evidence of the hastily copied part-books for the cantatas, Bach was rarely able to compose ahead of schedule. However, his last newly composed work before Advent was BWV 90 on 14 Nov. Most of BWV 70 the following week had been pre-composed in Weimar and all of BWV 61 performed on 28 Nov., so that one could reason that he had almost six weeks in total to compose the *Magnificat*, his largest-scale vocal composition to date, and all the other works due for performance as part of his first Christmas festival.

<sup>o</sup> Scholars have been quick to point to the smaller scale of a few works such as BWV 153 and 154 – so as ‘not to strain the choir unduly’ – requiring the choir to sing only simple four-part chorales or to have the help of instrumental doubling (BWV 64). But when was that ever a ‘compensation for the lack of rehearsal time?’ (Christoph Wolff, *Bach: The Learned Musician* (2000), p. 264). In my experience, instrumental doubling by cornets and sackbuts, such as Bach uses in several of his *stile antico* opening movements, while providing the singers with a safety net, also requires extra time to ensure balance and good intonation. The truth is that this Christmas sequence comprises some of the most hair-raisingly difficult music in his whole œuvre: the succession of difficult tenor arias, the tempo changes mid-movement in BWV 63, the opulent orchestration of BWV 65, the acrobatic *Fecit potentiam* fugue in the *Magnificat*, etc.

<sup>p</sup> While this Johannine slant could be said on this occasion to come from the Christmas Gospel (John 1: 1–14), there is unquestionably a detectable Johannine emphasis all through the cantatas of Bach’s First Leipzig Cycle that cannot be attributed to the Gospel formulations alone and must therefore have formed part of Bach’s overall design and the way he prepares his listeners for the ‘big event’ – his first Passion setting. Leaving aside the Passion narratives, there were thirty-four Gospel lections taken from Matthew, compared to twenty-one from John, or (in terms of verses) 319 verses from Matthew against 203 from John. (I am grateful to Robin Leaver for these figures.) On the other hand John’s Gospel marks the crucial start of key segments of the liturgical year, and this is reflected by Bach in his first cycle, where he favoured a biblical citation as the text of twenty-eight out of forty of his newly composed cantatas.

<sup>q</sup> Neither Bach’s autograph score nor the original parts contain any indication of articulation, which of course does not preclude their introduction in his performances. Experimenting with different slur-permutations and with localised *crescendi* aborted one beat earlier than their natural wave-crest, I found that this worked both idiomatically and pictorially, as did the final ritornello played smoothly and softly, as though now obedient to Christ’s commands. The stilling of the storm is also implicit both in the alto soloist’s concluding recitative and in the final chorale, the seventh verse of Johann Franck’s hymn ‘Jesu, meine Freude’ – a perfect conclusion to this extraordinary work.

<sup>r</sup> Overall the cycle contains sequences where formal structures recur: a pattern for ten cantatas in the Trinity season that use a scriptural dictum and a closing chorale to act as bookends to two recitative/aria pairings, a further scheme at Christmas that interpolates a second chorale at the midpoint, and a third of pre-Lenten works similar to the second, only dropping the first recitative.

<sup>s</sup> One need only reflect on how many of Bach’s children died in infancy and how both his parents had died on reaching the age of fifty to appreciate how human mortality and death were a constant reality for him – hence the continuing significance of eschatology. One of the books in his library was Martin Geier’s *Zeit und Ewigkeit* (*Time and Eternity*), a fat quarto volume of sermons on the Gospels throughout the church year (1664) in which each Gospel is

expounded for its significance for time and eternity, now and then, showing that eschatological themes were explored at all times during the year.

<sup>t</sup> Back in his Weimar days Bach had found what a powerful setting a French overture could make for a chorale *cantus firmus* in his Advent cantata BWV 61 – how Louis XIV’s most regal and ceremonial manner provided a naturalistic way to announce the arrival of Christ on earth.

<sup>u</sup> It evokes Leibniz’s spectre of the ‘best of all possible worlds’, one that contains necessary and perfectly balanced dissonance, though Bach might have agreed with Spinoza’s twist to this: that ‘this is not the best of all possible worlds; it is the *only* possible world’. Leibniz apparently claimed to have lived by the Roman playwright Terence’s famous saying *homo sum: humani nil a me alienum puto* – ‘As a man I consider nothing pertaining to human affairs outside my domain.’ Leibniz was a true polymath, as Bach was not. But it is instances such as these that suggest not just that he might have endorsed Terence’s aphorism, but that he included it within the purview of his cantatas and Passions.

<sup>v</sup> Richard Stokes’s translation of the original is: ‘O mankind, save your soul / Flee from Satan’s slavery / And free yourself from sin / That in the pit of sulphur / Death, which plagues the damned / Shall not for ever gnaw at your soul / O mankind, save your soul’ (*J. S. Bach: The Complete Cantatas* (1999), pp. 31–2).

<sup>w</sup> ‘The power of music, especially Bach’s music, surely extends beyond what words or pictures or gestures can signify, which is why, at best, Bach seduces us with his subversive pleasures as much as he challenges us with his unique insights’ (from a lecture given at the Lufthansa Festival, London, 14 May 2011).

<sup>x</sup> Alternatively the idea may have been hinted at discreetly, or even imposed, by the clergy, as a corrective to what they saw as Bach’s overtly Pietistic leanings in some of his first cycle works. Alfred Dürr questions darkly whether Bach might have ‘needed any special inducement’ (op. cit., p. 30). Perhaps what he had in mind was the *Zusatz* – the supplementary fee paid by the Stadtrat to an earlier Thomascantor, Sebastian Knüpfer, for composing a chorale cantata cycle in 1666/7 – something that Bach would surely have welcomed – but there is no evidence that he was similarly rewarded.

<sup>y</sup> This was an anonymous adaptation of the chorale of 1584 by Martin Moller, and it reads like a penitential cry from the Thirty Years War: ‘Protect us from war and famine / Contagion, fire and grievous pain ... Sin has greatly corrupted us / The Devil plagues us even more / The world, our very flesh and blood / Leads us astray incessantly / Such misery, Lord, is known to Thee alone / Ah, let us be commended to Thee.’

<sup>z</sup> There is a clear explanation for this: ‘since St John’s Gospel is known as the *Book of Signs*, and since the tonal plan of Bach’s *St John Passion* appears to have been conceived as a form of play on the three musical signs (i.e., sharp, flat and natural key areas), this important detail in the plan of *Aus tiefer Not* perhaps possesses a wider significance, relating it to Bach’s tonal-allegorical procedures in general’ (Eric Chafe, *Tonal Allegory in the Vocal Music of J. S. Bach* (1991), p. 320).

<sup>aa</sup> To English ears the main melody has more than a passing similarity to the nursery rhyme ‘Lavender’s blue, dilly, dilly’, while the fervent concluding chorale (Verse 10 of Paul Gerhardt’s ‘Ich hab in Gottes Herz und Sinn’), set to a secular French sixteenth-century melody, is familiar as the hymn ‘O God, Our Help in Ages Past’.

<sup>bb</sup> The Society’s grand, well-intentioned project came to a close in 1900, by which time all the available cantatas, both sacred and secular, including some that were not by Bach at all, had been published – an invitation to performance that was taken up only selectively and then with drastic re-orchestration, thick wads of organ accompaniment and what seems to have been a characteristically lugubrious delivery. There has been another whole century of trial and error, fierce debate over the ways to resuscitate them (in or out of the liturgy), historical research, critical appraisal of the source material, variably successful attempts to fill the gaps in the threadbare sources, heated arguments over Bach’s original performing forces and practice – and still the cantatas remain on the fringes of many Bach lovers’ knowledge of his œuvre.

<sup>cc</sup> Philipp Nicolai’s hymn is known to English churchgoers as ‘How brightly shines the morning star’. When we performed Bach’s elaboration of it in Walpole St Peter’s on Palm Sunday 2000, there seemed to be enough audience familiarity with the tune to elicit that ‘invisible circle of human effort’, as Yo-Yo Ma describes it, when performers and listeners alike are engaged in a collective or communal act. It was a feeling that returned twenty-four hours later during a rock concert in the Royal Albert Hall in which Sting exchanged snatches of familiar songs with his adoring audience in a kind of spontaneous litany. It is in moments like this, when there is a particularly strong bond between musicians and listeners, that one gets a sense of how these cantatas might have been received in Leipzig at the time of their creation – or at least of how Bach would have hoped they might be received.

<sup>dd</sup> Dürr noticed that the last of the five newly composed works in Bach’s first cycle, BWV 44, *Sie werden euch in den Bann tun* (his first version of a cantata of this title), shares with three other post-Easter cantatas from the following year’s cycle (BWV 6, 42 and 85) a similarity in overall design (biblical *Spruch* – aria – chorale – recitative – aria – chorale) and in the emphasis placed on Christian suffering in the world. This leads to the conclusion that Bach originally intended those three cantatas to be incorporated into his First Leipzig Cycle along with BWV 44 (see Plates 15 and 16), but they had not been set to music until now – casualties of the fallout from the *John Passion* in 1724 (Dürr, op. cit., p. 33).

<sup>ee</sup> A later instance – far too good not to mention – is an aria for solo oboe, strings and bass soloist from BWV 159, *Sehet, wir gehn hinauf*, from the so-called ‘Picander’ cycle of 1729, which opens with the same words as the celebrated ‘Es ist vollbracht’ from the *John Passion*. That Bach should have set these words twice, both so memorably and each time with such overwhelming but distinctive pathos, is something to marvel at. In this cantata version in B<sup>3</sup>, time seems almost to stand still – even when the singer’s words are ‘Now shall I hasten’ – radiating a solemn peace achieved through Christ’s resignation to his fate. This may be partly a function of the exceptional richness of Bach’s harmonic language – a frequent stressing of the subdominant key, even the subdominant of the subdominant.

<sup>ff</sup> As with his other collaborations with Ziegler there is evidence of a productive dialogue between them (often sadly lacking when he was confronted with a set text), although there are signs that from time to time he may have

changed Ziegler's text without consulting her, for, as we saw in [Chapter 7](#), p. 218, her printed versions differed sometimes quite strikingly from those that Bach actually set to music.

<sup>88</sup> This again is a tangential reference to *His Dark Materials*, by Philip Pullman, who may have had this image in mind when he formulated his concept of Dust. Bach's music reminds us of a need to re-embrace Christian orthodoxy (quite the opposite of Pullman's view, therefore), but more than this, it points to a godhead beyond petty human self-representations.

**10**

**First Passion**